

JANE EYRE AND THE STEREOTYPES OF NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMEN

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Jane Eyre may be a story about a governess in Victorian England, surrounded by the ideals and customs of Victorian England, but above all the story focuses on Jane's individuality and willfulness as a woman: she succumbs where she knows she must (not necessarily as a woman but as a person) and she expands her willfulness where she knows she can. The story never loses sight of her individuality as a person, which she is allowed by her author (whom may have felt she could only wish for it herself). Throughout the story there is such strong respect for Jane's individuality, indeed this point is faithfully painted and is never adulterated.

Instead of being the stereotypical powerless woman of her time period, succumbing to and living at the will of men, Jane Eyre has her own power in her own willfulness, for she has an insight and judgment that went beyond the customs of her times. Instead of allowing those in power to tell her story for her, she dictates her own story and instigates her own actions. However, rather than overcoming her predeterminations entirely, she does render her will to a degree, most notably in her artistic capabilities and work.

The early parts of the story are heart-wrenching and I wonder if these stereotypes of poor children did not also call to the humanity needed to read Jane's story. So hard to bear is the thought of any child treated without love, even scorned and neglected. In rousing the distressed feelings in her readers, Charlotte Bronte is also calling for the understanding and liberation of 19th Century women. I especially felt this when Jane's friend is punished by having her hands slapped, which may have reflected the punishment of free thought in a woman (Charlotte herself). An interesting note in relation to this is that science has proven that the hands are directly linked to the frontal lobe (executive functioning control) of the brain; slapping the hands is like slapping free thought.

Highly symbolic and telling of the times in which she lived is that Jane had a gift for drawing but did not pursue that gift. Charlotte Bronte herself may have felt that she needed to give up her writing. Especially touching was the virtue of friendship that Jane displayed, well beyond her years, when she joined her friend in getting her hair cut off and when she sought out the same girls when she was sick and sleeping in a different part of the school. The most striking thing about Jane after her time in this school was how much self-restraint she shows, even though independently-minded. There exist many flowery words about friendship written in this

time period, but she may have broken the mold by displaying true friendship rather than merely talking about it.

In 19th century England, being a governess was one of the few occupations considered suitable for an unmarried poor woman, and Jane Eyre seems to be the perfect Victorian governess. At the same time however, her strong-willed, independent, and assertive qualities bestow her with individuality that was her own, dispelling of the governess norms. In Rochester's house where she was governess, Jane Eyre's personal character is revealed when she did not go in search of the strange noises on her own in secret. She controlled her curiosity, and this personal temperament may be her own or a sign of her times. She met the master of the house when she was on a walk by herself, as though she were soul-searching, wandering to and fro in her own mind, recognizing him by heart when they met, in essence finding herself. She also has a healing nature, even with her mere presence, first displayed by her friendship with the girl in Lowood then with the master of the house when he fell off the horse.

Rochester also calls upon her not to be afraid of his horse upon falling off of it, and he seems to want deeper communication with her...he probes her mind on several occasions. She uses her talent through him, for she was inspired to draw his portrait when she looked down upon him from the balcony, using him as her muse. Again, striking is that she tells Adele that the shadows are as important as the light when teaching her how to draw, meaning that it may often be what we don't see that shows us as much truth as what we do see. She also adheres strongly to religion and speaking what is religiously correct, benefiting her role as a Victorian lady in one aspect. But as much as she broke from Victorian expectations of a woman, Rochester broke from them also by allowing her freedom of will. Their love allows them to break many of the bindings of normalcy.

It was typical and socially acceptable for a governess to be expected to attend social settings if invited, though she should be isolated. The scenes of Jane joining the party and staying by herself are very accurate to the times and circumstance. She does show her own will upon leaving one of those social settings when Rochester is dancing closely with his fiancé, however. Though Rochester has some resentment of Adele which comes out harshly, Jane is able to see and point out when he makes her feel unwanted and unloved, which was very telling of her character and healing nature. She feels free in pointing out his faults.

Fire is a striking, repeated symbol throughout the story, beginning with Rochester's bed afire. He puts himself in Jane's debt when she saves him from the fire. He bids her to stay for the parties, but out of his desire to squeeze the admission of her love for him out of her. I love what he says about the longing string before he proposes to Jane, for his words reminded me of Rumi's poetry. Rochester says that she's an equal and she says she's free, and he asks her to stay...specifying that he loves her as his own flesh. The fire at the story's climax is a burning away of everything he wishes he had not, and his resulted blindness may be symbolic of his emotional blindness. Their love builds in the separation between their first marriage attempt and when she comes back – the time away may have been necessary to deepen them in each other.

Jane and Rochester are equally matched in the consequence of his handicap, for she's placed above him in the role of caretaker and benefactor of love and willingness. Her love and care are unconditional. *She's* made a sacrifice. The fact that she then has money and Rochester is blind actually empowers her to actively love him (she was not passive at this point), and thus she was in higher stature than him. It was by her means (internal courage and humility) that they were re-united; all the physical money did was pay for her trip back to him. She also has power when St. John Rivers asks her to marry him but she doesn't return his feelings and instead

leaves...out of deep love and connection to Rochester - not pride and not submission. She shows none of the needfulness she may be assumed to have as a 19th Century Victorian woman. Rochester is also deeply stunned and grateful when she returns to him. Because of this, I consider his fate more of a humbling than a punishment. The novel has a happy conclusion because it states that she is blessed to give someone the unconditional love that she herself never had. The ending gives her power and she uses it to bring healing to her own life, as well as the life of someone else.

As an appendage, regarding the reading of Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein* reflects the feeling of being less than human, the effects left by being treated with prejudice. The stark loss of Shelly's own baby takes life in the story she created by resurrecting dead bodies from the graveyard; her baby having died and her wish to warm him and bring him back to life is so striking and symbolic of the fire in *Frankenstein* and even the fires in *Jane Eyre*. *Frankenstein* also gives Shelly power where the women of her time had none (she effectively has the ultimate power of life and death with her pen).

In the end, both Jane and Mary Shelly were the protectors of men, and ultimately that in itself should be the essence of the message in *Jane Eyre*, which goes against the stereotype of Victorian women as being completely dependent upon the generosity of men. *Jane Eyre* begins the story by being oppressed and ends with being fully liberated, for she is a response to Charlotte Bronte's times. 1837 critic Robert Southey wrote of Charlotte Bronte: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and as recreation." *Jane Eyre* spoke Charlotte Bronte's rebuttal of these set limitations.