

International Baccalaureate

Extended Essay

English B, Category 3: Literature

The analysis of Charlotte Brontë's use of Jane's character to critique gender inequality in
Victorian Society in the novel
"Jane Eyre"

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Research Question:

How does Charlotte Brontë use the character of Jane Eyre to critique the inequality faced by women in Victorian society, and in what ways does the novel challenge traditional gender roles?

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Introduction

In the period when women were defined by the places they held in men's lives—loved spouses, siblings, daughters—the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë acts as a remarkably nontraditional narrative which challenges the rigid structure of the Victorian society. Released under the male pseudonym “Currer Bell” in October 19, 1847, the novel astonished both readers and critics during the period due to the fact that it featured an independent, strong, clever, smart, and a self-assured woman who was not frightened to act on her own (History, 2025). The novel *Jane Eyre*, standing both as a groundbreaking feminist extract and as a romantic gothic fiction, integrates hope and sentimental tension to expose the emotional and reasonable constraints enforced on women. Charlotte Brontë's ability to combine emotional independence with social critique not only makes the novel a narrative accomplishment but a convincing social review, resisting up against the conventional roles women were forced to accept.

The mid-1800's was a time of serious inequality and strict forecasts for women in England. In Victorian Society, the ideal woman, the quality of a woman was assessed by modesty, servility and commitment to household duties, in contrast characteristics like freedom—especially cognitive or monetary—were usually seen contrary to feminine ideals or sometimes even dangerous. Legal and religious organizations strengthened male authority, once women got married they were subsumed under their husbands' lawful identity. Women did not have the opportunity to vote, they didn't have the chance to get a simple education or own property, making them rely on their husbands both economically and politically. As feminist activist Bessie Rayner Parkes pointed out in her writings on women's work, Victorian society placed “immense value on

feminine delicacy,” yet still refused woman liberty and social acknowledgement (Belloc, *Essays on Woman’s Work*, 1865). The writers of the era often portrayed women as dutiful, decorative, and humble.

In this essay, I will explore how Charlotte Brontë uses the character of Jane Eyre to critique the gender inequalities present in Victorian society and to question the assumptions regarding femininity, marriage, and freedom based on the research question “*How does Charlotte Brontë use the character of Jane Eyre to critique the inequality faced by woman in Victorian society, and in what ways does the novel challenge traditional gender roles?*” In the theme of inequality and traditional gender roles women were faced will be analysed by narrative voice, metaphors, textual analysis and literary techniques like symbolism. This essay will point out how Charlotte Brontë critiques male power and reforms female identity and freedom by analyzing Jane’s determination, romantic involvements inside the historical context of Victorian society. With creating a central figure who surpasses social constraints while upholding her values, Brontë portrays not merely a captivating novel but also a fearless vision of women’s empowerment. Not simply being a novel of personal development or love, *Jane Eyre* stands as a revolutionary statement that women have the entitlement to build their own life and identity.

Main Body

Through the character of Jane Eyre, Brontë criticizes the gender inequality in Victorian society while at the same time depicting a symbol of female independence who challenges societal expectations. Within the traditional framework, *Jane Eyre* presents itself as a novel of subversion. Charlotte Brontë not only gave perspective to a woman who denies to be described by her financial

position or romantic involvements but also builds a portrayal in which that perspective is critical. The character of Jane Eyre who is an orphaned governess, is not either beautiful or rich, but her quick-thinking noble view, determined sense of inner self, as well as rejection to surrender her pride establishes her as a literary individual significantly ahead of her era. Using the character of Jane, Charlotte Brontë judges the discrimination encountered by women and recommends a revolutionary reinterpreting of female identity: one grounded not in obedience, but in equity, ethics, and integrity.

Since the beginning of the novel, the main character—Jane Eyre— is displayed as a stranger; she is deeply emotional and relies on others for economical purposes, but she resists inequity with courage and perseverance. Jane's interaction with Mrs. Reed—her abusive aunt—she says, "I am glad you are no relation of mine... I will never call you aunt again," (Eyre, 53) lays the foundation for an entire life of upholding moral independence in the face of unfairness. Jane's experience at Lowood Institution uncovers the systems intended to restrict women's freedom and speech. The institution's emphasize on humility, modesty, and endurance is a vivid representation of the academic and religious foundations which established female compliance. Jane being an outsider and a quiet person does not make her obedient as the novel progresses. Rather, Brontë expresses her education not in a restrictive manner, but as the foundation for free thinking. The use of first-person point of view is specifically important in this context. The reader is fully immersed in Jane's internal world, doubts, dreams, and decisions. This narrative approach establishes a woman's perspective at the focal point of the novel and insists that her stance be recognized. In Victorian society where women were commonly spoken for by others, Jane Eyre reflects her personal views. Jane's appreciation of her own humanity, stating her emotional sincerity, and moral clarity without fear, given in the metaphor: "I am no bird; no net ensues me," (Eyre, 412) is given as a rejection

for authoritarian control. In times like these, Brontë exposes the power imbalance surrounding women and establishes female independence as both fundamental and instinctive.

