

Discuss the Role and Function of Religion in *Jane Eyre*

Religion undeniably plays a critical role and function in the novel *Jane Eyre*. Religion and the characters it presents are used by Brontë throughout the piece to raise poignant questions regarding moral boundaries, the exact nature of religion as well as the guidelines we importance of such a moral code as to guide us to independence and eventual self-fulfillment. In this dissertation, I will evaluate the role and function of religion in *Jane Eyre* as a whole and develop some of the ideas it helps to present in the process.

Before we proceed, it is important that a clear distinction be made between the “role” and “function” of religion in this novel. For purposes of this essay, the “role” of this device may refer to the effect of Religion on the novel’s readership; “function” may be defined as the effect intended by Brontë in the inclusion of this critical theme.

In *Jane Eyre*, we are presented with three different religious viewpoints through three distinct religious role models: Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns and St John Rivers. The inclusion of these three characters may be viewed as Brontë’s means of presenting the flaws she sees in other people’s assessment of what religion is, followed by a conclusion that presents what religion means to Jane and implicitly to Brontë herself. Alternatively, the characters could be viewed as a means of allowing readers to choose from the ideals presented their own personal definition of religion. In the novel, Jane does not choose any extreme, but rather chooses her own definition of religion to follow—is it possible that Brontë is offering us the opportunity to do the same? Regardless, *Jane Eyre* offers us a vantage point on three different views of religion, as well as perspective on the kind of image they may be seen to represent.

In the novel, Mr. Brocklehurst undeniably characterizes the dangers and hypocrisies that Charlotte Brontë perceived in the nineteenth-century Evangelical movement. He adopts the rhetoric of Evangelicalism presented in the Old Testament when he claims to be purging his students of pride, but his methods of subjecting them to various privations and humiliations, like when he orders that the naturally curly hair of one of Jane’s classmates be cut so as to lie straight, which is entirely unchristian. Of course, Brocklehursts’ proscriptions are difficult to follow, and his hypocritical

support of his own luxuriously wealthy family at the expense of Lowood students may be said to show Brontë's wariness of the Evangelical movement and the ideals it presents.

Jane's second religious role model, Helen Burns, presented beliefs that may be seen as being closer to Jane's own religious ideas. However, they are still too passive for Jane to accept, which serves to illustrate her fiery and resisting nature, as well as the flaws in Helen's religious views from Brontë's perspective. Helen believes in bearing all her sufferance on Earth and allowing God to punish those who have wronged her through his retribution in heaven. Helen endures many movements of suffering with an extreme degree of self-restraint and grace. Her view is primarily that, "why, then, should we even sink overwhelmed with distress, when life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness — to glory?" She tells Jane that she must not hold on to all her resentment and negative feelings towards those who have treated her badly, including her Aunt and cousins. When Helen is dying, she and Jane converse about God. While Helen represents a view of unquestioning faith, Jane has nothing but questions. Such a questioning nature may be said to undermine the idea that she has Christianity at her core for moral direction. Jane, however, is unable to adopt Helen Burns' meek and forbearing mode of Christianity, as it is too passive for her to accept, although she loves and admires Helen for it.

St. John Rivers provides yet another religious model of Christian conduct for Jane to follow. His is a Christianity of ambition, glory and extreme self-importance. He urges Jane to sacrifice her emotional needs for the fulfillment of her moral duty, offering her a way of life that would require her to be disloyal to her own self. Through her rejection of his marriage proposal, Jane shows she does not believe God wishes her to sacrifice her happiness on Earth for the sake of religious fulfillment. Brontë may be seen to use St. John in order to illustrate her belief that happiness on Earth is necessary to fulfill God's will and to bring harmony and understanding between man and God. Ultimately, Jane finds this happiness on Earth through her love of Mr. Rochester, which is an intellectual, physical and spiritual love that is implicit of the real existence of a world "beyond".

Brontë also uses Jane's relationship with St. John to present a turning point where she must finally choose to submit to the "will of God" or maintain her autonomy. Arguably, because she turns away from St. John and towards a relationship where she can be held as an equal and maintain her agency to some degree, this is evidence to refute the idea that Christianity drives her moral core. Rather, it seems much more arguable that love drives Jane's moral decisions, though it is not as though she does not run into situations of ambivalent hesitation. If Christianity had been Jane's core of moral sense, would she have said, "I broke from St. John, who had followed, and would have detained. It was my time to assume ascendancy" (p. 358)? St. John is described as "patient and placid" (p. 349) and is not satirized or exposed for hypocrisy as Brocklehurst is in the novel. He is described in appealing terms by Jane, both physically and in his nature, yet Jane exclaims "I scorn your idea of love" (p. 348); this serves as further evidence for her real core moral sense.

Religion also serves a number of important functions in *Jane Eyre*. The novel is very much a story of a quest to be loved, in that Jane searches, not just for love, but also for a sense of being valued, of belonging. Thus, Jane says to Helen Burns: "to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, I would willingly submit to...stand behind a kicking horse and let it dash its hoof at my chest" (Chapter 8). Yet, over the course of the book, Jane must learn how to gain love without sacrificing and harming herself in the process — in this sense, Brontë uses the concepts of religion in order to guide Jane through this self-development, by relating Jane to various religious role models who help her to form her own ideas of how to love herself and gain an appreciation of what she has to offer in God's eyes.

Brontë also uses religion to develop Jane's independence throughout the novel. As *Jane Eyre* is a story of self-discovery and self-reliance, Religion also serves the important function of providing a moral code, a humanist doctrine, for Jane to follow, as she does not have many benevolent individuals to mold her moral code. Jane's dependence on religion and God throughout the novel provides her with a strength that obliges and enables her to leave Mr. Rochester and only return to him when ethics and social equality permitted. When her wedding is interrupted, she prays to God for solace (Chapter 26). As she wanders in the heath poor and starving, she puts her survival in the hands of God (Chapter 28). She strongly objects to Rochester's

lustful immorality, and she refuses to consider living with him while the church still deem him married to another man. Even so, Jane can barely bring herself to leave the only love she has ever known. She ultimately credits God with helping her to escape what she knows would have been an immoral life.

This independence in turn serves a very important function in *Jane Eyre*. In the beginning of the novel, Jane struggles against Bessie, the nurse at Gateshead Hall and says, “I resisted all the way: a new thing for me” (Chapter 2). This sentence foreshadows what will be an important theme of the rest of the book, that of female independence or rebelliousness. Jane is here resisting unfair punishment, but throughout the novel, she expresses her opinions of the state of women. Jane not only shows the reader her beliefs of female independence through her actions, but also through her actions, but also through her thoughts. Religion serves to support her in her quest for autonomy, while providing her with the moral guidelines to keep herself within the realm of acceptable female conduct.

Through religious discovery, Jane ultimately finds a comfortable middle ground. Her spiritual understanding is not hateful and oppressive like Mr. Brocklehurst’s, nor does it require retreat from the everyday world as Helen’s and St. John’s religions do. For Jane, Religion helps curb immoderate passions, and it spurs on worldly efforts and achievements. These achievements include full self-knowledge, independence and complete faith in God. It is also important to note that Brontë uses religion as a tool, but suggests that it must be balanced with a self-love and a love of others that may guide you to happiness and selflessness, as well as equality and independence.

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