



DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGION PRACTICES PRESENTED IN JANE EYRE

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Abstract

Charlotte Bronte was born on 21st April 1816 in Yorkshire, England for a poor clergyman and died at a very young age on the 31st of March 1855. In August 1824, she was sent with her sisters to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire. This is to better understand her religious background and to interpret issues raised through her protagonist Jane Eyre who is considered by many as a reflection and autobiography for Charlotte herself. Critics have criticised *Jane Eyre* for what they considered as a threat against society's beliefs. They suggested that it is a novel in which Charlotte stabs the religion from the back, trying to destroy the basics of the British society and religion. Others claimed that she was trying to neglect religious concepts and only focused on individuals' morals. In order to understand why many people claimed that Charlotte Bronte or her protagonist Jane are against religion, it is better first to follow Jane's character development, the incidents and the characters she meets. Thus, a better understanding to her point of view and the text interpretation would be in the right way.

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1.Introduction

Jane Eyre is a novel that explores the complex relationship between religion and personal beliefs. The narration written by Charlotte Bronte follows the journey of the protagonist, Jane Eyre, as she discovers her life through different social classes and moral dilemmas. Throughout the novel, religion is a central theme that influences the characters' decisions and beliefs. Jane's religious beliefs are shaped by her experiences with different religious institutions, including Lowood School and the different people she encounters.

The novel refers to the tension that took place in the 19th century among the different sects of christianity in the British society. While Protestantism was the dominant belief among the public, its followers found themselves in a challenge with the classical old beliefs such as catholicism that was adopted by many of the higher class society. Thus, Jane's inner perspective about religion differ from her counterparts, as she seeks a more personal and emotional connection to God rather than merely

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following the rigid doctrines of the Church. This contrasts with the views of other characters such as St. John Rivers, as he pays more attention to duty and rules rather than emotions as the only way to reach God's path.

Moreover, the novel shows a general attitude that started to widespread in the society during that time which was dominated by skepticism and criticism of the Church. Not so far, Charlotte Bronte as well was known for her criticism of the Church and not the religion itself as referred earlier. This constructive criticism is reflected through the narration of the novel and highlighted by her protagonist Jane Eyre. The core of this criticism mainly falls on the abuse of religion and twisting its meanings as well as hypocrisy to serve some groups' interests. The novel suggests the need for more private relation that connects individuals directly with God without any mediators.

In conclusion, *Jane Eyre* is a novel that would suggest a further study of the complex relationship between religion and the uprising individuals' beliefs during the 19th century. This essay aims to study the tension between different religious views displayed in the novel. Additionally, it criticises the societal attitudes towards religion during the time period, highlighting the need for personal interpretation and practical application of religious beliefs in real life.

2. A Brief About The Writer

As one of the leading female novelists, Charlotte Bronte, who was born in the nineteenth century that witnessed a lots of controversial issues, played an important role in questioning and displaying these issues. Since her father was a clergyman who died when Bronte was young and was sent with her sisters including Emily Bronte, who is considered as one of the great Victorian novelists as well to a boarding religious school, Charlotte was in touch with religion doctrine from young age. That definitely shaped her own perspective about many beliefs including religion. In contrast to some critics' claims about her that she was attacking and trying to demolish religion in society, Charlotte Bronte was just a part of the wide controversy that took place in the nineteenth century. In fact, she was trying to compromise different perspectives and come up with what she believed to be the right way (Glen, 2004, pp. 65-67).

The nineteenth century witnessed many conflicts in views on many sides including society beliefs, economy, politics, equality between men and women and religion itself. As the society was growing, and the increasing number of people with different religious views and doctrines including Protestant, Anglicans and

Evangelicalism; it was difficult for the Church at that time to absorb all these beliefs and became indifferent to its community member's needs. Important ideas of Christianity such as Salvation, Confession and Spirit versus Body were questioned as well. This religious controversy had its impact on novelists of that age, especially Bronte, who had religious back-ground as a daughter of an Anglican clergyman. However, she didn't attack religion itself but the practice of some clergymen, that was still not accepted by some people. Marianne Thormahlen says about this "any criticism against the conduct of clergymen, and against opinions and values held by Anglican Christians, expressed in Bronte novels has always been interpreted as a more or less covert repudiation of the Christian faith" (Thormahlen,2004, P.7). Additionally, there are some letters by Bronte herself assuring her love to the Church and that she was not denying the belief itself but the perspectives of some people in which their social classes and benefits affect their perspectives. In a letter to Ellen Nussey she wrote:

If I could always live with you, and "daily" read the Bible with you, if your lips and mine could at the same time, drink the same draught from the same pure fountain of Mercy – I hope, I trust, I might one day become better, far better, than my evil wandering thoughts, my corrupt heart, cold to the spirit, and warm to the flesh will now permit me to be. (Littell & Littell,1857/2019, P.399).

