

Rasselas in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre

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Rasselas in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre There are many instances in Jane Eyre where Charlotte Bronte uses or alludes to other literary works. One work in particular, Samuel Johnson's fable, Rasselas, has important implications for the novel. Rasselas is the book Helen Burns is reading when Jane first encounters her at Lowood. Bronte did not choose this work at random. She was familiar with Johnson's works, and she relied on the contemporary Victorian reader's knowledge of it, as she clearly states the title rather than just alluding to it. A knowledge of Johnson's famous work is especially important in understanding the relationship between Helen and Jane. Many aspects from Rasselas come out through Helen in the novel. Themes in Rasselas are evident throughout Bronte's novel, and understanding these similarities gives insight into aspects of the novel, especially in regards to such things as Jane's quest for permanent happiness. Charlotte Bronte was known to have read Johnson's works. In 1834, in a letter to Ellen Nussey, a long time friend of hers, Bronte wrote: "You ask me to recommend some books for your perusal...For Biography, read Johnson's lives of the Poets, Boswell's life of Johnson..." (Bronte, Letters 1:129-132). In another letter, this time to a man she met on a trip to London, William S. Williams, Bronte wrote in 1849: "Johnson--I think--makes mournful mention somewhere of the pleasure that accrues...when we are 'solitary, and cannot impart it'" (Bronte, Letters, 2:228). While there is no evidence of Charlotte Bronte

having read Johnson's *Rasselas*, clearly she was familiar with his works. Relying on her own knowledge of Samuel Johnson's works, as well as the knowledge of her Victorian readers, Bronte uses middle of paper in the novel. Bronte was able to use a work of art that obviously influenced her as an influence in the reading of her novel *Jane Eyre*. While little is known on Bronte's own views of *Rasselas*, it is obvious that the usage of it in the novel serves a purpose of showing how each person has decide for themselves what makes them happy. Works Cited Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1848 . Ed. Beth Newman. Boston: St. Martin's, 1996. Bronte, Charlotte. *The Letters of Charlotte Bronte: 1829-1847*. Ed. Margaret Smith. 2 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 1995-2000. Gilbert, Sarah M. "Plain Jane's Progress." *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Beth Newman. Boston: St. Martin's, 1996. 475-501. Johnson, Samuel. *The History of Rasselas Prince of Abyssinia*. 1759. Ed. Gwin J. Kolb. Chicago: AHM Publishing, 1962. Moglen, Helene. *Charlotte Bronte: The Self Conceived*. New York: Norton 1978.

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