RESEARCH ARTICLE

What She is Not: Jane Eyre and the Female Desirability

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ABSTRACT

In the Victorian era appropriate behaviour was dictated by gender-based social norms. Not only the law was judging female actions, but the law was also judged according to the idealized conception of womanhood. This paper traces the transformation of Jane Eyre from the Victorian woman to a desirable woman in the light of the new ideal of female desirability by Nancy Armstrong (1990). She states that the female as the object of desire, attains a sense of power over the male, and is defined not by the extrinsic influences of political and social status but by the intrinsic workings of her mind. The paper will explain why and how Jane Eyre asserts her own autonomy to make controversial decisions and behaves according to individual codes of desire to battle the expectations of Victorian society and brings change into the female desirability to show what she is not. The paper concludes that Jane Eyre has established the new female ideal - a woman more confident in her own intrinsic desirability. She was a rebel, to a great extent, against the Nineteenth-Century domestic feminine ideal which the Victorians were busy building up. In other words, she makes great effort to shape her life with energy and vigor. She struggles against conventions and aspires for liberty to breathe according to her own will in a world dominated by power of tradition and conventions. She explicitly challenges and condemns the conventions of the domestic feminine ideal and becomes the source to empower the middle class woman with an ability to make autonomous decisions, and a sense of desirability who, nevertheless, to fulfill her emotional and physical role of mother and wife, sacrificed her personal desires.

Keywords: Jane Eyre, Victorian conventions, Companion, Female desirability, Controversy.
domestic female within the text of novels, conduct books and magazines taught the qualities of a new kind of woman and helped to shape the rise of the female. The idea of desiring a woman for her accomplishments and wealth was replaced with the idea of desiring a woman for her unique female qualities. The conduct books outlined and redefined the features that make a woman desirable to men of any class. A true sense of reform in shaping the female ideal is explored within the texts of the novels of the time (Armstrong 60). These authors seemed to ignore the radical world run by men and began to represent an individual’s voice more often in terms of her essential qualities of mind.

Contrasting earlier domestic fictions that reinforce the conventional power of man over woman and ends with marital unions, the later domestic fiction portrays a woman more confident in her own intrinsic desirability, establishing the new female ideal. The heroines behave according to individual codes of desire to make controversial decisions that often conflict with the expectations of society which begin to assert their own autonomous wishes.

This development shows that a vibrant correlation between autonomy and desirability was established in the domestic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Women assert their individual desire to be appreciated for intrinsic reasons and cease to become pawns in the hands of wealth and land. Female as the object of desire, in the domestic fiction of time, is defined not by the extrinsic influences of political and social status, but by the intrinsic niceties of her mind and succeeds by achieving a sense of power over the male.

By providing strong voice to her character, Charlotte Bronte refuses to accept the Victorian repression of woman. Unlike Austen who like Richardson did, ends her novels with female subordination and makes a return to male power, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* shares her vision of marriage and woman in her heroine’s momentous stands against the anticipated societal order by the reversal of male dominance in *Jane Eyre*.

Bronte in *Jane Eyre* traces the seeds of modernism in Victorian society in her unusual depiction of an autonomous rational heroine who refuses to go along with customary religious beliefs and traditional class structures.

She once told her sisters, “I will prove that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.” (Gaskell 236)

Harriet Martineau (friend of Charlotte) shares the anecdote from Bronte about the creation of her most celebrated heroine Jane Eyre, who challenges the conventional description of beautiful heroines. She believes that her sisters are wrong in making their heroines striking and beautiful. Indeed, Charlotte Bronte proves the success of her heroine to her sisters by presenting plain little obscure Jane Eyre with her avant-garde rebelliousness and unexpected progress.

