Protofeminist Criticism of Women’s Role in the Victorian Period: A Systemic-Functional Analysis of a Fragment of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

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**Abstract**

Many Victorian novels written by women are presented from the point of view of a single narrating voice, that of the protagonist of the story in the way of autobiography. On many occasions, the events described in the story faithfully reflect the women authors’ lives. When this occurs, it is not easy to distinguish whether the addressee of the message is the author herself or the protagonist character, because there is a frequent conflation of both in these literary works.

Women writers used their novels as a tool to criticize the injustices of their society, such as sexual inequality, lack of education, poverty, etc., especially at a time when women were relegated to the private sphere of the home. The authors tried to portray their restricted reality with a subtle veiled criticism.

The aim of this paper is to show how a traditional systemic-functional method of linguistic analysis is able to unveil hidden or implicit messages between the lines of a Victorian proto-feminist literary text, namely Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

The systemic-functional analysis of the text under focus will reveal that the author employs different grammatical resources with a strong meaning potential in order to convey subtle feminist vindications.

**Key words:** Victorian novels, narrative voice, systemic-functional analysis, proto-feminism

1. **INTRODUCTION.**

A feature in many Victorian novels written by women is the maintenance of a single narrating voice, that of the protagonist of the story in the way of autobiography. For us readers, it proves very easy to forget whether the addresser of the message is the author herself or the protagonist character, because there is a frequent conflation of both in these novels. Besides, on many occasions, the events the protagonist narrates resemble and reflect their authors’ lives (Langland, 1995; Peterson, 2015) [13,17]

The fact that there is a single narrating voice involves that the only point of view is that of the protagonist, at the same time teller of the story. The speaking voice is the “I” of the narrator, and, relevantly to our analysis, a female “I”.

Women writers used their narrative as a tool in order to criticize the injustices of their society, such as sexual inequality, lack of education, poverty, etc.,
especially at times when the public sphere was only associated with men, whereas women were relegated to the private sphere of the home (Caine, 1992; Lewis, 1991) [2,15].

The authors used their narrating voices mainly:
1. to portray their ‘restricted’ reality with a more or less veiled criticism of the situation (especially the reduced sphere of women’s lives, in most cases limited to domestic households).
2. to project on the readers their own vision of their existence as women and to feed the readers’ concern for their shared reality.

That is why there are constant addresses to the reading public in the way of the “you” of the reader, and also the appearance of “educative maxims” designed to instruct the readers.

The presence of this single narrating voice obviously affects the point of view in the narration. The features which account for this are many and have to do with the three metafunctions of language, as stated by the systemic-functional linguist M.A.K. Halliday (1985, 1994, 2004) [8,10,11]. This work will particularly focus on:

- **Thematic structure**: the narrator and organizer of the story selects what is going to be “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message, ... that with which the clause is concerned” (Halliday, [1985] 2004: 38) [11]. The writer focuses on what she, in this case, considers adequate.
- **Transitivity system**: it unveils the roles carried out and assigned to the different participants, according to the narrating voice.
- **Modality**: it shows “the speaker’s judgement of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he is saying” (Halliday, [1985] 2004: 75) [11]
- **Projection** of the characters’ thoughts and feelings (always from the narrator’s point of view).
- **System of personal reference** (i.e. pronouns, possessives...): in this case, the “I” of the protagonist, the “you” of the reading public and the third person of the other referred to characters.

The aim of this paper is to show how a traditional systemic-functional method of linguistic analysis is able to unveil hidden or implicit messages between the lines of a Victorian proto-feminist literary text, namely Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Discourse and stylistics.

Halliday (1988) [9] expressed the need to join the “practice” of literary creation and reception with the “analysis” of the linguistic expressions in order to discover the vast array of meaning resources, that is, of “meaning potential” in literature. This implied two important things: on the one hand, it meant that the writer’s potential and creative options cannot be subjected to a biplanar model of language (Toolan, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1998) [20,21,22,23]. In other words, the reductionist analyses taking into account a “fixed code” between form and content in the linguistic sign should be dismissed, for there is no fixed message: “The assumption that stylistic content is inter-subjective has surfaced in every new specification. This is the assumption that a message communicates the same content to each of its addressees...” (Taylor, 1980: 104) [19].

