

The Individual against the Social Order: Development and Resistance in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) present protagonists whose processes of development are shaped by their encounters with restrictive social structures. Although separated by historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, both novels examine the tension between individual identity and the demands of the social order. This paper explores how Jane Eyre and Scout Finch negotiate, question, and resist the social conventions that seek to regulate their identities and choices. Drawing upon the conceptual framework of the Bildungsroman, the study approaches development not merely as physical or psychological maturation but as the gradual formation of an independent consciousness through conflict with social expectations. Jane's experiences of orphanhood, class hierarchy, patriarchal authority, religious discipline, and prescribed gender roles compel her to assert her dignity, autonomy, and moral principles. Similarly, Scout's experiences within the racially and socially divided community of Maycomb expose her to entrenched assumptions concerning race, gender, class, and social conformity. Through their developing perceptions, both protagonists learn to distinguish individual conscience from collective prejudice. The paper argues that resistance is not simply an external response to social oppression but an essential component of the protagonists' self-formation. Brontë and Lee therefore complicate the conventional understanding of individual development by presenting maturity as the ability to negotiate social belonging without surrendering personal moral judgment. Through a comparative textual analysis of the two novels, this study demonstrates that both narratives transform the traditional developmental trajectory into a process of ethical and social awakening.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Individualism, Social Order, Resistance, Self-Formation, Moral Consciousness, Social Conformity.

Introduction

The relationship between the individual and society constitutes one of the most persistent concerns of the modern novel. Literary narratives frequently place individual characters within social structures that attempt to determine their identities, regulate their conduct, and establish the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. The conflict becomes particularly significant in narratives of development, where the protagonist's movement toward maturity is simultaneously a process of discovering the self and

discovering the social world. The individual does not develop in isolation; rather, identity is formed through encounters with family, education, class, gender, religion, community, law, and other systems of authority. Consequently, the process of becoming an autonomous individual often involves a difficult negotiation between conformity and resistance. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* offer two particularly productive examples of this conflict. Published more than a century apart, the novels belong to markedly different historical and cultural contexts. Brontë's novel appeared in Victorian England in 1847, while Lee's was published in the United States in 1960 and is situated within the racially segregated American South of the 1930s. Nevertheless, both novels construct young protagonists whose developing consciousness brings them into contact with social structures that are unjust, restrictive, or morally compromised. *Jane Eyre* traces Jane's movement from an abused and dependent orphan to an economically and morally independent woman. *To Kill a Mockingbird* follows Scout Finch as she moves from a relatively innocent childhood understanding of Maycomb to a more complicated recognition of racial injustice, class prejudice, social hypocrisy, and moral courage. Both novels can be associated with the Bildungsroman tradition because their narratives are concerned with the formation of the individual. Project Gutenberg classifies *Jane Eyre* among Bildungsromane, while recent scholarship has also explicitly examined *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a Bildungsroman and emphasized the relationship between Scout's development and changes within her community. Yet the present study does not attempt simply to establish that either novel belongs to the genre. Such an approach would reduce the complexity of the two texts to a list of conventional generic characteristics. Instead, this paper uses the developmental dimension of the Bildungsroman as a point of departure for examining a more specific question: How does resistance to the social order contribute to the formation of the individual?

This question is especially important because neither Jane nor Scout develops simply by acquiring age or experience. Their development occurs when experience forces them to question the values imposed upon them. Jane learns that obedience without moral judgment can become a form of oppression. Scout learns that social consensus does not necessarily correspond to justice. Both protagonists therefore move from an initial dependence upon social structures toward a more independent understanding of right and wrong. The difference between the two novels is equally important. Jane's resistance is frequently personal, direct, and explicitly articulated. She confronts patriarchal authority, class hierarchy, religious absolutism, and emotional dependence. Scout's resistance is initially more implicit. Her questions, observations, and refusal to accept racial and gender conventions gradually develop into a moral consciousness. In Jane's case, resistance becomes a means of securing personal autonomy; in Scout's case, it becomes a means of understanding the moral contradictions of her community. The central argument of this paper is that both Brontë and Lee present development as a process in which the individual must negotiate the pressure of social conformity while preserving an independent moral consciousness. Resistance, therefore, is not merely opposition for its own sake. It is a developmental mechanism. Jane becomes herself by refusing to surrender her dignity, while Scout develops by learning that belonging to a community does not require accepting all of its beliefs. The two novels consequently complicate the traditional developmental narrative by showing that maturity may require not accommodation to society but critical engagement with it.

