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# Reconciling Christianity and Paganism

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# Reconciling Christianity and Paganism

## **Abstract**

In her novel "Jane Eyre," Charlotte Bronte works to bring opposing ideas of Christianity and Paganism together to strengthen her protagonist, Jane. Bronte uses symbols of supernaturalism, nature, and the moon to highlight Jane's complex spiritual growth. This essay explores those symbols in conjunction with Christianity and their influences on Jane Eyre as she becomes an empowered woman.

## **Keywords**

Jane Eyre, Paganism, Christianity, moon, nature

## **Disciplines**

Christianity | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles | Literature in English, North America | Religion

## **Comments**

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### Reconciling Christianity and Paganism

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* was criticized when it was first published because of Brontë's use of supernatural elements and pagan ideas. At the time, Brontë's Christian audience felt uncomfortable and offended by the inclusion of these ideas, even though the book is primarily about Jane Eyre's growth into the Christian faith. Brontë attempts to reconcile Christianity and paganism even though the two beliefs seem to conflict. She depicts paganism through Jane's reliance on the power of Mother Nature and the moon. These pagan powers subsequently allow Jane to take control over her own life. Brontë includes both paganism and the supernatural as a complement to Christian values in *Jane Eyre*, and Jane's unshakeable belief in all of these makes her a strong, empowered female protagonist.

The supernatural world plays a large role in Jane's life over the course of the novel. Fairies and elves are mentioned frequently and spoken of as if they are real. Rochester even accuses Jane of being a fairy. He asserts that when they first met, Jane was waiting

“For the men in green: it was a proper moonlight evening for them. Did I break through one of your rings, that you spread that damned ice on the causeway?”

I shook my head. “The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago,” said I, speaking as seriously as he had done. (720-1)

This is not the only occasion that Rochester insists that Jane has supernatural qualities. He calls her names such as “fairy”, “elf” (825), and even “phantom” (834). Jane is characterized as having connections with otherworldly beings and mystical creatures.

Rochester consistently declares that Jane’s personality and appearance have supernatural qualities, but Jane also has some experiences that are distinctly otherworldly. When Jane is locked into the Red Room as a young child, she is overcome with terror with the appearance of a “herald of some coming vision from another world” (644). She firmly believes that the ghost of her late uncle, Mr. Reed, is about to appear. This experience helps to root Jane’s belief in the supernatural. In her adulthood, Jane encounters the mysterious Mrs. Rochester in her room. This meeting is also fraught with supernatural elements. Jane recounts the tale to Mr. Rochester: “The lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes . . . [It reminded me] of the foul German specter – the Vampyre” (837). Both of these experiences connect Jane closely with the supernatural world.

Supernatural elements hold an influence over Jane, but Christianity is also an important presence in her life. Jane’s journey into the Christian faith occurs little by little over the course of the novel, beginning with her friendship with Helen. Helen believes steadfastly in God and heaven, and she imparts her faith to Jane when Jane questions heaven’s existence. Helen teaches fervently, “I am sure there is a future state; I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to him without any misgiving. God is my father; God is my friend: I love him, I believe he loves me” (691). Helen is Jane’s first Christian role model, and Jane continually tries to follow her example. J. Franklin notes that Helen is the best Christian character in the novel:

Helen is the emblem in the novel of a Christ-like love and forgiveness that takes its paradigmatic form in many Victorian novels as the figure of "sympathy." . . . It is this sympathy that Jane will draw on to forgive her Aunt Reed . . . Further, Helen also serves as Jane's introduction to her most important (human, as opposed to lunar) mother-figure in the novel, Miss Temple. It is through Helen and Miss Temple that Jane has her first taste of the combined intellectual and emotional "communion" with women. Helen Burns . . . simultaneously brings into play issues of human sympathy and woman's identity that supersede Christian spirituality. (465)

At Lowood, Jane finds feminine strength and pure faith with Helen and Miss Temple, which shapes her attitude of Christianity and female empowerment afterwards.

