



Religion

The early chapters of *Jane Eyre* give a clear impression of the way religion was taught in the nineteenth century. After Jane's passionate outburst, Miss Abbott tells Bessie: 'God will punish her: He might strike her dead in the midst of her tantrums', and to Jane she says: 'if you don't repent, something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney and fetch you away.' Jane has been well indoctrinated; she tells Mr Brocklehurst that hell is 'a pit full of fire' into which the wicked fall and where they burn for ever (Chapter II).

The nineteenth-century Church taught that 'Every soul that has ever lived must appear before the High Court of Heaven to be judged' (Ecclesiastes 12:14, Romans 14:12, Hebrews 9:27). 'Every motive, thought, word and deed will be under close scrutiny in the Day of Judgement' (Matthew 12:36, Revelation 20:12). Although God was deemed to be merciful, in the interest of universal justice He was still expected to punish every unrepentant sinner on the Day of Judgement. For the obedient believer, it was promised that this day would usher in eternal glory, but the unbeliever was warned that it would be a day of anguish and annihilation.

For people living in the first half of the nineteenth century, death was an integral part of life. They never knew where it would strike, nor how quickly, so it was important to them to prepare for the afterlife. The Church exploited this fear in an attempt to make people submissive and uncomplaining. For the majority, life in this world was hard and unrewarding, but the Church promised them their reward after death: 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5).

Life and death

Life expectancy was low, especially for the working classes. Overcrowding, poor housing, lack of sanitation, no running water, low wages, poor standards of nutrition, ignorance and lack of effective medical treatment all contributed to the spread of disease. It is estimated that tuberculosis accounted for a quarter of all deaths. Other major killers were typhus, cholera and influenza, which were more or less endemic, but reached epidemic proportions frequently. Other diseases such as measles, whooping cough and diphtheria were also endemic. In Haworth, 'wool-sorter's disease', which we now know as anthrax, was virulent.

As well as disease, bad living conditions and ignorance led to food poisoning, and bad diet led to rickets, which could cause contracted pelvises, making childbirth difficult and even dangerous. Death in childbirth was not uncommon due to puerperal fever. By the age of ten years, 11% of children had lost a father, and 11% had lost a mother by the same age. Among the poor, 30% of children died before they reached their first birthday.



In Haworth, 41.6% of children died before they reached the age of six, and the average life expectancy was only 24 years. Reverend Brontë worked tirelessly to relieve the suffering of the poor, and he repeatedly petitioned the General Board of Health to improve sanitation. Eventually, when the overcrowded graveyard was contaminating the already unhealthy water supply, the Board commissioned the Babbage Report in 1850, and, as a result of this, conditions began to improve.

Reverend Brontë could not raise public subscription for the relief of the poor because the poor were regarded as an underclass whose degradation was largely their own fault. It was frequently asserted that God had made them poor, and that He wished them to remain poor. Society regarded widows, orphans, old people and the chronically sick as ‘deserving’ and so they could receive help through the degrading system of the Poor House. Anyone else was regarded as ‘undeserving’ and refused any help at all. With no unemployment benefit, no sick pay and no pensions, people needed children to support them through illness and old age, so families were large and children were sent out to work from the age of five or six.

This led to another common cause of death or crippling injury in children. Children earned only 10% of an adult wage so mill-owners liked to employ them as cheap labour. They were forced to work long hours without breaks, and tiredness and hunger frequently led to accidents with the machinery. The smallest children were employed as ‘scavengers’ to creep under the machines, while they were still in operation, to gather up bits of loose cotton or wool.

‘Self-righteousness is not religion’

Established religion was used as a form of social control to keep the poor in their place and prevent them from rebelling against the establishment. At Lowood, the daughters of impoverished gentlemen are taught humility and self-sacrifice, supposedly for the good of their souls. The established Church was firmly committed to supporting the government in preserving the existing class divisions. Significantly, it was the bishops in the House of Lords who were responsible for defeating the first Reform Bill.

When the novel was criticised for being ‘an insult to piety’, Brontë replied in her preface to the second edition: ‘Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns...narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ.’