3. Hermeneutics in Religion interpretations

Hermeneutics is a literary theory concerned with the interpretation of texts. It is based on the idea that understanding a text involves not just reading the words on the page, but also understanding the historical and cultural context in which the text was produced as well as the reader understanding.

In his book *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, James Rissler explores the concept of interpretation in hermeneutics, which is the theory and practice of interpretation. Rissler argues that interpretation is a process that involves a dialogue between the interpreter and the object of interpretation, as well as an acknowledgement of the voice of the other. He defines it as " Interpretation is an exposition, laying out that which has been projected by understanding. The direction in the identification of interpretation and understanding is significant. The identification is not one in which there is first (Riser, 1997, p.48).

Rissler's emphasizes the importance of listening to the voice of the other, which he calls it the voice of the text or object being interpreted, as well as the voices of those who are marginalized or excluded in society. He states that " In the situation where

interpretation follows understanding one is claiming by that that an immediacy of understanding is possible" (Riser, 1997, p.132). He suggests that by listening to these voices, interpreters can gain a deeper understanding of texts and their back-ground context.

Rissler emphasizes the important role of the interpreter in the process of interpretation. As he says that interpreters' own biases and assumptions can not be separated from the interpretation, since these biases and assumptions shape the way they interpret texts. Therefore, he suggests that interpreters should be self-reflective and aware of their own biases in order to make the interpretations as objective as possible. He highlights " Historical understanding as are re-experiencing is objective in the same way that an interpretation of a text is objective" (Riser, 1997, p.65).

On the other hand, Paul Ricoeur emphasis on the important role of language and narrative in understanding any text. He argues that our understanding of texts is always mediated through language, and that understanding is an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation. He defines interpretation by saying "Interpretation, we will say, is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden" (Ricoeur, 2004, p.12).

Thus it is one of Ricoeur's main concepts is that the meaning is not fixed or static, but is always open to reinterpretation and revision. He emphasised the importance of understanding text in its different levels, since each text has its explicit meaning, the implicit meaning, and the symbolic one.

In his book *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, he argues that interpretation includes a "conflict of interpretations" which refers to the suggestion that different readers can have different or even conflicting interpretations of the same text. Ricoeur argues that this conflict is not something to be avoided or resolved, but in fact it is an essential part of the interpretation process since it agrees with human nature. He states "He makes it clear that conflict is inescapable in human interaction. Why? First, man is the only being who possesses so long a childhood and who, as a result, remains for an incomparably long time in a condition of" (Ricoeur, 2004, p.151).

Ricoeur's ideas focus on the concept of human's complete freedom, as he argues that individuals have the ability to shape their own lives and make meaningful choices despite the social and cultural restrictions.

In conclusion, Hermeneutics studies are significantly useful when analysing complex literary works in which many factors involves in shaping their meanings. Includin

the understanding of the historical and cultural context in which the work takes place. In the following essay, different perceptions of religion presented in *Jane Eyre* will be explored through the novel's analysis and the opinions offered by other writers.

4. The Classical perception

In the novel *Jane Eyre*, the Reed family is introduced at the beginning of the story, consisting of Mrs. Reed and her children John, Georgiana, and Eliza. The name symbolism of the Reeds is an indication for the classical perspective of religion, as they participate in Jane's early perception of life. According to Lane, "Reed is a plant that grows rigid and straight near the water" (United States Customs Court, 1970, p. 565), and this name is fitting because of their stiff and inflexible behavior towards Jane. Mrs. Reed takes care of Jane after her father's death, but she treats her poorly, even blaming her for being beaten by John and punishing her by sending her to detention in the red room.