In the 19th century Austen was synthesizing feelings with conventions and presented in her novel a vocal woman with conventional morality more concerned with social values and marriage. Hardy resisted Austen’s celebrated females and redefined the role of woman by focusing on the sexual aspect of femininity. He had introduced Victorians with the concept of ‘Fallen’ woman. Contrary to both great writers of the time Charlotte Bronte created Jane with perception of traditional Victorian domestic life retaining her independence and a sense of desirability.

Victorian era provided a model of set standards and codes of conduct which were the idealized notion of how Victorian men and women should be. One’s social standing depended on “proper” Victorian behaviour, which argued that women belong to “separate spheres” of paid labour and domesticity and they should fulfill their responsibilities keeping themselves in those proper spheres (Newman p. 5). Victorian portrayed their woman as angel in the house but charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is an action reversed with a different attitude.

This paper will explain why and how Jane Eyre acts according to individual codes of desire and asserts her own autonomy to make controversial decisions that clash with the beliefs of Victorian society and brings change into the female desirability and shows what she is not.

In the Nineteenth century, as compared to men the status of women was miserable. Very few opportunities of better survival were offered to unmarried women. Good marriage was the best option for middle class women to
get economic security and raise social position. The conception of submissive, pure, religious, and a flawless lady, as “an angel in the house” was chiefly held among the middle classes (Showalter p. 13).

On the other hand poor women could survive by offering their services as farm labourers, household servants and factory workers (Thaden p. 65). The notion of Victorian womanhood was changed with the rise of industrialization when the urban areas became the center of economic importance. Women were offered to come out of their homes changing the traditional “proper duties” with man spheres of paid labor (Newman p. 6).

The Victorian perception of an idealized female figure was a morally elevated lady who should turn her home to a comfortable, clean and tranquil heaven where her man could relax himself from the fatigue of the paid labor (Newman p.8). Women in the Victorian society were expected to play different role, but the very important assigned role was to marry and satisfy the needs and demands of the husband. They were taught early to dedicate their lives to family and home if married, and to assist others who support her financially if she did not.

Virginia Woolf defined the Victorian idealized woman:

She was intensely sympathetic...immensely charming...utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily...she never had a mind or wish of her own...Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (Newman p.9).

Jane refuses to succumb to this description by claiming her individual being and independent free will by rejecting the rule of Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brockelhurst, Mr. Rochester’s and John Reed’s proposals proving herself a woman with a mind and a will of her own.

Where Victorian men and women were seeking for an ideal relationship based on the expectations and demands of the society Jane Eyre progress is in opposite direction of the Victorian conventionality.

This demotion from the traditional domestic novels surprised Victorians who saw Jane Eyre as an “independent agent” (Ewbank p. 38) in the age where the “female sensibility” was considered a great sin to female writing. Charlotte traced in her novel not only Jane’s journey of self-realization but a journey of Victorian chained woman towards the origin of new independent woman. However, in Jane Eyre, by saying:

I can live alone...I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give. (Bronte 239)

Jane refused to exist in terms of her impact with a domestic circle. She asserted her own identity as an individual and presented herself as an independent being rather than a slave to make someone happy.

Jane’s longing for independence and equality, rebellion against subjection and oppression and her courage to express her true self and love for Rochester, made Jane too much unlike “the Angel in the House” that the Victorians adorned (Pan 14). Jane’s revelation of her feelings for Rochester directly challenges the Victorian convention where female was never allowed to voice her love. When Rochester pretends to arouse her jealousy she speaks out her heart:

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! I have as much soul as you...and full as much hearts!... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; ...and we stood at God’s feet, equal -- as we are! (Bronte 241)

Not only does Jane express her feelings openly to Rochester but she makes him realize her equality that she has a soul and a heart forgetting about her Victorian constructed female identity. She proves herself performing more than a caretaker and comforter like roles and fixes herself on the pedestal of companionship by providing Rochester with the opportunity to pour his heart out by sharing his sexual transgression and have lighten the burden on his conscience.
Here she makes the Victorian moralist uncomfortable because it was considered immodest on part of young ladies to listen to love affairs without any distasteful feeling (Rigby 173).