Charlotte Brontë would have been familiar with these ‘narrow human doctrines’ throughout her life. Reverend Patrick Brontë was a broad-minded and tolerant man with an optimistic and cheerful view of religion. As a theological student at Cambridge he had come under the influence of the non-conformist evangelical wing of the Anglican Church. This movement was born out of a new



sense of urgency and personal commitment to spreading the new doctrines of Christianity, and in its early days it was responsible for the reform of a number of social abuses, such as the abolition of the slave trade. However, the children's aunt, Miss Branwell, was a strict Calvinist believing in predestination and damnation, and so, even at the family dinner table, there would have been lively discussions on religious matters. The debates would have included:

- the challenge to faith posed by new scientific discoveries
- the problems posed by a more historical approach to biblical criticism
- whether God's omnipotent power and knowledge meant that he had already, before the Creation, predestined the salvation of individuals, leading to an elect few who are saved, or whether Christ died for all and so everyone is capable of being born again
- whether God had no direct involvement with the individual destinies of human beings, or whether each individual can make direct contact with God through prayer

The danger of certainty

These religious questions are central to *Jane Eyre*. The rigidities of institutionalised religion are satirised in the inflexible Mr Brocklehurst and criticised in St John Rivers, whose sermons convey 'a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness; stern allusions to Calvinist doctrines — election, predestination, reprobation — were frequent; and each reference to these points sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom' (Chapter XXX). St John represses his natural instinct because he is convinced that he has to choose between religion and earthly love. St John's certainty that he will win 'his incorruptible crown' leads to his early death. A religion that excludes human affections is fit for heroes, but Brontë demonstrates that it is not a creed to live by.

Nevertheless, St John is a man to be admired, but who can take Mr Brocklehurst seriously when, after his pious lecture against vanity and the lusts of the flesh, his wife and daughters enter. With well-targeted humour, Jane notes: 'They ought to have come a little sooner to have heard his lecture on dress.' Not only are they 'splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs', but their hair is elaborately curled and Mrs Brocklehurst even 'wore a false front of French curls'. As Jane is placed on the stool, 'a spread of shot orange and purple silk pelisses and a cloud of silvery plumage extended and waved below me' (Chapter VII). The word 'satire' comes from the same Latin root as 'saturate', and surely these three females are saturated in too much extravagant and gaudy dress.

Another devout character who dies prematurely is Helen Burns. Helen teaches Jane a 'creed which no one ever taught me', and which 'extends hope to all' (Chapter VI). She is certain that her suffering on this earth will gain its reward in heaven, and so she teaches forgiveness of one's tormentors and acceptance of one's lot. Jane is influenced by Helen's faith so that she is able to forgive Mrs Reed on



her deathbed, even though she knows that this will not change her aunt's feelings for her, but she does not have Helen's absolute faith in heaven, and she cannot accept that life is merely a brief time of suffering before the better life to come.

The prodigal son

Mr Rochester is a good example of the evangelical belief in individual regeneration. He finds faith after passing 'through the valley of the shadow of death' (Chapter XXXVII). His Byronic cynicism gives way to religious acceptance and an acknowledgement of his individual responsibility for his troubles. As soon as he turns back to God, he is rewarded because Jane hears his voice and returns to him.

Jane's own religious position is not so easy to classify. As a child she has a very pragmatic attitude that to avoid going to hell she must keep in good health and not die. A realist, she questions the very idea of heaven: 'Where is that region? Does it exist?' (Chapter IX). At Thornfield, she falls into the trap of idolatry: 'I could not, in those days, see God for His creature: of whom I had made an idol' (Chapter XXIV). As she journeys through life, her faith develops into one based on individual conscience and the guiding influence of nature. For her, the proof of God's existence is in her natural surroundings: 'We know that God is everywhere; but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us; and it is in the unclouded night-sky, where His worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence' (Chapter XXVIII).

Charlotte Brontë manages to combine the Romanticism of many of her literary influences (e.g. Wordsworth, Scott and Byron) with a strong religious faith. Jane tells St John, 'I owe to their [Diana's and Mary's] spontaneous, genuine, genial compassion as large a debt as to your evangelical charity' (Chapter XXIX). The central theme of the novel is that Jane has learned the importance of a balance between reason and feeling.

Critical history

Contemporary criticism

Jane Eyre was immediately popular, praised for its vigour and boldness, its freshness and originality, its powers of thought and expression. However, it also proved controversial. Some reviewers complained about the improbable plot and the suggestions of supernatural intervention; some were outraged by the manner in which the young Jane confronted adults, and the grown woman confronted the supposedly superior sex; some accused the writer of attacking religion in the characterisation of the hypocritical Mr Brocklehurst.

