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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical Echoes: The Transformation of *Jane Eyre* Scholarship Over Time

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| ABSTRACT
Since its 1847 publication, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has attracted steadily shifting critical attention. This study maps those changes by analyzing two representative scholarly articles from each of four periods—1950–1960, 1965–1975, 1980–1990, and 1995–2015—to track evolving methods and thematic priorities. Whereas earlier criticism focuses on narrative technique, language, and other formal devices, later work increasingly engages social and cultural questions, especially issues of gender and feminism. The pattern shows how *Jane Eyre* continually registers new theoretical currents and remains a central text in debates over women's status in Victorian Britain and literary studies more broadly.

| KEYWORDS
Jane Eyre, Literary Criticism, Gender Studies, Feminism, Victorian Literature.

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1. Introduction

Jane *Eyre* is a Victorian novel written by Charlotte Brontë, a renowned English novelist and poet, who was born on April 21, 1816 in the United Kingdom (Barratt, 2015). It tells the story of Jane Eyre, a young orphan who suffers during her childhood from the ill-treatment by her aunt, who as unfair punishment sends Jane to a corrupt school. Jane loses her friend from school as a result of an infectious disease. After becoming a teacher, she moves to a castle to work as a governess for a rich man whom she later marries (Davies, 2006). Since the year it was published, *Jane Eyre* has received all kinds of reviews and criticisms that deal with various aspects of the novel.

This article argues that the changing critical reception of *Jane Eyre* from 1950 to 2015 reflects major methodological shifts in literary studies, showing how the novel's formal innovations and thematic breadth continually invite new readings centered on narrative technique, psychoanalytic symbolism, and feminist concerns. By mapping this diachronic evolution, the article demonstrates that tracing these shifts deepens our understanding of both the text and the discipline of literary criticism.

2. Literature Review

It is the 1950s. The world is still recovering from the horror of the Second World War. New literary schools have started to arise in the sphere of literary criticisms; one that is of our concern is New Criticism. The school of New Criticism places an emphasis on the text, ignoring other factors such as the culture and the people who contribute to the text (Reist, 2015). An example that could be classified under that is an article written in 1950, in which the author suggests that *Jane Eyre* is unique for its intensity and this uniqueness is employed to refute the argument that its plot is of a low quality (Scargill, 1950, p. 120). The author refers to what Ernest A. Baker wrote in *The History of the English Novel* about *Jane Eyre*: "Clumsiness and glaring improbabilities in the plot, blunders and absurdities in the picturing of a society to which Charlotte Brontë was a complete stranger . . ." (Baker, 1924, p. 36). It is almost impossible, if ever, to see a critic nowadays perceiving *Jane Eyre* as Baker did in 1924, and the reason could be that *Jane Eyre* is, as many consider, ahead of its time; therefore, its perception changes as history goes forward. Scargill also argues that this intensity is the reason that made the readers take an interest and that

"*Jane Eyre* may speak for many women, but it speaks also for all humanity, and it speaks in unmistakable terms. *Jane Eyre* is the record of an intense spiritual experience, as powerful in its way as King Lear's ordeal of purgation" (Scargill, 1950, p. 121). However, the writer notes that we expect probability from a novelist, as opposed to a poet, unlike what Brontë did when "she used the conventional elements of the novel, the medium she understood best," to record her emotional experience, which resulted in "a new type of novel" (Scargill, 1950, p. 122). The author makes an analogy of the use of the fiction elements in *Jane Eyre* to the way a poet makes use of language and imagery to "impose belief" (Scargill, 1950, p. 122).

Now it is 1955, yet we still have another article in which the author employs the close-reading technique. Edgar Shannon notes that narrating in the first person may make the reader unable to perceive the events being told by the narrator, but this is not the case in *Jane Eyre* because Charlotte Brontë avoids that by her use of the present tense (Shannon, 1955, p. 141). He considers the shift from the past tense to the present tense in *Jane Eyre* to be a device to "convey either a rising emotional tension or a new departure in the story" and makes a comment on her use of the present tense: "Skillfully depicting number of characters simultaneously animated, the technique presents immediately to the reader the brilliancy of the scene as it appears to Jane and evoke the charged atmosphere that compels her self-acknowledgment of love for Rochester, with its concomitant dread of Blanche Ingram's rival charm" (Shannon, 1955, p. 141). The writer reports instances from the novel where the shift from the past tense to the present tense happens, such as when Jane acknowledges her love for Rochester and the other instance when she moves to Thornfield (Shannon, 1955, p. 144).

