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Jane Eyre: The Bridge Between Christianity and Folklore

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë's acclaimed novel, *Jane Eyre*, was first marketed as an autobiography. The story, told from the point of view of a poor orphan girl, takes on a narrative similar to that of a fairytale. In this way, a reader may find difficulty in believing this novel to be a work of nonfiction. Charlotte Brontë employs aspects of both Christianity and fantasy in her novel not to discourage her readers from believing its validity but rather to emphasize how even poor orphan girls like Jane have forces of good guiding them. Jane Eyre is fictional, yet the hardships she faces could befall anyone. Charlotte Brontë purposefully parallels her story to a fairytale to portray how even the seemingly random misfortunes and griefs of life are not without reason and that no one is helpless. With both religion and fable on her side, the orphan, Jane Eyre, was never truly alone.

Keywords

Jane Eyre, Christianity, Folklore, Religion

Disciplines

Christianity | English Language and Literature | Women's Studies

Comments

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Professor Flynn

Shakespeare's Sisters

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Jane Eyre: The Bridge Between Christianity and Folklore

Charlotte Brontë's acclaimed novel, *Jane Eyre*, was first marketed as an autobiography. The story, told from the point of view of a poor orphan girl, takes on a narrative similar to that of a fairytale. In this way, a reader may find difficulty in believing this novel to be a work of nonfiction. Charlotte Brontë employs aspects of both Christianity and fantasy in her novel not to discourage her readers from believing its validity but rather to emphasize how even poor orphan girls like Jane have forces of good guiding them. *Jane Eyre* is fictional, yet the hardships she faces could befall anyone. Charlotte Brontë purposefully parallels her story to a fairytale to portray how even the seemingly random misfortunes and griefs of life are not without reason and that no one is helpless. With both religion and fable on her side, the orphan, *Jane Eyre*, was never truly alone.

Charlotte Brontë was raised in England in the nineteenth century, a time when the Anglican Church was the established Church of England. During this time, Anglican Evangelicalism was at its near height of popularity. Evangelicals were characterized by their "high seriousness and energetic pursuit of holiness and social reform" (Melnyk, 21). Charlotte Brontë, herself, was heavily influenced by the movement since her father, Patrick Brontë, was an Anglican clergyman. However, she was not distinctly defined by this movement nor did she particularly agree with all of its values. In fact, Charlotte Brontë had a "dedication to the truth"

which made her “adherence to a party impossible and caused her to move freely on matters far away from the heartland of Anglican Orthodoxy” (Thormählen, 47). While she may have been raised upon Anglican values, Charlotte Brontë was not afraid to develop her own understanding of religion rather than blindly accept all teachings of the Anglican Church.

A faction of the Anglican Church that was popular during this time was the “Broad Church”. These Anglicans were a “group of liberal, educated, theologically progressive men who shared a vision of the Church of England as tolerant of dissenting opinions and open to new ideas” (Melnik, 30). Progressive in her own right, Charlotte Brontë appears to align with this group’s values. In fact, Hoxie Neale Fairchild described Charlotte Brontë as “a Broad Churchwoman” (qtd. in Thormählen, 13). While this description may be simplified, it does introduce a fair point worth investigating. Brontë does appear to have a malleable definition of religion that is inclusive of various teachings. She aligns with the Broad Church due to her more tolerant and compassionate views of religion that differ from the other Anglican Evangelists’ ritualism and solemnity. Perhaps Charlotte Brontë was not simply influenced by one singular church of England but rather by the many Christian movements Victorian England had to offer. She reveals their prevalence in her writings and most especially in her novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Perhaps one of the more prominent characters in *Jane Eyre* who embodies Charlotte Brontë’s own understanding of Christianity is the young Helen Burns. Serving as one of Jane’s first friends, Helen Burns is the picture of piety. Her values are devoutly Christian and she often encourages Jane to realize these values as well. In one instance, Helen comforts Jane and tells her that “there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits” who are “commissioned to guard us” (682). For Jane, these words of comfort hold great significance. Jane was raised without love

or affection, and she was taught daily that she had little worth. As an orphan without caring relatives, she felt truly secluded and abandoned. Thus far, Jane's "spiritual needs have hitherto been as neglected as her physical and emotional needs", and Helen's teachings serve as "her first true religious instruction" (Thormählen, 60). Helen not only provides Jane with her first religious instruction but with her first form of religious comfort. To a young orphan, the notion of a body of spirits existing just to aid her is a great source of solace. Brontë includes Helen's words of comfort in her novel so that she may foreshadow the spiritual aid Jane will later receive. Helen Burns speaks the truth; Jane Eyre does have spirits guiding her. Brontë emphasizes the existence of guardian angels in her novel so that she may express how even in our own lives, we are not alone and receive aid just as Jane does.