Jane struggles throughout the novel to distinguish between the strict Christian beliefs held by stern men like St. John and the Christianity that she learned from Helen. Jane's Christianity emphasizes the spirit's connection with God and the joy of salvation, while the Christianity practiced by St. John requires great self-sacrifice and strict forbearance. St. John's Christianity is oriented around men, while Jane's Christianity focuses on people as spirits who transcend gender and class, and emphasizes the ability of women to commune with God (Griesinger 51-2). Emily Griesinger equates Jane's focus as a type of Christian feminism:

[Jane's] angry outburst on the night he proposes exemplifies a "biblical feminism" in recognizing that regardless of custom and conventionalities that emphasize wealth, class, and gender, men and women stand at God's feet, in Jane's words, "equal—as we are!" (48)

Jane grows into an unshakably faithful woman who turns to God for answers without fail, even though her faith differs from that of St. John. When faced with a terrible decision, Jane struggles: "I sincerely, deeply, fervently longed to do what was right; and only that. 'Show me, show me the path!' I entreated of Heaven" (934). Jane has no doubts about God and looks to the Christian faith for answers.

Bronte creates a link between the Christian faith and Jane's connections to otherworldly beings. Jane believes readily in the supernatural, and knows for a fact that there are things in the world that cannot be explained. She doesn't try to explain the mysteries of the world; she just accepts the unknown even as it plays a major role in her life decisions. For example, Jane receives an otherworldly summons to Mr. Rochester's side. She ponders the voice:

I recalled that inward sensation I had experienced: for I could recall it, with all its unspeakable strangeness . . . I questioned whence it came, as vainly as before: it seemed in me – not in the external world . . . I could not conceive or believe: it was more like an inspiration. The wondrous shock of feeling had come like the earthquake which shook the foundations of Paul and Silas's prison. (936)

Jane can tell instinctively that her sensation came from a positive source, even though she has no idea what actually caused it. She compares it to an earthquake that was sent by God. Her ready acceptance of the supernatural mirrors the faith that Christians have in God and Jesus Christ. Christians believe in their God without easy proof, as Jane does with the supernatural world. She does not try to explain her experiences away through science or logic.

Jane faithfully accepts otherworldly elements in her life both from supernatural sources and from traditionally pagan sources. Paganism is mentioned both explicitly and implicitly throughout *Jane Eyre*. For example, the moon (a traditionally pagan and creative power) is mentioned every time something important happens in Jane's life. Robert Graves explores the supernatural connotations that are traditionally attributed to the moon:

[One] attributes 'creative power in poetry' to 'inspiration' and 'inspiration' to 'the Lunar Muse.' [The moon] 'moves the tides, influences growth, rules the festal calendar of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and

possesses other unaccountable magic qualities, known to every lover and poet.’ (qtd. in Heilman 288)

The moon plays a creative role as a muse and a major influence on the physical world, and it plays a similar role in *Jane Eyre*. Heilman describes Bronte’s use of the moon as

An aesthetic staple, at times a scenic element inherently charming to the writer, at times almost a character . . . Every crucial event has its special lunar display . . . Always there is the suggestion of a transcendental force mildly at work; but above all, these lunar nocturns have an air of mystery. (292-3)

The moon in *Jane Eyre* is a constantly present character.

The moon sends both explicit and covert messages to Jane. The moon sends a positive covert message to Jane when she first meets Rochester. During this encounter, the moon is visible in the sky even though it is not very late at night and the sun still shines. Bronte writes: “On the hilltop above me sat the rising moon; pale yet as a cloud, but brightening momentarily: she looked over Hay” (712-3). The moon is a feminine presence at this important moment of Jane’s life. The moon later rouses Jane when there is an emergency at Thornfield:

I had forgotten to draw my curtain, which I usually did; and also to let down my window-blind. The consequence was, that when the moon, which was full and bright (for the night was fine), came in her course to that space in the sky opposite my casement, and looked in at me through the unveiled panes, her glorious gaze roused me. Awaking in the dead of night, I opened my eyes on her disk – silver-white and crystal-clear. (780-1)

After Jane wakes to see the moon, she hears an awful yell from upstairs and is required to give medical care. Jane has a connection with the female, human-like moon, which seems to communicate with her explicitly. Jane’s connection illustrates the pagan beliefs in the feminine power of the moon on human lives, and shows that the moon is a force for good in Jane’s life.

Heilman highlights a time when the lack of the moon's rays indicates something negative that is happening in Jane's life. He describes Rochester's initial proposal to Jane, a proposal that is illegitimate and secretive, although Jane doesn't know it yet. The moon, Heilman points out, fails to shine on Rochester's face when Jane looks for verification of his love: "But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master's face" (Bronte 817) In this case, the lack of the moon portends that Rochester's proposal is not as positive as it appears to be. The outside world mirrors the dubious circumstances of Jane's engagement (Heilman 294).

