

Jane eyre: a critical analysis of gender relations in victorian literature

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Jane Eyre: A Critical Analysis of Gender Relations in Victorian Literature

Modern society tends to view the Victorian era as one of oppression and constraint, despite the social and cultural upheaval of the time. This contradiction refers, in large, to the constraints imposed on the female gender. Women in Victorian England were viewed as inferior to their male counterparts, and were allocated clearly defined roles within society. Their treatment is a subject that is explored and critiqued throughout the literature of the time, and subsequent analysis by literary commentators.

As Maynard comments (1984); ‘ Few observers of the Victorian Scene have failed to point out the unusual degree of sexual restraint imposed upon social life and published literature’. However, it is in the work of the Bronte sisters that one witnesses the most comprehensive, and sometimes startling account of the social and gender restraints of the time. This paper will concentrate on the novel *Jane Eyre*, written by Charlotte Bronte, and published in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell.

The adoption of a male pseudonym in itself reflects an underlying social prejudice towards female novelists, as outlined by the author; ‘ Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell... while we did not like to declare ourselves women... we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice’ (Smith, 2000). This somewhat disturbing observation by the author sets the tone of the novel itself, and implies what it is exactly that set the Bronte sisters apart from their contemporaries; their ‘ unfeminine’ style of writing.

Jane Eyre is, in effect, a love story, and concentrates on the main character's quest to find true love. It cannot be classed, however, as a solely romantic novel as the character's quest for love involves a struggle for equal treatment, social acceptance, and value. In doing so, she questions and refuses to conform to an array of social norms associated with the era. Jane's desire to be loved is evident in the opening stages of the story, in her conversation with Helen Burn's; 'if others don't love me I would rather die than live...

I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest' (Bronte, 1847). This somewhat distressing insight into the young Eyre's mindset captures her quest for 'true love', as opposed to the loveless relationships and marriages associated with the time. This association is witnessed by Jane's eventual husband, Mr Rochester, in his first marriage; 'Bertha Antoinette Mason, she was wanted by my father for her fortune. I hardly spoke with her before the wedding. I lived with her for 4 years.

Her temper ripened, her vices sprang up, violent and unchaste' (Bronte, 1847). Rochester's summary of the 'marriage' is a disturbing insight into the arranged, and socially acceptable, marriages of the time. Bronte sets her protagonist apart from her peers in her views of love, but further cements this difference in her continued criticism of the attitudes of the Victorian class. This is apparent in chapter 17 in particular, when she questions her growing feelings for Mr Rochester; 'You have nothing to do with the master of Thornfield, further than to receive the salary he gives you for teaching his

protege.... o don't make him the object of your fine feelings'. (Bronte, 1847)

It becomes clear, however, that despite Jane's attempts to restrain her emotions, she is fighting a losing battle and is becoming increasingly enraptured with Mr Rochester, reacting in a heated manner upon receipt of a letter from him; ' And while she broke the seal and perused the document, I went on taking my coffee... Why my hand shook, and why I involuntarily spilt half the contents of my cup into my saucer, I did not choose to consider' (Bronte, 1847).

Jane's employment as a governess by Mr Rochester further complicates her situation and her increasing love for her employer. Hedgecock summarises the role of the governess in Victorian society (2008): ' in ordinary Victorian life, the governess is the genteel spinster, self-effacing, having no ambitions outside the home in which she is subjected to a life of dependency'. Eyre, however, was not willing to conform to ' ordinary Victorian life', nor was she willing to fit the mould of the unassuming governess.

Eyre's constant struggle with her feelings for Rochester is impacted throughout by the norms of society at the time, and her resilience to them. She is unwilling to marry Rochester while Bertha is still in the picture, as it would equate her to a mistress, a position that she wholly disapproves of and one which Rochester wishes her to take: ' As a married man you will shun me, keep out of my way: just now you have refused to kiss me'. (Bronte, 1847). Despite Eyre eventually marrying Rochester, when his wife has passed away, she refuses throughout to conform to and comply with the social etiquette of the time.

Just like her creator, she is almost masculine throughout the novel, thus portrayed through her personal values and strength of character. It can be understood that Charlotte Bronte depicted herself through the life of Jane Eyre, and used her fictional character as one whom modelled and almost mimicked Bronte as a person. Eyre possessed the same strong drive in seeking equality and independence as a woman. Her refusal in accepting the conformities of the time mirrors Bronte.

Bernstein (1997) sets the scene for those non-familiar with the Victorian era: 'in the larger cultural context of Victorian England in which women are not accorded by law or by custom much opportunity to act on their own behalf'. This supports the motive behind Bronte and her actions. It portrays the gender roles, which strongly influenced people's behaviour and identities. This 'social rule' fuelled women's endurance of the condescending attitudes about a woman's place, intelligence, and voice. Thus, in turn, Jane became subjected to an uphill battle to become independent and recognized for her personal qualities.

Bronte attempts to illustrate how personal virtues are better indicators of character than class. The red-room mentioned in the novel is a metaphorical image for Jane's entrapment in the life she is expected to lead. A life of entrapment from society, limiting her freedom due to her independent streak, race and foremost – gender. Eyre's struggles in attempting to overcome the oppression are all of a display through the feminine movement, in which the Bronte sisters each played a significant role in

setting off. Eyre displays characteristics of masculinity, such of which in Victorian era would only be confined to that of male prominence.

The strong connection made between both author and character is evident to the reader. In conclusion, Jane Eyre captures the struggle and oppression faced by the women of Victorian Britain. Despite the eventual happy-ending to the novel, the lead character is forced to overcome strict social and gender restrictions in order to be with her true love. We see throughout the novel, however, that Eyre is an exceptional character at the time and represents only a small number of women who were quietly moving against society's expectations of them.

Charlotte, the eldest of the Bronte sisters, received reputably the most critical recognition with her creation, Jane Eyre. Overall, the three Bronte sisters are highly known in English literature for their historical prominence that made them significant to the era of the Victorians. Their livelihood painted the path in which their work followed and their upbringing greatly influenced their beliefs and outlooks. The three sister's strong and willing characteristics aided them in delivering what can be perceived as staples in literature, and for centuries become only stronger with growth and eminence.

As Winnifrith (1988) stated; ' the Brontes had the courage to break away from the almost universal belief that sinners merited eternal punishment'. This reflects upon their independence and strength in striving for their own beliefs and expressing their opinions. These opinions were of such strong stature, resulting in the power to in script their everlasting effect on the

literature of the Victorian era and even on English literature as a whole.

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