ENGH SEM 4: PAPER HCC-T-10

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Critical issues in Jane Eyre

1. A novel of growth: “Jane Eyre” is written in first person narrative, the autobiographical memoirs of a lady in her mature and settled phase of life looking back to her past and recounting it in chronological order up to the present. The narrative begins at the age of ten and ends when the heroine is in her twenties – she is a penniless orphan at the beginning and a wealthy woman married to a rich and famous landholder at the end. Such a narrative tracing an individual’s growth through personal experiences and ordeals is a bildungsroman – a form quite popular in Victorian fiction. In tracing the growth, the narrative voice at times breaks into two – the voice of the child situated in the past, and the voice of the mature lady remembering and reviewing from the present. The first voice attempts to rebuild the child’s consciousness and sensibility, and the living nature of experiences undergone as the child. The second voice alternates with the first, especially in the early chapters, commenting on the perceptions of the childish mind from an adult viewpoint. Together the network of voices tell the story of a girl’s physical and psychological growth – from hopeless orphan to hardworking student to accomplished governess and brave upright woman, then to a lady who finds her rewards in money, husband and social position. The tale of her growth is a metaphor for the growth of the Victorian woman who wins her place in society by rebellion and moral strength.
2. Characterization: As a bildungsroman, the novel’s narrative is focused on the heroine – much of the narration seems to be her monologic recounting of experience and her impressions and commentary of other people. All other characters are seen through her eyes, and are developed to the measure that they are important in Jane’s life. People whom Jane come to love – Helen Burns, Miss Temple, Rochester, Mrs. Fairfax, St John Rivers and his sisters – are painted with depth and dimension, the others are treated as types. Only Jane and Rochester are round characters, and St John Rivers to some extent. Characterization stands upon four aspects: physiognomy, social standing, moral purity, and gentility, all judged from Jane’s viewpoint. Jane’s own characterization of herself is done largely through the dramatization of her conflicting inner passions – her urge and love for freedom, her desire to experience the outer world, her responses to natural landscapes, and her simplicity and moral fortitude built as an orphan and a lone fighter against odds. She also defines herself by contrast with other women – Helen, Miss Temple, Bertha Mason, the Rivers sisters. Generally speaking, the modes of characterization follow the social categorizations of the Victorian era.
3. Romantic influences: Charlotte Bronte grew up in a natural setting, familial circumstance and reading habit that were conducive to a romantic sensibility, and her heroine displays essentially romantic traits of character: love of freedom, nature, rebelliousness to social norms and unjust authority, love of material like books and pictures that inspires the imagination (her first self-image of a girl immersed in a picture-book on birds attaches her to the archetypal romantic symbol of freedom). Other romantic influences are the Gothic fascinations of Thornfield Hall in its grandeur and mystery, the terror of the red room and the upper floor at Thornfield, the hidden madwoman, and the fairytale nature of Jane’s turn to wealth and love.
4. Colonial influence: Influence of ideological discourses originating in the colonies was inescapable in Victorian novels. In this bildungsroman of a typical Englishwoman, the heroine’s restless urge to see the outer world signals her entry into political, moral and cultural influences on Englishness arriving from the colonial experience. English colonies in Jamaica and India are used in the plot to examine their effects on the men – on Rochester it has a corrupting, demoralizing effect through his marriage to the Creole madwoman, resulting in his vain sensual affairs in Europe. On St John Rivers it is no less corrupting – the colonies inspire in him a missionary zeal that is really the spiritual garb of repressive ruling machinery. Only Jane’s uncle who dies in Jamaica but saves her twice (from the deceitful marriage and by leaving her his legacy) seems to be uncorrupted. Altogether, the colonies stand for three things: wealth that must be handled with moral precaution, sensuality that corrupts and destroys, and space for exercise of white power in various ideological disguises. All three are threats to the English moral character, and Jane through her actions makes a statement about all of them. She emerges as the guarding conscience against colonial evils, not only of English womanhood but of the race and nation.