Diane Hoeveler in her book *A Companion to the Brontës* describes Mrs. Reed's faith as a 'colored' one that serves to keep her class regulations in order and her authority unblamed. "woman coded as colored, and animalistic, as well as treacherous and unworthy aristocratic woman" (Hoeveler, 2009, p. 38) This indicates that her faith is only a façade, used to justify her mistreatment of Jane and maintain her status in society. When Jane's uncle asks about her, Mrs. Reed lies to him and tells him that Jane had died. This dishonesty shows that Mrs. Reed is more concerned about appearances rather than doing what is right.

As the story progresses, Jane's feelings towards the Reed family change from anger to sympathy. At the end of Mrs. Reed's life, she sends for Jane as a way of seeking relief or salvation, but she can not bring herself to express any true kindness to her. In fact, Mrs. Reed tells Jane that she wishes she had never existed in her life, indicating that even salvation cannot be achieved without true repentance.

Bronte's portrayal of Jane's changing attitude towards the Reeds family highlights the idea that this classical doctrine needs help itself and is not as superior as it may seem. Initially, Jane fights back against John when he hits her and tells Mrs. Reed that she intends to reveal her true character. However, by the end of the novel, Jane accepts Mrs. Reed's invitation and stays behind to help her cousins during the funeral. However the pain Mrs. Reed caused her but still Jane was able to forgive "Yes Mrs. Reed to you I owe some fearful pangs of mental suffering. But I ought to forgive you" (Bronte, 2001, p.16). This transformation demonstrates how Jane's compassion

overcomes her anger and resentment towards the Reed family, and also suggests the possibility for redemption and reformation for those who hold to the classical and rigid doctrine.

In conclusion, the Reed family in *Jane Eyre* is portrayed as adherents of a classical perspective of religion. Their inflexible and rigid behavior towards Jane reflects their lack of true faith and their focus on maintaining their status in society. Bronte's depiction of Jane's transformation towards the Reed family highlights the potential for growth and redemption, even for those who hold to a classical perspective.

5. The Insincere focus on merely soul neglecting the physical humanity side

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is a novel that deeply explores the themes of morality and passion. However, one of the most prominent themes in the novel is the conflict between the spiritual and physical aspects of humanity. Throughout the novel, characters struggle to balance the demands of their physical bodies with their spiritual needs, and the consequences of neglecting one side in favor of the other are significantly clear. While some argue that the novel emphasises the spiritual aspects of humanity at the expense of the physical, a closer examination reveals a more complex integration between the two.

In *Jane Eyre* the character of Mr. Brocklehurst embodies the idea of a rigid, insincere focus on spiritual matters that neglects the physical needs of individuals. He believes that the physical body is a source of temptation and sin, and that it must be subdued in order for the soul to flourish. As he says, "And, ma'am," he continued, 'the laundress tells me some of the girls have two clean tuckers in the week: it is too much; the rules limit them to one. I think I had better take a seat and an umbrella, and go myself and fetch it'" (Bronte, 2001, p.52). However, his approach is criticised by Jane, who recognises the negative impact it has on the students at Lowood as she describes the miserable scene at the school by saying:

The meal over, prayers were read by Miss Miller, and the classes filed off, two and two, upstairs. Overpowered by this time with weariness, I scarcely noticed what sort of a place the bedroom was, except that, like the schoolroom, I saw it was very long. To-night I was to be Miss Miller's bed-fellow; she helped me to undress: when laid down I glanced at the long rows of beds, each of which was quickly filled with two occupants (Bronte, 2001, p.37).

In contrast to Mr. Brocklehurst's approach, the character of Rochester represents a more balanced view of the human condition. He recognises the importance of both the spiritual and physical aspects of humanity, and he is able to appreciate both in Jane. As he says, "I would not exchange this one little English girl for the Grand

Turk's whole seraglio, gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!" (Bronte, 2001, P. 229). According to Hoeveler, religion or catholicism in particular is presented as dominant power over the physical side of people in *Jane eyre* while "the spirit is quite absent" (Hoeveler, 2009, p.109). This dominance has its historical back-ground when the church failed to approach people hearts and minds so tend to have more physical control over people using in many cases physical punishment or degrading the body. Hoeveler says that "Jane Eyre figuratively link catholicism to mental and physical subjugation" (Hoeveler, 2009, p.446).

