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The Cultural Other and Self-Confirmation: An Analysis of the French Image in Charlotte Brontë's Works

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Abstract: Charlotte Brontë is a representative writer of 19th-century Britain. From the perspective of imagology, existing scholarship often focuses on individual texts, neglecting the integrity of the French image and failing to explore the relationship between the Other and self-image in depth. In fact, Brontë constructs France as a negative cultural Other in her novels, thereby accomplishing the self-confirmation of British identity. Drawing on comparative literary imagology as a theoretical framework, this paper analyzes the French image in The Professor, Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette. Brontë constructs France as a morally disordered cultural Other through the dimensions of characters, language, and space. This not only reflects the moral anxieties within British society but also mirrors imperialist ideologies amid Anglo-French rivalry. This study offers a new perspective for understanding the ideological structure of 19th-century British society.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë, French Image, Cultural Superiority, Comparative Literary Imagology

1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë is one of the important female writers of the Victorian era in Britain. Although she wrote only four novels in her lifetime (*The Professor, Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette*), scholarly research on Brontë has been enduring both at home and abroad. From the perspective of imagology, some foreign scholars have pointed out that *The Professor* reflects colonial characteristics such as oppression, conquest, exploitation, racial and cultural superiority [1]. Other researchers have studied the characters of Adèle and Céline Varens in *Jane Eyre*, arguing that they embody the most popular stereotypes of the French in British literature of the late 18th and early 19th centuries [2]. It should be noted that most foreign studies focus on a single novel and neglect the integrity of the French image in Brontë's works. In China, only one paper has examined the French image in Charlotte Brontë's novels [3]. Although it analyzed the moral critique behind this image, it failed to explore the interactive mechanism between the image of the Other and the self-image in depth, and overlooked the connection between the French characters and other dimensions. This paper, taking comparative literary imagology as the theoretical reference, examines the French representations in *The Professor, Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette* from multiple dimensions including characters, language, and space. The aim is to reveal how Brontë accomplishes the self-confirmation of the

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British image through France as a cultural Other, thus supplementing the shortcomings of existing research.

2. The cultural other: the depiction of the French image in Brontë's works

The concept of the "Other" originates in anthropology, initially referring to the heterogeneous cultures encountered by anthropologists when studying specific groups. When this concept entered comparative literary imagology, it became focused on the study of national-level images of the Other. Charlotte Brontë never traveled to France; thus, the France depicted in her works is not a real geographical space but a culturally imagined and mentally fixed image of the Other. This paper analyzes how Brontë constructs the "Other" from three dimensions—French national character, the metaphorical use of the French language, and the function of French space—and reveals the underlying logic of ethnic identity behind this literary construction.

2.1. The French: frivolous character and moral degeneracy

In Charlotte Brontë's works, French characters with moral deficiencies are frequently depicted. Through exaggerated behavioral traits and frivolous moral flaws, Brontë constructs a cultural imagination of the Other. For example, Céline Varens, the French dancer in *Jane Eyre*, seduces Rochester with her appearance, brazenly brings a scoundrel into Rochester's residence, abandons her own child, and ultimately elopes to Italy with a musician. Such behavior flagrantly violates widely accepted social moral standards, demonstrating her frivolity in emotional and familial values. Varens's illegitimate daughter, Adèle, is also portrayed as excessively vulgar: "The coquetry was in her blood, mixed with her brain, and even in her bones." [4] She displays intense materialistic enthusiasm, loudly demanding a "gift" upon seeing Rochester, [4] embodying a "child entirely nurtured by money and land." [4] Similarly, in *Villette*, the French factory girl, Rochinny Marthe, is depicted as lacking virtue. She is "careless and loud," [5] habitually "coquettishly laughing and calling" to Dr. John, showing "no embarrassment at all," [5] and even accepts gold coins from him unabashedly despite the presence of others [5]. These behaviors reveal not only a lack of proper modesty but also a deficiency in moral integrity. Likewise, Rosalie, the French lodge-keeper in *The Professor*, is described as "lying because she was bribed." [6] The middle-aged French governess, Miss Saint-Pierre, is labeled by Brontë as "an old woman showing off her coquettishness"; she "has an unusual enthusiasm for gifts," and Mr. Paul comments on "her grudges, her vanity, and her frivolity." [5] The French governess Zephyrine is referred to as a "pure Parisian coquette." [6]