In addition to this Jane Eyre challenges the very domestic ideal. Jane is shown opposing her destiny since childhood. As a child of ten, she did something unusual when she resisted the red room punishment and confronted Mrs. Reed calling her “deceitful” and “hard hearted” woman (Bronte 36).

Jane begins her pilgrim of freedom and independence by solving problems she was confronting. As she was not a “contented, happy, little child” (Bronte 8), she was separated from the “normal society” by being excluded from the drawing room of Mrs. Reed. Cruelly treated by John Reed, without any fault, when she was imprisoned in the ‘red room’ she feels herself a “trifle” and “out of myself” and “like a rebel slave” she decides to go all lengths (Bronte 16) to write her own self for herself. She starts focusing on the formation of her personality which moves her from innocence to experience, from unconscious to conscious.

Her visit to the red room and her life with Reeds has taken a large emotional charge on Jane. In the red room Jane cannot picture herself when she gazes into a “great looking glass” and finds an image float. She does not recognize the image as a part of herself but some alien or more disturbing force that compels her to plan an escape “through flight, starvation or madness” (Sandra M. 477). Red room incident is a life changing incident because the foundation of her desire for love and liberty surfaced through this incident. Another such incident follows in Loowood school when she is alienated and is punished by Mr. Brockkulhurst for being a ‘liar’ and the third incident at Thornfield when she feels entrapped out of herself and she struggles to escape from Thornfield to preserve her real self by gathering shattered pieces of her broken heart:

"Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt... May you never appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless...for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love.” (Bronte361)

Although Jane knows that leaving Thornfield means to face many mental and physical hardships and bearing that will not be easy but she knows that she must because she is firm not to sacrifice her values even for love.

Jane’s journey of self-independence progresses, as she physically moves from one place to another. Jane has a desire to explore the world to experience something new to get the knowledge of life even if there are risks.

“now I remembered that the real world was wide...and awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expance to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils.” (Bronte p. 98-99)

The development of her personality can be divided into five distinct phases. As a child in Gateshead, as a student and then teacher in Lowood she explores her abilities and educates herself, as a governess in Thornfield, as an outcast and as a cousin at Moors she finally comes to Ferndean with Rochester. In the first phase of her life “poor, plain and little” Jane finding herself like Cinderella among selfish and unpleasant stepsisters, wicked and foolish stepmother and a tyrant brother, nourishes the seeds of rebellion against the hierarchy that oppresses her, she comes to know the meaning of “sanguine and brilliant” (Bronte 24) which equips her to face the challenges of future in her encounter with Mrs. Reed. For the first time she gives want to her feelings through a voice telling Mrs. Reed that,

“I am happy you are no relation of mine.” (Bronte 47)

It was something over which she had not had control. Jane in Gateshead, as a child constantly reminded of not being the part of family. Mrs. Reeds excludes her until she learns more sociable childlike disposition. Defending herself against the physical attack of her cousin was not considered an acceptable conduct on the part of girl who should know to repress her anger and her place in social order. When she was not given fair opportunity to defend herself, ‘Unjust unjust’ were the words of Jane against the unequal treatment and punishment of Red Room. In red room she grows mature and strong overnight to speak for herself and defend herself. Constantly oppressed and harassed by her cousin John Reed she feels like invisible air, the heir to
nothing. Without a sense of belonging she develops strong feelings for kinship, identity and independence.

Jane remains strong and lives against another Victorian patriarchal figure Mr. Brocklehurst who uses religion as an instrument to subjugate the teachers and girls and repress their sense of identity and individuality. In the company of Miss Temple, Jane develops a strong sense of self which does not permit her to get transformed with accordance to unjust patriarchal society rather to trust herself and prove herself good against the humiliation and accusation of Mr. Brocklehurst (patriarch).

