

***Jane Eyre*: The Infancy Narrative of Victorian Reformism by Ava DiGiuseppe**

Introduction

The preface of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents a proposal that is diametrically opposed to Victorian fundamentalism and gender-oriented hegemony: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns" (Brontë 6). Correspondingly, the application of feminist literary criticism to *Jane Eyre* promotes the examination of sociological hindrances faced by representations of period-centered feminine archetypes, as well as author Brontë. The study of literature through critical lenses sanctions a methodical approach to textual analysis; critical lenses provide the foundation of ideological principles that aid in a structured study of a text. Additionally, a feminist critical analysis of *Jane Eyre* argues for the study of the rights and responsibilities of women during the Victorian Era. Though Victorian women were expected to maintain subservience under the scrutiny of social obligation and puritanical religion, literature such as *Jane Eyre* argues that Victorian women may find independence through excellence in their field despite aforementioned circumstances. This argument is perceptible with the progression of Jane Eyre from childhood through adolescence and adulthood since her academic pursuits in childhood, undeterred by hardships faced at Gateshead Manor and the Lowood School, culminate in maturity and intellectual prosperity at Thornfield Hall. The characters with whom Jane shares relations are representative of sociological auxiliaries and hindrances to her development; Jane prohibits characters who impeded upon her childhood development from deterring her ambitions in adulthood. Furthermore, feminist critical analysis argues for the study of Brontë in congruence with semi-autobiographical Jane as their parallel nature provides analytical insight. With its propositions in opposition to nineteenth-century fundamentalism and persecution of womanhood, *Jane Eyre* supports the employment and principles of feminist literary criticism. While maintaining the paradigmatic sociological positions expected of her Victorian contemporaries and simultaneously outlining an anachronistic argument for social progression, Brontë contributed *Jane Eyre* as doctrine within the feminist literary canon.

Literary Theory

Literary theory describes the analytical relationship between a text and an interpretive evaluation of its parts; the subjective element of literary theory culminates in the study of literature through critical lenses. With the periodical development of philosophical schools, branches of literary theory have expanded into varying sectors of study, which provide additional background for purposes of research and study through critical lenses in the form of dogmatic literary works. Critical lenses seek to develop a series of principles or tenets that are attributed to ideologies of their founders. Critical lenses are pioneered by authors, scholars, and theorists whose contributions to literary criticism are composed of literary works and theses. Furthermore, critical lenses study a syllabus of works that are considered doctrine within their schools of

thought (e.g. *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carlson, an environmentalist, is a canonical piece of literature within the study of ecocriticism) (Brewton). The literary contributions of critical lens founders provide literary material for analysis in addition to the necessary tools for researchers and students to develop critical skills. In addition to literary doctrine and the ideological teachings of lens founders, critical lenses may be applied to various pieces of literature, including works that are not within the canonical repertoire of a selected critical lens. The philosophical foundations of a critical lens require periodical additions, including works of literature and arguments presented by critical lens scholars, as the school of thought risks eradication without modern theorists to continue the practice. The practice of studying contemporary literature through critical lens analysis allows for the inclusion of additional literature in the ideological canon. With the principles of critical analysis having been applied to a text such as *Jane Eyre*, the literary canon of a selected critical lens will have been expanded upon in a manner that promotes the inclusion of contemporary literature and ideology.

The study of literary theory in congruence with the tenets and principles of contemporary feminism allows for the organized study of womanhood through literature. Feminist literary criticism proposes that works of literature are produced within the confines of a male-dominated society; therefore, it is essential to contextualize the social positions of women within these literary works for the purpose of comprehensive understanding (Spivak). The principles of feminist literary criticism promote the study of literary works with concentration on the roles of women in literature. Additionally, feminist literary criticism studies the hierarchical differences between the opposing sexes with the aid of historical resources for the purpose of sociological contextualization (Evans 285). Feminist literary criticism may study both works of literature and their authors as the position of authorship provides context that promotes concentrated textual analysis. In alignment with its predecessors, feminist literary theory studies works that are treated as doctrine within the philosophical scope of the lens. These dogmatic works of literature are credited to the founders of feminist literary criticism such as *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft (Goulimari). The academic value of these works parallels itself to the growth of the feminist movement from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries to the present day. Furthermore, the historical value of feminist literary doctrine allows for the addition of contemporary feminist literature to be included within the ideological canon (Goulimari). The application of feminist literary criticism to *Jane Eyre* promotes the analysis of nineteenth-century womanhood and advances the argument that periodical literature acts as an auxiliary to the study of Victorian sociology.

