

Feminist Theory Applied to *Jane Eyre*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

Three main areas of study/points of criticism:

1. Differences between men and women
2. Women in power or power relationships between men and women
3. The female experience

1. Differences between men and women

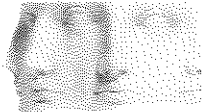
- The basic assumption is that gender determines everything, including values and language.
- The canon must be expanded to include the study of those genres in which women “traditionally” write: journals, diaries, and personal letters.
- Note the differences in the topics or issues about which men and women write and the perspectives from which they write about them.

2. Women in power or power relationships between men and women

- Note and attack the social, economic, and political exploitation of women. Note whether women have any power and what type it is.
- Society has not treated all of its constituencies with equality, and literature is a means by which inequities can be identified, protested, and possibly rectified.
- Note the division of labor and economics between men and women.
- Note how men and women interact with one another in a variety of relationships (romantic, professional, etc.). Does the woman act in any way subservient to the man? Does the man treat the woman like an adult? A political and economic equal?

3. The female experience

- On the most basic level, women experience different things in life than men do. Examine what aspects of feminine life are included in the work. Note the point of view through which the events are told. Is it male or female? Pay attention to how the narrator, male or female, treats the events. For example, are they depicted with sensitivity, harshness, etc.?



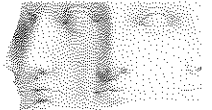
- Reject any view of female personality in contrast to male personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality can stand independent of the male personality, just as the male can stand independent of the female.
- Examine, and possibly celebrate, the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Though traditionally women have been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male's relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as “Mama's boy”).
- Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine “incompleteness” alone (Adam's rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.). ■

Essential Questions for A Feminist Reading

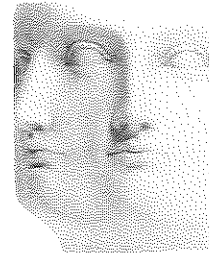
1. What stereotypes of women are present? Are female characters oversimplified? Weak? Foolish? Excessively naive?
2. Do the female characters play major or minor roles in the action of the work? Are they supportive or independent? Powerless or strong? Subservient or in control?
3. If the female characters have any power, what kind is it? Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?
4. How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
5. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
6. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
7. How do the female characters act toward each other?
8. Is the work, in general, sympathetic to female characters? Too sympathetic?
9. Are the female characters and situations in which they are placed oversimplified or presented fully and in detail?
10. What are the predominant images? Are they images usually associated with women? Why or why not?
11. Do any of the work's themes touch upon any idea that could be seen as a feminist issue? Is the theme supportive or disparaging of women?
12. Overall, do you think that the female characters are believable (based on women you know)? For that matter, do you think that the male characters are believable?

Focus of Study

- Jane Eyre as a strong protagonist
- Jane as a model of Victorian femininity
- Misogynist undertones in *Jane Eyre*
- A comparison of Jane's "three marriages"



Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *Jane Eyre*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

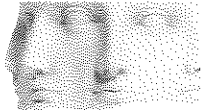
- According to psychoanalytic theory, there are three parts to the subconscious, which is the largest part of the human personality. The three parts are:
 1. The **id** – the basic desire. The id is the fundamental root of what each person wants. There is no sense of conscience in it, thus making it everyone’s “inner child.” Children, before they are taught social skills, operate entirely through the id. They cry in public, wet their diapers, and demand immediate gratification of their needs and desires.
 2. The **superego** – the opposite of the id. This is the repository of all socially imposed behavior and sense of guilt. While the id is innate, the superego is learned through parental instruction and living in society. Humans develop a superego by having parents scold them and other members of society criticize or teach them.
 3. The **ego** – reality. The balance between the id and the superego. The ego takes the desires of the id, filters them through the superego, and comes up with an action that satisfies both entities. The ego realizes that the id must be satisfied, but that there are certain socially acceptable ways to achieve satisfaction.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the second view:

According to the second view, an essential relationship exists between the author of the work and the work itself. This view is in direct contrast to the Formalist approach to literature. In order to understand a work, one must fully understand the author’s life and emotional stance, and vice versa. Though a work might not be blatantly autobiographical, psychoanalysts argue that there is always something of the author in the work, whether it is a character, character trait, theme, or motif. Often, authors will satirize people they dislike or will be overtly sympathetic to people they do like. This author bias often has an effect on the reader, which is exactly what the author wants. When reading, people are very vulnerable to the author’s chosen point of view (the only way they hear the story is through the author’s narrator). This aspect of the psychoanalytic view is a very subjective and controversial approach to literature, but the psychoanalysts of the world argue that it is a valid and important type of literary study.

This type of psychoanalytic reading includes the following:

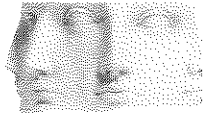
1. Reference to what is known or surmised about the author’s personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work. For example, Charles Dickens grew up poor and later wrote books very sympathetic to boys who grew up poor.