As Barroux points out, exotic images represent "the sum of understandings of foreign countries acquired through processes of literary and social construction." [7] In Brontë's narrative logic, the negative portrayal of character traits is not limited to individual behavioral deviance but is closely linked to the moral decay of the nation. In *The Professor*, Crimsworth claims that "Pellet's single life was lived in a thoroughly French manner," which is characterized by "a complete disregard for moral constraints." [6] A similar sentiment appears in *Shirley*, where the novel mercilessly disparages French family life: "The god you worship is the god of French marriage—but what is French family life? Everything around him is rapidly decaying, under his rule everything is degenerating and falling apart. The god you worship is a grim reaper wearing a mask!" [8] Brontë frequently contrasts the moral degradation of France with the superiority of British morality. For example, when Jane criticizes Adèle's impertinence, frivolity, and superficiality, she specifically points out that "these habits come from her mother" but "are considered inappropriate by the British." [4] When discussing Adèle's obsession with fashion, Jane notes that she is a "little

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Parisian," and even judges this as somewhat "ridiculous." [4] Rochester likewise regards Adèle as inherently frivolous because she is "a true daughter of Paris," [4] and bringing her from France to England is likened to a form of salvation, meaning "to pull this poor creature out of the mud and mire of Paris and transplant her here, so that she may grow clean and pure in the fertile soil of an English garden." [4] Later, Brontë remarks that "a thorough English education has greatly corrected her French faults." [4] By piling up traits of frivolity, Brontë constructs an image with strong national connotations, reflecting the cultural superiority upheld by Victorian British society. British Prime Minister Gladstone acknowledged, "It may be said that imperial sentiment is innate in every Englishman." [9] The early concept of "imperialism" did not primarily refer to the relationship between the metropole and colonies, but rather to the struggles among various imperial systems and the nation-states of the colonial powers. British society regarded itself as superior to France, and thus Brontë emphasized the French's negative traits regarding sexual morality and ethics in her works, while comparatively neglecting the complexity of their characters.

2.2. French: superficially elegant but ultimately frivolous

In Charlotte Brontë's literary works, her attitude toward the French language presents an apparently contradictory state. On the one hand, she does not hesitate to praise the elegance of French. In *The Professor*, Crimsworth overhears two gentlemen conversing in French and cannot help but exclaim that the language "sounds to me almost like music," while also lamenting his own "detestable English Southern accent" when speaking French [6]. When he introduces Mr. Hunsden to Frances, Frances's expression of pleasure at the introduction in French—delivered with "a pure and elegant tone, low, sweet, and quite clear voice"—immediately produces an excellent effect [6]. He further compliments Frances for "perfectly capturing the characteristics and elegance of French," and is even "enchanted" by the poetry she recites in French [6]. In *Villette*, Lucy is similarly captivated by a scholar's pure French pronunciation, remarking: "Her French enchanted me, flawless—grammatically correct, idiomatic, and perfectly accented." [5] In Brontë's writing, mastery of French often becomes a symbol of being well-read. For example, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane is impressed when she sees others well acquainted with French names and writers, exclaiming, "How much they read! How profound their knowledge!" [4] Before Jane goes to Thornfield as a governess, Blanche judges whether Jane is a "lady of quality" by asking if she has studied French; in *Shirley*, Hortense expresses satisfaction with Caroline's diligent study of the poems of Corneille and Racine; and in *Villette*, Ginevra takes pride in her command of both French and German. Overall, French in Brontë's works highlights elegance and refinement, while also symbolizing knowledge. Her admiration for the French language is far from mere lip service.

However, the seemingly elegant French language in Brontë's novels often serves frivolous purposes, creating a stark contrast with the solemnity of English. Patricia Yeager incisively observes: "In *Villette*, French is established from the outset as the language representing transgression, anger, and joy." [10] Like the French characters in Brontë's works, French is closely associated with improper sexual notions or immoral behavior. When Ginevra and Lucy first meet, Ginevra speaks incessantly in French about "sending the homework to hell," [5] with the author deliberately emphasizing that this expression would be inappropriate in English but seems acceptable in French. When Ginevra toys with Graham's feelings, she chooses to say in French that she "does not love him at all," because "she often resorts to French when she wants to say something particularly heartless and perverse." [5] Erika Quistad comments on this, stating: "For her, code-switching (the use of two or more languages within a single expression) involves not only a broader linguistic domain but also a set of moral and identity-related possibilities." [11] In other