Contextual Summary

The metamorphic experiences of Jane occur in accordance with her age, societal expectations, and relationships. With her orphaned position, Jane resides at the persecutionary Gateshead Hall from childhood until early adolescence with tyrannical figures such as Mrs. Reed and her pugnacious children. As a form of punishment, the ReedJane is subjected to treatment such as confinement to the fearsome red-room and physical abuse delivered by the Reed

children. With contempt for Jane, the matriarch, Mrs. Reed condemns her to study at the fundamentalist Lowood School as a conclusive form of punishment that marks a cessation to her residence at Gateshead Hall. At the Lowood School, Jane is subjected to a disciplined and evangelical academic study that facilitates her excellence in the fields of music, visual art, language and composition, and literature. It is within the confines of the Lowood School that Jane develops relationships and socratic mentorships with her peers and instructors that counteract the autocratic rule of figures such as the sanctimonious headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst. Despite Jane's valiance, she is burdened with the reign of consumption that strikes her dearest friend, Helen Burns, and stalemates her into a defenseless position of adolescence. Succeeding her tenure at the Lowood School, Jane accepts a position as a governess at the Gothic Thornfield Hall. In accordance with Victorian social conventions, Jane applies her education to the instruction of her pupil, Adèle Varens, in her fields of excellence and develops relationships with Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, and Edward Rochester, the guardian of Adèle. With the passage of time at Thornfield Hall, Jane learns of the enigmatic secrets that plague Thornfield Hall, such as the psychologically impaired first wife of Edward Rochester who is confined to the attic, Bertha Mason. Bertha acts both as a hindrance to the developing romantic relationship between Jane and Edward and as the antithesis of Jane. In spite of Bertha's incendiary act that causes the disfiguration of Edward, however, Jane and Edward joyously wed one another as the culmination of the text.

Literary Analysis

The role of women in nineteenth-century works of literature requires a historical and theological analysis of fundamentalist doctrine in the Victorian era. With the application of a theological analysis, orthodox Victorian works equate the role of women to religious, and by extension, domestic subservience; religious subordinates act in accordance with auxiliary partnerships. Marriage and motherhood were vocational pursuits in which the woman served her dependents as a religious obligation. Victorian works, such as the poem "Woman's Rights," reflected the belief that the political role of women was a realization of fundamentalist social organization in accordance with theological doctrine:

Such are the noblest woman's rights,
The rights which God hath given,
The right to comfort a man on earth
And smooth his path to heaven. (M.C.M.R.)

With the precedent of traditionalist theological philosophies, the development of conservative etiquette and mannerisms arranged an equilibrium of nineteenth-century religion and state in which women were subjected to subserviency. The women acted as the governed party that was subjected to servitude of a male-dominated oligarchy. In marital servitude, the woman was required to be the learned, economical, and didactic partner who acted as an auxiliary to the energetic counterpart (Young). Victorian professions such as teaching and private tutoring as a governess expanded the traditionalist role of women from the domestic plane to the professional.

A profession as a governess allowed a woman to prosper in the pursuit of intellectual achievement with devolution to the latter generation. With relation to Victorian theology, the governess was expected to instill moral, deportmental, and academic integrity in the pupil. In literature, a position as a governess represented an extended state of orphanage in which the subject was a dependent to their employer (Hughes). Additionally, the governess inhabited a purgatorial state between hierarchical subservience and academic aspiration. Theological and sociological principles developed in nineteenth-century England are obligatory to the study of its traditional and reformist literature.

