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INGL 3109: Personal Identity; The Literature of Growing Up

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Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre

Charlotte Bronte was born on April 21, 1816 in Thornton, United Kingdom. She was the third daughter of the Reverend Patrick Bronte, an Anglican minister, and his wife, Maria. Charlotte and her older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, would later welcome a brother, Branwell, and two more sisters, Emily and Anne, born in 1818 and 1820, respectively. (“Charlotte Bronte: Biography”)

In 1820, Patrick accepted a position in Haworth, Yorkshire, where the family moved. Charlotte’s mother, Maria, died of cancer, and Elizabeth Branwell, aunt to all the Bronte children, moved in with the family. (“Charlotte Bronte”)

At age 8, Charlotte was sent to Clergy Daughters’ School in Cowan Bridge, Lancashire. Because of the poor conditions, Charlotte’s two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, died at the school. Charlotte returned to the family home, where Patrick took up the responsibility of educating his children. (“Charlotte Bronte: Biography”)

Bronte and her siblings lived in relative isolation with their father and aunt. They reportedly devised fantasy worlds of their own when Patrick brought home a box of wooden soldiers for the children to play with. They wrote about the characters they created and the kingdoms they devised and the doings of these on scraps of paper. The conflicts between this fantasy world and the harsh reality of her life caused her great suffering. (“Charlotte Bronte”)

In 1831, at age 15, Charlotte was sent to Roe Head School (a boarding school), but left the following year so that she could teach her siblings. She returned to this school on 1835, but this time as governess. Her sister Emily attended this school as a pupil during this time, but Charlotte left and returned to Haworth. Her sister Ann took her place from 1836 to 1837. (Cody)

According to Cody, in 1839, Charlotte accepted a position as governess in the Sidgewick family but left after three months. In 1841, she assumed the same position within the White family, but left after nine months, and returned to Haworth.

Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte decided to open their own school, and so travelled to Belgium, where they would pursue studies. Upon their return to Haworth, their project proved to be a failure. They abandoned the idea, and turned to their talents in writing after Charlotte discovered poems that were written by her sister Emily. (Cody)

In 1846, the sisters published their poems, written under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (They used their respective initials.). As stated by Cody, Charlotte and her sisters later decided to continue writing, and so came forth their first work: *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, *Agnes Grey* by Anne Bronte, and *The Professor* by Charlotte Bronte, to be published under *Bell* pseudonyms. Charlotte’s first novel was rejected. She quickly wrote another, and *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847. It was an immediate success, as were her other novels, *Shirley* (1848) and *Vilette* (1853).

However, tragedy struck as her siblings began to die one after the other. Her siblings, Branwell and Emily, died in 1848. Anne died the following year. (“Charlotte Bronte”)

In June 1854, Charlotte married Arthur Bell Nicholls. Charlotte became ill while pregnant with her first child. She died aged 38, on March 31, 1855. (“Charlotte Bronte: Biography”)

Other notable works by this author include *Vilette* and *Shirley*, published in 1853 and 1848, respectively. The first is about a young girl, Lucy Snowe, that moves to the fictional city of Vilette, where she thrives as an exceptional English teacher (despite her lack of knowledge of French), and happens to come across old childhood friends and Monsieur Paul, a professor at a school he and Lucy work in. They happen to fall in love, but their different religions (Lucy being a protestant and Monsieur Paul being a Catholic) impede the union. (Smith)

According to Smith, Monsieur Paul then has to cross the Atlantic to tend to some business in Guadalupe, a matter of which Lucy is aware of. He sought out a house for her to establish a new school in, so that she can be independent and thrive in his absence. It is implied that Monsieur Paul perished in a shipwreck on the way back. Lucy lives alone, but happy for the rest of her life. (Smith)

*Shirley* was published in 1848, following the deaths of two of Charlotte’s siblings (Emily and Branwell Bronte). According to Hall, these events greatly impacted the tone of the novel, as well as added additional interest to the book.

