
An Analysis On The Portrayal Of Males In Jane Eyre

Introduction

The question around which this paper is based is: How effectively does Charlotte Bronte demonstrate feminism through the use of her male characters in the book Jane Eyre and contrast the conventional image of women at the time?

'Feminism' in this sense being, acts that support the equality of genders. (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019)

Jane Eyre was published by Charlotte Bronte in Britain in 1847, during the Victorian Era. Gender roles were becoming increasingly defined, at this time and women had numerous expectations that they were expected to uphold. (Hughes 2014)

Through Jane Eyre, Bronte expresses these ideals and offers a glimpse at the patriarchal and classist society in which women are oppressed (her society at the time), but she also demonstrates how the protagonist, 'Jane', refused to conform to all of these rules.

This essay seeks to highlight the evidence that suggests that Bronte demonstrated feminism in her book "Jane Eyre". It will also make use of papers by several researchers and information from numerous websites on the context and content of Jane Eyre.

Feminism is a topic that is still much at the forefront of people's minds today and when investigating the topic, much can be discovered through its portrayal in the arts. There are few books from the 19th century as highly connected to gender studies as Jane Eyre and an analysis of the book should offer great insight on feminism at the time.

The Context and Reception

Jane Eyre was published by Charlotte Bronte in 1847 under the male pseudonym "Currer Bell". This this book may have disrupted the social order at the time and would, therefore, be highly frowned upon if it were to be openly written by a woman. Some people did suspect that the author was in fact a woman, however the general populace strongly believed that it was a man who wrote the novel.

The book was apparently so out of character for a female that "The conservative Lady Eastlake suggested that if the book was by a woman 'she had long forfeited the society of her own sex'" (Shuttleworth, S. 2014). This article also suggests that Lady Eastlake attributed to the book a 'spirit of rebellion' that she 'likened to the working class.... With their demand for votes'. "Jane Eyre unsettled views as to how women should act and behave, suggesting in lady Eastlake's eyes, almost an overthrowing of social order."

This is only one of the reviews that Jane Eyre received upon its publication, in December of 1948, Elizabeth Rigby in her assessment for the Quarterly Review holds the with even more contempt. She "describes Jane's strong character traits as being immoral and not intended by

God: "It is by her own talents, virtues, and courage that she is made to attain the summit of human happiness, and, as far as Jane Eyre's own statement is concerned, no one would think that she owed anything either to God above or to man below" (Harrison, K. 2015).

These reviews clearly suggest that Charlotte Bronte's work was very controversial, pushing the boundaries of the time in which it was released. Even now Jane Eyre is one of the most popular novels produced during the Victorian Era and the book remains linked to gender relations and studies. It stands to reason that Bronte was subtly trying to protest against the prominent attitudes towards women at the time. She even chose to publish it under a male pseudonym, suggesting that she understood the powers that be at the time and knew that she would not be given a fair review under the guise of a woman. It is also ironic to note that "A critic for the Era goes on to state that the text is written with such brilliancy that no woman could have ever written this." (Harrison, K. 2015), again suggestive of the attitudes towards women and their abilities at the time.

The portrayal of the male characters in Jane Eyre

The development of the male characters not only further the plot, but also demonstrate the attitudes towards the women and the ways in which Jane stands out from the typical woman at the time.

The male characters portrayed in Jane Eyre are not ideal "Victorian gentlemen", who were supposed to be "courteous, obliging, polite, free, and easy in his manners, honourable, humane, forgiving, humble-minded, devoid of all conceit or vanity and virtuous" (The Derby, 1831). Instead all of the male characters of the book have at least one of the following traits: cruelty, a propensity to lie, deception, and domineering characteristics, and there is a reason that Bronte does this.

John Reed

The first character that readers are given a full description of is John Reed (Jane's cousin), he is described as "large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities.", he is "bilious", with a "bleared eye and flabby cheeks" caused by his gluttony. He is the most prominent antagonist in Jane's early life.

Jane states that she fears him and all others in the house turn a blind eye to his poor treatment of Jane. This may be symbolic of the way in which women in Bronte's society were constantly treated poorly by men and it was very rarely addressed. (Jane Eyre 2016).

He is domineering, cruel and wicked and with is with him that Jane first stands her ground against a male figure. Jane states that she was "habitually obedient to John" (Jane Eyre 2016), however when John hurts Jane so badly that "(her) terror had passed its climax", she exclaims "Wicked and cruel boy!" I said. 'You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!'" (Jane Eyre 2016). When John retaliates physically and Jane responds in sort she is the person who is punished. When Jane is sent to the "red-room" and it is here that Jane contemplates her life and determines that her treatment is "Unjust!" (Jane Eyre 2016) and she resolves to escape it.

John serves to show Jane her self-worth, shown when the maids who are punishing Jane refer to John as her master, and she exclaims “Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?” (Jane Eyre 2016). John is also the catalyst into Jane’s tendency to advocate and stand for herself and for justice.

Reverend Brocklehurst

The next male that Jane encounters is Reverend Brocklehurst, the superintendent of Lowood School, where Jane is sent. Mr. Brocklehurst, proves to be yet another cruel man in Jane’s life, he is also selfish, dishonest and hypocritical and most importantly very oppressive. He forces the girls at Lowood to conform to his ideal of a female, a poor female at that, by instructing them all to cut their hair so they would be humble. He states “ my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young persons before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven: these, I repeat, must be cut off; think of the time wasted of”. (Jane Eyre, 2016. P 40). His aim is exercise his authority in order to force the girls into the females that he believes that they should be. He tries to repress every girl’s individuality and make them believe that what he is doing is right, especially in the eyes of God.

