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Lacanian Illuminations

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Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is a novel rich in material concerning Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. In particular, at the end of Chapter Sixteen when Jane learns of Blanche Ingram and her possible engagement to Rochester, Jane's emotional response, neurotic self-talk, and reactionary portrait drawing all reflect Lacan's concepts of the unconscious, the transition into the symbolic, and identity. Moreover, by exploring these parallels within the novel, one can further argue the validity of Lacanian theory.

In a passage from the novel at the end of Chapter Sixteen, Jane finds herself overcome with emotions of embarrassment and shame, and expresses these emotions with a tone of self-unawareness and utter surprise, thus displaying Lacanian concepts of the repression of desires and the unconscious respectively. After learning of Rochester's journey to Millcote to stay with a party of distinguished individuals, one being the "accomplished lady of rank," Blanche Ingram, Jane agonizes over the "probability of a union between Mr. Rochester and the beautiful Blanche" (Brontë 186). Once alone with the idea, Jane describes that she "reviewed the information I had got; looked into my heart, examined its thoughts and feelings, and endeavored to bring back with a strict hand such as had been straying through imagination's boundless and trackless waste, into the safe fold of common sense" (Brontë 186). Jane's description of her imagination's "boundless and trackless waste" is highly relative to Lacan's idea of the "unconscious as a continual movement and activity of signifiers, whose signifieds are often inaccessible to us because they are repressed... a constant fading and evaporation of meaning" (Eagleton 146). Just as the imagination is described as having "boundless and trackless waste," the unconscious is also boundless, in that it's a "continual movement of activity," never ending and always enduring.

Not only does the imagination relate itself to the unconscious in that respect, but also its "trackless waste" can be likened to the unconscious in regards to its "fading and evaporation of meaning," given that anything that evaporates, in this case meaning, leaves no tracks behind. Perhaps the most important similarity between the description of Jane's imagination and Lacan's concept of the unconscious is that they both are a place where desires are found. For example, "the place to which we relegate the desires we are unable to fulfill is known as the unconscious," (Eagleton 132) and although the idea of the imagination implies a conscious state of mind, the diction in this passage, in particular the word "straying," connotes a sense of slippage or escape, as if her feelings entered her imagination from some other place without her conscious knowledge. Furthermore, as Jane describes the emotions she feels, it's as if she is coming to terms with her feelings towards

Mr. Rochester for the first time, reinforcing the idea that beforehand they had only been repressed desires, perhaps residing within her unconscious until this situation beckoned them to the surface. By examining the correspondences between Jane's imagination and the concept of the unconscious, validation of Lacanian theory is further exemplified.

The following paragraphs describe Jane as being arraigned at her own bar, realizing her newfound feelings and then severely punishing herself for allowing herself to have them, underlining still the aforementioned concept of the unconscious while illustrating Jane's failure to fully accept the symbolic order. She describes how:

> Arraigned at my own bar, Memory having given her evidence of the hopes, wishes, sentiments I had been cherishing since last night – of the general state of mind in which I had indulged for nearly a fortnight past; Reason having come forward and told, in her own quiet way, a plain, unvarnished tale, showing how I had rejected the real, and rabidly devoured the ideal; - I pronounced judgment to this effect: - that a greater fool than *Jane Eyre* had never breathed the breath of life: that a more fantastic idiot had never surfeited herself on sweet lies, and swallowed poison as if it were nectar. (Brontë 186)