Toolan or Taylor already believed in the existence of an “interpretant” and a communicative discourse, even more in literary texts, because taking for granted the “fixed meaning” in a message would amount to denying the very process by which we
interpret meaning. That is, both authors already defended the need for a “pragmatic”, not reductionist, approach to communicative events.

Roger Fowler (1981) in *Literature as Social Discourse: the Practice of Linguistic Criticism* [5] set the basis for a “pragmatic stylistic criticism”, different from the biplanar reductionist criticism attached to the propositional context of sentences. Far from that, he considered the global “textual” and “contextual” meaning that went beyond mere “literal” sense. His words served to summarise an alternative methodological programme:

To treat literature as discourse is to see the text as mediating relationships between language-users: not only relationships of speech, but also of consciousness, ideology, role and class. The text ceases to be an object and becomes an action or process. (1981: 80)

The “new stylists” (Roger Fowler, Michael Toolan, David Birch, Ronald Carter, Michael Short, Michael O'Toole...) then preferred to choose the “functional grammar” tools of analysis, instead to those devoted to the analysis of the “linguistic code”. The reason for this was that a ‘functional’ stylistic analysis would permit a focus on the general semantic meaning of certain structures, their function in communication, their frequency of use, as well as other informations that helped them draw a more precise map of the choices made by a particular writer, relating them to the social environment in which they were created.

H.G. Widdowson ([1975] 1992) [24] also insisted on the need to apply the tools offered by textual grammar on literary texts in order to unveil the multiple interpretative ways within literature. On the other hand, other scholars considered that reducing literary language to grammatical structures involved a break with the ‘specificity’ of literary facts, for, according to them, literature is unique and cannot be paraphrased.

Geoffrey Hartman (1980), in *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* [12], stated that literature was a unique discourse capable of attracting the attention on itself. He recommended an attentive reading of the text, an analysis of its linguistic and rhetorical forms, and an assessment of the contextual environment that accounted for the way in which the text worked. As can be seen, this approach only meant a “close reading” of the text, similar to the one proposed by I.A Richards ([1925] 2001) [18], in order to obtain an “interested” reading of the texts and their underlying meanings.

Ronald Carter and Walter Nash, in *Seeing through Language* (1990) [3], summarised what they believed to be “style”:

a) “Style” cannot be explained by making reference to just one linguistic level, such as grammar or vocabulary.

b) “Context” is one of the most relevant levels for the analysis.

c) The concept of “style as a deviation from the norm” is not adequate.

d) The concept of a special language for literature or “literary style” is not useful.

We totally agree with the first three postulates, but consider the last one dubious or debatable, since it seems to challenge the whole premise of a literary specificity and the very nature of ‘stylistics’.

In his Prologue to R. Cummings and R. Simmons’ *The Language of Literature: A Stylistic Introduction to the Study of Literature* (1988) [4,9], M.A.K. Halliday explicitly recognised what he called “verbal art” as an essentially distinctive feature of literature, supporting the more or less general consensus on what literature is and is not. He deliberately left unanswered an essential
question “...whether the property of “being literature” is an attribute of the text itself, or of some aspect of its environment -the context of situation, perhaps, or the mental set of a particular listener or reader.” (1988: vii). Nevertheless, he clearly affirms son afterward that:

...by analysing a literary text as a verbal artifact, we are asserting its status as literature … and far from damaging the object or one’s perception of it, the act of close and thoughtful linguistic analysis turns out to enhance one's awareness and enjoyment. (1988: viii)

Halliday also debated the nature of texts as ‘products’ or ‘processes’, implying that, in spite of the fact that analysis and interpretation are conceptually different, both are inherently related, because the stylistic analysis of a text will always involve the interpretation of it:

The analysis of a text as a piece of literature -stylistic analysis- always involves acts of interpretation. This does not mean that we lose contact with the text; each hermeneutic step can be ultimately related to what is there on the page...It is not being suggested that analysis and interpretation are two separate portions of the task, to be performed in sequence... They may be interleaved with one another. In some problems they overlap...But conceptually they are distinct. (1988: ix-x)

2.2. Systemic-functional linguistics.

The textual model initially developed by M.A.K. Halliday has served as a guide for the analysis and interpretation of literary works during decades.

