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**Jane Eyre: A Subversive Discussion of Gender, Class, and Sexuality**

"Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for the 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…" (Brontë 109). These sentiments shared by Brontë's titular character in the novel *Jane Eyre* were sentiments also shared by dress reformers of the Victorian era, who believed (rightly so) that the fashions of the time were to blame for illness and even death (Roberts 180). The study of the clothing trends during the Victorian era does make for interesting interpretations of Victorian novels, and although Jane Eyre falls early in the spectrum of the Victorian sensation fiction genre, there are certain elements of the novel that can be studied which lend insight to the repressed Victorian state of mind. Some of the most common themes present throughout sensation fiction, however discreetly they appear, are those of gender, class and sexuality, and clothing is used in this genre as a metaphor for these themes, and as a vehicle for discussion.

The clothing of the Victorian period focused on exaggerating and emphasizing parts of a woman's body in artificial ways that were increasingly painful, constricting, and troublesome. Two major styles which occurred during Victoria's reign were the crinoline style and the bustle style (Kyoto Costume Institute 152). The crinoline style was centered upon the crinoline, an undergarment which was a single petticoat containing hoops of steel in order to widen and expand the skirt. This had replaced the earlier fashion of wearing layers upon layers of petticoats in order to achieve the full skirt, which was cumbersome and weighty, although the crinoline was

by no means an improvement. Although the crinoline was lighter, the material was highly flammable and one English women's magazine reported that 3,000 women were burned to death because of the garment (Roberts 178). Sleeves during this time were also a major hindrance, and were so low and tight that movement was incredibly difficult. As the Victorian era progressed, the crinoline fell out of fashion and the narrow, bustle style became more popular. The skirts with this style were incredibly narrow and also restricted movement.

The one constant throughout these changes was the corset, which was worn to form the waist into the small shape so favored by the period, sometimes as small as seventeen or eighteen inches (Roberts 178). Roberts argues in her essay "The Exquisite Slave" that the Victorian notion of the ideal woman was "the willingness to bear suffering, either physical or mental" and that the clothing of the period had an "underlying masochism" which taught women that submissiveness and pain were one and the same (176-177). Because of the physical restrictions and the pain that had to be endured when wearing even the most basic clothing, women were inherently kept in a submissive and immobile position, turning them into 'the exquisite slave'.

While the character of Jane Eyre never mentions the specifics of her clothing or the physical limitations her clothing places on her, it is important to consider just what a normal women's wardrobe consisted of during the time in which Brontë writes. Clothing during this time period was not only a major indicator of femininity, but also of class, and Jane's clothing choices (or rather the limitations that have been put on her wardrobe from financial constraints), speak volumes about her position in society and in the world of women in the 1840s.

Clothing and gender are two inextricably linked elements of life because clothing gives a strong indication of gender identity and roles. A woman's clothing is highly distinctive and is worn to make women appear more attractive to men. "Woman, no matter what form of labor she

was expected to follow in the home, found her main line of economic advantage in pleasing man. Through him came wealth and pleasure, as also social station, home and family" (Gilman 23). By wearing attractive clothing, and putting effort into appearance, a woman could expect to please a man and then enter into an advantageous relationship that kept her in her traditional gender role.

After spending eight years in the charitable school Lowood, Jane leaves to become a governess to a young French girl whose guardian Jane later begins a romantic relationship with. Throughout *Jane Eyre*, Jane's awareness of her physical appearance and her clothing grows in relation to the growth of her feelings for Mr. Rochester, her mysterious employer. At the beginning of her time spent at Thornfield she dresses with incredible plainness and muses over her perceived lack of positive physical attributes.

> I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It was not my habit to be disregardful of appearance, or careless of the impression I made: on the contrary, I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit (Brontë 98).

She dresses in a black dress, and adds no adornment. Esther Godfrey, in her essay "*Jane Eyre*, from Governess to Girl Bride" discusses the idea of gender androgyny of the lower classes and how this androgyny was greatly feared by the middle and upper classes, thus inciting the upper classes to adopt increasingly elaborate fashions to indicate material wealth (856). Jane's plainness of dress is a trait that had been instilled in her from her days at Lowood, where the austerity of the clothing created a stark androgynous look among all the pupils. After leaving the

school and becoming independent, she slightly advances in her gender role by becoming more aware of her clothing, although she still retains the simple Lowood style because she has not yet been introduced to Mr. Rochester.