Later, when it was known to have been written by a woman, although it still sold extremely well it attracted criticism from both conservatives and radical feminists. Conservatives regarded it as politically subversive. Brontë challenged the



contemporary perception of women by portraying Jane as both intelligent and passionate, equal to men in her capacity for intellectual aspiration as well as the depth of her sexual desire and the force of her anger. An autobiographical narrative necessarily asserts the importance of the individual, and expresses indignation at society's treatment of her. Conservative readers felt that God had made Jane a penniless orphan and she ought to be grateful for the charity offered by her benefactors instead of expecting equality. In both her writing and her paintings, Jane asserts her individuality. Politically this was subversive, because if each individual is valuable in his or her own right, then each individual should have the right to vote. Britain, however, was not a democracy; only male landowners were permitted to vote. One reviewer wrote: 'We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code, human and divine, abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has written *Jane Eyre*' (Elizabeth Rigby, *Quarterly Review* December 1948).

Outspoken though she is about social injustice, Charlotte Brontë was also criticised by contemporary feminists. Her friend Mary Taylor complained that she was soft on the 'rights of woman' issue. Mary had emigrated to New Zealand so that she could earn her own living in business and she felt that equal opportunity to work was an important issue that should be addressed head on. For Brontë, sentiment was more important than rights. In response to an article on the emancipation of women by John Stuart Mill, she agreed that 'if there be a natural unfitness in women for men's employment, there is no need to make laws on the subject; leave all careers open; let them try'. However, she criticises him for ignoring the heart: 'I think the writer forgets there is such a thing as self-sacrificing love and disinherited devotion' (letter to Mrs Gaskell, 20 September 1851). At the end of the novel, Brontë comes down firmly on the side of 'self-sacrificing love' as Jane suppresses her restlessness and her ambition; she marries Mr Rochester and becomes the domesticated woman she had earlier rejected.

Charlotte Brontë expressed contentment with what had been achieved for women and the change she perceived in men's attitudes to an educated woman. She felt, however, that 'there are other evils — deep-rooted in the foundation of the social system — which no efforts of ours can touch; of which we cannot complain; of which it is advisable not too often to think' (letter to Mrs Gaskell, 27 August 1850). She was not a campaigning social reformer like her friend Elizabeth Gaskell, but her novel does reflect issues and changes in her society. Schools for girls were being established and conditions were gradually improving. The social hierarchies were changing so that the son of a journeyman needlemaker, Mr Oliver, could become the most important man at Morton, while the children of the traditional gentry, Diana and Mary Rivers, have to leave home to find work. Brontë draws satirical portraits of upper-class guests at Thornfield and roundly condemns the hypocritical middle-class Mrs Reed and Mr Brocklehurst. Jane, however, expresses



approval of Lowood once it is run compassionately, calling it a 'truly useful and noble institution' (Chapter X), even though its education programme is still designed to prepare the daughters of impoverished gentry for a life of duty and service.

Modern feminist criticism

Recent feminist critics attempt to describe and interpret women's experience as depicted in literature. They question the long-standing dominant male ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature. They challenge traditional and accepted male ideas about the nature of women and how women are, according to male writers, supposed to feel, act and think. Elaine Showalter defines the period in which the Brontës were writing as the 'Feminine phase', when women first imitated a masculine tradition, followed by 'Feminist' and 'Female' phases when women protested against masculine values and traditions, and then finally advocated their own autonomous perspective (*A Literature of Their Own*, 1977). Feminist critics interpret Jane Eyre less for what Brontë advocates and more for her struggle against the cultural inhibitions by which she was conditioned. Her female protagonist, for example, could not actually express her sexual desire, so Brontë had to employ imagery. Many of the unrealistic melodramatic elements of the novel are perceived by feminist critics as evidence of Brontë's battling against the contemporary social mores and resorting to Gothic characters, events and imagery in order to suggest what she cannot express in words. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), in their widely acclaimed study of nineteenth-century women writers *The Madwoman in the Attic*, read her forcefulness when she breaks away from St John after hearing Mr Rochester's call as:

...the climax of all that has gone before...The plot device of the cry is merely a sign that the relationship for which both lovers had longed is now possible, a sign that Jane's metaphoric speech of the first betrothal scene has been translated into reality 'my spirit...addresses your spirit, just as if we both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal — as we are!'

Psychoanalytic criticism

Psychoanalytic critics see literature as they do dreams. Both are fictions, inventions of the mind that, although based on reality, are, by definition, not true. The theory is that much of what lies in the unconscious mind has been repressed or censored by consciousness and emerges only in disguised forms, such as dreams, or in an art form, such as painting or writing. They interpret the author's purpose in writing as being to gratify secretly some forbidden wish that has been repressed into the unconscious mind. Therefore, the novel is seen as wish-fulfilment on the part of Charlotte Brontë with its plain, poor, intelligent heroine falling madly in love with the passionate, masterful Byronic hero, but marrying him on equal terms rather than allowing herself to be dominated.



