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Love and Marriage in Jane Eyre

When two people discuss the possibility of marriage, there are always questions that arise regarding the intentions that ultimately motivate each of them to get married. Some people consider that marriage should be motivated by convenience (be it financial or otherwise); others consider that the sole motivation behind a marriage should be love. Due to this, marriage has become controversial over the years; money, power, family, friends, and love are factors that affect marriage by exerting excess pressure on those entertaining the idea of getting married. Over the years, various others have concerned themselves with love and marriage, including Charlotte Bronte; her novel *Jane Eyre* reflects the author's ideas on love and marriage in the context of English Victorian society. Ultimately, her novel questions whether marriage is after all conditioned by society's pressures (including social class, wealth, family, and women's role in a misogynistic society) or by love.

Throughout her novel, Charlotte Bronte develops various themes, including love, marriage, and women's independence (in the context of a patriarchal society where women are perceived as being inferior to men). At a time in which women's freedom seemed impossible, the relationships that developed between men and women were unequal given that they were founded on the belief that men were superior to women (and because of this, women were bound to obey). This is the context in which Jane Eyre grows and develops. Being an orphan from a young age, she suffered several mishaps growing up; her life was overly difficult given that she was alone in the world (no matter how much she tried to love and be loved, she ended up being rejected by those around her). Despite all of the hardships

she was forced to endure being all alone, Jane always proved to be a strong, independent woman, one who had the will to overcome adversity and find what she truly wanted: love and companionship.

Her desire to receive real affection is so strong that she even states the following: “I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest” (Bronte 50). Evidently, Jane is a woman that believes in true love. Furthermore, she is a woman that believes that marriage should be driven by true love and equality. Being independent and strong-willed as she is, Jane refuses to allow herself to be subjugated by a man. Instead, she wishes to be loved for who she is; she longs to be treated as an equal. In the end she manages to fulfill her desires; after receiving her uncle’s inheritance, she is able to prove, both to herself and others, that she is autonomous. This allows her to marry her beloved Mr. Rochester under conditions of equality (and being motivated only by love).

After reviewing the way in which love and marriage are developed in the figure of Jane Eyre, it becomes clear that Charlotte Bronte feels that love should be the only true motivation behind marriage. In other words, the author believes that two people should unite their lives (before God and society) because of something more than convenience, social class, wealth, or family. Furthermore, upon analyzing Jane’s plight it becomes clear that Bronte’s views on love and marriage contradicted the generalized view of love and marriage in the context of the English Victorian Society. During that time, marriage was seldom motivated by true love, but rather by family arrangements, social class convenience (or related interests), or wealth. In other words, it was a time in which marriage was not the true union between a man and a woman who loved and respected each other. Instead, it was a social contract in which women agreed to subject themselves to men in exchange for commodity and stability (for themselves and their families), while men indulged in it in order

to bear children and continue the family name. Jane's experience evidences this social reality when St. John proposes marriage noting that it is convenient for both of them. Jane, however, does not agree with the way in which society perceives love and marriage. She does consider love to be important; she views it as a prerequisite to marriage given that it ensures that women will have men's respect (and they will be on equal footing after marriage). This is why she refuses St. John and only agrees to marry Mr. Rochester after she has proven herself to be his equal (financially, socially, and intellectually). Jane's character reflects Bronte's own beliefs regarding love and marriage.

However, it must also be noted that Bronte recognizes the importance of conforming to the social norms. Jane only marries Mr. Rochester after she has gained her uncle's inheritance and is perceived by society as Mr. Rochester's equal. Based on this, it becomes clear that Charlotte Bronte envisions marriage as being founded on love, but she is realistic in admitting that marriage can only materialize when society's conditions have been met in full (meaning equal class standing, wealth, and education). The truth of the matter is that despite being an orphan (and being raised in a public school for girls), Jane was a refined woman. Since a young age she had been educated to be a governess, which meant that she had sufficient manners and education to interact on equal footing with aristocrats. However, she was never an aristocrat. For one thing, she lacked the wealth (until she came into her uncle's inheritance) and social standing that an aristocrat had. For another, she was never a woman who allowed herself be subjugated by men, nor was she ever a woman who considered herself to be above all others. She was a grounded, humble, independent, and loving woman who cared not about material possessions, but about friendship, family, and love (as is evidenced by the fact that she insisted on sharing her inheritance equally with her distant cousins).

Throughout Charlotte Brontë's novel, one learns about how Victorian society viewed love and marriage. As well, one learns about how the author herself viewed love and marriage. Jane Eyre's life occurrences, her strenuous quest for love and belonging, reflect the author's own ideals on what love truly was and how it should be the sole motivation behind a long-lasting marriage. Jane Eyre stands out as a person practicing justice, human dignity, and morality. She comes along with countless men propositioning her, but she is on a quest to find her true love. Jane believes that it is better being alone than to be with somebody that she has no love for. Jane does not care about the appearance of the man she chose or his wealth. Love for her means to care about that person without thinking of their personal well-being. She is faithful to her feelings, her mind, and her sense of true love. Jane has gone through a lot of obstacles and challenges in her life, which made her immensely brave, strong, persistent, emotional, sensitive, and faithful at the same time. Love, as Charlotte Brontë presents it, elevates women to an equal footing (relative to men), thus allowing for a marriage that is founded on respect, loyalty, friendship, and naturally, love.

Works Cited

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. New York: Signet Classics, 1997. Print