Loowood School offers her a chance to administer her anger and provides her with opportunity to become a governess in the company of an admirable lady Miss Temple. Angel in the house like Victorian ideal figure Miss Temple teaches plain but ferocious and fiery Jane how to repress rage and madness. On the other hand Helenburns: the ideal of self-renunciation (Sandra 481) teaches her morality, the demands of religion and duty. Parting from Miss Temple brings Jane back to her real “elements” and she wishes for “liberty” (Bronte 84) and asks for a new “servitude” (Bronte 85). Her urge for an adventure of new kind brings her in direct conflict to the limitations that were impressed by Victorian society upon woman. She releases her famous “feminist manifesto” (Rich 97):

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. (Bronte 102)

The idea of women as being equal to men in their needs and demands was undoubtedly insane, unwise and unacceptable to contemporaries. What the Victorians opposed to was exactly this “subversive tendency” (Poovey 146) that was intolerable to contemporary society. Before sharing her manifesto of feminism she says, “Anybody may blame me who likes” (Bronte 102) which implied that she was aware of the after affects.

Jane’s struggle for male-female equality and thirst for independence shows her autonomy, but against the social ideals, she does not forget her self-worth and moral responsibility (Lowes 2015, web). That’s how she travels towards becoming desirable for an aristocratic proud gentleman. Even though having strong feelings of love for Mr. Rochester, she upholds the principle of morality and belief and does not marry him. Resisting the impulse to marry she finds herself weak, she utters prayers that they should not be parted far or soon but still she prefers to keep the divine “law given by God” and approved by man. She understands that she must uphold “the principles received by [her] when [she] was conscious, and not insane.”

The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man... Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth – so I have always believed... (Bronte 322)

She upholds the standard of morality and leaves Rochester when she realizes that her marriage is unlawful and means surrendering her virtue and dignity (Lowes 2015, Web). Her love’s sacrifice for self-respect becomes the means of mental and physical pains but ultimately she is rewarded when Rochester after his physical dependence
and isolation stands on equal footing with her (Williams 20). She prefers becoming a desirable companion holding hand in every spring and autumn of life instead of following the convention of domestic feminine ideal. When Rochester wishes to take this “comforter” and “angel” (Bronte 247) on his revisit to Europe, she responds very eccentrically,

“I am not an angel… and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself.” (Bronte 247)

Her rejection of the convention of the domestic angel is obvious when she states that, she is “a free human being with an independent will” and that she is “not a bird; and no net [can] ensnares [her]” (Bronte 237).

She struggles to defend her emotional and personal autonomy by preferring situations that offer freedom. She rejects the proposal of St. John Rivers sensing that she is expected to serve a person for the lone reason of moral duty. She advises him to seek better partner than her who deems fit to fulfill his expectations “St. John: seek one fitted to you” (Bronte 452).

She disowns all hostile and patronizing relationships and forms new relationships that value her. She marries Rochester, who provides her freedom of choice. She creates her own society finding kinship and autonomy as a companion in Rochester and changes the female desirability of the Victorian society by transforming the patriarchal view of an angel in the house to independent, equal companion of the soul.

Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* does not simply deal with the proud aristocrats but converts their own misperceptions of love and marriage and changes their thinking in order to find true happiness in marriage. She remains independent despite her weak social position and clearly overturns the patterns of male power. A close analysis of *Jane Eyre* reveals the progression of marriage, a shift from an aristocratic social contract regulated by an aristocratic society and a family interest to an institution that values the worth of the distinct individual woman while limiting her to a realm of domesticity. Indeed, the very movement toward individuality eventually led Jane to the development of intellectual curiosity to see, observe, weigh and choose. Jane leaves prints to be followed; she indirectly empowers the middle class woman with an ability to make autonomous decisions and fills her with a sense of desirability who always preferred to make sacrifice of her personal wishes and desires to accomplish her emotional and physical role of wife and mother.
References


