

An Analysis of St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre* from the Perspectives of Postcolonial Critique and Identity Construction

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Abstract

This study adopts the perspective of postcolonial theory to analyze the identity of St. John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, uncovering the profound impact of the intersection between colonialism and religious belief on self-recognition. The article begins by outlining the literary background of *Jane Eyre* and subsequently introduces key postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha to examine how colonial discourse shapes St. John's identity conflicts. By investigating 19th-century British society's religious culture, racial tensions, and colonial history, the paper explores his journey of self-recognition and redemption under the shadow of colonialism. Through these analyses, the study reveals how the character of St. John illustrates the profound influence of colonialism on identity construction. This research contributes a new theoretical perspective to understand the mechanisms through which colonial discourse shapes individual identities and expands the interpretative scope of this literary classic.

Keywords

Postcolonial theory, *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers, self-recognition, colonialism, religious belief.

1. Introduction

Jane Eyre, a novel by British author Charlotte Brontë, first published in 1847, merges autobiographical elements with a profound exploration of social issues. The narrative centers on Jane Eyre, a resilient orphan who navigates a life fraught with poverty, abuse, and societal constraints. Despite the challenges she faces, Jane ultimately finds happiness, asserting her independence and pursuing self-fulfillment. Renowned for its feminist undertones and incisive critique of social class, the novel occupies a pivotal place in Victorian literary history. Brontë crafts a story that transcends traditional female portrayals of the time, emphasizing women's resistance to oppression and their journey toward self-redemption within a patriarchal society. Through Jane's experiences, Brontë champions the idea that personal integrity and emotional resilience are essential for overcoming life's adversities. This exploration of identity and autonomy not only resonates with contemporary audiences but also laid the groundwork for future feminist literature.

Among the pivotal male figures in *Jane Eyre* is St. John Rivers, whose identity, religious faith, and life choices embody the contradictions and complexities of 19th-century British society. His character serves as a counterpoint to Jane, reflecting the tensions between societal expectations and personal desires. St. John, driven by a strong sense of duty, embodies the ethos of Victorian masculinity and the fervor of missionary ambition. His desire to serve in India can be interpreted through a postcolonial lens, revealing the colonial mindset that underpins his character—a conviction that he can civilize and uplift those he perceives as less fortunate. However, this ambition also masks deeper issues of control and power, raising ethical questions

about the true nature of his benevolence. The relationship between St. John and Jane highlights themes of self-recognition, with St. John attempting to impose his ideals on Jane, ultimately disregarding her individuality and needs. This dynamic invites a critical examination of colonialism, class, and the rigid social structures of the time, illustrating how Brontë artfully critiques these constructs through her nuanced characterization of St. John Rivers.

2. A Theoretical Framework for Analyzing St. John Rivers in Jane Eyre

2.1. Overview of Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory emerged and developed rapidly in the mid-20th century, reaching maturity in the late 1970s. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is considered a foundational text^[2]. In 1989, the book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin popularized the term 'post-colonial' in academia, gradually replacing earlier terms like 'Commonwealth' and 'Third World' that were used to describe the literature of former European colonies. The term 'post-colonial' originally emerged after World War II and was generally used to refer to those former colonies that had gained independence^[3]. As post-colonialism evolved, it ascended to the level of a methodology. It has facilitated systematic studies on how the colonized skillfully utilized these strategies to seek self-recognition within the tensions of oppression and resistance, actively striving for self-empowerment^[4]. Therefore, post-colonialism not only emphasizes the deconstruction of political and economic structures but also underscores cultural identity and the reshaping of language. In this process, identity becomes a critical issue in post-colonial studies. How to maintain or reconstruct personal and collective identity within a colonial context poses a significant challenge for the colonized.

