

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

LITERARY PERCEPTION AND JANE EYRE

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Article Received: 19/08/2021

Article Accepted: 28/09/2021

Published online:30/09/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.311](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.311)

Abstract

Jane Eyre is considered to be one of the most pioneering, forward-thinking and important pieces of feminist literature. This essay seeks to provide a different perspective on the classic, one that acknowledges the feminist and modernist components of the text, but also takes the fact into account that it was not written with the intention of being a revolutionary feminist text, resulting in a few contradictions with modern feminism. While doing that, the essay also takes note of how the perception of the classic has evolved over time, and what factors influenced the perception.

Key words: Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte, feminism, literary perception

Introduction

Published in 1847 under the pen name Currer Bell, Jane Eyre is an integral part of the classical cannon, and even more so of the feminist cannon. Looked upon as an unquestionably feminist piece of literature, there have been minimal significant perspectives on this being anything other than, while the intentions of this novel were completely different. Jane Eyre, written by Charlotte Brontë, is a romance and coming of age novel, presented in form of an autobiography of Jane Eyre, who lends her name to the title of this novel. The novel follows Jane Eyre at her relatives' home after her parents' death, and then at Lowood school, Thornfield, Marsh end and Moor House. Every location brings about a change in Jane, from angry and rebellious Jane to content Jane, and confused one, the reader gets to observe her actions in various forms, and at different ages. While the feminist parts of the classic are analysed at length by various authors including Sandra Gilbert among others, the other parts are,

more often than not, conveniently forgotten. There is a possibility that Jane Eyre is not entirely a feminist text, and this paper seeks to explore that possibility through the phenomenon of public perception.

Widely considered as one of the earliest and one of the most revolutionary works of feminism, 'Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Bronte lies in a complicated place when it comes to contemporary feminism and morality. First published in the mid nineteenth century, Jane Eyre was widely accepted as a 'remarkable project'. Whether a person agreed that the novel was a beautiful representation of strong women and a project that would go on to be one of the most loved pieces of literature, or they argued negatively to all of these points, one could not deny the immediate and profound effect it had in the public discussion in Victorian England.

Looking beyond the impact it has had, Jane Eyre is primarily a romance novel that has been written as an autobiography, from the perspective of Jane Eyre. Having lost her parents early, she lives

with Mrs. Reed, Jane's aunt, and her family. Here, she has a tormenting experience filled with bullying, hatred and discrimination towards her. The reader gets introduced to her only a few weeks before she is gone from the home, so it is hard to discern if her revolting behaviour is an anomaly or the usual behaviour of hers. After the aforementioned conflict, however, she moves to Lowood, which is where we get the most insightful looks into Jane's psychic. After studying and teaching at Lowood, a charity school, for a combined eight years, and following Miss Temple's— a mentor of Jane's— marriage, she moves to Thornfield, a residence near Millcote, to fill the position of the governess of Adele. Here we are introduced to several important characters, including Jane's love interest, Edward Rochester. A fairly turbulent history was behind the stringent and cold Rochester, both of which curiously attracted Jane. While there are a few character traits further explored along detours that do not necessarily reinforce the already presented ones, there is relatively less insight into Jane from this point onwards. Yes, her decisions provide a valuable, and a much needed, insight into her towards the very end, but the larger part of the second part of this classic is condensed plot, and Jane's thoughts on it, which is very much not a critique, but an influencing factor nonetheless.

The reason the plot goes on like it does is that Jane is a revolting, self righteous and loud individual, who does not believe it is correct to be oppressed, and feels a certain responsibility to stand straight when faced with the same. These are just a few traits that very apparent in the text. As Elizabeth Rigby pointed out in her now popular critical review of the 1847 novel, Jane Eyre is not someone one should aspire to be. She is unethical—at least by the ridiculous standards of the Victorian era— and a self contradicting character full of flaws. In the same piece, she mentions the fact that the reader and the other characters get a different and, in ways, contradicting perceptions of Jane. Her claims in the diary do not match her actions, and Rigby failed to acknowledge that any further than the initial criticism. That is the reason we have a perfect representation of the perception this novel generates.

During key acts of the novel, Jane's words and those of other characters, are hugely different. For one, the other characters are far more eloquent, are portrayed much smarter and possess an inherent ability to persuade, while Jane is blunt, plain and almost repelling, especially in some of the more important scenes. For example, just after Jane's new found friend at Lowood, Helen, was repeatedly flogged and punished by Ms Scatcherd, a teacher at Lowood, Jane is troubled by the incident and approaches Helen.

