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Brontian Pastiche in Post-Suffrage South Riding

Introduction & Pastiche

Pastiche has become an increasingly popular way of adapting and reformulating contemporary works of literature that fit within the presentation of universally understandable concepts and characterizations. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is a particularly well-known part of the English literary canon, and her work has been continually reproduced and adapted; though, many of these recreations have been set in the period that *Jane Eyre* was written, both in literary and media forms, with very little attached literary commentary of different time periods.

Pastiche is unique in that it has a thematic basis in a root work without being a direct adaptation, and tends to include dissimilar environmental factors to the original work while producing narrative continuation. A well known contemporary example of pastiche can be found in the popular BBC television series *Sherlock*, which has an intertextual, thematic basis in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle while being simultaneously set in a modern London and has a continued mystery narrative through the Holmes' investigations.

Winifred Holtby is a similarly articulate manipulator of the pastiche form, especially concerning parallels in thematic paratext. The novel, *South Riding*, by Winifred Holtby, is a particularly intriguing pastiche of *Jane Eyre* through its function as a feminist novel in a post-suffrage environment. There are shared concepts of matriarchal power structures in education, traditionalist masculine dominance, and instances of feminine strength and egalitarianism cast

through social roles in both *Jane Eyre* and *South Riding*. *South Riding* functions as a new but familiar pretense by which one may analyze transformations in English society, and the role feminism has in altering the society's and the novel's structures. This form of pastiche allows the academic import of post-suffrage feminism to be more readily compared with the aspects of pre-suffrage feminism in *Jane Eyre* in a way that is relatable to both contemporary and classical audiences.

***Jane Eyre* and Theoretical Perspective**

Jane Eyre was initially published in 1847, about a decade into Queen Victoria's reign, under Charlotte Brontë's pseudonym Currer Bell (Schaff 25-26). The work has been in print since its publication and has relentlessly enthralled both every-day readers and literary critics. The book has a strong sense of thematic universality and has been evaluated across the entire theoretical spectrum. No longer is *Jane Eyre* just a work of Victorian, realistic fiction, it has transcended a generic place in literary existence and has become a framework for representation of gender roles, and the struggles and constructs faced in everyday situations that other authors have the ability to utilize as an prototypical model for modification and artistic transmogrification. As Erica Hateley notes in her article *The End Of The Eyre Affair: Jane Eyre, Parody, And Popular Culture*, "The novel has sustained a varied 'afterlife,' appearing in or as numerous sequels, prequels, simultaneous tales, stage plays, a musical, comic books, parodies, postage stamps, and [...] has been the source of at least twenty-one films" (Hateley 1022), and in the sense of the topic at hand Hateley clarifies the ease of adaptation that sets *Jane Eyre* as both a thematic foundation but an exemplar of Novel purpose. Every comparative literary analysis, however, has a perspective as a guide of measuring similarities or differences. *South Riding* and *Jane Eyre* both share intertextual foci on gender roles, narrative structure as a means of

representative social change, and in a comparative sense is further relegated by discussions of paratextual theory in regard to both novels.

Paratext's purpose as a theoretical additive to the comparative literary analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *South Riding* provides functional nomenclature that supplements textual understanding. Gérard Genette, a French literary theorist, has written a large series of articles, and a novel, specifically discussing the importance of understanding what paratext is, and how it contributes to a more succinct understanding of a work's literary contextuality. Genette states that the term paratext refers to "[the] fringe, in effect, always bearer of an authorial commentary either more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes, between the text and what lies outside it, a zone not just of transition, but of transaction" (Genette 261). This is to say that all the supplementary information surrounding a work, like the writers' personality and elements like sociohistorical environment as it relates to narrative creation, and all other liminal factors attached directly to the work, behave in such a manner as to provide contextual understanding of an author's literary presentation. This is metaphorically comparable to opening all the allegorical doors and windows of a narrative home to allow multiple realms of liminal admittance rather than restricting comprehension to one entrance and one perspective. Understanding the concept of paratext allows one to further analyze the deeper complexities of the narratives in *Jane Eyre* and *South Riding* by understanding the factors surrounding each text that affect the structure of each because it asks certain key questions that interrelate the author and text such as:

Defining an element of the paratext consists in determining its date of and position (the question *where?*), appearance, eventually of disappearance (*when?*), its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*), the characteristics of its

communicating instance, addresser and addressee (*from whom? To whom?*).