The fact that Jane's memory and reason tell her "a plain, unvarnished tale" relates to the fact that her desires emerged from her unconscious, as they are being told to her in a way that is finally "unvarnished," the latter implying that beforehand whatever feelings she had for Mr. Rochester were, so she thought, being shut down perhaps, dismissed or repressed into the unconscious where they belong. That being said, Jane's realization of her inability to subdue her feelings for her master results in severe self-criticism and shaming, calling upon her failure to fully accept what Lacan calls the "symbolic order: the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society" (Eagleton 145). Following the laws of Lacanian psychoanalysis then, Jane asserts that "it does no woman good to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it" (Brontë 186). Because the idea of Mr. Rochester intending to marry her completely defies the symbolic order of the period, Jane feels it would be impossible and therefore useless, perhaps even dangerous, to entertain the idea. Jane's assertion also relates to the psychoanalytic idea that although "every human being has to undergo repression... for some of us, the repression may become excessive and make us ill... This form of sickness is known as

neurosis; and... neurosis is involved with what is creative about us as a race, as well as with the causes of our unhappiness" (Eagleton 131-32). The idea that excessive repression leads to neurosis, which is involved with what causes unhappiness, directly correlates with the fact that Jane herself is dealing with the repression of her desires, and dealing with the neurosis as a result. Just as she claims, "it is madness in all women who let a secret love kindle within them," Jane actually experiences a mild version of madness in the form of neurosis, and not surprisingly her method of coping happens to be a creative outlet, further justifying how Lacanian theory exhibits legitimacy.

In the last few paragraphs of the passage, Jane literally draws a plan to reconcile the desires of her unconscious with the larger symbolic order in which she is apart by drawing portraits of herself and Miss Ingram, thus rediscovering her identity in relation to that of Blanche, which thoroughly illustrates Lacan's idea of identity and how it's created. According to Lacanian theory, "identities come about only as a result of difference – that one term or subject is what it is only by excluding another" (Eagleton 143-44). It's interesting then, that Jane sentences herself to draw a self-portrait only using chalk and without trying to make herself look special in anyway, writing "under it, 'Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain" and then afterwards, she tells herself, "take a piece of smooth ivory... delineate carefully the loveliest face you can imagine... call it, "Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank" (Brontë 187). Jane places immense importance on the difference between not only the compositions of each portrait, but also on the titles. For instance, the self-portrait only gets writing underneath whereas Blanche gets to be "called" something, not to mention the differences in the descriptions of each portrait. Jane goes on to tell herself, "whenever, in future, you should chance to fancy Mr. Rochester thinks well of you, take out these two pictures and compare them" (Brontë 187). The fact that Jane compares herself to Blanche in order to better remember her own identity and place within the symbolic order is wholeheartedly reflective of the Lacanian notion that identities are a result of difference. In addition, after creating these portraits, Jane describes:

The contrast was as great as self-control could desire. I derived benefit from the task: it had kept my head and hands employed, and had given force and fixedness to the new impressions I wished to stamp indelibly on my heart. Ere long, I had reason to congratulate myself on the course of wholesome discipline to which I had thus focused my feeling to submit: thanks to it, I was able to meet subsequent occurrences with a decent calm; which, had they found me unprepared, I should probably have been unequal to maintain, even externally. (Brontë 187-88)

Finally, Jane is able to reconcile her unconscious desires with her identity within the symbolic order, and subsequently conquer the resulting neurosis

by way of creativity. This reconstruction of identity through contrast goes hand in hand with Lacan's notion of identity and how although "individuals can be studied simply... as a member of a specific social class and so on... we tend to see ourselves rather as free, unified, autonomous, self-generating individuals, and unless we did so we would be incapable of playing our parts in social life" (Eagleton 149). So while Jane is much more than just a member of the governess class, her identification with that class gives her a place within the symbolic order and allows her to play her social role with peace of mind. The therapeutic aspects of Jane's portrait drawing and her regained sense of identity as a result are direct parallels to Lacanian notions of neurosis and identity, demonstrating the soundness of Lacan's psychoanalytic theories.

Conclusively, Jane's struggle to reconcile her desires with the symbolic order illustrates many aspects of Lacanian theory including the unconscious, the symbolic, neurosis, and identity, therefore proving Lacan's notions to be an accurate depiction of psychosexual development.

Works Cited

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Steve Davies. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.