

The Effects of Imperialism on Women in *News from Nowhere* and *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

During the Victorian era, the rise of imperialism inspired writers such as William Morris to examine capitalism's domination and Victorian ideals by representing a utopian idealization of socialism. Charlotte Brontë depicts the complex results of situating a proto-feminist individual in a Victorian society that undermined these ideas. Through analysis of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, this paper elaborates on how imperialism prevailed in Britain during the Victorian period. Through an analysis of gender, I explore how these novels contribute to a new vision of the status of women, and how they look forward to new forms of female independence.

Keywords: Imperialism, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Colonization, Feminism

During the Victorian era, the rise of imperialism inspired writers such as William Morris to examine capitalism's domination and Victorian ideals by representing a utopian idealization of socialism. Charlotte Brontë depicts the complex results of situating a proto-feminist individual in a Victorian society that undermined progressive ideas. Through analysis of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, this paper elaborates on how imperialism prevailed in Britain during the Victorian period. Through analysis of gender equality in these two literary works, I explore how these novels contribute to a new vision of the status of women, and how they look forward to new forms of female independence.

During the Victorian period, colonial lands were regarded as distant cultures. According to Gayatri Spivak's *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, colonial cultures were "waiting to be recovered, interpreted and curricularized in English translation" (244). During the eighteenth and nineteenth century triangular trade systems, manufactured goods from West Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas were monopolized under European colonial power.... William Morris's *News from Nowhere* represents his response to the socialist-feminist conflicts of the nineteenth century where there were sharp distinctions and separations of traditional male and female social roles. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a utopia as "an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect" (OED). As with Thomas More's *Utopia*, Morris's *News from Nowhere* contains many ideals of a world surrounded by nature and its pleasures with the solutions to economic, cultural and social problems. It is through the utopian ideal that Morris is able to publish his ideas about a society that contrasts heavily with what was socially accepted in the Victorian era. He shows that individuals are capable of discovering and doing what they find fulfilling. The characters that lived in *News from Nowhere* all have one goal: a genuine pursuit of happiness. Morris's socialist conventions inspired the ideas of freedom for an individual, as he ultimately opposes the capitalist society he lived in.

This opposition is evident in Richard's conversation with the old man, Hammond, about a disease called 'idleness', which Richard is even surprised about, saying, "Fancy people not liking to work! - it's too ridiculous." (Morris 42). The inability to work or do anything productive in *News from Nowhere* is looked down on and mocked by the characters. It originates from "the direct descendants of those who in the bad times used to force other people to work for them—the people, you know, who are called slave-holders or employers of labour in the history books" (Morris 41). This conversation reveals Morris's attitude towards social hierarchies and the division of labour. Contrary to an appreciation of the capitalist class relations, the interpretation of Morris's views through a Marxist lens has changed how we view social institutions. Imperialism is not natural; neither is the division of labour, which imperialism demonstrated through colonial oppression. Imperialism ultimately sets class divisions and foundations for a

division of labour because the poor would always be at the bottom of the pyramid, while the rich would always benefit in these conditions.

Morris's concerns about society are further shown through his depiction of the women in the novel. The ideal woman in *News from Nowhere* is described by Richard as "a clever woman [who manages] a house skillfully, and [who does] it so that all the house-mates about her look pleased, and are grateful to her," (Morris 51). This addresses a huge shift in perception of women in this society because they are addressed as, being 'clever' and capable of 'manage[ing] a house skillfully' while others are 'grateful' to her for doing her division of labour. Morris takes a strong position in *News from Nowhere* to acknowledge how women were often domesticized after they were married. They were expected to do housework, take care of children, and other maternal labours around the house. However, Richard takes pleasure in demonstrating that women are capable of being clever and deserve gratification for their work, rather than being taken for granted. Women deserve acknowledgement for more than their aesthetics, and in this utopian context, it was preferable that they were acknowledged to bring more fulfilling and satisfying lifestyles.

The remarriage between Richard and Clara enables Morris to elaborate his views of sexual equity and autonomy (Boos 22). Marriage serves as an unnecessary constraint to symbolize a unity or a devotion of oneself to another person. Morris introduces sexual equity and autonomy in *News from Nowhere*, in which both men and women are allowed to bypass marriage, and replace it with unconditional affection that is fluid. This is evident when Clara left Richard for another man. In Victorian society, her action would be judged as infidelity because Clara commits adultery; however, in Morris's world, she is able to successfully reconcile with Richard without any complications or shame. There is no questioning or argument needed to depict Clara's intentions, just as long as she understands that her passion is for Richard and not for the other lover. Marriage and divorce is a small matter in *News from Nowhere* because Morris's characters do not suffer from the consequences that would typically occur under these circumstances. Love in *Nowhere* is fluid because it is considered natural for Clara to feel emotions and fleeting passions for different people.