The novel is also perceived as an exploration of Jane's own repressed subconscious. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) suggest that Bertha is Jane's night-time double. Jane wants to be Mr Rochester's equal; Bertha is his equal in size and strength. Jane does not like the 'vapoury veil'; Bertha tears it in two. Jane wants to put off 'the bridal day', which she dreads as well as longs for; Bertha delays the wedding. Jane dreams of Thornfield in ruins; Bertha destroys it. 'Bertha', they conclude, 'is Jane's truest and darkest double; she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead'.

When she decides to leave Thornfield, 'Conscience turned tyrant, held Passion by the throat', and told her 'No, you shall tear yourself away, none shall help you; you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand' (Chapter XXVII). This strange prophecy comes true when she marries the crippled Mr Rochester and becomes 'bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh' (Chapter XXXVIII). It is as if her subconscious wish to be on an equal footing with Mr Rochester maims him to make him dependent on her, removes the impediment to their marriage, and destroys Thornfield where she had been his social inferior.

Marxist criticism

The Marxist perspective is that works of literature are conditioned by the economic and political forces of their social context. Not only is Charlotte Brontë advocating the rights of the individual and universal education, but the whole plot of the novel is dictated by the need to create equality between a penniless orphan who arrives at Thornfield as a servant and her wealthy and dominant employer. She has to leave Thornfield and achieve independence; he has to become weaker and more dependent. Only when social conventions have been observed can they come together as equals and achieve a fulfilling and loving relationship. In *Myths of Power*, Terry Eagleton reads Charlotte Brontë's novels as 'myths which work towards a balance or fusion of blunt bourgeois rationality and flamboyant Romanticism, brash initiative and genteel cultivation, passionate rebellion and cautious conformity'. It is the tensions between these opposites that give *Jane Eyre* its dramatic power and lasting appeal.

Post-colonial criticism

Post-colonial critics oppose the view that 'culture' refers exclusively to 'high' culture and place a great deal of emphasis on the practice of everyday life. They focus on culture in relation to ideologies, which are different ways of viewing the world held by classes or individuals who have power in a given social group. Post-colonial critics have explored *Jane Eyre* in the context of the British Empire and the patronising attitudes of the dominant Christian English society to British colonies. Briggs's letter states that Bertha's mother is a 'creole', which could mean either that she is of European descent, or that she is of mixed race. In either case, Bertha might have



evoked British anxieties about having to deal with the other cultures under British dominion, and Bertha's imprisonment might signify Britain's attempts to control and contain the influences of these subject cultures. Rochester's marriage to Bertha represents the British Empire's cultural and economic exploitation of its colonial subjects. It is significant that Edward Rochester's wealth was made on the backs of slaves in the West Indies, a fact which Jean Rhys makes explicit in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to *Jane Eyre*. St John Rivers goes as a missionary to India, with arrogant hopes 'of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance — of substituting...religion for superstition', which is another way of exercising control (Chapter XXXII).

Deconstruction

To deconstruct a text is to show that it can have interpretations that are opposites and yet intertwined. Terry Eagleton (1975) points out the broad opposites that intertwine in the novel. Brontë, for instance, gives us the perspective of the child, Jane Eyre, so we learn how she felt at the time, as well as the interpretation of the adult, Jane Rochester, who is telling her story. Mr Rochester thinks his marriage to Bertha Mason destroyed him, but the reader can see that it gave him financial independence and social position. Jane is a modern woman, ambitious, independent, passionate, but at the same time she is trapped in nineteenth-century thinking, and to us she appears intellectually as well as socially snobbish. She knows, for instance, that she should not have feelings of dismay and degradation about teaching at the village school, but Brontë uses the future tense when she asserts 'I shall get the better of them', indicating that she has not yet conquered her feelings of 'disgust' at 'the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness' (Chapter XXXI).

Literary background

Fictional autobiography

Compared with the other broad categories of drama, poetry and non-fiction, the novel is a recent literary genre. Its beginnings can be traced back to the sixteenth century, when people started writing prose narratives. In the seventeenth century, after the Restoration, authors such as Aphra Behn, John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe wrote books we can term 'proto-novels', which have a story rather than a plot, relating a sequence of events with little development in the central characters. It was not until the eighteenth century that true novels emerged. By this time, the form had been developed so that, instead of a series of events being narrated chronologically, writers constructed a plot that linked events together, exploring cause and effect, revealing significances and reaching a planned conclusion.