There are obvious reasons for this. The main one is that this model tries to achieve the ambitious goal of providing a detailed account of the semantic meanings within a text, the functions they carry out in context, as well as the socio-cultural context itself.

Geoffrey N. Leech also recognised this in *Stylistics and Functionalism* (1987) [14], where he presented the metadependences as proposed by Halliday, manifested in their conception of a language as system and structure. The text is a final structured ‘product’, the result of a series of choices made by the writer among a range of possibilities within the system, that is, among a range of linguistic resources available for him to carry out the communicative event.

In other words, a basic tenet of this functional approach is that language serves a multiplicity of functions which are simultaneous at the time of being exemplified in a text:

- In the first place, language represents the way in which the speakers express their experience of the world, as well as their actions, feelings, perceptions, etc., that is, language codifies the “experiential meaning”. Related to this expression of experience is the expression of the logical relations used by the speaker in order to bring order to this experience by means of different structures such as coordination, apposition, etc. These two subfunctions represent the “ideational metafunction” of language.

- Besides, language also codifies the speaker’s way of interacting and communicating with other people and his/her way of expressing attitudes, comments, doubts, etc. The “interpersonal metafunction” is the one that allows the expression of “interpersonal meaning”.

- This expression of experiential meaning in an interpersonal context is possible thanks to the inner organisation of language. The ‘pieces’ are ‘intertwined’ in such a way that they create a coherent text. This function is achieved through the “textual metafunction”.

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Even though the most abstract essence of language is ‘lexico-grammatical’, this utterly depends on the metafunctions that will determine the options and the frequency with which they will occur.

Texts are examples or ‘realizations’ of the systemic networks that are intertwined, organized around three ‘systems’, whose point of departure is the ‘clause’ and which constitute the basic functional components of grammar:

a) Transitivity
b) Mode
c) Thematic structure

Each of these components of grammar is, then, oriented toward a series of functions:

- Logic and transitivity systems → Ideational metafunction
- Mode, modality and intonation systems → Interpersonal metafunction
- Theme, information and coherence systems → Textual metafunction

These three groups or “sets” of systems are not added to the structure of a clause, far from it, they are an integral part of the clause. Hence, the structural possibilities will be determined by the functions they are oriented to. In Halliday’s words:

...every structural feature has its origin in the semantics; that is, it has some function in the expression of meaning... the different types of structure tend to express different kinds of meaning, as embodied in the metafunctional hypothesis. (1985: 8) [8]

Language is, then, a ‘semiotic system’, not in the simplistic sense of a system restricted to univocal signs, but in the sense of an endless potential of socially exchanged meaning or “systematic resource of meaning” (2004 [1985]: introd.).

This statement has served as the basis for the formulation of a theory of “contexts”, a necessary level in order to place and give account of the factors that bear an influence on the description of linguistic exchanges.

The context of situation, in Malinowski’s terms, is coherently articulated within a group (‘register’) of general dimensions or categories that underline a contextual aspect:

- field,
- tenor, and
- mode

which, in a general way, correspond to the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions.

In the same way as the text has its “context of situation”, language also has its “context of culture”, which determines the nature of the code:

As a language is manifested through its texts, a culture is manifested through its situations; so by attending to text in-situation a child construes the code, and by using the code to interpret text he construes the culture. (Halliday, 2004: xxxii) [11]

2.3. Applications of the systemic-functional model to literary texts.

The first and most important applications of the model were developed by M.A.K. Halliday. In 1971 he published the paper “Linguistic function and literary style: an inquiry into the language of William Golding’s The Inheritors” [7], where he used the ideational metafunction in order to demonstrate the characters’ different perception of reality. He had previously carried out a deictic analysis as the key to interpret the poem “Leda and the Swan” by W.B.Yeats.