In conclusion, *Jane Eyre* presents a complex and accurate portrayal of the interplay between the spiritual and physical aspects of humanity. While some characters, such as Mr. Brocklehurst, embody an insincere focus on the spiritual at the expense of the physical, others such as Rochester, recognize the importance of both. Critics have debated the novel's treatment of the spiritual and physical. Ultimately, the novel presents a message of balance and integration, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and embracing both aspects of ourselves.

6. Religion as Duty

Having a handsome look with a name derived from the Bible, St. John appears at the beginning as the perfect form of how a religious person should be. However, when the reader goes further discovering his conversations with Jane showing absolute coldness and no emotions which contrasts what Jane believes. Charlotte describes him as a handsome tall man with a straight nose and quite Athenian mouth and chin.

He was young—perhaps from twenty-eight to thirty—tall, slender; his face riveted the eye; it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline: quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin. It is seldom, indeed, an English face comes so near the antique models as did his. He might well be a little shocked at the irregularity of my lineaments, his own being so harmonious (Bronte, 2001, p.294).

This suggests that we are dealing with an idol rather than a normal human being. His help to Jane and support beside choosing being a missionary and travelling far away for that would make anyone from the first stance to admire his devotion and feels himself in front of intellectual and moral superiority. Asking a critic question, if this care towards Jane is out of sincere emotions or being a missionary is out of passion to religion? According to professor Harold Bloom, Jane starts to understand more John's character and gives the answers to these questions. She first describes how he puts barriers to friendship, even sometimes cold. Despite praising his patience while teaching her, she feels his demanding and controlling spirit that he

has. During her conversation with him, he told her how he was not happy at the beginning being a priest and that he was looking forward for a more interesting life until he accepted his duty and role in life by hearing God calling him as he says. This gives a clear explanation of how St. John believes: he thinks religion as 'duty', and his travel to India is to carry the 'word of God' and his proposal to Jane was because he thinks she is suitable to be "a missionary wife" 'she refuses St. John's call to selfless devotion in favour of self-fulfilment' (Bronte, 2014, p.145). He refuses Jane's suggestion for him to marry Rosamond who, however, he likes her he thinks that she is not suitable to be a missionary's wife. This to make the reader feels himself in front of an 'automaton' with no feelings, just duty and even not referring to himself as a person with flesh and soul. But as a missionary whom Jane has to accept his proposal as a kind of duty as well if she wants to travel with him.

Jane's self-awareness about his nature makes her escape from him at the end and refuses his proposal since she couldn't accept this perspective. St. John at the end says that he will go to India alone and that he is happy to stand without fault before God. He says:

Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.' His is the ambition of the high master-spirit, which aims to fill a place in the first rank of those who are redeemed from the earth— who stand without fault before the throne of God; who share the last mighty victories of the Lamb; who are called, and chosen, and faithful (Bronte, 2001,p. 401).

This quotation as it seems to be so idealistic and admired by many, could be so harsh way for many of people and not realistic as faults are part of human nature.

7. Asceticism and purity

Born as an Anglican from an Anglican clergyman father, Charlotte Bronte tends towards Anglican perception in some ways. However, many critics see that she doesn't represent the Anglican's views, still we can find the effect of her Anglican back-ground in her writing. Helen Burns' character acts as a reflection of many of Jane's features. Many critics suggest that she is the recall for Bronte's own sister who died when they were young. This explains Jane's emotion towards her, as she considers her as the closest perspective to the pure Christianity doctrine. Helen, as it means the bright shining light while burns suggests anguish indicates how careful Bronte was when she chose the name for this character for its symbol and reflection to this character's traits and her life until her dramatic death at the end (Peschier, 2005, pp. 112-113). Helen represents the purity, forgiveness, patience and her deep true faith even when mistreated and victimised. On her first day at school, Jane finds

Helen having humiliating punishment from the strict teacher Miss Scatcherd. Helen was standing in the middle of the classroom as a kind of degrading punishment and was exposed to everyone to watch her in this position. For a girl who is almost fourteen, the normal and expected reaction would be anger, fight, cry, or feeling ashamed. On the contrary, Helen shows none of these, which made all other students wonder how she is so quiet and patient. When Jane asks her why Miss Scatcherd is so cruel to her, Helen justifies that she is only severe may be and that she only doesn't like her faults. This response, as it seems to be so good to be real and can't match the real life. Jane is not justified with that as it makes her always victimized by other evil characters. Then Burns added further words that show that she deeply understands that was evil deep inside, but according to Christianity from her perspective, she should return good for evil and advised Jane to read the Bible further to understand her point of view. She quotes from Bible addressing Jane "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you" (Mathew 5:44, King James Version) says Helen Burns, quoting from the New Testament.