In the novel through Jane's relationship with her lover Rochester, Brontë presents a sensitive challenge against patriarchal romance. Although Jane has deep love for Rochester, she strictly denies to be owned by him. Upon discovering his existing marriage, she chooses to depart, opting for poverty and loneliness rather than settlement. This choice highlights a key theme of the novel: freedom holds greater value than security. It is only when she later returns to Rochester—now blind, humbled, and stripped of his superiority—that Brontë allows their union as equals. Jane says, "Reader, I married him," (Eyre, 685) subverting the conventional syntax of romantic fiction to assert her action. Consequently, the novel concludes not with agreement, but with self-possession.

I. Freedom and Equivalence in Jane Eyre

Since the beginning of the novel, Brontë forms Jane Eyre's goal of independence as a critique of Victorian gender injustice and as a refusal of the assumption that women should stay obedient. Jane's determination on freedom becomes evident, and progresses into the moral and emotional structure of the entire narrative. Ranging from Jane's encounter with Rochester to her final refusal for marriage proposal to St. John, Jane forms her self not as an object or item that others can order, but as a concerned and honorable figure. Charlotte Brontë announces Jane in a language that demands on equality: when Rochester makes a proposal to Jane, he calls her "my likeness" and "my equal," words the narrative undoubtedly assures just as phrases, not presents, of the relationship. In the moonlit scenery where he squeezes his suit, the language of monotony

punctures both the gender and class social scale that form their world: “because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane will you marry me?” (Eyre, 387) The proposal scene isn’t a submission of a mistress to a master; it’s a reciprocal naming which Jane assesses and justifies, waiting to “read” his expression before approving, a minor but noteworthy affirmation of instructive and noble autonomy.

This autonomy is later visible in the disturbed wedding, when Jane refuses to be Rochester’s governess. Her statement —“it is my spirit that addresses your spirit...we stood at God’s feet, equal” (Eyre, 386)—reconsiders affinity as a link with more dignity instead of a turnout by money or power. This idiom, God’s feet, states Jane’s wishes to a power other than law: she declares that her personality could interpret and act honestly. In the same part, she rejects metaphors which could make her entitled to someone else; she is neither prepared nor captured yet “a free human being with an independent will.”(Eyre, 386) By stating Jane’s independence to act freely as a moral right contrary to a resistant instinct, Brontë critiques Victorian norms that women must depend on man. This phrase is not just a blossom of love; it is a calculated strategy. In the one and the same scenery she refuses fatalist metaphors which would lower her to an entangled being; she is neither captured nor prepared yet “a free human being with an independent will.”(Eyre, 386) By stating Jane’s independence as a moral right opposed to a defiant impulse, Brontë criticises Victorian tradition that women must be sentimentally dependent on men and rather encourage feminist agency as necessary for personal dignity.

Charlotte Brontë intensifies this portrait of self-determination by comparing Jane among more “acceptable” Victorian feminineness. Blanche Ingram, a possible wife for Mr. Rochester, represents an affected superiority and uses a tactical approach to captivate a husband. When Jane

has to bother a billiards party to call for Rochester, Blanche's dislike "Does that person want you?" (Eyre, 339) captures her sociable habitat and the narrative's judgment of it: aristocratic relieve and aesthetic display that accentuate, rather than hide class brutality. Over this contradiction, Brontë disgraces the submissive and performative woman, whilst accepting a more silent alternative model—Miss Temple—in order to present how female jurisdiction and cognitive balance can magnify self-control and carefulness. The novel's affectionately descriptive explanation of Miss Temple— "stately", "benignant," (Eyre, 69) a teacher who directly guides and helps kids all the time—displays an achievable standard of female education and domination that grows, rather than reduces, the sovereign self Jane will eventually become. The novel's tenderly-critics have lengthily read Jane Eyre acting as a proto-feminist Bildungsroman in which the hero's upstanding education ends up in a moral of self-esteem. Elaine Showalter proclaims that Charlotte Brontë "invented a new feminist voice," (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 1999) one which protests both indigenous views and and literate demeanor by displaying "an inner life that insists on being spoken." The continuous "I" which powers the novel's first-person narrative is the chosen tool for that persistence. The freedom we come across isn't just a belief asserted; it is a use of narrative represented in how Jane tells her story.