Therefore, the paradigmatic development of Jane in opposition with nineteenth-century traditionalism supports Brontë's argument for reformism. Jane's childhood disposition is conventional in accordance with Victorian fundamentalism: learned, principled, and religious. Contrarily, the Reed family acts as the superlative form of sanctimony through which Jane is rebuked without principle. Analogous to her righteous constitution, Jane dismisses their Pharisaic reign as an allegory for the rejection of unjust social conventions: "I know that, had I been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child, though equally dependent and friendless, Mrs. Reed would have endured my presence more complacently; her children would have entertained for me more of the cordiality of fellow-feeling; the servants would have been less prone to make me the scape-goat of the nursery" (Brontë 19). With her passage to the Lowood School, Jane develops discipline and academic competencies required of her Victorian contemporaries in which she excels and experiences fulfillment. Nevertheless, the authoritative Mr. Brocklehurst, whose conservative practices correspond with the Reed family, unjustly persecutes Jane. Contrary to her vulnerable position at Gateshead Hall, the companions of Jane valiantly protect her against the duplicity of Mr. Brocklehurst. Jane and her companions act in accordance with immutable morale as opposed to the fleeting piety of Mr. Brocklehurst and the Reed family. The fortitude and academic discipline of Jane culminates in her wish to serve a pupil as a governess, to prosper in the sharing of intellect as opposed to the pursuit of cavalier accomplishments: "My world had for some years been in Lowood; my experience had been of its rules and systems; now I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse to seek real knowledge of life amid its perils" (Brontë 100). With Jane's position as a governess, she is permitted to maintain the symbolic status of an orphan as she becomes the tenant of Mr. Rochester in a foreign environment. Contrary to her position as a student, Jane must act as the primary caregiver to her pupil while burdened with the obstacle of adolescent naïvety (Bowen). Contrary to the Victorian convention of the pursuit of a governess position as a means to extend dependency, Jane develops cerebral independence through her passage of academic and developmental competencies to her pupil: "And when she [Adèle] left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion; docile, good-tempered, and well-principled. By her grateful attention to me and mine, she has long since well repaid any little kindness I ever had in my power to offer her" (Brontë 518). The professional, academic,

and moral positions held by Jane act as an auxiliary for her sovereignty against fundamentalism and principled authoritarianism.

Correspondingly, Brontë's principled education and upbringing served as precedent for that of Jane; their sociological positions provide plausibility with regard to Brontë's reformist tenets. In childhood, Brontë and her sisters studied at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire; Brontë's circumstances were plagued by the dominion of Reverend William Carus Wilson, the transmission of typhoid fever, and consequential deaths in relation to the epidemic (Tompkins). Brontë's tenure at the Clergy Daughters' School acts as the constitutional reference for the Lowood School. Consequently, Brontë's dissension against the feudal structure of the Clergy Daughters' School is perceptible with her interpretation of the Lowood School. Succeeding her residence at the Lowood School, Brontë attended Margaret Wooler's School at Roe Head, the establishment in which she developed academic independence with her studies of literature, music, art, and language (Tompkins). Regardless of Jane's continued education at the turpitudinous Lowood School, her pursuit of excellence in academia shares a parallel with Brontë as her reformist principals are substantiated by means of scholastic achievement without regard to the corruption of the establishment. With the intention of extending academic residency, Brontë pursued a position as a governess in Brussels, Belgium while enrolled in the esteemed Pensionnat Heger (Alexander). Brontë's pedagogical vocation shared a parallel to the pursuit of monasticism; Brontë's scholarship was enriched by means of academic discipline as a pupil and instructor in accordance with Victorian asceticism. The scholastic disciplines and vocational aspirations pursued by Brontë and Jane share an equilibrium with periodical masculine professions, contradicting orthodoxy and advocating for social amendments. With the equivocating forces of academic exuberance and psychological dependence, Brontë developed a compulsive admiration for her intellectual counterpart and instructor, Constantin Heger; Their unrequited relationship served as precedent for the romantic partnership of Jane and Edward Rochester (Alexander). Brontë's development of private relationships on the foundation of academia acts as unorthodox with relation to the principles of religious fundamentalism. Correspondingly, the development of the relationship between academic partners, Jane and Edward, shared a progressivist equivalent to that of Brontë and Heger. In accordance with the composition of *Jane Eyre* and the permissive proposals of Brontë, the text endured periodical criticism with regard to the iniquity of its exposition (Alexander 274). With dissension to the ideals of religious fundamentalism, Brontë, by means of her work, *Jane Eyre*, acts as a foundational theoretician of nineteenth-century reformism.

