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Jane Eyre and Female Individuality

In the novel, “Jane Eyre,” by Charlotte Bronte, Bronte explores protagonist Jane’s journey and self-realization in a patriarchal society, taking place in the Victorian era. Throughout Jane’s life, Bronte develops and examines the challenges of conventional gender roles, the rigidness associated with class, and Jane’s advocacy for the importance of independent thought. In Charlotte Bronte’s famous novel “Jane Eyre,” Bronte weaves together female identity, societal rebellion, and individual agency, to explore the complexity that is personal progress, and femininity within a patriarchal society.

In Charlotte Bronte’s timeless novel, “Jane Eyre,” Bronte discusses the intricacies of female identity to explore introspection of women in a patriarchal society. “Helen, why do you stay with a girl whom everybody believes to be a liar?” “Everybody, Jane? Why, there are only eighty people who have heard you called so, and the world contains hundreds of millions.” (Bronte Loc 1168). In this exchange, Helen’s response to Jane’s question about her reputation as a liar underscores the theme of individual agency in defining one’s identity amidst societal judgement. Bronte employs hyperbole to emphasize the insignificance of a small community’s opinions compared to the vastness of the world, highlighting the importance of self-awareness and resilience in the face of social scrutiny. “I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer; I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth; I desired to be tall, stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale...”

(Bronte Loc 1714). This piece of Jane's inner monologue reflects the internalized pressure Jane feels to conform to conventional standards of beauty imposed by a patriarchal society. Her longing for certain looks that are deemed desirable to men demonstrate the oppressive expectations placed upon women to adhere to narrow standards of femininity. Thus reinforcing the notion of women as objects of male desire rather than autonomous individuals. "... women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer..." (Bronte Loc 1917). This quote develops the societal misconception that women are naturally passive and subdued, challenging this notion by asserting that all peoples, regardless of their gender, need intellectual endeavors. Through the use of analogy, Bronte employs a form of comparison to illuminate the shared human experience of longing for autonomy and fulfillment, thus dismantling the stereotype that women are complacent. Bronte's use of literary techniques aims to explore the concept of female identity within the concept of feminine introspection throughout a male-dominated society.

Bronte's novel "Jane Eyre" dissects the complex nature of societal rebellion in order to delve into the search for female identity in a patriarchal society. "Jane, I don't like cavillers or questioners; besides, there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent" (Bronte Loc 57). This quote exemplifies the expectation of adherence to traditional gender roles and women refraining from challenging authority. Jane's outspokenness reveals the double standard imposed upon women where assertiveness is deemed as arrogance when exhibited by females but praised in males. This highlights the complexity of societal expectations placed upon women, who are

simultaneously expected to be submissive, yet they are also criticized for their lack of assertiveness. "Psalms are not interesting," I remarked. "That proves you have a wicked heart; and you must pray to God to change it:" (Bronte Loc 521). Here, Jane is challenging the stringent emphasis on religion at the Lowood school. By asserting her own independence and beliefs, even in this context demonstrates Jane's rebellion against conformity, and in turn the standards of gender roles. "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space:" (Bronte Loc 1469). Jane's imminent desire for freedom and autonomy symbolizes her rebellion against the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms. Jane's longing for freedom reflects her defiance against the societal shackles that confine women to submissive roles, showcasing her struggle to break free from the oppressive Victorian structures and assert her agency in a society that seeks to suppress her individuality. Jane's constant defiance of societal norms serves as a device to better develop the overall introspection of feminine exploration and development in a male dominated society.