Since then, there have been numerous applications of the systemic method to the study of style. In 1985, Christopher S. Butler compiled a
collection of essays that employed the functionalist paradigms and attempted to provide a description supporting the readers’ intuitions and helping them discover the values and key features in the interpretation of literary writing. The journal of the Poetics and Linguistics Association (P.A.L.A), that appeared under the title of Parlance and then was called Language and Literature, publishes papers whose methodology is mostly inspired by the systemic functional model. Some of the most outstanding contributions have been those by Ronald Carter, Mick Short, Willie van Peer, David Birch or Paul Simpson, among others. Besides, the Critical Linguistics approach developed by Roger Fowler in Norwich, East Anglia, that also included Robert Hodge, Tony Trew, Gunther Kress, includes literary texts within many of their explicitly functionalist publications.

3. FUNCTIONAL-STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF A LITERARY TEXT.

The application of the systemic-functional model to the study of a literary text will be illustrated with the analysis of a relevant extract from Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847).

This novel was originally published under the title of Jane Eyre: an Autobiography, since it is the protagonist herself, Jane, who narrates the story. As other Victorian women writers did, Charlotte Brontë had to use a masculine pseudonym, Currer Bell. Brontë has been recognised as a forerunner in the literary description of “inner consciousness” (Burt, 2008) [1] and many consider this work as a prelude to social and feminist vindications (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Martin, 1966) [6,16].

Charlotte Brontë wrote this novel at a time when women had little control over their own destinies, they were highly dependent upon men and marriage was a lifelong career with no escape for a wrong choice. A woman was expected to marry and devote her life to her family, and those who did not were termed ‘spinsters’ or ‘old maids’.

A woman who wanted to be independent could try to earn her own maintenance by the care and education of children, but being a governess, like Jane, meant living in loneliness, social inferiority and general abuse. There were not many other way-outs as education for girls was not considered very important. So, the prospects were not very promising.

In Jane Eyre Charlotte Brontë “challenged assumptions about the role of woman characters”, “she proved that women were as capable of passion and self-determination as any “male” Romantic hero and showed how education can provide a sense of escape” for women (Colomb, 1991: ix; intr. to Brontë, 1947). At the end of the novel Jane escapes her teaching role and achieves independent means.

3.1. Functional analysis of a relevant fragment: explicit and implicit criticism of women’s role in the Victorian period

I am not writing to flatter parental egotism, to echo can’t, or prop up humbug; I am merely telling the truth. (...) 

Anybody may blame me who likes, when I add further, that, now and then, when I took a walk by myself in the grounds, when I went down to the gates and looked through them along the road; or when, while Adèle played with her nurse, and Mrs. Fairfax made jellies in the storeroom, I climbed the three staircases, raised the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked out afar over sequestered field and hill, and along the dim sky-line -that then I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the
busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen -that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach. I valued what was good in Mrs. Fairfax, and what was good in Adèle; but I believed in the existence of other and more vivid kinds of goodness, and what I believed in I wished to behold.

Who blames me? Many, no doubt; and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes. It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller life than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Jane Eyre, 1847: 112-113)

a) Women are assigned a ‘passive’ role by men/society

By means of a relational intensive attributive process, the narrator, here conflated with the protagonist, shows in these lines how women have traditionally been attributed certain prototypical characteristics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CARRIER</th>
<th>ATTRIBUTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>calm [i.e., passive]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But this process of relation is carried out by a senser of the mental process “suppose”: “Women are supposed to be very calm generally”. Wittingly, Brontë makes use of this modulation by means of a passive verb implying a degree of obligation, and, at the same time, avoids telling who is this “attributor” by using the passive voice. They are supposed to be calm, by whom?, society? men?

b) But the narrator claims gender equality of feelings and thoughts

Brontë claims, through Jane’s words, that women are capable of feeling and thinking, just as men do. They are the sensers in the following processes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSER</th>
<th>MENTAL PROCESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They (women)</td>
<td>feel need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>just as men feel. as much as their brothers do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>precisely as men WOULD suffer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When the narrator refers to the restraints women are obliged to suffer, she significantly uses the finite modal operator “would” in the comparison with men: women feel as men do, need as men do, but suffer from restraint, stagnation, condemnation and scorn, just as men would do if they were in the situation, that is, in women’s situation; *modality* in this case indicates a not so probable degree (*probability*).

