

Explore the representation of women in Jane Eyre and Small Islands.

One of the most enduring images of the depiction of "femininity" in every sense of the word is that of, "Jane Eyre" a small, plain-faced, intelligent and honest English orphan, living in a charity school with harsh regime before taking a position as a governess at Thornfield Hall. It is an image that in some ways defines the experience of women in the Victorian era and this can also be applied to more recent text, and these experiences has accrued not only in earlier novels but also throughout the twentieth centuries in representations such as diverse as Andrea Levy's "Small Island" whatever the nature of the text, its time of production, its genre, its style or its functionality, the image of femininity and the hardship and inferior complex that women have faced throughout generations is entailed always has a pathos. This is often generated in a number of novels written by female writers. Our reception of these texts must inevitably be based by our own knowledge of history along with our own interpretation of such events or ideas.

Andrea Levy's "Small Island" the fourth novel to be published in the UK, winning the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005, perhaps one of her most famous piece of text. In her achievement this novel is based on the England's recovery from a war, while at 21 Neven Street,

London the conflict is ongoing as Levy switches between four protagonists. The first, Queenie, is Gilbert's white landlady; they met during wartime when he came over as an RAF recruit. Hortense, the Jamaican girl whom Gilbert married immediately before boarding the boat, arrives later to share his crumbling attic room; and Queenie's long-lost husband, Bernard, finds his way back, a year after his demobilization, shortly after Hortense has taken up residence. These representations of fictional characters are often based upon the experiences of people, most particularly the experiences of women during post-war Britain.

This contains element of women's genuine concerns such as the influence of the war verses the definition of femininity while women were expected to become more independent in order to maintain their status while living in patriarchal Britain. So this novel is not setting a precedent, merely following in a long tradition. Therefore, as a reader will have previous knowledge of these kinds of narrative situations whether it be the characters personal accounts or settings and to an extent we will always be engaging with the novelist paralleling our own reading and understanding with the fictional creations of the writer. As readers we will compare these events to that of our own experiences, directly in the case of how women are portrayed alongside historical events that may have been the

accumulation towards this, for example the introduction of feminism.

In "Small Island", Jamaican immigrant Hortense, like Queenie, believed she was destined for a superior life. This is a prominent feature of the female consciousness in Levy's novel. She considers herself a cut above most of the other islanders because she has skin, "the colour of warm honey". The daughter of Lovell Roberts, "a man of class", perfect diction, and manners. Furthermore, she has been educated to become a teacher. This is a suggestion of feminism as a Caribbean female such as Hortense, life would not have been so promising during the 1950s, and it was more likely that she would have been married off. However, due to her tolerant upbringing, Hortense looks to the future for successful career in England as a teacher. Hortense marries Bernard as a way of pursuing her career, Hortense's attitude as a married woman is unconventional, as she holds little or no attachment to her husband this is shown when Hortense tells Gilbert it is not his decision that he must sleep separately to her. Deciding that, "you sleep in the bed and I will sleep here on the floor" this suggests that the couple share no affection as Hortense views their marriage as a way of achieving her goals for the future. However, the power within the quote deepens with meaning. The fact that Hortense decides to sleep on the floor, suggest that she is looking for some form of

superiority in a more metaphorical sense. Some might argue that this symbolises the blossoming or the birth of feminist ideas in the novel. Though Gilbert decides to sleep on the floor this may not mean that Hortense has the upper hand, as this could also prove that patriarchy was starting to change, or maybe Gilbert did not fit male stereotypes as he proves to be a man of generosity by saying "you sleep in the bed". This however, could also be Levy's way presenting the struggles that women faced due to the after effects of the war, this means it could be a females reaction to hardship rather than merely a generalising representation of women on a whole.

The fact that this novel is set in the 50's, more than around seventy years after the end of the war may affect the reader's opinions of the novel. To an extent that it cannot be a "real" as other text written by Caribbean writers who had first hand of experience of the arrival of immigrations to a foreign country most importantly the effects it had upon women. In this way "Small Island" must be judged alongside other novels such as Zadie Smith's "white teeth" and Nancy Horan's "Loving Frank" other novels written in the twentieth century, novels partly responsible for sustaining the interest in the rise of women compare to the struggles that they faced. This is often of an independent, educated woman at odds

with restriction of the early twentieth century and introducing a new generation to experiences and issues of the time.

