

Honors English 4: British Literature

***Jane Eyre*, Past and Present: Honors British Literature Summer Reading Assignment**

Although the following reviews of *Jane Eyre* were written almost 170 years apart from each other, they offer their readers perspectives on the novel itself, the novelist's craft, or some aspect of the human condition.

- The reviewer of 1847 comments, "It's no woman's writing" and "no woman could have penned" the novel because the reviewer assumed Currie Bell, Charlotte Bronte's pseudonym, was a male name. However, his comment implies something about the craft of the writer or the novel itself.

Explain what this reviewer meant by the comment in light of its 19th century context. Include at least three specific examples from your reading of *Jane Eyre* that might support this reviewer's idea about the novel's author or the novel itself. You might also include any other ideas from the article itself to further your analysis

- The reviewer of the 2016 article states that "Unable to find her sense of self through others, Jane makes the surprising decision to turn *inward*."

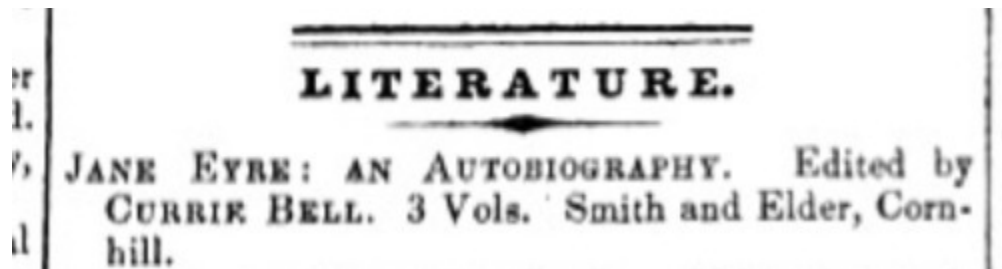
Explain what this reviewer means by the statement in light of its 21st century context. Include at least three specific examples from your reading of *Jane Eyre* that might support this reviewer's implications about the development of Jane's character, the author's purpose, or something about the human condition. You might also include any other ideas from the article itself to further your own analysis.

“It is no woman’s writing” A Contemporary [1847] Review of *Jane Eyre*

I was recently reading a review of *Jane Eyre*, from the newspaper “The Era” dated 14 November 1847 and found it an interesting review. I know that at the time, *Jane Eyre* was generally acclaimed and of course thought to be a great read, but it is fascinating to see here how much this reviewer loved the book. The timelessness of the story has been proved by its popularity over the years, but to read this contemporary enthusiasm for it makes me happy for Charlotte Bronte, as well as feel a little bit of a connection with the past as I love the story in a very similar way.

The reviewer’s assumption that the author of *Jane Eyre* is male is hilarious, but the justification is interesting. Just in that the reviewer is so accepting of a female character in a story embracing traits and ambitions equal to a man, yet still cannot see the reality of it in their time. I hope they eventually found out they were wrong!

I thought I would share the text of it here (I put in paragraph breaks for ease of reading) in case anyone else is curious to read it!



This is an extraordinary book. Although a work of fiction, it is no mere novel, for there is nothing but nature and truth about it, and its interest is entirely domestic; neither is it like your familiar writings, that are too close to reality. There is nothing morbid, nothing vague, nothing improbable about the story of *Jane Eyre*; at the same time it lacks neither the odour of romance nor the hue of sentiment. On the other hand, we are not taken to vulgar scenes, and made acquainted with low mysteries. We have no high life glorified, caricatured, or libelled; nor low life elevated to an enviable state of bliss; neither have we vice made charming. The story is, therefore, unlike all that we have read, with very few exceptions; and for power of thought and expression, we do not know its rival among modern productions.

Bulwer, James, D’Israeli, and all the serious novel writers of the day lose in comparison with Currie [sic] Bell, for we must presume the work to be his. It is no woman’s writing. Although ladies have written histories, and travels, and warlike novels, to say nothing of books upon the different arts and sciences, no woman *could have* penned the “Autobiography of *Jane Eyre*.” It is all that one of the other sex might invent, and much more, and reminds us of “Caleb Stukeley,” “Ten Thousand a Year,” and one or two domestic novels that have come out in strong relief within these few years. The tale is one of the heart, and the working out of a moral through the natural affections; it is the victory of mind over matter; the mastery of reason over feeling,

without unnatural sacrifices. The writer dives deep into human life, and possesses the gift of being able to write as he thinks and feels. There is a vigour in all he says, a power which fixes the reader's attention, and a charm about his "style and diction" which fascinates while it edifies. His pictures are likely the Cartoons of Raphael. The figures are not elaborately executed, but true, bold, well-defined, and full of life – struck off by an artist who embodies his imaginings in a touch.