c) **Women’s actions are restricted to the domestic sphere**

We also learn that women are told that “they ought to be satisfied with tranquillity” and that “they ought to confine themselves to” certain restricted *material* roles. Again, the modulation indicates a high degree of obligation imposed on women. What they have to do according to this obligation is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTOR</th>
<th>MATERIAL PROCESS</th>
<th>GOAL/RANGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>make</td>
<td>puddings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>knit</td>
<td>stockings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>play</td>
<td>the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>embroider</td>
<td>bags</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Brontë here criticizes this seclusion or confinement of women to the limits of the domestic sphere.*

d) **But the narrator claims new actions for women denouncing narrow-minded attitudes**

In the same way as she vindicated women’s feelings and thoughts, there is now a vindication of the right to develop other functions, *doing* more, even though the narrator tells us that women are condemned and laughed at “if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has *pronounced* necessary for their sex”.

We have to infer that society (men?) set themselves up as the *sayers* (“pronounce”) who tell women what they ought to do and how they ought to behave “properly”.

Brontë attacks this confinement, condemnation and scorn calling those who dictate these norms “narrow-minded” and “thoughtless” by means of the following *relational process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELATIONAL PROCESS</th>
<th>ATTRIBUTE</th>
<th>CARRIER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is</td>
<td>narrow-minded</td>
<td>to say that they ought to confine themselves...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thoughtless</td>
<td>to condemn them or laugh at them...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in vain</td>
<td>to say that human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One must take into consideration that the author is brave enough to criticize these attitudes, but she shields herself under ‘it- constructions’ with an embedded infinitive clause, which are *impersonal projections* of facts. A fact can be projected impersonally by these relational processes with no “I” (*sayer* or *senser*), thus the author can set a distance from the accusation. It is not “I say that...” or “I think that...” but “It is (adj.) to ......”. “This kind of projection involves neither mental
nor verbal process but comes as it were ready packaged in projected form” (Halliday, 1985: 243) [8].

Besides, this construction allows the author to avoid a direct accusation or naming of the “oppresor”/sayer. Notice that the author does not say:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Their more privileged creatures (men)</th>
<th>say that…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUBJECT/THEME</td>
<td>VERBAL PROCESS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It would be too direct an accusation.

Nevertheless, the narrator names the participants (sayers) responsible for this fact, in a quite concealed way, as part of the rhyme inside the theme in one of the examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTRIBUTE/ THEME</th>
<th>CARRIER / RHEME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures</td>
<td>to say [that they ought to confine themselves...]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEME</td>
<td>RHEME</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Curiously enough these fellow-creatures which are the sayers and sensers that dictate women’s norms of behaviour are indirectly termed “narrow-minded” and “thoughtless”, adjectives which denote “very little sense”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>e) The narrator compares conformist and non-conformist women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to the narrator, there are many women who do not question the roles that society expects from them:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTOR</th>
<th>MATERIAL PROCESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adèle Mrs. Fairfax</td>
<td>played… made jellies in the storeroom…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jane values what is good in this, but she believes in other possibilities for her sex, and tells us that while the other women are contented, she needs to do something more. So, “while Adèle / Mrs. Fairfax…” complied with the social expectations, she behaved in a different way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTOR/BEHAVER</th>
<th>MATERIAL/BEHAVIOURAL PROCESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>took a walk by myself, went down to the gates, looked through them…, climbed the stairs, raised the trap-door, reached the leads, looked out afar…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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There is a sequence of material processes of action or movement ending in a behavioural process: “look”. They all have in common this idea of escape from the seclusion. But she is trapped like a bird in a cage, and becomes the senser again of the following affective and cognitive mental processes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSER</th>
<th>AFFECTIVE / COGNITIVE PROCESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit which might reach the busy world (heard of but never seen) desired more of practical experience, more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character believed in other possibilities for my sex wished to behold [what I believed in]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jane expresses her heart’s desire to escape the prison (the low modal operator “might” clearly signals how difficult she considered it: “which might overpass that limit / which might reach the busy world… heard of but never seen). The culmination of her list of desires ends up with the utterance: “And [what I believed in] I wished [to behold]”, where the direct object of ‘behold’ is thematised (marked theme), thus attracting the main stress and becoming the main focus of information.

f) Jane’s voice becomes the voice of many silent women
The passage under analysis is obviously concerned with the narrator /protagonist’s inner world and, thus, told in the first person, from her point of view. On 12 occasions the pronoun “I” is the topical theme along the text.