Upon meeting Mr. Rochester, she again displays increased awareness of her clothing, and goes to the extent of changing her dress to appear more attractive at the bidding of Mrs. Fairfax. "…I repaired to my room, and, with Mrs. Fairfax's aid, replaced my black stuff dress by one of black silk; the best and the only additional one I had, except one of light grey, which, in my Lowood notions of toilette, I thought too fine to be worn..."(Brontë 119). Again, the Lowood standards of austerity and finery are addressed and although she does not wear what she believes to be her finest dress, she consciously makes a decision to wear her next best, in an effort to please Mrs. Fairfax and Mr. Rochester. By pleasing Mr. Rochester, she has a greater chance of success as a female. Also at the bidding of Mrs. Fairfax, she dons a brooch, the first time she mentions an accessory or adornment.

As Mr. Rochester and Jane begin their romantic relationship, Jane's progress toward greater femininity is substantial. At one point during Jane's time at Thornfield, a party of upper class country people arrives for a week long gathering, including the stunning beauty Blanche Ingram, whom Jane learns Mr. Rochester is likely to marry. Jane compares herself severely to the exquisite but vain Blanche (Brontë 161), but upon receiving the valued proposal from Mr. Rochester, she has supposedly reached a peak of femininity, and is taken shopping by him (Brontë 268-269). During this shopping trip Jane's Lowood sensibilities remain, and although she refuses the showy silks in exotic colors, one of the three new dresses she receives is lilac gingham, which is a definite departure from her usual black and grey. As small as a detail as this may seem, Jane's adoption of lighter, more feminine colors signifies her passage into

womanhood on the eve of her marriage, and these feminine characteristics of dress are supposed to signify her (nonexistent) feminine characteristics of "frivolity, delicacy, inactivity, and submissiveness" (Roberts 176). Because Mr. Rochester forces Jane to go shopping and buy new dresses in more feminine colors, he is in a sense forcing her to adopt gender characteristics that are not her own, thus foreshadowing the failure of their marriage attempt, due to the revealed existence of Mr. Rochester's first wife.

Closely related to clothing and gender are clothing and class, and often the three interact directly. The clothing of women was a strong indicator of class, mainly because a wealthier woman will have the resources and leisure for a physically constricting and elaborate dress. "Dress thus advertises the wearer's ability to command that wealth and leisure so necessary to festoon oneself with clothing made from expensive fabrics, designed with exquisite taste, and requiring long hours of another's labor to create" (Roberts 183). It is the definition of conspicuous consumption and leisure and announces to society that they have to means to avoid labor. Jane is a unique example of this. She had spent most of her childhood in a charitable institution which emphasized her lower class identity. By becoming a governess, she occupies a distinctive position in society in between the low class and middle class, and will eventually be capable of great social mobility because of her position. Jane's clothing, with its simple style and plain colors, obscures her social position and renders her invisible to the other women competing for Mr. Rochester's affections. Blanche Ingram, so obviously a product of a high class upbringing wears accentuating clothing which draws attention to both her beauty and her status.

> Miss Ingram, who had now seated herself with proud grace at the piano, spreading out her snowy robes in queenly amplitude commenced a brilliant prelude; talking meantime. She appeared to be on her high horse

> to-night; both her words and her air seemed intended to excite not only the admiration, but the amazement of her auditors…(Brontë 179).

During this display of "queenly amplitude" from Blanche, Jane discreetly sits in a corner of the room, her plain clothing drawing little attention to her. Because of this, Blanche barely entertains the idea that there is a competition occurring, allowing Jane to usurp her and win the proposal from Mr. Rochester.

There is another example of this issue of class and clothing in *Jane Eyre* which draws attention to Jane's peculiar class position. Nancy Armstrong, in her essay "Gender and the Victorian novel" describes a failure of middle-class masculinity in attracting a suitable female partner, because women will always be attracted to a more successful partner, who can provide the "taste and refinement" required to please a woman (101-103). Jane, because of her unique class position is exposed to two different types of masculinity: the middle class St. John, and the high class Mr. Rochester. Her encounter with St. John occurs after her failed marriage attempt to Mr. Rochester, when she takes up residence with her (unbeknownst at the time) relatives and begins living a more conventional middle class life. St. John eventually proposes to her, asking Jane to accompany him as his wife to India as a Christian missionary. In contemplating the proposal, Jane decides that existing as his wife would be the death of her. "I believe I must say, yes – and yet I shudder. Alas! If I join St. John, I abandon half myself: if I go to India, I go to premature death" (Brontë 404). St. John's middle class status is unappealing to her, and after refusing his proposal, she returns to Mr. Rochester. After finally being able to marry Mr. Rochester Jane adopts more upper class identifying aspects to her clothing by wearing a gold watch chain that Mr. Rochester first notices when he begins to regain his sight (Brontë 451). Mr. Rochester, despite his lack of sight, is still able to provide Jane the 'taste and refinement' of

an upper class lifestyle (as well as love, conveniently), which is a major influence on Jane when she refuses St. John.