The genre grew in popularity with the expansion of the middle class, because the daughters of tradesmen were better educated than their parents, but they were not permitted to work or study for a career like their husbands and brothers. Like the wives and daughters of the landed gentry and the professional class, they had servants to do most of the housework, so there was a growing number of women with plenty of leisure time. Circulating libraries started up to make it possible for people to read more books than they could afford to buy and to satisfy the great demand for entertaining fiction.

Memoir-novels

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a new form of novel, fictional autobiography or 'memoir-novels', became popular. The first well-known memoir-novel is *Robinson Crusoe*, which was published in 1719. In this book Daniel Defoe created an impression of realism by adapting Puritan self-confession narratives to suit the mode of a fictional moral tract. Crusoe relates his fall from grace as he defies his parents and runs away to sea, then the bulk of the novel traces his slow, painful journey back to a state of grace. Crusoe is an educated man from a 'good family' so he narrates his experiences and achievements meticulously, because he is recording the nature of his moral survival and redemption.

Seven years later, Jonathan Swift published the more complex *Gulliver's Travels*, for which he created another reliable narrator. As a surgeon, Lemuel Gulliver is well educated and informed, not only professionally but also politically. His travels take him to extraordinary and fantastic societies, which he observes closely, and he records the details of his experiences scrupulously, as is expected from a medical practitioner. However, as his name implies, he is easily 'gulled' and seems oblivious to the parallels with his own society, which Swift's satire is intended to ridicule. Brontë writes in Chapter III that, as a child, Jane 'considered it a narrative of facts' and 'doubted not that [she] might one day, by taking a long voyage, see with [her] own eyes the little fields, houses, and trees, the diminutive people, the tiny cows, sheep, and birds of the one realm; and the cornfields forest-high, the mighty mastiffs, the monster cats, the tower-like men and women of the other'.

Epistolary novels

It was not until Samuel Richardson, in the 1740s, that novels with first-person narratives achieved the moral introspection and psychological insight that characterises *Jane Eyre*. In his epistolary novel, *Clarissa*, Richardson weaves together four main narrative voices, supported by various minor characters of differing age, class, and point of view, to construct a novel of great psychological complexity. Another highly popular epistolary novel was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* in which a critical account of contemporary manners and ideas is



interwoven with a passionate love story. In 1818, Mary Shelley used letters as the framework for her novel *Frankenstein*, which juxtaposes the supposed narratives of the eponymous scientist and his creation.

Romanticism

When people say that Charlotte Brontë was influenced by Romantic writers, they are not merely referring to the fact that *Jane Eyre* is a love story about a poor Cinderella figure who ends up married to the man she adores. The Romantic period refers to a movement in the arts and ways of thinking that pervaded Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Many writers, artists and musicians reacted against the neo-Classical Age of Reason that characterised eighteenth-century thought. Instead of prizing reason and logical thinking, the new thinkers insisted that the emotional side of human responses was more important, that the brain should learn from the heart and natural instinct, and that the imagination held purer truths than the mind. Nature was all important, and some writers even rejected established religion and worshipped nature instead. In place of the eighteenth-century fascination with all things classical, writers and painters turned to the medieval, the Gothic, the foreign, the exotic, and the supernatural.

Reason versus Nature

Charlotte Brontë read widely among the Romantics and it is easy to see their influence in *Jane Eyre*. Jane values reason, and indeed it dictates her behaviour when she leaves Thornfield, but love is more important to her, and when she has to choose between a man she admires who declares ‘Reason, and not feeling, is my guide’ (Chapter XXXII) and the man she loves, who has a ‘resistless *bent* to love faithfully and well’ (Chapter XXVII), she realises that she needs love more than intellectual challenges. Jane is strongly influenced by nature, and looks there first for protection and guidance. When she flees from Thornfield, she declares: ‘I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose’ (Chapter XXVIII). She finds somewhere sheltered to sleep and some berries to eat, and only then does she say her ‘evening prayers’, as if by routine rather than need. Not until nightfall does she feel ‘the might and strength of God’.

A love of nature is what Jane and Mr Rochester have in common. In the final chapter, she gives no details of what she has been reading to her blind husband, but she does list how she puts ‘into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam — of the landscape before us, of the weather around us’. Settings are very important in the novel, and Jane often uses natural imagery as a means of explaining her feelings. After the revelation that Mr Rochester has a wife, she feels as if winter has come: ‘A Christmas frost’ (Chapter XVI).