In the second time period from 1965 until 1975, we continue to see that the focus of the articles about *Jane Eyre* still revolves around the text and specifically the narration of the plot. Earl Knies asserts, in 1966, that it is difficult to find evidence to support the argument that "Charlotte's struggle to get the situation of the story before us" (Knies, 1966, p. 547) when Jane narrates the events in the first person; however, weaknesses "are not the result of an inadequate method" (Knies, 1966, p. 547). Furthermore, he addresses the claim that the downside of using the first-person narrative is that the narrator might be missing events that are happening simultaneously somewhere else or the things the narrator considers unimportant by stating that Jane "presents exposition dramatically through scene rather than through summary — we are present when Rochester tells about his past, when the innkeeper tells about the burning of Thornfield and so everything seems to be happening within Jane's consciousness even though the events took place when Jane was not actually present" (Knies, 1966, p. 548). He explains that it is possible for the narrator, as in *Jane Eyre*, to describe "an admirable character" without any "self-glorification or pretentious humility" (Knies, 1966, p. 553). Moreover, he defends the narrator's characterization of themselves: "a first-person narrator cannot write essays on himself; he can see himself as others see him if he is the kind of person who invites frank comments from other people" (Knies, 1966, p. 553).

In the fourth article written in 1968, the author states that Charlotte Brontë was able to keep a narrative distance in a way that keeps the reader undisturbed by the fact that there is a narrative distance between the narrator and the events and does not reveal that until the end of the novel (Millgate, 1968, p. 315). He mentions: "throughout the novel there is, in fact, a productive tension between the judgements of thirty and the vision of ten or eighteen" (Millgate, 1968, p. 315). According to Millgate, Jane uses devices to bring the narrative closer, such as her use of present tense; this enables the readers to see through "the eyes of the girl rather than of the woman" (Millgate, 1968, p. 315). It is only plausible to believe that both articles center their arguments around the narrative due to the fact that there was an interest in the narrative in the 60s and 70s, and this can be apparent in 1961, when Wayne C. Booth coined the term "reliable narrator" (Booth, 2014). Additionally, it is the late 20th century, which many agree was the start of postmodernism that emphasizes the narrative (Felluga, n.d.).

Criticisms of *Jane Eyre* from 1980 until 1990 began to expand and vary. The fifth article, for example, was written in 1987 in which the author employs Freud's psychoanalytic theory to interpret a scene from *Jane Eyre*. Psychoanalysis was initially developed by Sigmund Freud to treat mental illness but later expanded to include literature (Abrams, 1999, p. 248). The author refers to Freud's psychoanalysis of the overcoat and the cloak as symbols for a man or his genital, and applies it to the scene when Jane first encounters Rochester wearing a riding cloak (Rea, 1987, p. 53). She argues that the idea of Rochester's riding cloak extends more than its basic meaning to represent something of a sexual nature: "the imagery and the underlying symbolism of cloaks in the novel validates the foregoing statement. The fact that the cloak covering Mr. Rochester when Jane meets him is a riding cloak has further symbolical significance — Rochester is riding nocturnally" (Rea, 1987, p. 53).

In the same decade, a writer drew attention to Brontë's allusion to the *Arabian Nights*. The author claims that Charlotte Brontë enjoyed the *Arabian Nights* as a child and reaffirms that *Jane Eyre* carries noticeable similarities in the characters and events from the *Arabian Nights* (Workman, 1988, p. 178). She explains that the imagery and behavior of Rochester in *Jane Eyre* are similar to those of Sultan Shahriyar (Workman, 1988, p. 179). She points out the similarities between the two characters, which are Thornfield Hall, Mesrour (the name of Rochester's black horse), and "the tableau scene in which Rochester and Blanche impersonate biblical characters, Eliezer and Rebecca" (Workman, 1988, p. 179), which she explains "evokes not just the Bible, but the *Arabian Night*" because Rochester's appearance fits the description of an "eastern emir" (Workman, 1988, p. 179). In addition, she remarks: "Brontë associates the heroine of her novel with Scheherazade in several textual allusions, as well as in the character traits the two women share, thus extending Scheherazade's mythical stature to Brontë's narrator" (Workman, 1988, p. 181). She proceeds to report the similarities between Jane and Scheherazade.

With the rise of third-wave feminism in the early 1990s that calls for the equality of women, female writers and literary works that address women's issues became the focus of criticism. This is best seen in an article written in 1996 by Carla Kaplan where she argues that Victorian Britain was a society dominated by men and women were treated unfairly and posits that "Victorian gender ideology justified itself claiming that women were destined to be mothers and wives and no more" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 46). She believes that *Jane Eyre* is an important work due to the fact that it resists this ideology as its protagonist, "Jane's quest for equality symbolizes her struggle to overcome the restraints of the period" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 48). The author goes on to discuss male cruelty of Jane's cousin, John Reed and her confrontation with him after he attacks her (Kaplan, 1996, p. 49). This confrontation results in Jane's punishment which the author uses to confirm her claim that "a woman is expected to be subservient in Victorian society" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 49). She also contends that Jane seeks change when she tries to work yet she can only work as a governess and reaffirms the restrictions put on women during that era and that the reason women were allowed because "Working as a governess was one of the few acceptable jobs for a woman in Victorian England since it was not much different from the work performed by a housewife" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 49).