*Shirley* takes place during the Napoleonic Wars and the beginning of the Industrial era (Hall). The former has raised the prices of goods, and the latter has brought forth machines that are meant to do the work that people would have been able to do before their introduction, leaving workers out in the streets. Robert Moore is the half-French owner of a mill that has no qualms in bringing in this new technology, in an effort to fix his family’s financial situation, and doesn’t mind laying off his employees for the sake of money, but angry workers destroy de machinery before it could get to his mill. (Hall)

Caroline is a young woman that comes to his home in order to learn French from Robert’s sister, Hortense. Caroline and Robert like each other, but Robert doesn’t bother because he cannot marry for love or pleasure; he needs to marry for money, so that he can save the family business. Caroline notices that there is a certain distance that is being forced by Robert, and she is deeply saddened by the fact that he doesn’t approach her. However, she finds a friend in Shirley, an independent, wealthy landowner. She is cheerful, lively, and charitable; she is also interested in business, a trait noted by greedy Robert. However, as Shirley gets closer to Robert, Caroline can’t help but get jealous and sickened, even though she considers Shirley to be a very close friend. (Hall)

Shirley tries her best to aid Robert in any w ay she can, even by giving some money to his former employees that had been laid off, but this did not prevent the uprising of workers. Robert took up arms along with other men and fought while Caroline and Shirley remained hidden. (Hall)

One evening, while Caroline and Hortense are at the Moore household, Louis Moore, the bother of Robert and Hortense arrives. It is then that all are convinced that a wedding will take place between Robert and Shirley. Due to the anticipation, Caroline begins to get sick and begins to feel as if she has nothing left to live for, until Mrs. Pryor, governess at Robert’s household, confesses that she is her mother. Caroline regains her strength as she has found a reason to live. (Hall)

Shirley’s uncle and aunt come visit her, and they bring with them their two children and their tutor, Louis Moore, Robert’s younger brother. He had been Shirley’s tutor when she was younger. (Hall)

Robert proposes to Shirley, but he gets turned down, He is humiliated, and decides to go to London, and it is then that he begins to think that marrying out of desire to be rich is a mistake, and that marriage is only suitable when there is love between the spouses. On the way back, he is shot by angry mob and carried off to the home of a friend, where he would recover. Caroline visits him and he begs for her forgiveness. (Hall)

Meanwhile, Shirley’s uncle is interested in marrying her to a baronet, whose proposal she refuses. Instead, she turns to her former tutor, lowly Louis, and accepts his marriage proposal. Caroline and Shirley marry the two brothers. (Hall)

This section of the essay will be predominantly about the comparison between the storyline of the novel “Jane Eyre” and the historical context in which it was written. This analysis is vastly made easy by the work of Craig M. Wise from Oklahoma in his dissertation titled *The Image of Empire in The Victorian Novel.* This includes the perspective from the author’s daily life in Victorian England and the social impediments brought with it. In the dissertation there is a segment which I will begin by detailing a very interesting passage near the end of the novel in which Jane Eyre is being proposed marriage by John Rivers. Wise tells us that at this point, even though Jane Eyre is keen on not accepting Rivers proposal, she is impressed by the “gentleness” of his approach. Craig M. Wise then cites the exact moment in which this occurs: “I stood motionless under my hierophant’s touch. May refusals were forgotten- my fears overcome- my wrestling paralyzed. The impossible- my marriage with St. John- was fast becoming the Possible” (Wise 102). This citation is meant to show how the historical context that surrounded Brontë is reflected in the reaction of Jane towards Rivers proposal. There were various occasions in which Rivers tried to propose matrimony but without success and this is because the first attempts were reason based (Wise 102). The success occurs when the approach takes a religious tone (Wise 101-102). After this apparent change of heart, the direction of events changes yet again when Jane begins to hear the voice of Rochester. Jane’s relationship with Rochester alludes to the English colonial system that was in place when Brontë wrote Jane Eyre (Wise 103).