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words, only by using French can she bypass British moral constraints to make frivolous remarks. In *The Professor*, the symbolic significance of French is further highlighted. William describes Frances as exposing "her hidden benevolent mockery and 'malice'… She often attacks me in French," so "I would make her bring a book and read aloud in English as a punishment. I often use this method to have her read Wordsworth's poetry, which immediately quiets her down." [6] Thus, French serves as a flirtatious tool between the couple, whereas English functions oppositely, capable of instantly bringing seriousness to the atmosphere. The association between French and moral issues is implied not only in the characters' everyday dialogue but also explicitly in their attitudes toward the language. A notable example in *Shirley* occurs when Robert asks if reading is done in French, to which Caroline replies directly: "Your French ancestors would not speak as beautifully, solemnly, or movingly as your English ancestors, Robert." [8] Caroline's uncle, Mr. Helstone, insists she must abandon learning French because, in his view, "French is at best a frivolous and corrupt language, and most of the works it boasts are bad and frivolous, often having extremely harmful effects on weakening the female psyche." [8] Clearly, Mr. Helstone links French with stereotypical European sexual behavior. Anne Longmuir observes: "In fact, in Brontë's works, English and French are not merely different languages but represent distinct moral systems. French is constructed as an essentially corrupt language, while English is associated with honesty, self-discipline, and self-restraint." [12] In this regard, Brontë reinforces the image of British moral superiority by endowing French with frivolous characteristics.

2.3. France: a space for indulging desire

In Charlotte Brontë's novels, although France often appears as the destination for her characters' planned travels, it is not depicted merely as a renowned tourist attraction but is constructed as a space for the indulgence of desires. The Pellet couple chooses Paris as their honeymoon destination; the aristocratic Ginevra spends the summer "accompanying the Chalmondley family on a tour through southern France," [5] while Pauline and Mr. Basanpill also divide their travel time between various French provinces and the capital [5]. Through these plot details, Brontë sketches a picture of France as a place of relaxed, unrestrained living. However, this indulgence extends beyond lifestyle into realms of sexuality and morality. Rochester's two proposals to take Jane to France notably reveal this point. The first occurs during his confession of love, when Rochester plans a honeymoon trip, stating his intention to take Jane to "the vineyards of France and the plains of Italy," [4] with stays in "Paris, Rome, and Naples." [4] The second occurs after their failed wedding ceremony, when Rochester suggests Jane live "in a house in southern France; a whitewashed villa on the Mediterranean coast," [4] where they could enjoy "a protected, most pure happiness." [4] It is important to note that Rochester is married during both these occasions. In other words, his relationship with Jane is illicit, and France becomes the ideal place to accommodate this extramarital liaison. Only by leaving England and accepting France's relatively lax moral standards could they live together. Jane's response directly exposes the nature of Rochester's proposition: "If I were to live with you as you wish, I should become your mistress; to say otherwise is sophistry—falsehood." [4] Greenfield points out that, compared with other European neighbors, France is famously known for its liberal sexual attitudes. This stereotype is deeply ingrained among the British, to the extent that "French" itself is used to denote sexual matters, as in the English phrase "French letters" meaning condoms. Brontë's construction of France as a place of desire and moral disregard reflects the imaginative projection of 19th-century British society's view of French culture and the implicit moral indictment behind it.

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As with the depiction of the French people and the French language, the spatial contrast between England and France in Brontë's works becomes a critical dimension for value judgment, with the denigration of France reinforced through this binary opposition. Rochester is a prime example: he regards France as a space for emotional release and indulgence in desire, while England is endowed with redemptive significance. After committing his insane wife to an asylum, Rochester "more often lived in Paris," where he "experimented with a dissolute life" and "tried keeping mistresses." [4] It was only upon his return to England on business that he escaped this moral decline and met Jane: "In January of this year, I rid myself of all mistresses… summoned by business, I came back to England." [4] Returning to England marked the beginning of Rochester's renewal. Jane's life choices similarly reflect this contrast. After becoming a rural schoolteacher in Morton, she begins to reflect on the differences between life in France and England. She imagines succumbing to temptation in France, "governed by passion," [4] living "half the time immersed in his love" [4] as a mistress— a life seemingly comfortable and luxurious but actually fraught with the dangers of moral decay. Subsequently, Jane likens Marseille to "a paradise for fools" [4], contrasting it with the "wholesome English Midlands" [4], thereby revealing the harm France's space inflicts on "freedom and integrity." [4] Ultimately, Jane resolutely affirms her choice of England over France, viewing it as the correct path guided by principle, law, and divine will. It can be said that the healthy and happy union between Rochester and Jane is inseparable from their coincident choice of England rather than France. Through the binary spatial writing of England and France, Brontë constructs France as an Other space characterized by indulgence and moral disorder, while England is portrayed as a self-space embodying reason, morality, and redemption. This creative tendency is not merely a matter of individual expression but a concentrated reflection of the era's collective psyche. Robert Gibson emphasizes that sexual attitudes played a crucial role in Anglo-French antagonism, with French libertinism and English sexual repression often forming a contrast. In Brontë's portrayal, spatial segregation reinforces the opposition between civilization and decadence, through which she confirms the cultural superiority of her own nation.