Soon after Jane entered the school Brocklehurst labels her a “liar”, shaming Jane publicly and forcing her to stand on a stool before everybody. It was there that Jane discovered “an extraordinary sensation”, she felt like the experience “imparted strength” and she “mastered the rising hysteria, lifted up (her) head, and took a firm stand on the stool.” After this, when Jane is in tears about the event, she cried and reflected that she was “treated as an equal”, and when she believed that Mr Brocklehurst had taken this away from her she felt “crushed and trodden on”. (Jane Eyre, 2016. p.42). This highlights the importance which Jane places on her equality to others, and also it shows that Jane understand the power which Mr Brocklehurst has. The girl’s response to him though demonstrates an act of feminism, Jane refuses to let him crush her individuality and Helen Burns states “Mr Brocklehurst is not a god: nor is he even a great and admired man”, suggesting that she understands that he is only a person with finite power equal in power to any human.

When Jane is asked later by Mr Rochester about Mr Brocklehurst, Jane states “I disliked Mr. Brocklehurst; and I was not alone in the feeling. He is a harsh man; at once pompous and meddling; he cut off our hair; and for economy’s sake bought us bad needles and thread, with which we could hardly sew.” (Jane Eyre 2016) and goes on to speak of his cruelty. This shocking to her audience as it is uncommon for a female to speak so negatively and frankly about a male, especially one in high social standing. Here, Jane demonstrated that she would not fit into the status quo and be the ever-polite female society demanded when she was being wronged.

St John Rivers

St. John Rivers was Jane’s highly religious cousin, with whom she stayed at Marsh End after she ran away from Mr Rochester. Mr Rivers, not unlike the other men encountered by Jane, is oppressive and controlling. Unlike the others, however, St John is described as attractive with a “Grecian profile”, which conceals his coldness and “statue”-like personality. More so, perhaps

than any others as he proceeds to control Jane in a way that no other male has managed to do. He was very direct in his control, when he wished for Jane to learn a new language he simply states “I want you to give up German and learn Hindostanee.”

Jane lamented, “I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. I was so fully aware that only serious moods and occupations were acceptable, that in his presence every effort to sustain or follow any other became vain: I fell under a freezing spell. When he said ‘go,’ I went; ‘come,’ I came; ‘do this,’ I did it. But I did not love my servitude: I wished, many a time, he had continued to neglect me.” (Jane Eyre, 2016. p 270)

Jane also calls him “master”(Jane Eyre, 2016. p 270), a title that she had bestowed upon no other being than God. Jane admits “I daily wished more to please him; but to do so, I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature,” demonstrating how St John’s overbearing nature was beginning to change Jane into the typical Victorian female. He does not ask Jane to marry him he tells her, he states “A missionary’s wife you must—shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you—not for my pleasure,” after describing her as “docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous; very gentle, and very heroic”, these qualities only representing the parts of Jane’s personality that were allowed to be shown under his heavy rule. Jane finally stands up against St John, stating, “I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it.”, shocking him as she displays her not so docile side. Jane wrote that St John “met resistance where (he) expected submission”(Jane Eyre, 2016 p.278). In Victorian England marriage was highly sought after by women, it was the avenue through which they would fulfill their domestic duties. By rejecting St John’s proposal, Jane gains her independence completely and so can return to Mr.Rochester a completely independent person, she has now become his equal.

Mr Rochester

Mr Edward Rochester is Jane’s employer while she is at Thornfield and he later becomes her fiancé. From the moment that Jane encounters Mr Rochester orders her harshly and it is this harsh nature that compels Jane to obey him.

He is never described as handsome but Jane describes him to have “athletic strength” and “vigorous prime”. This is a strength which Rochester later uses to intimidate Jane, “Jane, I am not a gentle-tempered man—you forget that: I am not longenduring; I am not cool and dispassionate. Out of pity to me and yourself, put your fingers on my pulse, feel how it throbs, and—beware!” (Jane Eyre 2016 p.205), after Jane refused to be his mistress he calls on the fact that men are stronger than women to try to urge her into changing her mind. Jane is aware of his strength over her but refuses to give in she responds by thinking that “to yield was out of the question”(Jane Eyre 2016 p.205). demonstrating how Jane stands up for herself even when directly faced with a threat from a male. By refusing to be Rochester’s mistress, though she loves him, Jane takes the first step towards the independence that she finds at Marsh End.

There are two major shifts in Rochester’s personality throughout the book, first his transition after becoming Jane’s fiancé and the second being after Jane returns to him. Before they become engaged the reader gets the sense that Rochester sees Jane almost as an equal or atleast that any superiority he feels is not due to his sex or hers’ he says “I don’t wish to treat

you as an inferior: that is'... 'I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years' difference in age and a century's advance in experience.". However, after ensuring Jane's love he begins to treat her as an inferior, he demands that she give up her salary and allow him to take care of her and when she refuses he says, "It is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently; and when once I have fairly seized you to have and to hold, I'll just... attach you to a chain...", Jane notices this shift and resolves to keep him "in reasonable check"(Jane Eyre, 2016. p.182).

The second shift is when Jane returns to Mr. Rochester he is made aware that Jane is a rich, independent woman and because he is now blind he is instead dependent on Jane. There is a mutual need for love and support (Nimni 2016) and this is important as the book ends with Jane finally having found her equal, which is the basis on which feminism is formed.

Conclusion

It can clearly be argued that Charlotte Bronte used the male characters in Jane Eyre to emphasize and further Jane's development as what would today be called a "Feminist". It is through these characters, John Reed, Mr Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers and Mr Rochester, that we see how Jane differs from society's expectations. Her "shocking" behavior, that is, standing up for herself and what she believes... her refusal to be seen or treated as less than she is worth and her propensity to speak frankly to vocalize her thoughts and feelings even when she knows that it is out of place, demonstrates Charlotte Bronte's image of a woman that stands out from society and demands equality.

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