The story itself is unique. An orphan girl – a mere child – is sent from her "home" where she was regarded as an interloper, and cruelly treated by her relations. She remains at a sort of half-charity half boarding-school, where she is severely disciplined and half-starved; plain, stunted, but educated, and endowed with superior understanding, she becomes a governess in a family. She captivates the mind of a man of uncommon intellect and some eccentricity.

She loved, and was beloved - she adored and was worshipped;

but not as Byron says "After nature's fashion" did their intense souls into each other pour. They were more than natural, they were intellectual, and conducted themselves after a fashion known only to two such beings. There is a secret in the life of her admirer. This we will not disclose, for we recommend the book strongly to our readers, and have told what we think will excite their curiosity.

The career of this orphan, whose early cup of life is full of bitters, is admirably depicted – nor that alone. The events in which she figures, or with which she is in any way connected, are nothing to the reflections which are made to spring out of them. The apt, eloquent, elegant, and yet easy mode by which the writer engages you, is something altogether out of the common way. He fixes you at the commencement, and there is no flagging on his part – no getting away on your's – till the end. You discover, in every chapter, that you are not simply amused, not only interested, not merely excited, but you are improved; you are receiving a delightful and comprehensible lesson, and you put down the volume with the consciousness of having benefited by its perusal. Such a work has no ordinary attractions, and it will be found that we have not overdrawn them. There is much to ponder over, rejoice over, and weep over, in its ably-written pages. Much of the heart laid bare, and the mind explored; much of greatness in affliction, and littleness in the ascendant; much of trial and temptation, of fortitude and resignation, of sound sense and Christianity – but no tameness.

The obvious moral thought is, that laws, both human and divine, approved in our calmer moments, are not to be disobeyed when our time of trial comes, however singular the "circumstances" under which we are tempted to disregard them; that there is an immaterial world about us, one wherein disobedience is sure to bring punishment; and that although to be truly wise is not, as a certain and immediate consequence, to be truly happy, the practice of simple propriety, founded on strict morality and religious principles, is the sure road to ultimate bliss, and a means of securing many beautiful and encouraging prospects along its borders, however rugged be the journey.

Jane Eyre and the Invention of the Self

Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel helped introduce the idea of the "modern individual"—a surprisingly radical concept for readers at the time. By Karen Swallow Prior
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Consider the selfie.

By now, it's a fairly mundane artistic tradition, even after a profusion of think pieces have wrestled with its rise thanks to the so-called Me Generation's "obsession" with social media. Anyone in possession of a cheap camera phone or laptop can take a picture of themselves, edit it (or not), and share it with the world in a matter of seconds.

But before the selfie came "the self," or the fairly modern concept of the independent "individual." The now-ubiquitous selfie expresses in miniature the seismic conceptual shift that came about centuries ago, spurred in part by advances in printing technology and new ways of thinking in philosophy. It's not that the self didn't exist in pre-modern cultures: Rather, the emphasis the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century placed on personal will, conscience, and understanding—rather than tradition and authority—in matters of faith spilled over the bounds of religious experience into all of life. Perhaps the first novel to best express the modern idea of the self was *Jane Eyre*, written in 1847 by Charlotte Brontë, born 200 years ago this year.

Those who remember *Jane Eyre* solely as required reading in high-school English class likely recall most vividly its over-the-top Gothic tropes: a childhood banishment to a death-haunted room, a mysterious presence in the attic, a Byronic hero, and a cold mansion going up in flames. It's more seemingly the stuff of Lifetime television, not revolutions. But as unbelievable as many of the events of the novel are, even today, Brontë's biggest accomplishment wasn't in plot devices. It was the narrative voice of Jane—who so openly expressed her desire for identity, definition, meaning, and agency—that rang powerfully true to its 19th-century audience. In fact, many early readers mistakenly believed *Jane Eyre* was a true account (in a clever marketing scheme, the novel was subtitled, "An Autobiography"), perhaps a validation of her character's authenticity.

