
The Handling Of Gender In Novels Jane Eyre And My Ántonia

With regards to gender, ideology 'reflects two aspects of research on this topic: (a) its roots in the feminist position that women are conceptualized as inferior to men to justify and sustain social and cultural systems dominated by men; and (b) the culturally constructed (as opposed to 'natural') nature of gender' as per the words of Philips (6016). Traditionally in Literature, gender roles are quite defined with most, if not all, societies being centred around patriarchy being the dominant ideology which resembled the concept of reality. However, authors use their power of language and devices to express their views of such ideologies of their time period through their artistic creations. That power provides the foundation for assessment of Charlotte Brontë's and Willa Cather's intentions towards the dominant gender ideologies of the respective societies in their novels Jane Eyre and My Ántonia.

In Brontë's Jane Eyre, the society in which the character, 'Jane', lived was in the Victorian era (nineteenth-century England, during a highly chaotic period in and European history); a time period in which, according to Hughes, 'men and women's roles became more sharply defined' where the men more characterized by their role as the bread-winner whilst the women were domesticated and demanded obedience from their sex. Hughes went on to stress on the concept of 'separate spheres' where 'women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands laboured all day, but they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life'. It was through the lens of this Jane did Brontë challenge the dominance of the patriarchal society where 'women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel...they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex' (114)

The character evolved, portraying ladies as equivalent to men in knowledge and quality of character and 'refusal to submit to her social destiny', as observed by Gilbert (780). Due to the novel being a bildungsroman, readers were granted the opportunity to observe Jane's life up until maturity, a period in which she proved that she was not the conventional Victorian female.

It was through the art of symbolism that Brontë first expressed that her Jane Eye was not a simple Victorian 'angel in the house' as Hughes identified when further explaining her theory of spheres but rather a woman with a motto, 'Speak I must' (34). Gill implies that the act of Brontë titling her novel Jane Eyre rather than Jane Rochester shows that 'Jane has a distinct identity apart from Edward Rochester even after she marries him' (119). Here Jane is seen as a symbol of liberation, setting herself free from the oppressive hold of the conventional expectations of marriage whereas the woman must take on the last name of her husband and forget her maiden name which, in a sense, is a symbol of her past identity. On taking on a new name, a woman is a fresh canvas with a new personality. However, Jane Eyre decided otherwise and nothing less was expected from the very woman that informed, "Reader, I

married him" (479). Through the act of declaring to the readers that it was SHE that married HIM, it brings to life of the theme 'Women Empowerment'; it shows that, with textual evidence, Jane had a choice to marry Mr. Rochester and that she was not forced to by society.

'I will at least choose—HER I LOVE BEST. Jane, will you marry me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'A crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?' 'Yes, sir.'

'Truly, Jane?'

'Most truly, sir.' (475)

Brontë's articulate usage of setting shows the different phases of Jane's life as well as her growing feminist nature. Conflict seemed to have been the root or seed from which this nature had stemmed in Gateshead; the fight in which Jane defended herself after being 'accustomed to John Reed's abuse' (7) and in consequence, she was taken 'away to the red-room' (8). Through Jane, Brontë had used slave imagery, comparing John Reed to a 'slave-driver' (7) and with that in mind, Gateshead is a metaphoric plantation that symbolizes oppression of freedom of speech and endorses the Victorian gender dominant gender ideology. The act of Jane being taken to the red room is like a rebellious slave that is going against system being dragged off to killed, or in this case, they attempt to kill off her growing empowerment. Mrs. Reed is the metaphoric Victorian society that idolizes John Reed, the male, despite him not having 'much affection for his mother' (6) or in metaphorical sense, society and its well-being. In that era, no matter how faulty a male may be and self-absorbed, he is praised for his sex. Thus, by challenging him, Jane is going against societal norms and is shunned.

Likewise, at Lowood, the institution for orphaned children, is a metaphoric concentration camp, force feeding its female prisoners society's expectations of them through the mechanism of religion. Mr. Brocklehurst, the camp's leader, is force feeding them the idea that women should be 'hardy, patient, self-denying' with regards to all pleasures and wants of life and they should not 'starve their immortal souls' (63). Referencing Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Mr. Brocklehurst shares similar traits with Papa Eugene with regards to controlling the 'weaker minds' in society through religion but yet seemed hypocritical in their actions. Whilst Mr. Brocklehurst ranted about modesty and plainness, his wife was introduced as 'splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs' (65) just as how Papa Eugene was an occasionally abuser. However, Jane defiantly goes against this system and this is seen through her friendship with Helen Burns. Jane refused to suppress her emotions about Helen's unjust treatment by Miss Scatcherd and Helen was the epitome of the perfect Victorian female- submissive and quiet- all that Jane was not; 'the fury of which she was incapable had been burning in my soul all day' (75).