The influence of the feminist movement led critics to examine not only the role of the female but also the role of the male in women's literature and his treatment toward the female. An example of that is what Bethany Dahlstrom posits: "although typically received as a novel about romance and means, *Jane Eyre* also acts as a psychological study of male dominance in the Victorian Age" (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 2). Her argument in this paper is that Jane, whom we know, is strongly influenced by men whom she encounters throughout the plot (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 2). The writer discusses these male characters with the instances that play a role in the development of her character (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 2). Mr. Brocklehurst, she points out, forces Jane to follow his instructions in the way she acts and she dresses during her childhood, and as a result this still impacts her personality even after he leaves the school and now it is impossible to reverse (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 3). The writer goes on to discuss Mr. Rochester who treats Jane as if she were his property: "She has become like property in his eyes, useful for his own purposes and something to be kept. He assumes that she cannot possibly fend for herself" (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 3). The author concludes with St. John who makes several requests for things in his own interest: "St. John forges a new Jane, one that he is constantly preparing for his own mission of service" (Dahlstrom, 2013, p. 4).

3. Methodology

To trace the evolution of *Jane Eyre* criticism with clarity, eight peer-reviewed articles were selected—two from each of four non-overlapping windows: 1950–1960, 1965–1975, 1980–1990, and 1995–2015. A five-year buffer between windows was maintained to prevent overlap and make shifts easier to observe.

All items were drawn from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania library databases and limited to English-language journals indexed in JSTOR, MLA International Bibliography, or comparable scholarly platforms. Within each window, priority was given to articles that either appeared frequently in citation lists or captured the decade's dominant critical mood. Each article was then read closely, noting the theoretical tools deployed and the specific features of the novel—style, structure, psychology, gender politics—that attracted critical attention. The findings were placed side by side to identify points of convergence and divergence.

This step-by-step procedure revealed a clear trajectory: the first two windows lean heavily on formalist close reading, whereas the later ones move toward psychoanalytic, intertextual, and feminist lenses. The systematic comparison helps keep the analysis orderly and persuasive.

4. Results and Discussion

Comparison of the eight articles confirms that questions posed to *Jane Eyre* have shifted in step with broader changes in literary theory. In the first period (**1950–1960**) discussion centres on form. Scargill (1950) praises the novel's "intensity," treating it almost as a poetic text, while Shannon (1955) shows how Brontë's sudden moves into the present tense pull readers into each scene. Both critics stay close to the language of the novel and leave social context largely untouched.

The next window (**1965–1975**) retains this focus on narrative yet adds an interest in the mechanics of storytelling. Knies (1966) explores the reach of first-person narration, demonstrating that events Jane does not witness can still feel immediate. Millgate (1968) draws attention to the distance between Jane the child and Jane the adult narrator, arguing that the two voices sit together without unsettling the reader. Such work reflects the rise of narratology in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

A turn outward marks the **1980–1990** articles. Rea (1987) imports Freud, reading Rochester's riding cloak as a sexual symbol and tracing how imagery can carry hidden meaning. Workman (1988) sets the novel beside the *Arabian Nights*, casting Rochester and Jane in the roles of Shahriyar and Scheherazade. Earlier critics stayed within the text; these writers connect it to psychology and to other story traditions.

The final pair (**1995–2015**) follows the rise of third-wave feminism. Kaplan (1996) presents the novel as a protest against Victorian rules that confined women to domestic life, and Dahlstrom (2013) examines how male characters attempt to shape Jane's identity for their own ends. Together the articles confirm the novel's place as a key text for debates about power and gender.

Viewed together, the four sets of essays trace a clear path: from formalist close reading, through narratology, to theory-driven and feminist work. Setting the articles side by side shows why *Jane Eyre* continues to attract fresh criticism—it remains open to the dominant ideas of each new moment.

5. Conclusion

The critical reception of *Jane Eyre* demonstrates the novel's significance in literary studies. Early analyses focused on its language and literary techniques, while later scholarship expanded to address broader cultural and social issues, particularly those related to gender and feminism. This shift reflects the changing priorities of literary criticism and the increasing recognition of *Jane Eyre* as a valuable text for exploring the status of women in the Victorian era. By tracing these critical transformations, this study highlights how *Jane Eyre* has remained a relevant and influential work that catches the interest of scholars across different theoretical and historical contexts.

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