3. Self-confirmation: the origins of the French image in Brontë's works

French imagologist Barroux points out that "the 'I' gazes at the Other, and the image of the Other simultaneously conveys a certain image of the 'I' as the gazer, speaker, and writer." [7] Any exotic image to some extent reflects the understanding and cognition that one's own nation holds toward foreign peoples, revealing the desires and psychological structure of the nation itself. Across Charlotte Brontë's four novels, her self-representation as a British subject is primarily manifested in the following two aspects.

3.1. Moral anxiety in Victorian England

The Victorian society imposed extremely strict moral demands, including those related to sexual morality, and this prevailing atmosphere profoundly influenced contemporary literary creation. The formation of the French image in Brontë's works is closely linked to the inner repression and anxiety of her contemporaries. During Brontë's lifetime, domestic tensions ran high, and the shadow of revolution loomed over everyone. Most Britons, represented by figures such as Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Arnold, believed that the root cause of the situation was moral decay. The widespread influence of evangelical Protestantism further intensified this atmosphere by tightly binding worldly success to moral purity. Consequently, the pursuit of morality reached an almost pathological degree, especially regarding sexual ethics. Walter Houghton, a scholar known for his research on

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Victorian literature and culture, described sexual behavior of the time as “the skeleton in the parents’ bedroom. No one mentioned it.” [13] Sexual misconduct was considered the gravest sin in Victorian moral views; even Shakespeare’s works were edited into “family editions” to avoid exposing audiences to sexually explicit content that might have a negative impact. Brontë herself believed that people should avoid reading sensitive passages in Shakespeare’s works: “The finest passages are always the purest ones, while the bad poems are invariably disgusting.” [14] In fact, she repeatedly emphasized the importance of morality, endorsing the idea that “the moral nature of humanity is holier than the intellectual nature” and that “a true lover of mankind... should cleanse all kinds of temptations.” [14] She even attributed her brother’s death to “the lack of support from religious and moral principles.” [14] Her admiration for Carlyle stemmed precisely from his noble morality. She criticized Thackeray’s lenient treatment of Fielding’s character and vices, stating: “If Thackeray had a son, either grown or growing, intelligent but misguided, would he treat so lightly the conduct that led him to disgrace and the grave?” [14]

The stringent demands on moral norms kept society in a state of constant tension, making people extremely sensitive to any signs of indulgence or moral decay. French novels became such a threat; widely circulated in Britain through translation, subscription libraries, and private collections, their open and liberal content sparked moral anxieties. “Throughout this period, the fierce denunciations of Balzac, Eugène Sue, and George Sand — as well as, toward the end of the period, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Zola — revealed far more than an incensed Puritanical conscience. These condemnations exposed a fear of the influence they exerted.” [13] Under this collective moral anxiety, British society urgently needed to project the dangers of decadence onto France as the “Other,” thereby confirming the superiority of its own moral system. Consequently, France gradually became symbolized in the British public imagination as a land of licentiousness. Linda Colley insightfully summarized that the British defined themselves in opposition to what they perceived as “French traits.” The famous contemporary writer Hannah More advocated that reading French novels could lead people to break solemn oaths, and Matthew Arnold further criticized the French for their worship of the so-called “goddess of indulgence,” bluntly stating, “It is precisely their fatal deficiency in morality and seriousness that has led to their ruin.” [15] Brontë also participated in this discourse, describing French books as “witty, acerbic, sophisticated, and immoral,” [16] asserting that she had no sympathy for the French because “love of liberty is not the same as craving for licentiousness.” [14] Based on this cultural psychology, Brontë excluded excessive sexual behavior from the British moral system in her novels. Michel Foucault, in his study of Victorian sexual attitudes, noted: “The prevailing view was that if space had to be made for unorthodox sexual behaviors, their harmful evils should be enacted elsewhere… brothels and asylums became the tolerated spaces for such behaviors.” [17] It can be said that the France Brontë depicted functioned as a substitute space for “brothels and asylums.” “Regardless of political stance, writers discussing appropriate female behavior commonly cited the so-called 'behavioral patterns of French women’ as the antithesis that Britain must avoid at all costs.” [18] The French image in Brontë’s works thus reflects a defense mechanism permeating Victorian British society to alleviate its moral anxieties, implicitly confirming the nation’s commitment to moral order.