II. Male Power and Female Defiance

By Jane's communications and interactions with male figures of power: Brocklehurst, Rochester, and St John, Bronte reveals the injustice women faced in Victorian Society and shows how Jane endures traditional norms of female submission. The debate between absolute authority and women independence reemerges with every single one of the main male characters. Mr. Brocklehurst represents a persistent integration of religious reasoning and social norms. He uses

girl figures to highlight his ideology of female modesty by stating “all those top-knots must be cut off.” (Eyre, 96) Ironically, Brontë issues his criticism opposed to the fancy furs and curls of his daughters and wife, forming artificiality into clear view. By this juxtaposition, Brontë critiques the double standards placed on women and reveals the injustice ingrained in Victorian society. Jane’s endurance for authority challenges the traditional norms and supports women’s independence.

Rochester portrays full-scale autocratic charisma—maturity, wealth, narration gravity. Still Brontë both concedes and restricts his power. The section’s language shifts to public space and legal fact when a legal practitioner proclaims, with calm decisiveness, that “Mr. Rochester has a wife now living,” (Eyre, 441) after the wedding is stopped. Rochester’s quotation “Produce him—or go to hell” (Eyre, 442) is driven by sentimental values, but the laws of society cannot be changed by these values. Law remains unchanged and cold. The point Brontë is trying to make here is clear: charm cannot overrule societal rules, especially the ones that bind women by social norms. Here, Jane’s resistance is not for Rochester’s love, but for the conditions of a non-marital relation which would make her dependent upon him. The time she says “I have as much soul as you,” (Eyre, 386) she debates over the philosophical logic that masculinizes emotion, mortals and feminizes body, possessions. Later on—Rochester humiliated by Thornfield’s destruction and incapacitation—enables a relationship which can be reestablished on tougher conditions of reciprocity. Terry Eagleton mentions that Brontë’s “myths of power” (Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, 2005) fluctuate among Romantic desire and social law; the narrative’s outcome insists that love should be honest and fundamental, not merely sentimental. Through Jane’s relationship with Rochester, Brontë critiques the authority men had over women in both social and emotional life.

St. John's power is of an unlike type—harsh, austere, purified. Jane interprets him as “restless...hard...eager,” (Eyre, 611) an image that signals authority and harshness. St. John's calmness threatens to ossify where Rochester's fire threatens to absorb. Rochester's proposal utilizes Jane's personality—“to procure a fitting fellow-laborer in his Indian toils” (Eyre, 633)—downsizing marriage to evangelist logistics. Jane's “No” for this calling is a second manumission, far from the first one: she rejects a religious patriarchy such that would conscript her principles. She clearly “refused to marry him” (Eyre, 633) and offers an another alternative affinity—“as his sister”—a moral alteration of autocratic terms. Brontë presents how humane pressure could be “more potent...than force,” (Eyre, 637) amplifying how divine charisma can outweigh a woman's feeling of self with blessed rhetoric; Jane endures exactly by claiming the right to analyze “God's will” (Eyre, 637) contrary to her own logic and perception. Jane's rejection for the proposal challenges the expectations that women should lose independence for male authority.

III. Economic, Class, and Marriage Power

Brontë uses economic dependence, marriage, and class position to reveal the inequality women faced in the Victorian society and to question traditional norms of female roles. Jane Eyre investigates marriage as a ground where gender discrimination is debated. There are three paradigms presented in the novel: first one is the unnatural/bigamous unification with Rochester at Thornfield which would wipe out Jane's societal and legal standing; the second one is the instrumental marriage with St. John which would wipe out her sentimental and visionary life; and the third one is the mutual equivalence with Rochester after Ferndean Manor (the place where Rochester lives after Thornfield burns), based on common requirements and revealed limits. Each one of the paradigms tells what Brontë thinks is unchangeable: the woman should have the power