The Victorian proto-feminist novel "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte tackles the complexities of female identity in male-dominated society through the use of independent thought. "If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends" (Bronte Loc 1178). This exchange highlights the value of individual conscience in defining one's sense of self - regardless of gender - despite societal condemnation. Through the use of paradox, Bronte highlights the resilience of the human spirit and the power of individual agency in the face of external judgment and adversity, ultimately emphasizing the triumph of personal integrity over

external validation. “It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find” (Bronte Loc 1915). Here, Jane’s individual agency and the innate drive for autonomy exemplifies the importance of independent thought for women in patriarchal society. The quote suggests that despite societal expectations for women to conform to a tranquil and submissive existence, individuals, especially strong-willed women like Jane Eyre, are compelled to seek action and assert their independence, regardless of the consequences. This concept contributes to the overarching meaning of the novel by emphasizing the importance of independent thought and agency in the face of societal constraints, empowering characters like Jane to defy expectations to pursue her own path of self-fulfillment and development. “Curiosity is a dangerous petition: it is well I have not taken a vow to accord every request—” (Bronte Loc 4686). Jane’s recognition of the blind conformity by others demonstrates a personal growth for her, as she no longer sees forcefulness in her need to conform. She feels a sense of liberation in her quest for knowledge, and pursuit for autonomy. In her refusal to blindly comply with every request, Jane demonstrates her commitment to critical thinking and asserts her right to question authority. All in all, the notion of independent thought exemplifies the novel’s overarching theme of challenging societal norms, specifically those of the patriarchy, to assert individual agency.

The theme of female identity and societal rebellion are further discussed in Valeire Beattie’s “THE MYSTERY AT THORNFIELD: REPRESENTATIONS OF MADNESS IN "JANE EYRE"” explored with the portrayal of the madwoman Bertha Mason in “Jane Eyre.” The treatment of Bertha exemplifies a patriarchal society’s treatment of women that deviate from societal norms. Bertha was confined to Rochester’s attic due to her mental health condition. However, this confinement represents the oppressive control exerted by male figures, like

Rochester, over women who challenge their authority (Beattie 16). Bertha's possible interpretation as a monstrous figure can be a metaphor for female submissiveness. Thus highlighting the continuous struggle of women often being portrayed as "mad" or "emotional." In the context of Jane as a character, Bronte underscores the gender dynamics as Jane's emergence as a strong-willed, defiant woman. Eyre's resilient nature whilst navigating the patriarchal landscape, asserts who owns identity and challenges of gender roles. The "monstrosity" of Bertha as analyzed by Beattie, along with Bronte's portrayal of Eyre sets the stage for further analysis of femininity in patriarchal society. In addition, Arnold Shapiro's analysis of "Jane Eyre" further corroborates the themes of feminine identity. Throughout the novel, Bronte consistently calls for openness and freedom between individuals. For example, Jane's initial departure from Rochester reflects her refusal to compromise her values for the expected submission (Shapiro 48). The notion of Jane's and blatant defiance begs the question as to whether or not she is being arrogant, or just making herself heard. Jane's behavior during her relationship with Rochester is a testament to that concept (Shapiro 50). As she never abides by the conventional wife/mistress standards. Rather she does what she in her conscience feels is right. However, her return to Rochester suggests a trying internal battle between individuality and conformity. Ultimately, Jane's return to Rochester signifies not only her individual triumph of self-growth, but also the larger idea of overcoming oppressive social forms. Furthermore, reaffirming Bronte's thematic exploration of empowerment and liberation.

Anne Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book" (1678) encapsulates the complex relationship between the writer and her creation, the complexity of this relationship parallels that of female struggles and creative autonomy within a patriarchal society. "Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain," (Bradstreet line 1). The speaker addresses her work negatively,

illustrates the sense of insecurity and inadequacy that often accompanies artistic endeavors, especially by women artists in a society that undervalues women's voices. "I stretched thy joynts to make thee even feet, Yet still thou run'st more hobling then is meet;" (Bradstreet lines 15-16). Here, Bradstreet portraying her attempts to better her work reflects the constant struggle for validation in the male-dominated literary world, much like the actual world. Bradstreet's demonstration of insecurity through her literary works, and Bronte's development of Jane as an independent woman in a male-dominated society, asserts the commonalities between women and Victorian Era gender roles.

In conclusion, Bronte's "Jane Eyre" emerges as a profound exploration of female identity, societal rebellion, and the quest for autonomy within a Victorian society. Through the journey of Jane, the novel challenges conventional gender roles, advocates for individual agency, and the resoluteness of humans overcoming adversity, leaving a lasting impact on readers and continuing to inspire discussions on feminism, human-identity, and justice.

Works Cited

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