The way that novels paid attention to the particularities of human experience (rather than the universals of the older epics and romances) made them the ideal vehicle to shape how readers understood the modern individual. The rise of the literary form was made possible by the technology of the printing press, the print culture that followed, and the widening literacy that was cultivated for centuries until *Jane Eyre's* publication. The novel seemed perfectly designed to tell Brontë's first-person narrative of a destitute orphan girl searching for a secure identity—first among an unloving family, then an austere charity school, and finally with the wealthy but unattainable employer she loves. Unable to find her sense of self through others, Jane makes the surprising decision to turn *inward*.

The broader cultural implications of the story—its insistence on the value of conscience and will—were such that one critic fretted some years after its publication that the “most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*.” Before the Reformation and the Enlightenment that followed, before Rene Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”), when the sources of authority were external and objective, the aspects of the self so central to today’s understanding mattered little because they didn’t really affect the course of an individual’s life. The Reformation empowered believers to read and interpret the scriptures for themselves, rather than relying on the help of clergy; by extension, this seemed to give people permission to read and interpret their own interior world.

To be sure, early novelists before Brontë such as Frances Burney, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Mary Shelley contributed to the form’s developing art of the first-person narrator. But these authors used the contrivances of edited letters or memoirs, devices that tended toward underdeveloped characters, episodic plots, and a general sense of artificiality—even when the stories were presented not as fiction but “histories.” No earlier novelist had provided a voice so seemingly pure, so fully belonging to the character, as Brontë. She developed her art alongside her sisters, the novelists Anne and Emily (all of them publishing under gender-neutral pseudonyms), but it was Charlotte whose work best captured the sense of the modern individual. Anne Brontë’s novels *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* contributed to the novel’s ability to offer social commentary and criticism, while the Romantic sensibilities of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* explored how the “other,” in the form of the dark, unpredictable Heathcliff, can threaten the integrity of the self.

One of the greatest testimonies to Brontë’s accomplishment came from Virginia Woolf, a modernist pioneer who represents a world far removed from that of Brontë’s Victorianism. “As we open *Jane Eyre* once more,” a doubting Woolf wrote in *The Common Reader*, “we cannot stifle the suspicion that we shall find her world of imagination as antiquated, mid-Victorian, and out of date as the parsonage on the moor, a place only to be visited by the curious, only preserved by the pious.” Woolf continues, “So we open *Jane Eyre*; and in two pages every doubt is swept clean from our minds.” There is nothing of the book, Woolf declares, “except *Jane Eyre*.” Jane’s voice is the source of the power the book has to absorb the reader completely into her world. Woolf explains how Brontë depicts:

... an overpowering personality, so that, as we say in real life, they have only to open the door to make themselves felt. There is in them some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things which makes them desire to create instantly rather than to observe patiently.

It is exactly this willingness—desire, even—to be “at war with the accepted order of things” that characterizes the modern self. While we now take such a sense for granted, it was, as

Brontë's contemporaries rightly understood, radical in her day. More disturbing to Brontë's Victorian readers than the sheer sensuality of the story and Jane's deep passion was "the heroine's refusal to submit to her social destiny," as the literary critic Sandra M.

Gilbert explains. Indeed, one contemporary review complained, "It is true Jane does right, and exerts great moral strength," but the critic continues that "it is the strength of a mere heathen mind which is a law unto itself." In presenting such a character, the reviewer worries, Brontë has "overthrown authority" and cultivated "rebellion." And in a way they were right: "I resisted all the way," Jane says as she is dragged by her cruel aunt toward banishment in the bedroom where her late uncle died. This sentence, Joyce Carol Oates argues, serves as the theme of Jane's whole story.

But Jane's resistance is not the empty rebellion of nihilism or self-absorption (consider how current practitioners of "selfie culture" frequently weather accusations of narcissism). Rather, her quest for her true self peels back the stiff layers of conventionality in order to discover *genuine* morality and faith. As Brontë explains in the preface to the novel's second edition (a preface necessitated by the moral outrage that followed the novel's publication),

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last ... These things and deeds are diametrically opposed: they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them: they should not be confounded: appearance should not be mistaken for truth; narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world.

In a letter to a friend, Brontë responded to her critics' objections by declaring, "Unless I have the courage to use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of Conventionality, I ought to be silent ..."

The refusal of such a woman, who lived in such a time, to be silent created a new mold for the self—one apparent not only in today's Instagram photos, but also more importantly in the collective modern sense that a person's inner life can allow her to effect change from the inside out.

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