to say “I,” to think by using logic, to spend time outside, to come back—through terms which she thinks to be fair. The moment that Jane breaks out, “Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings?” (Eyre, 385) The comment is not only of Rochester’s urgent strategy but of a wider Victorian philosophy which mechanizes women’s approval. Academics have graphed this comment along numerous axes. Nancy Armstrong interprets domestic novel such as *Jane Eyre* as the area where modern individuality—specifically female internality—was expressed contrary to the marriage market’s commercialization of women (Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 1987) When Jane eventually gets married to Rochester, it’s upcoming disaster reconstructs power: the enormous house being gone, the patriarch being damaged, the economic irregularity reduced by Jane’s heritage (and, most importantly, by her harsh-won-self-existing.). The unification becomes understandable as permit among equals rather than incorporation.

The class status of Jane is not either “poor mistress” or “mysterious lady”, but a problematic in-betweenness which interprets how class and gender interlinks. In the scene of the proposal Jane identifies the irregularity: “not a shilling but what you have given me,” (Eyre, 388) understanding how reliance distorts the very probability of free assent. Through comparing the order to cut girls’ hair with the, “furs and curls” (Eyre, 97) of the Brocklehurst ladies, Brontë indicts not merely insincerity but a class-discriminated modesty, where severeness is a play requested from the poor. Like Terry Eagleton comments, Brontë doesn’t surpass class very much as interfere it by transforming dependency into ethical power; Jane’s voice becomes central, subsidizing a novel social arrangement in marriage (Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, 2005) Through Jane’s ability to decide on her own for marriage and economic independence, Brontë criticises the Victorian norm that women should depend on men and instead shows power as a key role to female identity.

IV. Narration Technique and Metaphor

Brontë's use of narrative techniques, metaphors, symbolisms enhances her critique of Victorian gender inequality by providing Jane control over her own story and by revealing the sentimental and social restrictions placed on women. Even though the novel's previous "red-room" (Eyre, 16) part isn't given in detail here, its rationale satisfies the novel: an abundantly furnished prison wherein a child is trained into quietness under the spirit of patriarch remembrance (the Reed household order, the dead uncle). The red-room, hence, symbolizes not only the childhood punishment but also the confinement forced on women in patriarchal households. Esthetic brutality—blood-red, reddish brown, velvet—of the red room, foreshadows Thornfield's very old brilliance, making readers remember that beauty can contain violence. Brontë will non-stop present this visual absurdity: pleasurable surfaces, ethical danger under, so Jane's self-esteem should be established contrary to luxurious settings which propose obedience.

Vibrant and elementary motifs that Brontë makes—specifically ice and fire—mark the logic among control and longing. With these symbolisms Brontë highlights the injustice among male authority and female restrictions placed on women in Victorian society. Ingoing explosion of Rochester is implied as "heart-fire" (Eyre, 350) a "bloody light" (Eyre, 350) became visible in the eye whenever his past haunted him or when he felt threatened. Jane waits on his arrival with acts of everyday care—"the fire had been kindled...and burnt well" (Eyre, 252) —figuratively turning into the moral guardian of desire, not the killer of it. On the other hand, the influence of St. John is more solid and strict, a face that is "square" (Eyre, 611) and an unchanging stare which indicates ingoing coldness; indeed his unlikely flush before Rosamond is instantly "curbed... as a resolute rider would curb a rearing steed." (Eyre, 615) Narrative's most darkest natural illustration, the

lightning-crack chestnut of whom halves stick to the roots, turns into a forecast of the Jane-Rochester relationship: at once “charred and scorched” (Eyre, 391), nevertheless connected at a buried level that storms can’t separate.

Afterwards Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert’s important reading, Bertha can be viewed as Jane’s “madwoman in the attic” (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) : a character who represents the madness and longing Victorian standards suppress in “good” women. The legalized disclosure—the relationship accurate, Bertha still being alive (Eyre, 441)—blows Rochester’s book and reinstates Bertha’s place as a material (yet strained), not being just a simple element of the story. Still, Gubar and Gilbert’s metaphor should be interpreted along the side of ex-colonial analysts. Notoriously discussed by Gayatri Spivak, the narrative ensures Jane’s liberty at the expense of an “other” Caribbean, creating Bertha’s ethnicized and social history the extensible foil to an English hero’s independence (Spivak, *Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*).