Then comes the second part of Helen's name 'Burns' to be highlighted when she dies because of less careduring the pandemic. According to what the novel suggests, such purity can't coexist with the struggle of life and fighting with evil. In a dramatic and so poignant event, Helen Burns dies while Jane was sleeping beside her. When Jane asks Helen if she is afraid from death, Helen replies that she is feeling relaxed and happy to return back to the sky. Her death indicates for the impermanent existence for such purity to be existed on earth which helped the development of Jane's own perception about religion.

8. Jane's final perception for how religion should be considered

Jane's final perception for how religion should be considered in *Jane Eyre* is a central theme of the book, one that is developed through the protagonist's character and relationships as well as the narrator's voice. Bronte's perspective of religion is reflected in Jane's own beliefs, which are presented as a realistic, emotionally derived, and practical approach to religious faith. Many critics have misunderstood Bronte's intention in the novel, interpreting it as an attack on religion. However, Jane's beliefs are presented as genuine and rooted in her experiences. As Jane states "We know that God is everywhere; but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us" (Bronte, 2001, p. 276). This quote highlights Jane's belief in a mighty power that its impact can be clearly seen in the world as well its presence can be felt and experienced emotionally. Moreover, Jane's

relationship with Rochester shows her inner religious belief. When Rochester is in danger, Jane prays for his safety and finds her shelter and comfort within her faith as she expresses her feelings and says; I felt the might and strength of God. Sure was I of his efficiency to save what he had made: convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured. I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: The Source of Life was also the Saviour of spirits. Mr. Rochester was safe: he was God's and by God would he be guarded (Bronte, 2001, p. 276). This passage spots the light on Jane's faith in divine protection and her belief in God's power to save people.

Additionally, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* that Jane's belief in God is linked to her sense of duty and responsibility. (Gilbert & Gubar, 2020 P.347) When Rochester tries to have Jane as his mistress and go to France where no consequences for that, she refuses because she believes it is against God's will. However, she wanted to be beside him, but she feels that she no choice to accept and says "God must have led me on" (Bronte, 2001, p.274). This decision shows her priorities as she puts her religious beliefs over her own desires and highlights her sense of moral abide.

Jane's willingness to accompany St. John on his missionary work in India also demonstrates her religious beliefs, as she sees it as an opportunity to do good in the world. However, she declines St. John's proposal of marriage, explaining that she does not feel the same emotional connection to him as he does to her. As Jane tells him, "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (Bronte, 2001, p. 270). This is to suggest that Jane's religious beliefs are also tied to her sense of self-worth and her determination to make her own decisions, rather than submitting to others' will.

To sum up, Jane's perception of religion in *Jane Eyre* is presented as a sincere and emotionally driven approach to faith. In fact, Bronte uses Jane's character development and relationships to resembles her own perspective on religion. Through Jane's experiences, Bronte offers a and more compassionate perspective of religion that challenges traditional views of religious belief and practice.

9. "Conclusion

In conclusion, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is a novel that explores and digs in the different aspects of people's religion thoughts and their understanding about God in that age. Throughout the novel, Jane confronts various experiences that are based on wrong understanding of o religion. The classical perception of religion as a moral and ethical guide is reflected in the treatment of Jane by the Reed family and her

subsequent character development. The insincere focus on soul neglecting the physical humanity side is seen in Mr. Brocklehurst's character and the role of ragged schools in the society. Religion as duty is represented by St. John's character and his doctrine, which Jane ultimately rejects. The theme of asceticism and purity is embodied in the character of Helen Burns and the negative side effects of this adaptation on individuals and society. Through these different perspectives, Jane ultimately arrives at her own understanding of religion and spirituality, one that emphasises a balance between moral duty and compassion for others. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* continues to captivate readers with its complex portrayal of religious and spiritual themes, showcasing the power of literature to explore timeless questions about the human experience.

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