The outside world and the moon can be combined into one being or concept: Nature. Nature is a pagan influence on Jane's life throughout the novel. One of Jane's major struggles in the novel is between reason and nature. Charles Burkhardt points out that the word 'nature' comes into play often to describe a person's inherent character in *Jane Eyre* (178). Rochester says of himself: "Nature meant me to be . . . a good man" (Bronte, 730). In order to wed St. John, Jane must "disown half my nature" (919). Burkhardt believes that Bronte uses this wording to define what is true about each person's inner self: "What is natural comes from nature, and is therefore right" (178). Jane's inherent nature shines through above reason when she first flees from Rochester and then flees from St. John. In the first case, Jane decides that she cannot live with herself as Rochester's mistress, even though she could easily do so if they moved from England. Her nature triumphs over reason, which tempted her to stay. When Jane flees from St. John's proposal of marriage, she is tempted by his promise of a good Christian life of service and humility. Jane responds to her nature, however, which tells her that she

cannot be herself and reach her full potential as St. John's wife. Jane's nature wins the day over reason, often with guidance from the physical being, Nature.

Nature is shown to protect Jane and offer advice to her as a mother would. When Jane is struck low by the news that Mr. Rochester would have made her his mistress, she has a vision of the moon as it transforms into a sublime female being. The shining woman touches Jane's spirit and tells her to escape Thornfield while she can:

The roof resolved to clouds, high and dim; the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapors she is about to sever. I watched her come – watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart – “My daughter, flee temptation!”  
“Mother, I will.” (863)

This event proves to Jane that leaving Thornfield is the right thing to do. Jane leaves Thornfield penniless and friendless, but she entrusts her safety to Nature. She cries out: “I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose” (865). Jane has nowhere else to turn but to Nature, who thus far in her life has done nothing but help her and guide her in the right direction, much as a real mother would do. Jane has never had a real mother before, so her reliance on pagan figures such as the moon and Mother Nature are understandable.

Jane's acceptance of Nature as the mother of all and as her sole comfort would seem to contradict Christian values of God as the creator of all. The inclusion of paganism, however, mirrors how Jane grows up and becomes a strong, independent Christian woman. Jane believes strongly in the pagan power of Nature, but this belief complements her Christian faith. For example, Jane is led by a sign from Nature to return

to Mr. Rochester. This sign appears to her when she is considering St. John's marriage proposal and becoming a missionary in India. This decision would stifle her personality and life purpose in the long run. She contemplates the sign:

The room was full of moonlight . . . “Down superstition!” I commented, as that spectre rose up black by the black yew at the gate. “This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did – no miracle – but her best.” . . . I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit; and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet. I rose from the thanksgiving – took a resolve – and lay down, unscared, enlightened – eager but for the daylight. (935)

Nature gives Jane a sign that the path she was about to choose with St. John would not be fulfilling her life's purpose. Nature provides the signal for Jane, who then prays to God about what she has seen. Her communication with God convinces her that she is correct to return to Rochester. This moment is very important in Jane's life because Christianity and paganism combine and show Jane the same path. She chooses the path of righteousness and embraces her identity instead of allowing herself to be smothered by St. John. Emily Griesinger comments on Jane's feminist empowerment that occurs in this scene:

The prayer scene as well as Jane's rejection of St. John's missionary proposal can be viewed as a remarkable (for Bronte's day) assertion of women's spiritual authority and an equally memorable rejection of the idea predominant among Victorians, and still dominant in many conservative evangelical churches, that women must always be "under" the spiritual authority of men. (53)

Jane draws from the feminine influence of nature and paganism as well as her incredible Christian faith to “assume [her] ascendancy” (Bronte 935) and choose her own path.

Jane Eyre's acceptance of both pagan beliefs and the Christian faith is not an inconsistency. Throughout *Jane Eyre*, female pagan characters like the moon and Mother Nature look over Jane, protect her, and empower her to make decisions that are healthy

for her. Essentially, Jane's paganism allows her to come into her own as a strong female. At the same time, she is growing into her Christian faith and love for God. She prays for guidance and accepts the truth of the Bible. Jane combines the personal freedom and empowerment that she receives from paganism with the morals that she has learned from the Bible and Helen, her Christian role model. Jane is a pure Christian woman who is not trodden upon. Charlotte Bronte combines the female power of paganism and the moral power of Christianity to create a protagonist whom any woman can look up to as a role model.

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Susanna Mills