2.2. Overview of Identity Theory

Identity is a key concept in Western cultural studies, particularly favored by the New Left, feminism, and post-colonialism. Its fundamental meaning refers to an identification with a specific social and cultural context. The term often explores questions such as: *Who am I? Where do I come from, and where am I going?*^[5] From Tao Jiajun's explanation, we can understand that identity construction emphasizes the subject's inquiry and affirmation of self-identity during the exploration of their past and future. Tao Jiajun identifies four types of identity: individual identity, collective identity, self-identity, and social identity. Among these, self-identity and social identity represent two contrasting focal points. Self-identity highlights an individual's focus on their physical experience and psychological perception, asking the fundamental question, *Who am I?* This question serves as the primary premise for an individual to affirm their existence. On the contrary, social identity emphasizes an individual's social attributes, focusing on the influence of external social environments and the affirmation of one's social identity. It is primarily concerned with the question, *Where am I going?* Although self-identity and social identity are distinct modes of identity, they are interconnected through a bridge of collective identity. Collective identity focuses on the question, *Where do I come from?* It includes familial, racial, national, or other group identities. These three modes of identity are dynamically interconnected, with each influencing an individual's understanding and construction of the other two forms of identity.

2.3. Identity Contains in Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory has evolved over more than four decades, with contributions from numerous scholars. This study focuses on the second generation, particularly Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, analyzing their perspectives on identity and applying these to the character of St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*. Identity in postcolonial contexts

encompasses a rich and complex array of issues, primarily referring a hybrid concept involving race, ethnicity, politics, psychology, power, and class.

Edward Said, a foundational figure in postcolonial theory, explored the construction of the 'Orient' by the 'Occident' in *Orientalism* (1978). He argued that the West constructed the East as an 'Other' through an imagined narrative that framed it as backward, marginal, and exotic^[6]. This binary oppositional framework not only reinforced Western superiority but also deepened the identity crisis of colonized peoples. In *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers embodies Said's theory. Through his missionary zeal, exhibiting typical Western-centric attitudes, leading to cultural and identity clashes with Jane Eyre. From a postcolonial perspective, St. John represents the colonial project's use of religion and cultural domination to reshape and assimilate the identities of the colonized.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, another key figure in postcolonial theory, innovatively combined postcolonial theory, deconstruction, and Marxism to redefine feminist theory. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, she introduced the concept of the 'silent woman', addressing the identity struggles of women in postcolonial contexts^[7]. Spivak argued that in colonial and postcolonial societies, women are often subjected to dual oppression: on one hand, they face subjugation as part of colonized communities, and on the other hand, their voices and rights are frequently erased by both men and colonial powers. While Western feminism has made significant strides in addressing its own injustices, it often overlooks the voices and experiences of women from the Global South. This dynamic is evident in the relationship between St. John Rivers and Jane Eyre. While Jane challenges gender and societal constraints, St. John's religious convictions and colonial mindset attempt to impose a role of self-sacrifice upon her, disregarding her independence. Spivak's theory offers a critical perspective to help us understand the struggles of Jane Eyre between religious constraints and identity formation, while also highlighting how she resists such multilayered oppression through self-recognition.

Homi K. Bhabha has explored the complex interplay of cultural identity, power, and resistance in *The Location of Culture*. He introduced the concept of 'hybridity', emphasizing the dynamic interaction and blending of colonizer and colonized cultures, resulting in the creation of new identities. Bhabha argued that colonial cultural exchange was not a one-sided domination but rather an interactive phenomenon that generated a 'third space'—a creative, unstable zone of cultural fusion and reformation^[4]. St. John's identity can be analyzed through Bhabha's lens of cultural hybridity. Although St. John epitomizes the Western colonialist with a strong sense of religious mission and cultural superiority, his interactions with Jane reveal tensions and contradictions. He attempts to mold Jane into an idealized version of femininity exposes with his own cultural identity. Bhabha's theory provides a deeper understanding of St. John's character as one caught in the crosscurrents of cultural conflict and identity transformation.

