

Jane eyre: model
feminist in the eyes of
wollstonecraft?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Fifty years before the publication of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Mary Wollstonecraft released *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a predominate piece of feminist philosophy, and one of the first of its kind. This piece works to analyze popular enlightenment ideals and sentiments that were being discussed by leading intellectuals and apply those same ideas to women. She argues that women are rational beings capable of complex, interesting thoughts, but have faced many barriers in being able to develop those thoughts fully. She also states that if men think that women are simplistic beings it is only because society has crafted them to be simplistic and care about frivolous, shallow matters. She pays special attention to the power of education to change this pattern for the better, stating that if given the same opportunities as men within the educational sector, women would be fully capable of rising to the same intellectual capacity as men. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë furthers this argument that women are capable, rational beings through the narration of Jane, the protagonist, a strong female who obtains equality through education in spite of her social class and gender.

Jane, after arriving at Thornfield, has a scene within the attic that really begins to outline her perspective on the expectations related to her gender as well her personal views about the matter. She identifies the issue that "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." In this statement, she not only underlines the expectation that women cannot show passion actively, but also establishes equality between herself and her metaphoric brethren. This section also begins to show Jane's maturation. She can think about these ideas without

growing overly passionate or angry. Later within the same section, she further outlines the menial tasks women are expected. These things include “making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags.” Just as Wollstonecraft in *Vindication*, Bronte is showing her disgust here for how men make fun of women’s folly, the same folly that they have instilled within their heads through lack of equal opportunity. This idea directly aligns with Wollstonecraft’s idea that women “acquire manners before morals and a knowledge of life before they have from reflection any acquaintance with the grand outline of human nature.” This attic section is the first time Bronte shows just how sick she is with society and its unreasonable expectations on females. She, as a female author, often faced discrimination in her line of work, and chose to use a pseudonym instead of her birth name. This makes perfect sense, for the very idea that women could be rational beings was being debated during this time period. It would be almost inconceivable for people of this time period to recognize Bronte’s genius.

Another section that directly parrots the words of Wollstonecraft is the proposal scene in the garden with Rochester. Here, he toys with her emotions in order to rouse a reaction. He tells her that he will marry Miss. Blanche and thinks it best if Jane goes to Ireland to be the governess for some other little girl. Immediately, Jane is enflamed and states “‘I tell you I must go!’ I retorted, roused to something like passion. ‘Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? O you think I am an automation?—a machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup?’” Here, Jane lets

passion take over her, something a proper lady within society would never think to do. It outlines the unnaturalness of Jane as a character and a woman, the type of character only a female author could have produced during this time period. She is educated in a lot of ways due to her lonely childhood, so immediately there is a distinction between her and women of the upper class who were taught domestic duties that are easily undermined because they do not apply to the public sector. This also creates a kinship between the character of Jane and Mary Wollstonecraft. She, during her time, was also considered an unnatural woman for seeking an education beyond common household duties and educating her daughter in a similar way.

The scene continues with Jane pleading “ do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? -You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should make it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: It is my spirit addressing your spirit.” This quote directly aligns with the popular notion that if a woman is not outwardly beautiful or seems disadvantaged, she must lack in some type of virtue. This aligns with the religious convention of the elect and the idea that members of the elect will make themselves obvious due to earthly blessings such as beauty and grace. Wollstonecraft tackles the idea of virtue within Vindication as well, stating that virtue is universal and not relative. She argues that because of men’s standing within society, it makes virtue an easier property to obtain; men are autonomous and not bent to the will of their father’s and husband’s like

women are. Wollstonecraft argues that without choice, one cannot be virtuous, so women cannot be virtuous. This is the main reason Wollstonecraft is so adamant about educating women: she believes that her salvation and chance at heaven may be threatened by her standing within society. Jane, who practices her own type of Christianity founded in equality under God, would likely share the same views as Wollstonecraft, though to a less extreme extent. She believes that men and women are equal in virtue, but she herself has been disadvantaged within society due to her economic status and gender. This quote states that under God, Rochester is her undeniable equal. When talking to him from her spirit, her essence, she is not talking through the mouth of a female, but through the mouth of a fellow human being. Her passion is so strong that it causes her to disregard social and gender barriers heaved upon her and address him through her spirit.

This quote also brings up an important idea about class. Jane, in many ways, is unsuitable for marriage. Despite being raised by a family of some wealth, she herself is an orphan with no clear lineage of affluence. She is working as a governess, so a woman that must take on all of the social expectations of a lady, but is not regarded as one. She describes herself as “plain” and “poor” putting an emphasis on the absurdity that Rochester would ever share the same feelings that she holds. Being that marriage during this time was primarily an exchange of wealth and status, not something done for love or even fondness (especially on the side of the female), the idea that a woman could love and would marry for love was preposterous. While Wollstonecraft did not believe that love was something to be trifled with (she often uses love and lust synonymously within *Vindication* and describes the passion in

less than favorable terms) she did believe an equal partnership rooted in a strong friendship was something to strive for within a marriage. She did not think this type of friendship could be obtained though without women acquiring a proper education on things other than domestic responsibilities. Women focused solely on domestic matters would not be able to keep their husbands' attention and friendship. Unlike Jane and Bronte by affiliation, Wollstonecraft would rather take indifference to love, though her ideas of what constituted love were probably quite skewed by her social status and her fervent religiousness.

The last quote and perhaps the most iconic of the feminist quotes from Jane Eyre occurs at the very end of the proposal scene. Rochester is still tricking Jane into believing that he will marry Blanche instead and says " Jane, be still; don't struggle so like a wild, frantic bird, that is rending its own plumage in its desperation." To this comment, Jane responds " I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being, with independent will; which I now exert to leave you." This line is Bronte's legacy, her manifesto. This is her assertion that she will be autonomous, and she is a rational, living, breathing human, not a romanticized fancy. This aligns with the ensnarement imagery present throughout the piece's entirety and answers Wollstonecraft's essential message: yes, women are rational human beings and deserve to be treated as such. Wollstonecraft, who stated " if they be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves" would state that this is a new beginning for women, a time where they can exert their autonomy and shake off the shackles that had been imposed upon them for so long. Wollstonecraft would say that this is the way

a woman can reach virtue, by choice. If Jane had stayed linked to Rochester's side, Wollstonecraft would have argued her to be not virtuous. She would have been bound Rochester, who would be married to another woman.

Overall, it is clear the Bronte was well versed in Wollstonecraft's works. She creates the character of Jane, an arguably unnatural woman, to assert and extend the narrative of women as rational beings capable of immense passion just as men are capable of such things. She creates a dialogue where societal conventions are discussed and challenged constantly, where a woman who's role within society should deem her absolutely powerless gains personal autonomy through education and finding her spiritual equal. With just fifty years of progress separating the works of Bronte and Wollstonecraft, many steps were taken and many barriers were broken down.