Sexuality in the Victorian sensation novel is at once everywhere and nowhere, as the title of Carolyn Dever's essay implies. Dever's essay explores the complex class relationships, as well as the sexual overtones that occur in the relationship between Mr. Rochester and Jane. The ideal female sexuality in the Victorian period was one of submission, repression, and the 'angel in the house' archetype, which the clothing of the period strictly enforced. Jane flouts these conventions as they are presented during her early romantic relationship with Mr. Rochester. His attempts at sexualizing Jane before their doomed wedding ceremony fail, and Jane is allowed to assert her own sexuality by returning to him once he has been blinded and crippled.

By wearing a corset and keeping a woman in restrictive stays allowing for little mobility and comfort, a woman was often referred to in terms of masochistic submission (Roberts 182). Mr. Rochester, in his multiple conversations with Jane attempts to assert his dominance over her by drawing attention to her sexual inexperience and childishness (Brontë 141). After his proposal to her, he confesses the depth of his affection for her. " 'I never met your likeness, Jane: you please me, and you master me – you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart; and while I am twining the soft, silken skein round my finger, it sends a thrill up my arm to my heart" (Brontë 260). This passage gives an excellent indication of Mr. Rochester's desire for Jane to adopt Victorian sexual ideals and conventions, something which Jane will never do. From the very beginning of the novel she has silently rebelled and remained passionate when she should have been otherwise.

In the same conversation quoted above, Mr. Rochester directly addresses her as an angel, which expresses his wish to have Jane conform to the sexual ideal of the 'angel in the house',

which is a gender identity based on "the association of virtuous femininity with unpaid, private work" (Dever 163). By proposing to Jane, he wishes her to leave her position as a paid governess in order to become an unpaid wife. Again, Jane refutes this association with angels by responding rather bluntly. "I laughed at him as he said this. 'I am not an angel,' I asserted; 'and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me, - for you will not get it…" (Brontë 260). Her assertiveness is remarkable for her position, and provides foreshadowing for the thwarted marriage. Mr. Rochester continually asks for things that Jane can never give, and she is saved from compromising those parts of herself when the ceremony fails. She learns from this lesson when she encounters the proposal from St. John, who also insists that she give up parts of herself, which she flatly refuses.

Clothing in Victorian novels can often act as a metaphor for the repression of sexuality, which was a deeply taboo subject in Victorian England. A prime example of this is the scene in which Jane's bridal veil is torn by the escaped Bertha Mason, who enters Jane's room in the dead of night and has a disturbing wordless interaction with Jane (Brontë 283-284). Up to this point in the novel, Jane has maintained both a submissive and obstinate relationship with Mr. Rochester. Although she asserts her lack of 'angelic' qualities, Mr. Rochester continues to emphasize his dominance over her lack of sexuality and experience, and she does little to defy him. This silent interaction between Jane and Bertha is quite intriguing, and seems to be a time in which Jane begins the process of embracing her sexuality and the power it can bring her. Mr. Rochester seems to be aware of this change, and is brusque and impatient on their wedding day, as if he wants the wedding to be completed before Jane can realize the extent of the dominant hold he has over her.

Bertha serves as an example of what a dominant husband could potentially do to a wife (given the fact that the nature of her madness is alarmingly ambiguous), and remains an object of pity for Jane, because she herself realizes when contemplating St. John's proposal that she would be driven mad by a marriage to him. Mr. Rochester's early dominance of Jane is "perverted" and "self-destructive" (Shuttleworth 169), and it is only when Mr. Rochester is himself put in a submissive position due to his blindness and invalidity that Jane can finally assert her sexual dominance and her flouting of sexual ideals and norms of the Victorian era.

By engaging in an in depth and subversive discussion of gender, class, and sexuality, Brontë places herself at the forefront of sensation fiction genre of the Victorian age. By exploring these themes through the interior of the household and domestic life, and through metaphors of clothing and physical appearance, the reader encounters a heroine who at once conforms to expectations to please her romantic interest, and also flouts convention in order to be in a relationship where she is the dominant figure. Jane adjusts her clothing to attract Mr. Rochester, maintains a socially ambiguous clothing style to protect herself from competition and maintain social mobility, and asserts her own sexuality to win Mr. Rochester's love. All of these themes occurred in later works from the sensational genre, which can owe their existence to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

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