We have seen how Morris strives to demonstrate transformations of Victorian ideals within his own visions of a greater, natural world where there is no

confinement to a social hierarchy, labour, or marriage. This ideal is similar to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as Brontë tries to position herself through Jane in an industrial and imperial world on the cusp of the vast expansion of the late British Empire. Although she does not use feminist ideals as Morris does in his envisioned utopia of *Nowhere*, Brontë examines the impacts of imperialism in terms of social relations and the identity of women.

In the beginning of the novel, Jane is trapped in a difficult social sphere under her aunt's custody. When she misbehaves, her aunt confines her to a red room where she is physically and mentally isolated, and experiences visual hallucinations of her deceased uncle, Mr. Reed. Jane's experience in the red room suggests that a restricted, confined space, despite being in one's home, can still make someone feel like an outcast. Supporting this fact, the room embodies "a sense of dreary consecration [guarding] it from frequent intrusion" (Brontë 2), making it eerie and a place no one would want to interfere with. In order to discipline Jane, Mrs. Reed uses this confinement to impose the unequal power dynamics between an adult and a child. Her hallucinations are results from this confinement and experience in the red room. These connections are ultimately drawn upon to indicate how imperialism affects and influences the everyday life in *Jane Eyre*.

However, Jane retains her power as an adult after Bertha Mason is introduced in the novel to stop the marriage between Jane and Rochester. Bertha was the estranged wife of Rochester who happens to be of Creole descent. Her position as a woman of mixed race in this time-period shows how her ethnic heritage is a result of imperialism. Bertha is essentially an 'import' and an 'outcast' in European society because she is unable, in terms of racial matters, to fit into a society where her position is equal to Jane, who evidently has a higher status because she is fully of English descent. When Bertha is revealed to Jane it is difficult for Jane to identify her as a human: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (Brontë 257-58). Bertha is described as a beast-like creature that had been locked up in the attic for a very long time. It is also difficult to seek out Bertha's individuality due to her confinement in Rochester's attic. She is essentially

Rochester's property due to their union of marriage because of the gender hierarchy and traditions during this era. This evokes the double standard because Rochester can comfortably lie to Jane and attempt to wed her, despite the fact that polygamous relationships were not supported at this time. But because both Rochester is English, he has legal and social control over her.

As a human construct, imperialism is not natural; neither are the racial divisions that came with colonization. Elaine Freedgood refers to Samuel Smile's idea in his *Self Help* of 1859 of how "You don't have to be a slave if you don't want to be one; if you think of yourself as free, you are free" (Freedgood, 49). She mentions how these individualist ideas describe the paradoxical lot of smart women in the nineteenth century who did not want to be identified or reduced to the limitations of their gender. Jane complicates this power dynamic when she complies to marriage with Rochester at the beginning of the final chapter with her statement of "Reader, I married him" (Brontë, 385). Jane shifts from her passivity to an aggressive statement of declaring to her audience that she was given a second-chance to marry him, and ultimately decided to.

The institution of marriage that Morris posits in *News from Nowhere*, by allowing women freedom to choose love, and Brontë's ideals of a liberated female individualist, by allowing Jane to have the agency to choose whether she marries Rochester or not, are powerfully similar. The decision is ultimately given to Jane to decide what to do, but a surprise ending is dealt to the readers who would have expected her to leave Rochester after his deceit. Jane's imperialistic ideals of keeping Rochester with her wherever she goes embodies how British culture strives to overpower a 'distant culture', which we can identify with Bertha Mason, as Bertha is essentially Rochester's property. Through the unification of marriage, Rochester is ultimately Jane's spouse and her property. Therefore, Jane is able to have metaphysical and sadistic control and ownership of all that Bertha represents as well. For Jane, the institution of marriage not only symbolizes liberation and love, but also control and power; whereas for the women in *News from Nowhere*, there is no sense of this sadistic shift in power dynamics because, in the end, Clara is ultimately satisfied with her relationship with Richard.

The females described in *News from Nowhere* and in *Jane Eyre* embody the roles of traditional Victorian women; however, imperialism and socialism affected the way the Victorian society viewed these women. Both women in *News*

from Nowhere and Jane Eyre ultimately obtain a sense of female individuality because they are able to marry the person they chose. Because women are recognized through these literary works, they are able to express their opinions and show that they are capable of agency. This is important to understand because News from Nowhere and Jane Eyre evidently affect and shape the development of female individualism and agency for future generations.

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