"You must wish to leave Lowood?"

"No! why should I? I was sent to Lowood to get an education; and it would be of no use going away until I have attained that object."

"But that teacher, Miss Scatcherd, is so cruel to you?"

"Cruel? Not at all! She is severe: she dislikes my faults."

"And if I were in your place I should dislike her; I should resist her. If she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose."

"Probably you would do nothing of the sort: but if you did, Mr. Brocklehurst would expel you from the school; that would be a great grief to your relations. It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you; and besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil."

"But then it seems disgraceful to be flogged, and to be sent to stand in the middle of a room full of people; and you are such a great girl: I am far younger than you, and I could not bear it."

"Yet it would be your duty to bear it, if you could not avoid it: it is weak and silly to say you cannot bear what it is your fate to be required to bear."

I heard her with wonder: I could not comprehend this doctrine of endurance; and still less could I understand or sympathise with the forbearance she expressed for her

chastiser. Still I felt that Helen Burns considered things by a light invisible to my eyes. I suspected she might be right and I wrong; but I would not ponder the matter deeply; like Felix, I put it off to a more convenient season.

"You say you have faults, Helen: what are they? To me you seem very good."

"Then learn from me, not to judge by appearances: I am, as Miss Scatcherd said, slatternly; I seldom put, and never keep, things, in order; I am careless; I forget rules; I read when I should learn my lessons; I have no method; and sometimes I say, like you, I cannot bear to be subjected to systematic arrangements. This is all very provoking to Miss Scatcherd, who is naturally neat, punctual, and particular."

"And cross and cruel," I added; but Helen Burns would not admit my addition: she kept silence.

During the aforementioned conversation, Jane is direct and frank. Helen, however, acts calm, understanding and accepting, and it does not help that she is extremely well spoken. The perception, when one reads this conversation would be what Brocklehurst and Mrs Reed want us to believe. Jane Eyre comes off blunt, angry, and short tempered. These things are not necessarily bad, per say. The context, however, begs us to perceive this as bad. When Helen says "and yet it would be your duty to bear it...", she emphasises her opinion and makes Jane think. In addition, Helen puts forward very legitimate thoughts and even Jane, somewhere in her mind, agrees, and admires even. The thoughts Jane expresses after the reasoning by Helen are clear to be of confusion and when put bluntly, of inferiority. Jane *suspects* herself to be wrong, so is there any reason for the reader to perceive anything else? Helen being an excelling individual only furthers the legitimacy of her opinions.

Helen is present only for a brief period in the book, after which she dies due to an epidemic that spreads at Lowood. In that period, along with the previous conversation, Helen's thoughts on Mrs

Reed are equally troubling, just as eloquent and even more reasonable.

The many decades of mulling over the greatness of this book, the liberty Jane gave herself, the statement of feminism that this surely is, has resulted in this being one of the very first classics students are meant to read. The context provided is what has been the popular belief about the work, one of the most ground-breaking, forward thinking feminist literary work that has seen the light of the day. There are, however, several problems in this.

Feminism is not about being discourteous, or blunt. This book was not meant to be a grand statement on feminism like so many today are, and that needs to be taken into account while analysing it, because the most important part of reading is perception. Perception of the characters, their positives, negatives, and the perception of the situation, who is correct? Who is not?

Charlotte Bronte probably reasoned the character of Jane Eyre as a rebel who knelt in front of love, a sweet plot far from what has been popularised as the epitome of feminism ever since Sandra Gilbert's famous essay. That is not to say there is no ground to cover when feminist side of Jane Eyre is considered. The mental monologue in the twelfth chapter while she sat alone in Thornfield is a brilliant example and the thoughts presented are certainly feminist. There is, however, a large number of instances in the text that delegitimise a few thought-trains like this.

All of this also recognises the duality of public perception of, and the character itself, Jane Eyre. There is never a memorable character without multifaceted personality. The popular public perception, however, is more often than not, based around a single trait of a character. Feminism for Jane Eyre is only one example, 'bravery and friendship' of Harry Potter, decadence of Dorian Gray, eccentric intelligence of Sherlock Holmes are all very similar cases.

Acknowledgement: Conducted under the guidance of Dr Milind Pandit.

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