
Jane Eyre and the 21st Century Woman

Carolina Dias Naughton

From outcast orphan to accomplished governess to friendless girl surviving in the wilderness to school headmistress to rich heiress with a newfound family, and finally, to happily married, all achieved before turning twenty. It is hard to see anything that could compel us to think *Jane Eyre* as a novel to which 21st century young women can relate to. The Victorian context of the story, where the biggest –if not only– aspiration a woman could have was marriage, can cast in the mind of an educated young woman of our day and age the impression that, while enjoyable, Jane Eyre’s life cannot be considered something in tune with our vision of the world. But if we look past the most superficial aspects of Jane Eyre; are her character, her personality, and her decisions really not something that we can feel connected to, even today? Is there not something about Jane that goes beyond ages and centuries, and gives a feeling of sisterhood which can be universally understood among women even now? How far is *Jane Eyre* from the perspective and experiences of a college student woman of our times?

We see Jane suffering from being an outcast from the start, and in a Victorian society no less; an orphan, born to parents whose marriage was shunned by her mother’s family who disowned her over it, and to make matters worse, ugly. Now, Jane’s appearance might seem like something inconsequential, but in a world where beauty was something valued and coveted, especially among females, her looks sometimes made her situation even worse, as we see through this exchange between Abbot and Bessie, when Abbot says: “If she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that” (Brontë, 1847/1993, p. 14). Years later, and working at Thornfield, upon learning about Blanche Ingram, Jane goes on to sketch her image and paint Blanche’s as some bitter reminder of that which she lacked: beauty. In today’s world we do not see beauty with the same eyes that Victorian society did, but it would be a lie to say that we ignore it entirely. Even if a little shallow, Jane’s actions are not far from things that happen nowadays. Comparing one’s beauty to the beauty of others is part of the reason why we talk about the problematics of beauty standards and the idealized image women struggle or grow desperate trying to achieve: “Brontë is realistic: life is harder for Jane because she is not attractive. But Brontë is criticizing Victorian culture for putting so much value in beauty. Jane is an amazing person, beautiful or not.” (Triska, 2017).

From Jane’s journey we learn that coming to terms with the fact that she is not conventionally attractive gets some stress off her shoulders, and this is not something characteristic of Victorian society either. Jane’s real and most important beauty came from her mind and her heart. And that is true for today as well.

We know that beauty is as much of an issue now as it was in the Victorian age, even if it is more talked about. But what can be said of matters such as social hierarchy and the given role women have in society? One thing is certain: Now we have more options. There is more to life than marrying (though marriage is still important, as great aunts are so fond of reminding us). Yet we are still viewed as unequal to our fellow men: women can only get so far in their field of choice, and there are some career paths which are also discouraged, not unlike Jane’s observation:

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; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë, 1847/1993, p. 65).

We see in *Jane Eyre* that not only was the social ladder of Victorian society extremely defined, it was also hard to advance through it. While Jane does improve her situation when she becomes a governess, it is still under the expectations of what an outcast orphan would achieve. And while now we have more options, the social mockery and the expectations for women remains ever present.

Perhaps the most conflictive point to address when talking about *Jane Eyre* as a novel to which 21st century young women can feel connected to, is that of love and marriage. Marriage does not hold the same position now as it did in Victorian times. As it has been stated, women have more options now that go beyond being an educator or a housewife (with the emphasis on housewife). But it is through love that *Jane Eyre* offers views that are almost beyond her time. Jane loved Rochester, but she loved herself more when she declined marrying him when the marriage would make her own existence miserable: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (Brontë, 1847/1993, p. 191). And in doing so, Jane loved her independence and her personal image of herself better than Rochester. With St. John the situation is almost reversed. As a wife, Jane did not love him more than he loved her as a husband, despite the admiration she bore for him. And Jane, having experienced love, chose herself once more, by refusing to lead a loveless marriage, because she knew she could expect more of a marriage than what was being offered. Through these two proposals Jane receives, and her final marriage to Rochester under her own terms, we are exposed to an idea of self-love which was almost revolutionary for her time (Blakemore, 2019).

There is no denying that the culture and time in which we are born have a part in defining us as individuals. Jane most definitely is not an outstanding character because of the ways in which she openly challenges her society, nor could she be considered a hardcore feminist icon: Even when some aspects of her personality are contrary to the Victorian standards for women, she still develops her womanhood within the parameters of what is acceptable for a young lady. Jane challenges her society in a way that is all the more intrinsic to all of us, which is by learning from her experiences and giving her decisions the colour of her own personal views on what is wrong. We know the things we will not stand by, we know the things that are not right about our world, and yet because we are imbued in the culture in which we are born, our achievements to modify it will be subject to the frame of the society in which we live. This does not go on to say, however, that *Jane Eyre* does not have any valuable lessons. For her age, Brontë wrote a most controversial novel, but the notion of love and respect for herself that Jane nurtures with her decisions through her growth transcends time.

References

- Brontë, C. (1993). "*Jane Eyre*." *Charlotte and Emily Brontë, the Complete Novels*. Gramercy. (Original work published 1847)
- Blakemore, E. (2019, February 27) Sorry, but Jane Eyre Isn't the Romance You Want It to Be. *Jstor Daily*. Retrieved from <https://daily.jstor.org/sorry-but-jane-eyre-isnt-the-perfect-romance-you-want-it-to-be/>

Triska, Z. (2017, December 17) 11 Lessons That 'Jane Eyre' Can Teach Every 21st Century Woman About How to Live Well. *HuffPost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jane-eyre-lessons-_n_4101000