In conclusion, contemporary literature such as *Jane Eyre* that subsumes a social movement or theoretical field must be incorporated within its respective canon to develop the principles of the philosophy. The study of *Jane Eyre* by means of the feminist critical lens establishes the tenets and principles of feminist literary theory with relation to nineteenth-century literature and its successors. Additionally, the study of literature according to critical lens analysis provides historical and sociological insight with regard to a corresponding period. Accordingly, texts such as *Jane Eyre* convict nineteenth-century authoritative systems of civil,

sociological, and religious maladministration. By means of satirization and the employment of periodical archetypes, *Jane Eyre* opposes the Victorian tenets and principles of womanhood. The positions of Jane and her contemporaries act as paradigms of Victorian womanhood, developing a sociologically infallible platform to express notions of reform. Correspondingly, Brontë's esteemed vocational position within nineteenth-century society and masculine publishing pseudonym constituted her works as doctrinal. With the scholastic adoption of Brontë's tenets and principles, succeeding works have promoted the delegation of theological and sociological sovereignty to the governed bodies. The progressive proposals presented in *Jane Eyre* act as the paragon of nineteenth-century political reformism and gender-related egalitarianism.

Works Cited

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This webpage source details historic contributions to literary theory and proper methodology for practicing literary criticism. The source introduces and organizes ideas proposed by authors and philosophers in their greatest literary works, or "magna opera". Additionally, the webpage provides tenets, works of literature, and contextual definitions for a variety of forms of literary criticism. This source is helpful for a research paper that studies the feminist lens in connection to literary works as it provides historical figures, authors, and works to reference. The webpage also provides the necessary information needed to study a work through the feminist lens, which will contribute to a proper and methodical analysis of *Jane Eyre*.

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The interview source narrated by John Bowen, Ph.D. studies the context of Victorian gender roles in *Jane Eyre*. The narrator studies women as the dominant forces and assertive heroines of nineteenth-century literature written by women. The narrator explores the idea of mundane professions held by women in Victorian England (i.e. governess) as a focal point of analysis for female characterization in *Jane Eyre* and other nineteenth-century works. This work aids a research paper that studies the role of women in *Jane Eyre* as it provides historical context and analysis that details societal expectations. The narrator examines *Jane Eyre* through the feminist critical lens including information about the gender roles, intellectual pursuits, and professions of Victorian women.

M.C.M.R. *Woman's Rights*. *The British Library*, British Library Board,
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This primary source is a work of poetry written in the 19th century penned by author M.C.M.R that details the role of women in nineteenth-century England. The poem equates the "rights" of women to their responsibilities as homemakers, religious subjects, and household companions. The source is helpful to a study of gender roles in Victorian society as it portrays women as the subservient party in their religious activities in which they are second to God, their (implied) marriages, and eventually to their children through the selfless responsibility of motherhood. The source also clarifies the expectations of nineteenth-century women as those who exist for the purposes of consolation and motivation to those whom they serve; This contributes to further study as it provides an accurate basis for comparison to 19th-century female literary characters such as those written in *Jane Eyre*.

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The encyclopedia source entitled "Charlotte Brontë " analyzes the connection between the author and her works of literature, particularly, *Jane Eyre*. The source analyzes *Jane Eyre* as a novel about a woman subject to the pressures of Victorian society juxtaposed against her innate needs relative to the experiences of author Charlotte Brontë. The reference source researches Charlotte's childhood familial and scholastic experiences which translate to the characters written in *Jane Eyre*. The source contributes to a study of *Jane Eyre* as a reflection of Brontë's experiences with her family and within her place(s) of education. The encyclopedia source additionally studies Brontë's experiences as a female author, academic, and student which are integral to further study of gender roles in Victorian society.

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