(Genette 263)

Genette believes by answering these central questions to a work the liminal boundaries of external influence that form paratext are articulated. In the two literary works under comparison both are set in Yorkshire-esque, northern England; this provides a cultural context for literary audiences. This is important because it is an English social construct comparable to the opinions of the American South as far as regional perspective of labor, social class, and behavior are concerned. *Jane Eyre* is set in 1840s Victorian England while *South Riding* is an interwar novel following England's suffrage movement, which is one of this paper's primary focuses on society-to-novel influence. Another aspect of paratext that further defines the work is the family background of both Winifred Holtby and Charlotte Brontë who "both had a family background in education work" one as an inspector and the other as a minister administering parish schools, respectively (Julien 130). This justifies each author's extensive knowledge of the education system from a young age that allowed them to articulate the matriarchal construction of the Lowood and Kiplington Schools. All these factors are ways extratextual factors have made their way into the texts and thereby elucidate meaning, and further communicates how background differences in each articulate variable aspects of feminism in a pre and post suffrage environment. In many ways the entirety of this analysis exemplifies extratextual, socially effective factors and their explicit similarities and differences intertextually.

The Matriarchal Spheres of Education: Lowood & Kiplington

The central body of literary adaptation that occurs between *Jane Eyre* and *South Riding* can be found in the narrative formation of the educational sphere. Each novel features an underprivileged school for girls in squalid physical conditions. The teachers are what brings life

and vitality to these conditions and form the symbolic importance of these particular environments. By the 1840s education is permeated with female secondary school teachers creating a convent-like matriarchal structure of feminine authority amongst faculty and students. Jane's particular feminine role models during her stay at the Lowood School are Miss Temple and Helen Burns. Jane is a volatile and emotional child who has faced Cinderella-esque familial neglect and abuse, and from this downtrodden background Jane has her life restructured into an exemplar of feminine independence. Miss Temple is a gentle mentor to all the students who is consistently a strong female character unwavering in her presentation to her students and upon vacating her position and in Jane's upcoming governorship Jane notes:

Miss Temple's friendship and society had been my continual solace; she had stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and latterly, companion [...] From the day she left I was no longer the same: with her was gone every settled feeling, every association that had made Lowood in some degree a home to me. I had imbibed from her something of her nature and much of her habits [...] my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple – or rather, that she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity – and that now I was left in my natural element, and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotion.

(Brontë 100)

Helen embodies the collected and logical nature of independence, never acting out of emotional impulse, focused on academics, solitary, and unyielding self-amelioration. While Miss Temple acts as Jane Eyre's guiding force Helen provides the mental framework through which Jane might achieve her personal formation in independence. This women-driven environment is an ideal one for analyzing feminine idealism and independence in a time where patriarchal

dominance was a seemingly insurmountable social norm. *Jane Eyre* in this regard provides the standard of this feminine ideal involving self-actuating independence as a key to social betterment and personal intelligence, used in discussions of the narrative importance of women's current and ideal roles.

The Yorkshire characterization christened *South Riding* has several environments that readily embody the transformation of women's roles and are the subject of Holtby's feminist ideology. The teachers and headmistress are prime examples to their students, though they all have a different way of portraying these messages of the positive effects of feminine independence. Sarah Burton as the headmistress of the Kiplington School in South Riding is the zenith of idyllic independence in the setting of this particular schoolhouse. She is well traveled, having gone throughout Europe and to South Africa for a time on her own; is an academic role model, with her Masters degree level education (which would have been mostly unheard of a century before); and is a model of modern feminine leadership and opportunity to both her faculty and her students. Burton's students idolize her every deed and piece of advice, as do most of the staff. In many ways she is the adaptive conglomeration of everything Miss Temple and Helen Burns personify in *Jane Eyre*. Miss Parsons, one of the unmarried teachers at the Kiplington School, as a faculty member reaches an epiphany upon her retirement beyond previous patriarchal constraints that say 'women must dread being alone/unmarried.' She notably asseverates,

The thought of being alone held no terrors for her; it was a luxury. All her life she had loved and served and given, so that her own company meant not deprivation, but a little relaxation in which she might pander to her own neglected preferences. [...] She had loved and served and feared and hoped and given. She had enriched

herself immeasurably by the renunciation of possessions. All over Yorkshire, in farm-houses and shops and villas, lingered the memory of her unstinted service. Miss Parsons knew that in a hundred homes women thought of her, and would think, with affection – a little amused, a little critical perhaps, but they were grateful to her. (Holtby 264)

She derives strength and consolation from her experience and the influence that she has had on those she has taught. She has no fear of being alone as is stigmatized, which is a marked freedom available to post-suffrage women who are no longer as strictly held to the necessity of marriage and male presence. Miss Siggleswaite is very comparable to Miss Parsons and similarly does not fear being alone, and in fact more often pursues it. Miss Siggleswaite is noted as the most qualified of all the teachers with her consistent academic publication in the field of natural sciences (a male-dominated field even today), and as she develops in the novel her suppressed independence comes to the surface in a raging fury, though her classroom retaliation against a student is certainly not a professional one it makes it no less a statement of her personal autonomous capabilities by way of acting on feminine strength against personal persecutors – a fight against oppression.