3. Characteristics of 19th- Century British Society in Jane Eyre

Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 1760s, Britain witnessed a remarkable increase in industrial productivity. By the Victorian era (1837–1914), often regarded as the pinnacle of the Industrial Revolution, the country reached its Golden Age in both economic and cultural terms^[8]. This period not only marked profound social transformations driven by industrialization but also encompassed colonial expansion, the rise of imperialism, and the pervasive influence of religion. These societal characteristics deeply influenced British literary production.

Firstly, The 19th-century British society was heavily shaped by Christianity, which influenced individual lives as well as societal norms, including family relationships and marriage. The rationalization of Christian faith and its moral doctrines shaped behavioral standards. In *Jane Eyre*, the character of St. John Rivers exemplifies the profound impact of religious culture. As a

clergyman, St. John embodies loyalty to God and a strong sense of religious duty, which extends to his proposal of marriage to Jane Eyre. His proposition is rooted in religious obligation rather than personal affection. St. John's view of marriage as an extension of his ecclesiastical responsibilities highlights the Victorian era's rigid expectations surrounding religion and morality.

Secondly, The 19th century also witnessed increasing tensions between the working class and the bourgeoisie, which were often depicted in literature. For example, Jane Eyre, became an orphan at an early age, represented an individual marginalized by class and gender. Her struggles for education reflect the broader realities of the working class and impoverished communities during the early stages of industrialization. The harsh conditions at Lowood School, marked by poverty, hunger, and austere management, serve as a microcosm of the struggles faced by the working class in industrial Britain. These depictions underscore the systemic oppression of the laboring poor, including children, whose rights were frequently neglected during this period.

Thirdly, Britain's colonial expansion brought the forefront contradiction of race and cultural conflict, providing a critical lens for understanding 19th-century literature. In Jane Eyre, while the plot mainly focuses on Jane and Rochester's romantic relationship, his 'foreign' wife named Bertha Mason, also play an essential role to encapsulate themes of colonial history and racial ideologies. Bertha, a white woman from Jamaica, symbolizes the cultural conflicts and racial tensions inherent in the colonial enterprise. Her portrayal as an exotic, mad, and savage figure reflects the era's stereotypical perceptions of colonial subjects. Bertha's 'wildness' and mental illness serve to underscore her irrationality and 'otherness', contrasting sharply with Jane Eyre's English native identity. In this context, Bertha represents not merely a spousal character but a manifestation of the racial and cultural dichotomies between the imperial center and its colonies.

Last but not least, the 19th century's literary works often mirrored the societal expectations and limitations imposed on women. Marriage was perceived as the defining milestone in a woman's life, overshadowing pursuits such as education, career, or personal autonomy. As a result, female characters were frequently relegated to roles that supported male protagonists or embodied traditional feminine virtues, rather than serving as complex and independent figures^[9]. In Jane Eyre, Jane and Rochester's initial relationship reflects significant gender inequalities. Rochester as an upper-class male holds power, wealth, and social status, while Jane as a female orphan lacks financial independence and social standing. However, Jane's independence and self-recognition emerge prominently. Through education and employment, she secures financial autonomy and asserts her self-worth, ultimately demanding equality in her relationship with Rochester. This portrayal of an independent female protagonist significantly contributes to the novel's enduring relevance and prominence in Victorian literature.

4. Analysis of St. John Rivers

4.1. St. John Rivers' Religious Beliefs

As Jane Eyre's cousin, St. John Rivers is strikingly characterized by his handsome appearance, with blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and classical Grecian features that convey an air of nobility and distinction. He embodies a strong sense of morality, mission, and dedication, yet his excessive emphasis on duty renders him a stern and unyielding figure. St. John first makes his entrance on page 416 of the novel, presenting himself as a composed and disciplined individual whose emotions toward Jane are notably complex and profound. As an idealist, he is consumed by an almost pathological obsession with achieving higher spiritual and moral perfection. This is illustrated in his relentless pursuit of good works: as noted, "No weather seemed to hinder