2. Reference to a literary work is made in order to establish an understanding of the mind of the author. For example, judging by Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one might reasonably conclude that Harper Lee herself was sympathetic to the plight of black Americans.
3. Studying the literary work of an author is a means of knowing the author as a person. The more novels by Charles Dickens one reads, the clearer idea one can infer about the author's beliefs, values, hopes, fears, etc.
4. An artist may put his or her repressed desires on the page in the form of actions performed by characters. Pay attention to behaviors that are not socially "normal" to see if there is any evidence of the id at work. For example, an author who consistently writes stories in which his female characters are weak, dependent, or unintelligent might be expressing latent misogynist tendencies. Likewise, a female author might express her latent misandry through weak, blatantly evil, or thoroughly inconsequential male characters. ■

Essential Questions for A Psychoanalytic Reading

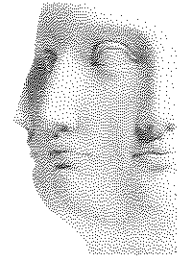
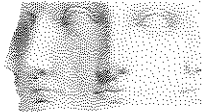
1. What are the traits of the main character?
2. How does the author reveal those traits?
3. What do you learn about the character through the narrator?
4. What do you learn about the character from the way other characters relate to him or her?
5. What do you infer about the character from his or her thoughts, actions, and speech?
6. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and how other characters react to him or her?
7. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and the reader's inferences?
8. Is the main character a dynamic character (does he or she change throughout the course of the story)? If so, how and why?
9. How does the character view him or herself?
10. What discrepancies exist between a character's view of him or herself and other characters' reactions, the author's portrayal, and/or reader inference?
11. How do the characters view one another?
12. Is there any discrepancy between a character's personal opinion of himself or herself and how others think about him or her?
13. What types of relationships exist in the work?
14. What types of images are used in conjunction with the character? What do they symbolize?
15. What symbols are used in the course of the story? What do they symbolize?
16. Do any characters have dreams or inner monologues? What is revealed about a character through dreams that would not otherwise be revealed?



17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?
18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

Focus of Study

- The role of dreams, omens, and madness in *Jane Eyre*
- Contrast Jane's perception of herself with other characters' perceptions of her
- *Jane Eyre* as a *psychological* autobiography



Marxist Theory Applied to *Jane Eyre*

Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated the means of production, not in the hands of those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies

1. Economic Power

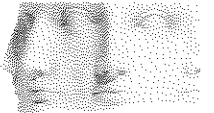
- A society is shaped by its forces of production. Those who own the means of production dictate what type of society it is.
- Two main classes of society according to the Marxist framework are the bourgeoisie (the people who control the means of production and wealth) and the proletariat (the people who operate the means of production and are controlled by the bourgeoisie).
- Since the bourgeoisie own the means of production—and, therefore, the money—in a society, they can manipulate the politics, government, education, art, and media.
- Capitalism is flawed in that it makes people want things, so they shop due to commodification (wanting things not for their innate usefulness, but for their social value). When one has money, one shows it by buying things—jewelry, large houses, luxury cars, etc.
- Commodification is one way the bourgeoisie keep the proletariat oppressed. When the proletariat manage to acquire some sort of status symbol, the bourgeoisie buy something newer and better, thus making the proletariat struggle more.

2. Materialism versus Spirituality

- Society is not based on ideals or abstractions, but on things.
- The material world shows us reality. The material world is the only non-subjective element in a society. Money and material possessions are the same by every measure within a society, whereas spirituality is completely subjective.
- People are not destroyed by spiritual failure, only material failure.

3. Class Conflict

- A Capitalist society will inevitably experience conflict between its social classes.
- The owners and the workers will have different ideas about the division of the wealth generated, and the owners will ultimately make the decision.
- This constant conflict, or **dialectical materialism**, is what instigates change.



- The bourgeoisie make their system seem like the only logical one, so the proletariat are trapped. They are led to have pride in their station, thus preventing them from wanting to overthrow their oppressors (the smaller and actually less-powerful group).
- The only real division in society is between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Divisions of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion are artificial divisions, which keep the proletariat from unifying against their actual oppressor.
- Marx called on the proletariat to reject the social structure of the bourgeoisie, the rules that would keep them subservient forever, and form their own values. Such a course would be the only way to escape the oppression, for the proletariat could never defeat the bourgeoisie on its own terms. For the workers to win, they would have to establish new terms.

4. Art, Literature, and Ideologies

- Art and literature are vehicles for the bourgeoisie to impose their value system on the proletariat. The arts can make the current system look attractive and logical, thus lulling the workers into complacency.
- Works of art and literature are enjoyable to experience, so the audience is unaware of being swayed, which is dangerous.
- The bourgeoisie can easily take control of artistic output because they are the entity that is funding it. Since the bourgeoisie are bankrolling the writers and the painters by publishing the books and buying the art, the artist must take pains not to offend them. Anything that is offensive to the bourgeoisie will simply not be published or sold.
- Any artist who wishes to criticize the bourgeoisie must do so in a subtle way (satire, irony, etc.). ■

Essential Questions for A Marxist Reading

1. Who are the powerful people in the text? Who are the powerless? Who receives the most attention?
2. Why do the powerful have the power? Why are the powerless powerless?
3. Is there class conflict and struggle?
4. Is there alienation and fragmentation evident in any of the characters? If so, in whom? The powerful? The powerless?
5. Do the powerful in the text suppress the powerless? How? News? Media? Religion? Literature?
6. What can you infer from the setting about the distribution of wealth?
7. What does the society value? Are possessions acquired for their usefulness or their social value?
8. Is the text itself a product of the society in which it was created? How do you know?
9. Is the work consistent in its ideologies, or is there an inner conflict?
10. Do other types of criticism—feminist, psychoanalytic, or others—overlap the Marxism?
11. After reading this text, do you notice any system of oppression that you have accepted? If so, what system, and how do you think you came to accept it?