
Jane Eyre as a Possible Precedent of the Feminist Movement

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Jane Eyre, a classic of English literature, was written by Charlotte Brontë and published in 1847 under a pseudonym: Currer Bell. As every classic should, it was deeply analysed and discussed throughout the years, and many arguments on different matters have arisen ever since, feminism being one of them.

Even though feminism as such had not appeared until some years later, many critics considered the novel a crucial piece for the movement. In the present day it is, by some, no longer regarded as part of the feminist movement, or sometimes even regarded as the exact opposite. The purpose of this piece is to analyse whether *Jane Eyre* is or is not one of the first novels to address feminism and women's rights, taking into account the historical and social context it has been written in.

Before diving into the story, I find it relevant to reiterate the fact that Brontë has seen herself forced to change her name in order to publish her novel. A glimpse of feminism becomes apparent already: Brontë is determined to make her voice heard, whatever the cost, in a patriarchal world where a female name may translate as a lack of success. This, by some considered a detail, is not a mere coincidence with what Brontë elaborates in the novel.

Jane breaks many rules and traditions that once were put on women's shoulders, and that were still abided when *Jane Eyre* was written. She is aware of her desires and pursues them: she takes the first step towards the declaration of her love to Mr. Rochester, unusual and unfeminine for her times. She is certain about her beliefs and, even though shy at first, she is not afraid of speaking her truth: as a kid, she talks back to Mrs. Reed, reasserting her worth. Back then, "women were expected to center their lives on home and family" (Schor, 2005, p. 172), which Jane refuses to do as she is ambitious and looks for growth – not material, as ascending in society, which was to be expected from a woman, but personal. Even so, according to St. John, she has "a man's vigorous brain" (Brontë, 1847/1992, p. 361): women were not supposed to think or to be intelligent, but only to feel and to be beautiful.

Jane breaks this stereotype established many years ago and still in existence to this day: she is not depicted as beautiful or attractive, but she seeks to cultivate her mind in every possible occasion. Examples are not lacking: as a kid, she desired to go to school; as a grown-up, she took up German with her cousins. She is ambitious enough to even want to save money to set up a school. Another stereotype that was broken is the fact that women were not considered fit to work, but to serve. Jane is determined to achieve her goals, whether they comply with society's expectations of a woman or not. And Brontë, through Jane's thoughts, addresses the inequality with which women are seen when their heart's desire is to do and behave as a man does:

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; (...) 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, 1847/1992, p. 95)

Jane is aware of the inherent power she does have and, even though she does not abuse it, she has no fear of defending herself and exercising it when necessary. Neither with Mr. Rochester nor with St. John does she feel inferior because of her sex. To Mr. Rochester, she makes clear that she is “a free human being with an independent will.” (Brontë, 1847/1992, p. 223); and she also reflects this on her way of speaking to St. John: “He had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man.” (Brontë, 1847/1992, p. 331). As *Jane Eyre* is an autobiography, Jane herself seeks to make her voice heard as Brontë does: she is “a heroine who does not fear speaking her own mind.” (Schor, 2005, p. 173).

Her power, her straightforwardness, the radical difference between her and every other woman is what catches Mr. Rochester’s attention, and what leads to the union of both. One of the reasons some critics or feminist activists may not consider *Jane Eyre* a feminist novel is due to the ending, since it involves a marriage with a rich man, and a life of servitude to him. But what these people may be overlooking is the context in which she marries: Jane had acquired a fortune after the passing of her uncle, and therefore was already an equal to Mr. Rochester – one of the terms under which she would agree to marry him. On the other hand, she had agreed to marry St. John the day before fleeing to Thornfield Hall, a promise she breaks to pursue her own desires, instead of abiding by those that society and tradition have always commanded her to. As Mitchell and Osland (2005) said: “Jane Eyre is perhaps the hungriest of all fictional heroines; she wants everything – or at least everything that stories can give her.” (p. 177)

In conclusion, Charlotte Brontë, generally, and *Jane Eyre*, specifically, deal with what we today call feminism. It may not address the matter as openly as we do nowadays, but analysing the novel as if in the present context would be a wrong course of action: it was written in the 19th century, and it has to be analysed as such. Just as we would not analyse Shakespeare comparing it to current standards, we should not read *Jane Eyre* with current knowledge and rights glasses on, for that would only blur instead of clear what Charlotte Brontë has to communicate.

References

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