him from undertaking these pastoral excursions” (Shanghai Translation Edition, 423), reflecting his commitment to duty over personal comfort or sentiment. St. John consistently prioritizes his mission above his emotions, demonstrating an unwavering focus on his spiritual ambitions. At his core, however, he embodies a paradoxical understanding of human nature; he is capable of compartmentalizing his feelings, demonstrating a chilling ability to detach himself from the emotional weight of other people’s lives. His self-sacrifice manifests in ways that verge on ruthless, as described in *Jane Eyre* (Shanghai Translation Edition, 451): “he seemed able to detach humanity from himself and perform acts of ruthless self-abnegation.” This profound complexity highlights his internal conflict between idealism and personal emotion, vividly portraying the tension between his lofty spiritual aspirations and the natural human desires that he consciously represses. St. John’s character exposes the intricate entanglements of religious faith and individual feelings, revealing the dangers of extreme idealism that can lead to a disconnection from the humanity of oneself and others. This interplay not only complicates his character but also serves as a critique of a rigid moralism that can render true compassion and love secondary to duty, casting a shadow on the very faith he seeks to uphold.

4.2. St. John’s Colonial Mindset: A Desire for Power and Control

St. John Rivers’ proposal to Jane is fundamentally devoid of romantic love; rather, it is driven by his need for a suitable assistant in his missionary endeavors. As a representation of male authority, St. John embodies the patriarchal expectations of the time, anticipating that Jane should conform to his rigid vision for their partnership, serving as an ideal companion rather than embracing her independence and personal aspirations. When Jane courageously asserts, “I freely consent to go with you as your fellow missionary, but not as your wife. I cannot marry you and become part of you,” St. John’s response underscores his steadfast commitment to traditional gender roles: “You must become part of me. Otherwise, the whole thing is at an end” (Shanghai Translation Edition, 493). His insistence reveals the entrenched patriarchal mindset prevalent in Victorian society, in which women were often viewed as extensions of men, primarily defined by their relationships to male figures and their roles in fulfilling male ambitions. St. John’s use of marriage as a mechanism to secure Jane’s submission highlights his restrictive and reductive view of female identity, positioning her not as an equal partner but as a subordinate figure expected to conform to his directives and ambitions. This dynamic reflects not only personal desires but also the broader societal structure that enforces male dominance over women. The relationship between St. John and Jane transcends their individual emotional entanglements, symbolizing the larger societal structure and the oppressive gender power dynamics of the era. Through this complex and fraught relationship, Charlotte Brontë illuminates the broader interplay of gender and power, revealing the limitations placed on women and the societal expectations that confine them to roles that suppress their autonomy. St. John’s character ultimately serves as a critique of a patriarchal system that values control and conformity over genuine partnership and emotional connection, highlighting the struggle for female empowerment and self-determination.

4.3. St. John’s Moral Dilemma: Self-Sacrifice

St. John Rivers’ moral struggles are profoundly rooted in the conflict between his idealized notions of self-sacrifice and the often messy realities of human emotion. His extreme self-discipline, coupled with an unwavering dedication to his religious duties, compels him to suppress personal feelings, even at the significant expense of his own happiness and emotional well-being. St. John is relentless in his pursuit of moral aspiration through self-denial, as epitomized in his declaration: “I resolved to become a missionary; from that hour my spirit was set free, leaving only the frantic sorrow of torment” (Shanghai Translation Edition, 437). This pursuit of an unwavering moral idealism, however, ultimately alienates him from the fundamental human connections and personal fulfillment that are vital to a well-rounded