While emphasizing Christianity, Brontë also references elements of folklore in her novel. As a young girl, Jane has a fixation with elves and other supernatural creatures. She searched for elves among nature and after her search proved inconclusive, she made up her mind "to the sad truth that they were all gone out of England to some savage country, where the woods were wilder and thicker, and the population scant" (646). Even before Jane receives her lesson from Helen, she desires to believe in the existence of beings other than herself. Through this desire, Brontë "helps create the child's view of the world" (Sullivan, 62). With Jane's fixation with elves, Charlotte Brontë successively divulges young Jane's deepest desires and hurts. Through her eyes and perception of the world, we learn of Jane's feelings of solitude. The world can be a lonely place for a child, especially for Jane. With rampant imaginations, children often seek solace in the idea of magic. Elves especially are characters that may provide assistance to heroes in folklore. As a young child, Jane clutches onto the idea. Her days spent scouring the English

countryside are her way of seeking help. In the elves, she seeks companionship. Brontë successfully introduces young Jane's desire for guidance from external forces even before Jane receives it.

Not only does Jane have a fixation with elves, but she is later compared to one. This comparison is made by none other than Mr. Rochester. When Jane first arrives back to Thornfield after having gone to see her aunt, Mr. Rochester says upon seeing her, "If I dared, I'd touch you, to see if you are substance or shadow, you elf!" (809). To Mr. Rochester, Jane takes on an appearance of an otherworldly creature. In other words, she embodies the very creatures she admires. Mr. Rochester is like Jane in many ways, not only on intellectual grounds, but emotional as well. He also felt ostracized and cursed by the circumstances dealt to him by life, but he found his savior in Jane. He describes her as fairy-like, for she was to give him his fairy-tale ending. Like Jane, he associates aid with mystical beings. Jane and Mr. Rochester's shared appeal to mystical ideology "provides the major symbol for their spiritual affinity and for the sense each has of the other's difference from the common run of mankind" (Simpson, 49). In a way, Jane and Rochester's similar history of hardship weaves a natural sympathy between them. They are both so drawn to the idea of help from the metaphysical because of the hardships they endured that allowed them to feel forsaken by all mundane forces. When we are at our lowest, it is human nature to search for guidance from powers larger than ourselves. By including Mr. Rochester's allusions to elves, Brontë furthers her motif of mythical creatures.

Although Jane is no elf, she still experiences enchanting and mysterious phenomena in her life. One of the most significant of these moments occurs when Jane has just heard the truth about Mr. Rochester's first marriage. Lost and unsure what to do, Jane receives instruction from

a female spirit of the moon. She says to Jane “My daughter, flee temptation!”, to which Jane responds “Mother, I will” (863). Although this vision comes to Jane in a dream, it is nonetheless consequential for it is the driving force behind Jane’s decision to leave Thornfield. As explained by Emily Griesinger, “the vision confirms and helps to sustain Jane’s resolve” (50). This vision is essential to Jane’s decision, for it provides Jane with the encouragement necessary to desert Mr. Rochester. Prior to her vision, Jane is at her lowest, tortured by feelings of isolation and disillusionment. However, guidance is soon given to Jane by a woman of the moon. Brontë’s allusion to the supernatural is not as understated this time. Clearly, Jane’s guardian spirits are not as invisible as Helen led her to believe.

By including Jane’s vision of the moon mother, Brontë successfully combines aspects of folklore and christianity, for the moon spirit acts as Jane’s guardian angel, sent by God to watch over her always. Having lost her mother as an infant, Jane has never truly known motherly love, yet she finds it in a vision of the moon. The fact that she calls this moon spirit “mother” is no casual matter. Jeffrey J. Franklin interprets this scene as an instance which “significantly merges God the Father with Mother Nature” (475). Through her faith, Jane is given all that she lacked as an orphan: a father and a mother. She has finally found the fabled help she searched for those days as a child in the wood, only it is not the elves she has uncovered. Brontë provides Jane with her long desired religious guidance by introducing the woman in the moon.