Such novels written from a more distant perspective tend to be more cynical about the causes and the illustration of women and like much later twentieth century fiction are concerned with the psychological realism of their characters. Levy's novels are slightly different in that through her choice of such high profile changes to the English and Caribbean society as she is offering more insight into the production of important events of that period, whether it is on a larger scale or the small steps that women made towards change. Clearly because the novel is written from a number of protagonists, it does not mean it does not have any "real" insight into the representation of women.

In this quote, we can identify various stylistic features particular to the context of its production that influences this reading experience of the progression of women. Firstly, the narrative perspective is interesting with each one telling their part of the story from a first person narrative focussing, through a deliberate selecting of detail and the use of interior thought, yet also enabling the narrative's distance to be maintained. For example, we have a lot of physical detail, "if a body in its beauty is the work of God", and she thought that, "then this hideous predicament between his legs was without doubt the work of the devil" that establishes the readers focus yet

we also have more objective detail, "do not come near me with that thing" within which a female can identify. The writer's technique as she allows the readers to put themselves in Hortense situation. However, some might say that this symbolises a turning point for a woman as Hortense refuse to accept that Gilbert wants to have sex with her, instead she chooses to be more dominant as she has the choice by refusing him, this represents the rise in the female consciousness towards independence.

Secondly, Levy's use of sentence types reflects its later origin. She uses non-standard fragments such as "you will call for me" to build up an impressionistic portrait of the arrival of immigration. She varies the tone throughout the novel.

Finally, the writer has a different sensibility as to the representation of women. An example of this is that Queenie Bligh leaves home on the farm to big city life as a young woman in the 50's is that was uncommon as women were to stay at home until they were ready to be married. She eventually lives alone whilst her husband is in the war, taking in Jamaican lodgers to help with the financial problems this also shows independence and thinking ahead. Nevertheless, this could also imply that Queenie is disloyal to her husband and he showed adequate disapproval when he returns from war only to find Jamaican lodgers in his house. In contrast, Jane Eyre's aunt Mrs

Reid reinforces female stereotypes as she takes on a more traditional role as a widow. She too displays dislike towards Jane's unconformity as she goes to all measures to ensure that she conforms to her family's views. Within the novel, Mrs Reid is a depiction of a conventional female character. she upholds traditional views as she reinforces female stereotypes. This is shown as she allows her son to be "man of the house" this means that he's to take on from where his father left off. However, this view deepens with meaning. The idea of being, "man of the house" suggests that only men are fit to be head of a household, this means that Mrs Reid as a female is not able to take on such responsibilities as it doesn't suit her femininity. This means that feminism is a very contradictory theme in both novels. However, it does not have to be seen as a complete rebellion against men, but simply represent self worth and intelligence in a female.

Turning next to "Jane Eyre", Charlotte Bronte personifies her philosophy through Jane the main female protagonist, who happens to have had a misfortunate childhood, as a result, the character of Jane endures loneliness and cruelty, and this troubled childhood strengthens Jane's independent spirit allowing her to become a successful governess at Thornfield hall. Jane Eyre is the depiction of a 'ambitious female' however, her character has qualities that would have been frowned upon. As a woman in Victorian society

she challenged social order by taking on roles that would have been dominated by men. This would have been "shrew" like behaviour as Jane Challenged social order.

No character can be seen as good or bad, for example when Hortense looks with disregard upon the dreary women she sees on the streets of London she forgets that women have been through the war and are still not able to buy new clothes much less shelter themselves. Likewise when Bernard complains about Queenie taking a job, he demonstrates that he has no understanding of Queenie's disappointment at not having a child but more realistically this shows that he's not used to the idea of women being in the workforce.

To conclude, it is clear that there are many issues that affect a reader's reception of a text whether it is genre, the form, structure and language employed, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, the time it was written in, and the attitudes to the writer's subject. Perhaps what is parallel to the text is the purpose. A desire to report truth about what happened and the consideration of the limits of fiction. Each piece conveys the writer's careful consideration to society and how changed as women battles to fit in whilst conforming at the same time. In this the representation of women and how important they are to society is made anew through these texts.

Nathalie Gordon
A2 English Literature Coursework

~~Reference~~ 

Class notes on Gilbert, Hortense and Queenie

<http://www.andrealevy.co.uk/eca4-1.html>

Andrea Levy, Small Island

Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre