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The Portrayal of Blindness in *Jane Eyre*

From madness to blindness, disability permeates Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In many ways, the novel breaks down barriers and harmful connotations of disability, shining light on Brontë's progressive views. Focusing in on Mr. Rochester's blindness, this positive portrayal of disability can be seen through Jane's treatment of Mr. Rochester after he becomes disabled. Demonstrating an awareness of potential difficulties when communicating with someone with a disability, as well as an understanding of temporary able-bodiedness, Jane is able to connect with the blind Mr. Rochester and bring him out of isolation. However, for the progressiveness of the novel, *Jane Eyre* is by no means perfect in its portrayal of disability. Whether it be divine justice and forgiveness undermining temporary able-bodiedness and reinforcing the association of disability and sin, or Mr. Rochester's subdued sexual passion at the end of the novel, it is evident that *Jane Eyre* perpetuates many negative understandings and stigmas of disability. Without a doubt, the novel was strikingly forward for the Victorian Era in its portrayal of disability. However, if *Jane Eyre* is continued to be viewed as a progressive text today, careful consideration must be made of instances that perpetuate negative understandings and stigmas of disability.

Before delving into Mr. Rochester's blindness, the argument must be made that Victorian society viewed blindness as disability. This assertion may seem odd, as in the modern world, blindness is undoubtedly perceived as disability. However, because disability is socially constructed and therefore fluid, it must be proven then that Victorian society viewed blindness as

disability before analysis be conducted. As a basis for this paper, the definition of disability I will follow is by Tobin Siebers, who defines it in *Disability Theory* as a social process in which society deems a quality disabling by viewing it as “an individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being” (3). In the novel, the tavern keeper at Rochester Arms, who informs Jane of the Thornfield ruin when she returns to the estate at the end of the novel, displays a mindset clouded with negative connotations of disability. To begin, the tavern keeper demonstrates that he views the disabled Mr. Rochester as no longer, what Siebers would describe, “a quality human being” (4). Here, the quality of Mr. Rochester is not being judged morally, but instead by wholeness—that of which the tavern keeper believes Mr. Rochester lacks because he is blind. Not only does the tavern keeper state that Mr. Rochester “is now helpless, indeed—blind and a cripple,” he takes it one step further when he says, “Yes, yes: [Mr. Rochester] is alive; but many think he had better be dead” (Brontë 275). These quotes highlight that the tavern keeper views blindness not as difference, but as a defect that majorly hinders Mr. Rochester from functioning properly in society. Thus blindness is disability to the tavern keeper. Furthermore, the lack of detail given about the tavern keeper demonstrates that he can be viewed not just as a character who displays the negative connotations associated with disability, but also as a mouthpiece for Victorian society. Throughout the novel, Jane goes into extensive detail about the appearances of people she encounters. However, when examining the tavern keeper, Jane describes him as “a respectable-looking, middle-aged man” (Brontë 275). Not only are the features of the man utterly average, the brief description of him contrasts with the various other appearances in which Jane describes in great detail. This brief and average description of the man signifies that he is not meant to be seen as a character of immense significance, but as someone to help move the plot along. How-

ever, when examining Victorian society as a whole, the tavern keeper provides a reflection of common Victorian attitudes and beliefs, as he is simply supposed to represent a stereotypical citizen of the era. Through the anonymity of the tavern keeper, the connection between blindness and disability can be expanded to the societal level.

Examining blindness as disability, Jane displays a very progressive view of disability in her treatment of Mr. Rochester after he becomes blind. First, she does not allow Mr. Rochester's blindness to cloud her judgment of him. In *Enforcing Normal*, Leonard Davis comments on the importance of this, stating, "Disabled people are thought of primarily in terms of their disability, just as sexual preference, gender, or ethnicity becomes the defining factor in perceiving another person" (10). Jane neither avoids acknowledging Mr. Rochester's blindness nor gives it too much significance. Instead, she understands when she returns to Thornfield that Mr. Rochester should not be viewed as a disabled man, but a grieving man. Jane states, "I caressed, in order to sooth him. I knew of what he was thinking, and wanted to speak for him, but dared not. As he turned aside his face a minute, I saw a tear slide from under the sealed eyelid, and trickle down the manly cheek. My heart swelled" (Brontë 285). After experiencing heartbreak and complete destruction of his longtime home, Mr. Rochester's loss of sight is merely an addition to the litany of tragic events that have occurred over a brief amount of time. Jane senses his grief, and while she "knew of what he was thinking," she understands that, as vulnerable as he is, she must proceed with caution (Brontë 285). This awareness contrasts with members of Victorian society, such as the tavern keeper, who view Mr. Rochester as a helpless case and make no attempt to connect with the isolated fellow. Additionally, when Jane does converse with Mr. Rochester, her understanding of disability is showcased as she breaks down barriers of communication caused by disability. Highlighting the potential difficulty of these situations, Davis states, "A person

with an impairment is turned into a disabled person by the Medusa-like gaze of the observer; paradoxically, the observer becomes disabled by his or her reaction to the disabled person” (12). Here, Davis uses sight to explain how both the observer and disabled person can become disabled if the observer approaches a situation in a potentially harmful manner. This theory should not be seen as exclusive to sight, though, as the situation in which both people become disabled can be caused by more than just visual communication. In the case of Mr. Rochester, a demeaning gaze does not carry much significance as he now blind. Instead, for Mr. Rochester, verbal communication supersedes sight in its ability to disable a situation. Jane demonstrates her understanding of this potentially difficult situation, as seen through her conversations with the blind Mr. Rochester. After Mr. Rochester asks Jane if he is “hideous,” she responds, “Very, sir: you always were, you know”(Brontë 281). Jane is aware of the power of her actions. At times, it may be more beneficial for her to be a shoulder for Mr. Rochester to lean on, while in other circumstances being witty and nonchalant with him may be the more appropriate response. Jane’s understanding of how to react in these different situations saves her and Mr. Rochester from Davis’s potential “Medusa-like” situation (12). Overall, Jane’s communication skills and progressive view towards disability allow her to connect with Mr. Rochester and bring him out of isolation.

Additionally, Jane demonstrates an understanding of temporary able-bodiedness when conversing with Mr. Rochester. In brief, temporary able-bodiedness is the idea that “[w]e are as individuals feeble and finite” (Siebers). However, once accepting the imperfection of the human body, the implications of temporary able-bodiedness are vast. The first implication that Jane displays is the insignificance of the human body. Responding to Mr. Rochester’s request for Jane to “overlook [his] deficiencies,” Jane responds, “Which are none, sir, to me. I love you better now,

when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector” (286). Here, Jane demonstrates the belief that the body and all of its imperfections should not be given too much significance because, as Siebers states, “at best, the body is a vehicle, the means by which we convey who we are from place to place” (Siebers 7). Jane understands that although Mr. Rochester’s body may no longer be as equipped for his previous lifestyle, he is still himself and still able. Additionally, Jane’s acknowledgement of the changing roles in her and Rochester’s relationship demonstrates that it is unreasonable to have concrete societal roles when humans are merely temporarily able-bodied. Moving on, the next implication of temporary able-bodiedness shown through Jane and Mr. Rochester’s conversation is the beauty of the imperfect human body. When trying to comfort Mr. Rochester, Jane says, “You are no ruin, sir—no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow” (Brontë 285). In this quote, Jane advises Mr. Rochester to view his disability as less of a defect, and simply as a natural process. By doing so, he will realize the ability he still possesses to make lasting impressions on others. Furthermore, the use of the words “green and vigorous” not only portray disability as a natural process, but in a more beautiful manner than other natural words that could have been chosen. Thus, Jane’s understanding of temporary able-bodiedness once again demonstrates how the novel breaks down barriers and negative understanding of disability.

However, *Jane Eyre*’s progressive portrayal of disability only goes so far. Although Jane’s treatment of Mr. Rochester after he becomes blind portrays disability in a positive light, the portrayal of blindness at the end of the novel reinforces harmful views of disability. The first major issue to discuss about the end, in regards to perpetuating negative understandings and con-

notations of disability, is the use of divine justice to comprehend disability, as it inherently leads to a connection between sin and disability. After spending the majority of the novel indifferent to religion, Mr. Rochester firmly states how he uses divine justice to comprehend his blindness:

Jane! you think me, I daresay, an irreligious dog: but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. He sees not as a man sees, but far clearer; judges not as a man judges, but far more wisely. I did wrong. I would have sullied my innocent flower—breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me. I, in my stiff-necked rebellion, almost cursed the dispensation: instead of bending to the decree, I deified it. Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. His chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever. You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does its weakness? Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. (Brontë 267)

Here, Rochester explains what divine justice means to him: punishment for sin. Therefore, his blindness is God's punishment for living a deemed sinful lifestyle. Although this ideology seems to provide Mr. Rochester solace, as he believes that it has made him more humble, the consequences of embracing the association of sin and disability are quite harmful. Instead of viewing the body as simply an imperfect vehicle, divine justice portrays the body as a perfectible entity tied to fate. Furthermore, it perpetuates the preference for able-bodiedness by stigmatizing disability as a defect that can be tossed around as punishment for sin.

Additionally, proceeding divine justice, God's forgiveness of Mr. Rochester also raises flags about the portrayal of disability in the novel. Jane writes about Mr. Rochester as he recovers his sight, stating, "He eventually recovered the sight of that one eye...the sky is no longer a blank to him—the earth no longer void...he...acknowledged that God had tempered judgment with mercy" (Brontë 290). Similar to divine justice, God's forgiving of Mr. Rochester further perpetuates the connection between disability and sin, reinforcing negative understandings and stigmas of disability. Looking deeper into the matter, though, Mr. Rochester's regaining of his sight brings to light an interesting quality of the association of disability with sin. In this case, God's forgiveness of Rochester by gifting back his sight portrays disability as a temporary punishment, almost like a sickness, that can be overcome by taking the right steps. As optimistic as this portrayal of disability is, it is by no means realistic. Blindness, as well as other disabilities, should not be viewed as temporary defects. While some disabilities may be curable, treating disability like a fleeting sickness or punishment not only reinforces the idea of disability as a defect, but undermines the concept of temporary able-bodiedness, as it portrays the body as perfectible and separate from natural processes.

Lastly, the subduing of Mr. Rochester's sexual desire through blindness reinforces stigmas of people with disabilities in regards to sexual desire. On one hand, the fact that Mr. Rochester sustains his sexuality even after he becomes disabled can be interpreted as the novel once again portraying disability in a positive light by debunking the stigma that people with disabilities lack sexuality. However, the depiction of Mr. Rochester's sexuality fails in combatting the stigma that people with disabilities are less sexually driven than able-bodied individuals. During her time as a governess at Thornfield, Jane often draws attention to the fire in Mr. Rochester's eyes. While fire symbolizes many different things throughout the novel, in regards to Mr. Roch-

ester at this time, it signifies passion. Of course, the scene that most explicitly demonstrates this symbolization is the fiery bedroom scene, where Jane saves Mr. Rochester by awaking him and putting out the flame on his bed. As Jane looks to reside to her bedroom, she describes Mr. Rochester, stating, "Strange energy was in his voice, strange fire in his look" (Brontë 96). This scene, one of many in which Mr. Rochester's flame is presented, demonstrates the burning sexual desire Mr. Rochester has for Jane. However, when Jane encounters Mr. Rochester on her return to Thornfield, the flame of desire in Mr. Rochester is put out. Instead, there is a new flame, coming not from Mr. Rochester, but from the candles. John's wife tells Jane, "he always has candles brought in at dark, though he is blind." (Brontë 277). Remembering the passionate Mr. Rochester from earlier in the novel, the candles initially seem as though they are placed in the scene to continue the representation of Mr. Rochester's strong burning desire, as, now blind, he can no longer give the same fire-filled glances. However, with Mr. Rochester revealing later on that he asks for the candles because he can see the light, as well as the absence of lustful fire from him at the end of the novel, it becomes evident that the candles no longer symbolize fire but instead foreshadow God's forgiveness of Mr. Rochester by giving back his sight. Therefore, while it is clear that Mr. Rochester still has sexuality, as shown by the fact that he and Jane have a child together, Mr. Rochester's sexual drive is clearly subdued. Similar to how divine justice and forgiveness undermine temporary able-bodiedness and reinforce the stigma of disability as a defect, *Jane Eyre's* perpetuation of the stigma that people with disabilities lack sexual drive cannot be ignored when examining the progressiveness of the novel in its portrayal of disability.

Jane Eyre is often regarded as groundbreaking for its time. Tackling issues ranging from class, gender, and disability, it offers unmatched critiques of Victorian society. However, the novel is by no means perfect in its demonstration of progressive views. Although *Jane Eyre*,

through characters like Jane, offers positive portrayals of disability, the use of divine justice and forgiveness, as well as the subdued sexual desire of Mr. Rochester, cannot be ignored. In the end, *Jane Eyre* can be recognized as a progressive novel for the Victorian Era. However, for today's standards, this label must be more hesitantly offered to the novel.

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