But this is also a passage concerned with women: on 12 occasions “women” are the topical theme of their respective clauses. At the beginning they are mentioned in a cautious way, referring to them as “human beings”; they are also portrayed by means of the anaphoric 3rd person plural pronoun (“they”); some of the referents are fairly general, like “millions”; but they are overtly referred to as “women” in the end:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I (12 occasions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women are first referred to as “human beings”, though it is evident that this expression implicitly refers to them: “It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity; they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it”. Brontë or Jane is talking covertly about women in this first impersonal projection.

The narrator also refers to ‘women’ in a general abstract way as “millions”: “Millions are
condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot”.

Here again the author/narrator avoids (by means of the passive voice “are condemned”) making explicit the name of the actor of the process of condemnation.

It is only at the end of this stream of thought (that is a clear forerunner of the historians of private consciousness like Joyce or Proust) that she names “women” in a topical thematic position: “Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel as men feel…”.

Women are now overtly the theme, but still the use of the passive prevents us from reading a clear accusation against the ‘senser’ who ‘supposes’ they ought to be “passive”.

On 4 other occasions the topical theme is an abstract and non-specific referent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAYER</th>
<th>VERBAL/MATERIAL PROCESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anybody</td>
<td>may blame me who likes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>blames me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many</td>
<td>[blame me], no doubt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSER</th>
<th>MENTAL PROCESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nobody</td>
<td>knows how many rebellions ferment…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In spite of the fact that the participant protagonist of the process of blaming occupies the position of subject/theme in this examples, which would supposedly draw that attention to it, there is no strong accusation, since it loses strength because of the use of a ‘non-specific’ referent.

g) A woman’s text about women: but women are still “they”, not “we”

As commented above, we are dealing with a text concerned with the protagonist as woman. If we have a look at the personal referents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st PERSON SING. PRONOUN</th>
<th>WOMEN/HUMAN BEINGS</th>
<th>IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject:</td>
<td>16 (explicit)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 (non-explicit)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object:</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSSESSIVE:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFLEXIVE:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL:</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen, the 1st person referents are predominant throughout the text. Nevertheless, the most remarkable feature, which again emphasizes this idea of distance set up by the author, is the fact that the narrator never uses the 1st person plural pronoun which would be inclusive when she is talking about women; on the other hand, she employs the 3rd person plural “they”: “they need”; “they suffer”. It seems as if the author were preoccupied with exposing these ideas for she knew that they would not be easily accepted by the readers of that time. She even seems to be asking for forgiveness or understanding when she says almost apologetically: “...and I shall be called discontented. I couldn't help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes”.

Conclusions

The systemic-functional analysis of the text under focus has revealed that the author employs different grammatical resources with a strong meaning potential in order to convey subtle, still concealed, feminist vindications at a time when this type of claims were not well received. If some of the author/narrator’s claims seem overt and explicit, the main strength of the message particularly lies in the ‘implicit’ feminist overtones.

According to the narrator, women are assigned a passive role by society; nevertheless, she does not accuse men explicitly, she prefers to use the passive voice which allows her to avoid naming the attributor of this role.

The narrator claims gender equality of feelings and thoughts, thus criticizing the seclusion or confinement of women to the limits of the domestic sphere. Most of her attacks are veiled, and she hides herself under impersonal projections of facts, by means of ‘it-constructions’ with an embedded infinitive clause, which, again, allow her to set a distance from the accusation.

Another syntactic strategy Brontë typically employs in order to conceal and soften an attack is to hide this ‘criticism’ in a not very prominent or salient part of the utterance, for instance, as part of an embedded phrase inside a clause, where the focus is somehow blurred. On some other occasions her accusations lose strength because of the use of a ‘non-specific’ referent like “anybody, who, many...”.

Jane’s becomes the voice of many silent women; hence, the extensive use of the 1st person singular personal pronoun as topical theme. What is shocking is the fact that this female narrator never employs the 1st person plural personal pronoun “we” to refer to women, but the 3rd person plural “they”.

In spite of all this, Charlotte Brontë was as brave as she could be at a time when she even had to hide herself under a man’s name.

References

[4] Cummings, R. and Simmons, R. The
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