Moreover, from *Thornfield* onwards, Jane pursued her journey towards independence and love without conditions. Traditionally, in the Victorian era, courtship was only permitted to couples of

the same social status, with marriage being the final stage and the wife submitting to her role as mother and caretaker for the rest of her life. With that in mind, there were great differences between the 'courtship' of tradition and 'courtship' between Jane and Mr. Rochester. Firstly, their social status; Jane is an orphan with no money (for the time being) and she 'appears as a threat to the other characters. Either because she is an intruder from outside the community, because she is an enigma, or because her ideas are threatening...' as observed by critic, Peters (57). He goes on to say, through character observation, that 'Jane fits neither among the gentry nor among the servants' (59) and that is factual as where the Victorian women like Blanche Ingram is concerned -'face was like her mother's; a youthful unfurrowed likeness: the same low brow, the same high features, the same pride' (180)- and Jane. Whereas Ingram had born into wealth, Jane had to advertise to get her job as a governess and in that act alone goes against the dominant gender ideology. Though women were not frowned upon for having a job, the act of advertising and putting themselves out there for any job was rare and Jane Eyre did that as a mean of survival. Notably, though Brontë did use her main character Jane to challenge society's expectations of a woman, in certain aspects, Jane did reinforce those ideologies to a certain extent; the mindset of a woman wanting to marry and that was her inevitable end despite knowing that Mr. Rochester had lied to her in the past and called her derogatory and inhumane terms such as 'imp' and 'fairy' (465). So, in a sense, Jane Eyre both challenged and reinforced the dominant gender ideology in her respective society which is a stark contrast to the handling of gender in *My Ántonia*.

My Ántonia was published in 1918, a pivotal and transitional period in history for women where they were questioning their positions and claiming their rights within a socioeconomic basis which led to the 19th amendment in 1920; the Constitution of the United States provides men and women with equal voting rights. It was ironic how Cather chose to write her book from a male's perspective of a women yet it is significant because it shows her blurring gender barriers- the women are strong, athletic, and active, while the men are generally passive and weak. Giglio reinforces this by stating, 'Cather's feminist approach to this particular period of history casts a new light on the roles that women played in the settlement of the western prairies in America' (1). So, in simpler terms, the dominant gender ideology of the society of both the characters of Cather's novel and her own life, was blurred due to the historical events that were occurring and that heavily influenced the novel as well as conflict in Cather's life with regards to her queer nature. Thus, it was if the switch had flipped in gender roles and just as women in reality were challenging the patriarchal system of that era, Cather challenged the system through her immigrant girls in her novel.

Firstly, as mentioned before, Cather challenged the dominant gender ideology to reinforce the changes that was happening in reality through her immigrant characters, however, through Jim and his admiration for Ántonia, she shows how the mindsets of men are weak and submissive, compared to women who are forced to do what it takes to survive. Drawing reference to Charles Darwin's theory of 'survival of the fittest', it reinforces the idea of the fates of the immigrants, including Ántonia after her father's demise;

'Ántonia stood up, lifting and dropping her shoulders as if they were stiff. "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm" ... Ántonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached. Grandmother had said, "Heavy field work'll a spoil that girl. She'll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones." She had lost

them already' (143)

Through Jim's observations, *Ántonia's* evolution began. Her father's death is the metaphoric switch that 'flipped' her gender as her family now depended on her. However, Cather's first act of rebellion towards the patriarchal ideology is during the first official meeting of Jim and *Ántonia* where he taught her English words and after saying 'the new words over and over, she wanted to give [him] a little chased silver ring she wore on her middle finger' (29). It is an unconventional act as traditionally males offer females rings instead.

Giglio had went on to say that Cather's immigrant girls all represent different feminist ideals because 'whether they decide to marry and have children, travel, or succeed in the business world, they each decide on their own futures without having their lives planned for them' (3) as they had paved their own way on the male dominated land that pressured immigrants of their kind. One perfect example drawn from Cather's use of characterization is the life of Lena Lingard. She is the embodiment of exotic sexuality and treats it with indifference while, traditionally, women were not allowed to have or feel comfortable having. She was once one of the hired girls and soon worked her way into being one of the best dress makers in San Francisco. To further reinforce her marginalized personality, she had once expressed to Jim, 'I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it, and be accountable to nobody' (329), indicating that marriage will never be her future. On the contrary, whilst *Ántonia* was the first female character to challenge the dominant gender ideology in her younger years, Lambert pointed out that while Cather was dealing with a departure of loved one during the writing of her novel, '...her heroic stance in her fiction could not continue, and she abandons the creation of strong fictional women. In *My Ántonia* she denies Jim's erotic impulses and *Antonia's* sexuality as well; and she retreats into the safety of convention by ensconcing *Antonia* in marriage and rendering her apotheosis as earth mother. She abandons *Antonia's* selfhood along with her sexuality: as Mrs. Cuzak, *Antonia* is "a battered woman," and a "rich mine of life..." (684)

So, in a sense, Cather's characters both challenged and reinforced the dominant ideology, intentions influenced based on circumstances happening in her reality.

In conclusion, both Charlotte Brontë and Willa Cather handled the topic of gender in differing ways with respect to narrative perspectives and devices in their novels, however, whilst they both effortlessly challenged the dominant gender ideologies of their respective societies, reinforcement was present to a certain extent which could not be avoided unless the novels were to move away from the theme of realism. They both highlighted the struggles of women as well as promoted women empowerment in a world where the mere term is considered unrealistic and unconventional. Brontë and Cather catered to the feminist culture that is important when trying to bring about understanding of the nature of equality. *Jane Eyre* and *My Ántonia* are symbols of hope to women, representing the consequences of going against society's initial gender culture.

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