At the beginning, the text identifies the character of Antonietta, Bertha’s mother, and her Spanish Town, Jamaica, both places deeply inscribed into the English marriage plan. Overall, these viewpoints enhance (not diminish) Jane’s feminist trajectory, the narrative accuses one style of patriarchalism while uncovering an alternative matrix—power and origin—which requests the reader’s moral awareness. Understanding this complication enhances, instead of weakens, the viewpoint that *Jane Eyre* stands at a crucial position for feminist discussion.

At last, Charlotte Brontë’s story method itself is a feminist mechanism. The persistent reference to the “reader” attracts us inside to the collaboration with Jane’s ideas and attaches the storyline to

her explanatory labor. Even when she depicts St. John with external kindness, the grand narrative to one side—“This is a gentle delineation, is it not, reader?” (Eyre, 525)—states her autonomous dominance over portrayal; she will form the world, not only occur in it. The famous quotation “Reader, I married him”(Eyre, 685) is not merely a metaphorical expression of love but a statement showing the proficiency of grammar; subject, verb, object-Jane as the representative. In other words, the first person that Brontë uses it not only stylistic; it is also philosophical, implanting claims on who may choose, write and wish.

V. Trained Independence

Along these ideals, the main revolution in the novel is to make equality a thing which is acted out in practice rather than being only spoken about or felt in the inside. Jane’s self-control is continuously examined by types of patriarchy such as: law, religion, romanticism. Her replies display a balanced pattern: she listens, hears the allegation, questions it, evaluates it against moral sense, and then makes a move—some of the time leaving, some of the time returning, at all times making a decision. This journey of independence is achievable because Charlotte Brontë gives Jane the tools to help her— a life, an education, financial security, and an unsilenced voice. The novel’s most adored part about equivalence are not merely words; they are supported by Jane’s willingness to leave, to “exert” her will (Eyre, 386), and admit the consequences. At the end of the novel, Jane Eyre is not a fantasy picture of flawless equality but a lead to liberty action (economic, moral and narrative freedom), proving that a woman has the ability to read, speak, say no, and feel feeling of love without becoming a robot in the process. Overall, Jane’s trained independence reveals how Brontë utilizes her character to expose the inequalities of Victorian society and the traditional gender norms placed on women to silence them.

Conclusion

To sum up, this essay shows how the character of Jane Eyre used by Charlotte Brontë as a fascinating instrument for criticizing the gender discrimination ingrained in Victorian society, eventually destabilizing and challenging the traditional gender roles. During the novel, Brontë builds Jane as a person who continuously insists her moral independence in a place which believes strongly in female silence and dependency. Starting with Jane's first conflict with inequity at Gateshead to her resilience in contrast to Mr. Brocklehurst's autocratic morality at Lowood, her changing sense of pride explains Brontë's belief that women have a fundamental self-respect which Victorian society consistently restrains.

The feminist criticism Charlotte Brontë utilizes in the novel intensifies in Jane's partnership with Mr. Rochester. Jane refuses to give her freedom and power, in spite of her connection to him. Her decision to leave Thornfield after learning that Rochester is already married shows her dignity. While refusing for the characteristics of a kept woman, Jane also tests the Victorian culture that women's identity must be formed merely by romantic relationships and bondings. Her determination and precision when she says "I care for myself" confirms independence as a sentimental requirement instead of a revolutionary act (Eyre, 421). This scene underlines Brontë's broader analysis for gender inequality. Jane has to determine and build her own character before she can fully commit on love. Therefore, Brontë presents women's independence not as a selfishness but as a vital issue for integrity.

Furthermore, the novel evaluates conventional gender expectations during Jane's endurance to St. John Rivers's marriage proposal. St. John suggests Jane a socially approved life but at the price of sentimental and personal independence. With rejecting St. John, Jane denies the Victorian tradition of the obedient, sacrificing woman whose only purpose is to serve male desire. Her decision displays Brontë's idea that women shouldn't be defined by commitment. Rather, emotional accomplishment are essential to a woman's personality. When Jane finally comes back to Rochester, she does it as an economically independent person, deciding on partnership rather than obedience. Their last relation is constructed upon equality and refusing traditional Victorian hierarchy.

Eventually, *Jane Eyre* withstands as a fundamental feminist passage because Jane's storyline demands that women own sentimental depth, moral control, and rational autonomy is alike to any man's. Through Jane's endurance, Charlotte Brontë critiques traditional norms in Victorian society and establishes a depiction of female character grounded in freedom, fairness, and dignity. The novel *Jane Eyre* remains to be profoundly significant, strengthening its ongoing effect on literary and feminist critique.

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