

---

# Does *Jane Eyre* Portray the Concept of Religion of the 19th Century?

Sofía Yañez

Despite commonly being described simply as a romantic novel, *Jane Eyre* deals with the complexities of humanity and the inquisitions of the souls that force the characters to overcome problems related to morality and religion. Charlotte Brontë's real-life experiences – being the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, attending Clergy Daughter's School and working as a governess— seem to have inspired Jane's journey... especially the religious one.

In *Jane Eyre*, the author presents a religion with two sides. She focuses on the negative and harmful side of religion, usually comparing it with its positive counterparts. Does this novel represent the idea of that period or was it revolutionary? Fraser (2002) explains that the established church was in a crisis during the 19th century; from the theory of evolution to other religions gaining popularity. Christianity was also being judged, people reevaluated its values and wondered what was the meaning of being a Christian. Due to this, Victorian novels usually dealt with religion and personal morals. According to Kucich (2005), "Victorian fiction was a deeply moralistic genre, and the moral principles it espoused - self-sacrifice, humility, honesty - were clearly Christian in origin" (p. 216).

Bigotry is an example of the damage that religion causes. Mr. Brocklehurst in Lowood is Jane Eyre's first encounter with a despicable religious person. He is a religious man but hypocritical and sinister: "Is he a good man?' 'He is a clergyman, and is said to do a great deal of good.'" (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 58). In this conversation between Helen and Jane, we can see how clergymen were expected to be good persons. However, Brontë later shows us that Brocklehurst prefers to let the girls suffer from hunger believing that it will teach them Christian values instead of spending additional money on a decent breakfast: "Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!" (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 72). Mr. Brocklehurst believes that humility and obedience are the most important values and his method of education seems to be fear; he comments on Jane having the devil inside of her therefore no one can trust her, trying to implant fear and hate in the young girls:

You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example; if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse. Teachers, you must watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinise her actions, punish her body to save her soul. (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 75)

Furthermore, he shows hypocrisy by calling Jane a liar when his arguments are based on the lies that Mrs. Reeds told him. Another example is when ten-year-old Jane tells him that she does not enjoy reading Psalms, he responds by saying that she has a wicked heart and she must pray to God to change it (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 38).

Jane Eyre's ending can represent the idea that God will reward you if you do not commit sins. Throughout the novel Jane makes ethical choices, one example of this is Jane's rejection to Rochester's proposal due to him being already married. As Jane points out "I am rewarded now. To be your wife is, for me, to be as happy as I can be on earth" (Brontë, 1847/ 2007, p. 499), she seems to be rewarded due to her goodwill and faith when she inherits the money from the Rivers, meets a new and loving family, and marries the love of her life. However, we encounter with Rochester the idea of punishment and having to pay for your sins. At the end of the novel, Mr. Rochester goes blind after the fire at Thornfield as a consequence of a life of sin, vice and vanity. There have been many theories about it; however, it could be interpreted that Rochester's injuries are a punishment to redeem him and become worthy of marrying Jane:

'Jane! you think me, I daresay, an irreligious dog (...) I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flower— breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me. (...) Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. His chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever. (...) Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere.' (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 500)

Only when both of them have "pure" souls, they are able to find their own heaven. Wheeler said "reunited with a now tamed Rochester at Ferndean, she enters, not the Celestial City of Bunyan's Christian, but an earthy paradise: marriage and family life with her beloved master" (Wheeler, 2005, p. 188). Pickrel also contributes to this idea saying that Ferndean Manor represents Eden: "But for them it is no exile; rather it is the fulfillment of the earthly apocalypse: in the name of *FERnDEaN* we can read the name of the lost Eden." (Pickrel, 1986, p. 180)

Jane is a character that has learned from Evangelism "the capacity for making personal ethical judgements, even if they appear to conflict with the teaching of the church" (Fraser, 2002, p. 110). Her faith is not the centre of her life or an impediment to choose what she loves. Meanwhile, St John is a character enslaved by religion. He decides to not marry the woman he loves in order to marry a more suitable girl, Jane, thinking she will be a devoted religious wife:

'Rosamond a sufferer, a labourer, a female apostle? Rosamond a missionary's wife? No!'

'But you need not be a missionary. You might relinquish that scheme.'

'Relinquish! What! my vocation? My great work? My foundation laid on earth for a mansion in heaven? (...) the hope of heaven for the fear of hell? Must I relinquish that? It is dearer than the blood in my veins. It is what I have to look forward to, and to live for.' (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 418)

He also represents those negative qualities of religion that Jane tries to fight. In the quote:

(...) sentiments growing there fresh and sheltered which his austerity could never blight, nor his measured warrior-march trample down: but as his wife—at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry (...)—this would be unendurable. (Brontë, 1847/2007, p. 457)

Jane mentions the austerity and dominance of St John that would restrict her character if she decided to marry him. St John represents some of the flaws of religion, however, not at the level Mr Brocklehurst. At the end of the book, St John is dying alone in India, while Jane is happily married to Rochester.

While discussions about religion in Victorian novels were normal, *Jane Eyre* had quite radical ideas about questioning Christian morality and lessons. Religious people being dominant, hypocritical and sinister, and the fear of a menacing God were some problems the Victorian society had with religion that later led to movements such as The Oxford Movement. Charlotte Brontë probably experienced this first hand due to her close relationship with religious people. It seems as if for Brontë, religion is about happiness and feeling content with oneself on earth rather than sacrifice to get to Heaven.

### References

- Brontë, C. (2019). *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Editions Limited. (Original work published 1847)
- Fraser, H. (2002). The Victorian Novel and Religion. In P. Brantlinger & Thesing, W. B. (Eds.) *A Companion to The Victorian Novel (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture)* (pp. 101-118). Blackwell Publishing.
- Kucich, J. (2005). Intellectual debate in the Victorian novel: religion, science, and the Professional. In D. David (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (pp. 212-233). Cambridge University Press.
- Pickrel, P. (1986). Jane Eyre: The Apocalypse of the Body. *ELH*, 53(1), 165-182. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2307/2873152>
- Wheeler, M. (2005). 'One of the larger lost continents': Religion in the Victorian Novel. In F. O'Gorman (Ed.) *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel* (pp. 180-201). Blackwell Publishing.