existence. While he may appear outwardly virtuous and deeply devoted to his mission, St. John is inwardly consumed by a pervasive sense of loneliness and emotional repression, navigating a path that is devoid of genuine warmth or intimacy. His rigid adherence to duty prevents him from forming meaningful bonds with others, resulting in a profound isolation that is palpable throughout the narrative. This detachment is starkly illustrated in his response to Jane's inquiry about Miss Oliver, as he callously disregards her feelings: "And Miss Oliver? You care nothing for her disappointment and sorrow?" (Shanghai Translation Edition, 451). His indifferent reaction not only highlights his emotional coldness but also reveals a self-centered obsession with his lofty ideals that overshadows the more humane aspects of empathy and connection. By prioritizing his mission above all else, including the emotional needs of those around him, St. John embodies the dangers of an extreme moral absolutism that sacrifices individual relationships and emotional authenticity for the sake of duty. This internal conflict underscores the tragic consequences of a life led by rigid ideals, positioning St. John as a figure who, while striving for a noble purpose, ultimately becomes a tragic emblem of the very loneliness and isolation he seeks to overcome.

4.4. St. John's Cultural Reflection: Social Values and Identity

As a central figure in the novel, St. John is carefully crafted with a rich personal background. He belongs to the Rivers family, ^[11]'had been gentry since Henry VIII's time, as anyone could see by looking at the register in the vestry of Morton Church' (Shanghai Translation Edition, 414). This lineage indicates his origins as a landed gentry within the ruling hierarchy but vulnerable to the loss of social influence. The decline of St. John's aristocratic status is primarily reflected in the family's financial losses and diminishing land ownership: 'Their father had lost a great deal of money years ago through the bankruptcy of someone they trusted' (Shanghai Translation Edition, 414).

Although St. John does not dwell on his family's past wealth, he emphasizes his territorial heritage, suggesting his lingering attachment to the status he feels he has lost. As he narrates, 'I am of humble origin. Rivers is an ancient name; but of the three last descendants of the house, two earned their bread as subordinates, and the third is destined to expatriate himself, not only for a lifetime but for his whole existence' (Shanghai Translation Edition, 426). This statement underscores St. John's duality: he asserts his noble lineage while simultaneously rejecting the diminished social position brought about by his family's decline.

His decision to leave his homeland, particularly for the colonies (India), reflects his attempt to escape the pain of his family's downfall and reclaim a sense of identity. The colonial context of the British Empire provides St. John with an avenue to redefine his status and purpose. For St. John, the colonies symbolize a fresh start and an opportunity to regain dignity. Within the traditional British social hierarchy, there is no room for a declining gentry like St. John. Therefore, colonies become to achieve self-fulfillment and rediscover his identity. His departure is not just a physical act but a symbolic journey of escape from the loss of identity and a quest for renewal.

5. Conclusion

Through a postcolonial analysis of St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*, this study illuminates the intricate interplay between identity theory and the religious, colonial, and gendered frameworks that characterized 19th-century British society. St. John serves as a compelling representation of how contemporary societal influences shape individual identity, revealing the complexities of power dynamics, control, and cultural identity that are central to postcolonial discourse. His character embodies the contradictions of a society grappling with its imperial ambitions while simultaneously enforcing rigid gender roles, showcasing how these intersecting forces impact personal identity and self-perception. By engaging with these

themes, this research offers a novel lens through which to understand St. John Rivers' character, providing profound insights into the ways colonialism informs identity construction and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals caught between personal aspirations and societal expectations. Identity formation is inherently a dynamic process, shaped not only by historical and cultural contexts but also by religious beliefs and social structures that dictate norms and values. St. John's unwavering commitment to his missionary work exemplifies the struggle to reconcile individual desires with the overarching demands of duty and societal approval. In today's era of globalization and cultural diversity, it is increasingly essential to consider how individuals navigate and construct their identities within an ever-changing world. The exploration of St. John's character highlights the ongoing relevance of these issues, prompting contemporary readers to reflect on how the legacies of colonialism and patriarchal structures continue to influence identity formation and personal agency in modern society. By examining St. John Rivers through a postcolonial lens, we gain a deeper understanding of the enduring complexities of identity and the multifaceted ways in which individuals strive to assert their autonomy amidst prevailing cultural narratives.

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