Raging Traditionalist Patriarchy: Rochester & Carne

Another range of adaptation between the two works is a focus on the representation of traditionalist patriarchy through Edward Rochester and Robert Carne. These characters have similar modes of conveying masculinity when analyzed intertextually, both of which are resistant to power loss to the point of violence. Power is a fundamental function of any system that seeks to maintain dominance, and patriarchal and masculine dominated structures in these works are highly resistant ones, though their specific environments vary. This act of violence, threatened

and performed, in question is deemed the most extreme gender-specific means of dominance, rape. The genteel Edward Rochester, famed literary lover of Jane Eyre, at one point in the novel is overcome with a need to promulgate control through by threatening rape:

‘Jane! will you hear reason?’ [...] ‘because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence.’ His voice was hoarse; his look that of a man who is just about to burst an insufferable bond and plunge headlong into wild licence [...] the passing second of time --- was all I had in which to control and restrain him: a movement of repulsion, flight, fear would have sealed my doom – and his. But I was not afraid. (Brontë 349)

Robert Carne too is adapted in this similarly thematic manner. Carne is analogously adapted from Rochester’s projection of class, coming from a lower Gentry land owning family with a stake in the local government. In Holtby’s writing, however, she is more explicit in her presentation of Carne’s actions, as he fully perpetrated a rape against his wife.

After the child was born, she relapsed into intermittent insanity, there had been times when he had longed for proof that this was not his doing, that the one occasion when he had forced himself upon her, taking by violence what her whim refused, had not been the final cause of her destruction. (Holtby 430)

Rape itself fulfills its function; its function is to overpower and destroy, to quash all signs of opposition in the wake of patriarchal authority. Though rape in principle is rooted in dominance and power, it also fulfills a barbaric, and wholly ironic, role in that it simultaneously subverts the traditionalist patriarchal power structure at its core by debasing individuals who partake in such abhorrent acts. This pastiche of performed dominance allows for a more directly critical discussion in a society that is becoming increasingly less accepting of such abominable acts of

domination as they relate to changes and insurrection of traditionalism in male-dominated power structures.

Comparing Environments & Continuation

The characteristic, again, that makes pastiche unique as a form of adaptation rests in the ability to generate narrative continuation in the written and adapted novel form. Structures of environmental development in each novel mark one portion of this adaptation. *Jane Eyre* establishes a pre-suffrage male-dominated environment throughout the work. In the work's conclusion, following conflicts concerning Bertha and the threatened rape, one sees a man on the brink of destruction saved by an independent, caring woman (Brontë). The now-blind Rochester has been destroyed in the traditional sense of his gender roles, and must rely on a woman to meet his daily needs. Society in 1840s Yorkshire, however, remains held by the same prescriptive will of patriarchal control following this act; the transformation never permeates beyond the individual domestic sphere. Pastiche engages this point in *South Riding* by noting a similar starting structure of male-dominance, but the conclusion is one of total transformation. Carne commits suicide and progressive politicians now control the government of South Riding (Holtby). Traditionalism itself has imploded and now makes way for imminent socially progressive idealism led by Sara Burton.

Continuation is further articulated in the field of advancing feminine influence amongst *South Riding*'s many sub-narratives. Councilor Huggins, for example, is a man held under the constant will of women. He has several children already, and seeks sexual pleasure elsewhere only to have a child out of wedlock (Holtby); when the child's mother seeks him out for support Rev. Huggins is easily manipulated, out of fear public ostracism for his hypocritical behavior. His wife also functions as a controlling spouse that he too is openly subservient to. Holtby's

more positive illustration of changing gender roles is exemplified in the marriage of Lily and Tom Sawdon. They have a uniquely egalitarian relationship, seen more commonly in contemporary literature, and would do anything for one another in all circumstances. Lily has breast cancer, but hides it from her husband whose dream is to be a successful small-business owner because she knows that he would drop anything and everything to help her in all cases (Holtby). They operate as personifications of relational balance and self-sacrifice for the needs of the given partner without coming off as one partner being either superior or subordinate to one another.

The external function of time, society, and legislation can make an incredible difference in the way one presents ideas. Within the construct of the comparative analysis of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Holtby's *South Riding*, these Yorkshirewomen exemplify the role of social paratext on realistic narrative structures while maintaining specific ideological constructs. Brontë exhibits a compelling narrative discussion on education and gender roles in the constraint of Victorian society while maintaining a universality that has resonated with dozens of authors since its publication. The fundamental truths found in images of despair, happiness, and independence are important concepts of social commentary and western society that has inadvertently promoted adaptation. Holtby is quick to take these important discussions and make them her own, while staying true to her time through her use of pastiche in discussing feminine power structures, gender roles, and violent displays of patriarchal dominance. Unfortunately, in some ways *South Riding* seems to have fallen to the wayside of notoriety compared with canon texts, though this novel, and works of its sort are the life's blood of modern reinterpretation and understanding.

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