There are various things we can deduce from Jane’s interactions with Rochester, one of them implies a contradiction and the other serves as reference to her relation with her social and economic atmosphere. That is exactly what is explained in a fragment of the work done by Parma Roy that reads: “Jane ends up rather too well-adjusted and well-endowed for Bronte to carry through her radical convictions to the end; she approves Rochester's summary and callous treatment of his West Indian wife; and she is manifestly enthusiastic about the exploitation of colonized peoples. She thus yields a furtive assent to the authoritative word of her culture, in matters socioeconomic as well as religious" (Wise 103). Shortly after that, the author of Jane Eyre shows her views as being intertwined with that of her era, this means that the socioeconomic and religious aspects of the period were very much in favor of the treatment given to the inhabitants of the Creole in the colonies (Wise 103-104).

Another aspect that might resonate with Brontë's historical context is an argument that plays with the idea that Brontë shows Jane's quest (pilgrimage) to India as a way to change the values of the privileged class. This is best exemplified in this quote by Craig M. Wise: "Jane's spiritual Journey reveals what the author regards as savage impulses that drive the ruling classes to worship property and privilege. Brontë shows how some Evangelical Ministers emulate the behavior of the governing classes"(Wise 104). In other words, what Wise is trying to say in his work is that Brontë uses Jane and her religious discourse as a way to denote everything that is wrong with the class system that surrounded her.

One final aspect that would be relevant to the discussion would be when we first see Jane being forced out of her family's house. The fact that Jane is treated by her blood relatives in a very dramatic and violent fashion shows two things: from a moral perspective we sympathize with the protagonist. As a result the novel portrays a “symbolic clash of social classes” (Wise 113). We would also note that according to Brontë’s representation, sympathy is an emotion that belongs to the middle classes of Victorian England, which was on the rise (Wise 105-107). This is true when one compares the treatment of Jane by Rivers family vs. Jane’s own people of middle class or of modest upbringing.

Charlotte Brontë Novelist & Poet in Victorian English literature. Used an alias for her work known as 'Currer Bell' which she used as the author name for the novel “Jane Eyre”. The purpose of that alias was to ensure that her words as well as her writing style where not marginalized by the new “feminist” genre. She is very well known for her sentences that are complex. She uses phrases and clauses to make an elaborate description of a feeling, place, moment or detail in a novel. Like few woman of her time Charlotte’s mentality challenged the established idiosyncrasies of the time. In this time that woman were considered objects or child bearers. She challenged society through her writing demonstrating that women were capable of feeling strong emotions as well as being capable of emotional strength & maturity. This type of attitude leads to embrace the core of Jane Eyre’s values and how she constantly demonstrates that she won’t sacrifice her self-respect or her values for men, power, money or self-pity. This yearning for woman’s equality also came to life also in the traits of Jane eyes character. She wrote for the oppressed woman at her time. She was one of the first modern women of her era to do so.

Charlotte would often have sympathy of those in her situation. She would equate them to slaves in prison by circumstances beyond their control. Through her writing she created intellectual women, free thinkers, and woman with strong character. As well she would not deem good the use of woman’s sexuality for their advantage or greatness in society. Charlotte also is constantly developing ethics and morals in her main characters. That can be seen easily in the development of Jane Eyre’s growth and coming of age. She would often emulate herself through her characters. For example: how simple & quiet yet strong willed and independent she makes Jane Eyre to be. She also gives readers the notion that woman are equal as men in Jane Eyre & Rochester’s relationship. Meaning she gives her the power of intellect, witch in the Victorian age men where the ones who possess the highest knowledge in society as well as intellectual. She also gives Jane emotional stability & power, not by all the situations she is going through that where not stable at all. But yet she finds the emotional strength to bare them all and find security in her even if that meant being alone.

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