Although Jane’s guardian angel saves Jane from an unlawful coupling, Jane still faces another crisis even after escaping from Thornfield. This crisis occurs when Jane receives a marriage proposal from her cousin, St. John Rivers. St. John does not propose to Jane out of love, however, but out of duty. He wants Jane to accompany him to India where he will be a

missionary. Such a life there would undoubtedly be Jane's ruin, but St. John Rivers is convinced it is her purpose in life and will not accept her refusal. In his efforts to convince her, he "laid his hand upon [her] head" and treats her like "a pastor recalling his sheep--or better, of a guardian angel watching the soul for which he is responsible" (933). Brontë's allusions to religion are purposeful. St. John Rivers is attempting to become Jane's guardian angel, guiding her down the path he desires for her. However, his religious appeals to Jane evoke a "potential abuse of spiritual authority" (Griesinger, 52). Although he may be a clergyman, St. John clearly misinterprets God's word. He desires Jane to be his wife out of his own selfishness, not God's will. Through religious allusions, Charlotte Brontë emphasizes the forceful manner in which St. John attempts to manipulate Jane.

Unlike Helen Burns who was a pious Christian, St. John Rivers represents a more assertive form of religion. St. John does not exude the warmth and kindness customary of a person of faith. Instead, he adopts a "policy of blanket repression of every human emotion save ambition" (Thormählen, 211). His strict policy shows itself especially in his ambitions to have Jane as his wife. Although he believes he is leading her down a path of righteousness, he is truly putting her life in peril. He is not her guardian angel but actually quite the opposite. Besides, Jane already has guardian angels of her own, and they show themselves in their own time, gently assisting Jane down the right path. When St. John Rivers plays the role of guardian angel, his manner is unnatural and forced. Brontë allows St. John Rivers his attempt as guardian angel in order to accentuate the divine power of Jane's true guardian angels.

As Jane finds herself in another moment of peril, her guardian angels return to remedy the situation. Just as Jane is close to accepting St. John Rivers' proposal, she hears Mr.

Rochester's voice calling out to her in the wind saying, "Jane! Jane! Jane!" (934). Mr. Rochester is not in Jane's vicinity, therefore her ability to hear his voice in her time of need is nothing short of supernatural. Jane is essentially "empowered, then, through what first must be read as a contact with the supernatural" (Franklin, 476). This supernatural occurrence is only heightened when it is later revealed Mr. Rochester had heard Jane's voice calling out to him on that very night as well. Jane's vision of the moon spirit could be written off as a dream, but this otherworldly element to Jane's life cannot be denied. She does not imagine Mr. Rochester's voice; he is calling out to her in the literal sense. What makes his voice only audible to Jane is another question, however. Brontë means the answer to be of mystical origins. For once again, when Jane finds herself in a dire situation, her guardian angels come to the rescue.

The intervening of Jane's guardian angels, following St. John Rivers own religious appeals to Jane, is a moment of great significance. Jane's guardian angels return to supply her with the strength necessary to break from St. John. They remind Jane of the true path intended for her by God, rather than the path intended for her by St. John. Their intervening is a clear indicator that "God does not intend Jane to martyr her 'self' in Calcutta but is setting her free to pursue her heart's desire" (Griesinger, 52). Her guardian angels are enlisted so that their divine powers may squander St. John's own futile attempts as Jane's shepherd. Without divine intervention, Jane would not have had the ability to refuse St. John. She needs help; she needs her guardian angels. By ushering in the return of Jane's guardian angels, Brontë further affirms that Jane Eyre is not truly alone in the world and that she has spirits who guide her.

Despite being a novel filled with Christian ideology, *Jane Eyre* still includes elements of folklore. Charlotte Brontë incorporates Christian and pagan themes in her novel to

provide Jane with both divine guidance and mystical aid. As Helen says, Jane truly does have a “kingdom of spirits” who are “commissioned to guide” her. In her novel, Charlotte Brontë successfully establishes that no one, in literature or life, walks alone and that the hurts we experience are not without purpose. A person does not have to be religious to find solace in the idea that benevolent forces in the world watch over us. Whether these forces are elf-like creatures found in the wood or ethereal spirits deriving from the moon, any form of help would not be unwelcome. Underneath it all, we, as Jane does, all have an innate desire not be alone. We too long for the fanciful ending to our own tales that Jane received. However, Jane’s path to happiness was neither easy nor without cause. Charlotte Brontë simply intends to apply meaning to life by first applying it to her novel.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code

Signed: Teagan Lewis

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