3.2. Imperialism in Victorian England

In the nineteenth century, Britain and France were engaged in intense competition across cultural, political, and other domains. This competitive dynamic nurtured imperialism within British society, which ideologically manifested as a belief in the superiority of British culture, institutions, and systems over other nations and ethnicities, accompanied by a denigration of the unique values of

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other cultures. This provided a particular context for literary creation and significantly influenced the shaping of the French image in Brontë's works. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, "When reading nineteenth-century British literature, one cannot forget this: imperialism, regarded as the mission of British society, forms an essential part of the British cultural imagination." [19] As a member of the British people, Brontë was no exception. Critics note that Brontë herself supported the imperialist British government, admired the reactionary politician Wellington, and harbored considerable doubts about the political and social revolutions in France. In her letters, she claimed she "could not believe that France—or at least Paris—would become a true battlefield for liberty," disdainfully mocking Paris for "not knowing how true glory is enacted" and frankly expressing "little hope" for the French movement [14]. France, as the Other, was regarded as an unreliable and even ludicrous force, revealing Brontë's nationalist bias. The denigration of French culture is also evident in her assessments of key figures; for instance, she criticized the French bourgeois revolutionary leader Mirabeau as having "died like a worthless dog," characterized by "lack of self-control, lack of morality, lack of religion." [14] This critique is not merely a personal attack but a condemnation of the revolutionary spirit of France and the political path it represented—an expression of the discourse constructed by British conservative forces to defend their own system and cultural superiority.

The imperialist ideology prevalent in Victorian British society profoundly influenced the depiction of France in Brontë's works. In her novels, notions of sexuality and language emerge as two crucial dimensions in constructing the images of the Other and the Self, driven by imperialist ideology. Many critics have recognized the connection between imperialism and sexuality. Robert Gibson's *The Most Intractable Enemy* highlights the significance of sexual attitudes in Anglo-French antagonism, with the French frequently portrayed as licentious and dissolute. Brontë's novels inherit this stereotype, where French characters are often endowed with frivolous traits, contrasting sharply with the morally superior British characters such as *Jane Eyre*. Through this binary opposition in sexual morality, British cultural superiority is established, serving the imperialist imagination of its civilizing mission. Similarly, language functions as a vital marker distinguishing cultures. In the era of rising nation-state consciousness in which Brontë lived, language was elevated as a symbol of national identity. Consequently, language serves in her novels as a vehicle for identity construction and power relations. For example, in *Shirley*, Caroline demands that Robert, who usually speaks French, read Shakespeare in English to experience the "power of England" and thereby be "awakened," [8] which aligns with the imperialist logic of civilizing others through the imposition of a dominant culture. Similarly, in *Villette*, the Englishwoman Lucy, confronted by a group of French-speaking female students, thinks: "If only I could speak in my native tongue, I feel as if I might earn the chance to be heard... I could immediately flood them with English and disgrace their behavior." [5] This demonstrates Lucy's belief that English grants her discursive authority and the power to "discredit" French speakers; thus, English becomes a weapon to assert cultural dominance. The female writer Mary Ward insightfully noted that Charlotte Brontë's works embody "Celtic national character" and the "English national spirit." [20] Taken together, Brontë transforms the cultural differences between England and France into hierarchical distinctions. The essence of this narrative strategy lies in affirming national cultural superiority at the expense of belittling the Other. Hence, Brontë's texts become a testament to the imperial cultural imagination.

4. Conclusion

The construction of the French image in Charlotte Brontë's works stems both from the collective anxieties generated by the stringent moral norms of British society and from the imperialist ideology

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shaped by the political and cultural competition between Britain and France. Fundamentally, it serves as a form of self-affirmation that diminishes the cultural Other to reinforce the perceived superiority of the native culture. This study not only overcomes the limitations of existing research, which often focuses on single texts, by systematically examining the French image across Brontë's novels from the perspective of imagology, thereby revealing the interactive mechanism between literary imagination and national identity; it also offers a new entry point for understanding the ideological structure of nineteenth-century British society by analyzing the moral anxieties and imperial consciousness underlying the French image. The figure of the Other in cross-cultural contexts is always a metaphor for power relations, where differences in language, morality, and space are frequently transformed into hierarchical distinctions of civilization. In today's context of globalization, the historical experience of constructing the cultural Other remains a cautionary lesson. Only by transcending binary cognitive frameworks and acknowledging the complexity of cultural differences can we escape the trap of self-affirmation through the mirror of the Other and genuinely achieve equal dialogue among diverse civilizations.

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