Theoretical Framework: Bildungsroman, Individuality, and Resistance

The Bildungsroman traditionally focuses on the development or formation of an individual personality

through a series of experiences, conflicts, relationships, and encounters with society. The protagonist generally begins in a condition of incompleteness and gradually acquires greater self-awareness. Yet development in such narratives is rarely entirely private. The protagonist's formation takes place within a social environment and is therefore affected by institutions and cultural expectations. This social dimension is crucial to a reading of *Jane Eyre* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both protagonists encounter a world that already possesses rules about who they are supposed to be. Jane is poor, female, orphaned, and socially dependent. Scout is a girl growing up within a Southern community governed by racial hierarchy, class divisions, gender expectations, and inherited traditions. Neither begins with complete freedom to define herself. Their development consequently involves learning how these social structures operate and deciding how far they should be accepted. The present paper understands *Bildung* not merely as education but as the formation of an autonomous self. Such formation may include accommodation to society, but it may also involve resistance. A mature individual is not necessarily one who fits comfortably into an existing social order. Maturity can instead involve the ability to recognize the limitations of that order and to act according to one's own moral judgment.

Resistance, therefore, should not be treated as the opposite of development. In these novels, resistance is part of development. Jane's refusal to remain at Thornfield after discovering Rochester's existing marriage represents an important moment of self-definition. Similarly, Scout's growing rejection of Maycomb's racial assumptions demonstrates the emergence of independent judgment. Both protagonists learn that social approval cannot be the sole measure of ethical behaviour. This approach also allows the paper to move beyond a purely individualistic understanding of the *Bildungsroman*. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, Scout's development is connected to the social transformation of Maycomb. Recent scholarship has argued that the novel's developmental movement involves not only Scout but also a community experiencing tension between inherited values and the possibility of change. The novel therefore expands the developmental narrative from the individual toward society itself. Likewise, *Jane Eyre* does not present Jane's selfhood as completely detached from social relationships. Jane ultimately desires love, family, and belonging. Her objective is not permanent isolation but an ethical form of relationship in which she does not have to sacrifice her autonomy. Her final development is therefore based on negotiation rather than absolute rejection of society.

Jane Eyre: Childhood and the Discovery of Resistance

Jane's resistance begins in childhood. At Gateshead, she occupies an ambiguous position within the Reed household. She is physically present within the family but is denied genuine familial belonging. Mrs. Reed regards her as an unwanted dependent, while John Reed uses his social and familial authority to humiliate and punish her.

The famous red-room episode is crucial because it transforms Jane's sense of herself. The room becomes a physical representation of the social position imposed upon her: isolated, controlled, and denied agency. Yet Jane does not simply internalize the judgment of her oppressors. Her anger becomes an early indication that she possesses an independent sense of justice. Her confrontation with Mrs. Reed before leaving Gateshead is particularly significant. Jane's declaration that Mrs. Reed is "not my mother" is not merely an emotional rejection; it is a symbolic refusal of an imposed identity. Mrs. Reed has the authority to define Jane socially, but Jane increasingly insists on defining herself. This moment anticipates the central pattern of Jane's development. Whenever an institution or individual attempts to reduce her to a subordinate position, she experiences an internal conflict between obedience and self-

respect. Her development therefore depends upon her ability to distinguish legitimate authority from unjust domination. Lowood introduces a different form of social control. The institution claims to educate and discipline orphaned girls, but Mr. Brocklehurst uses religion to justify deprivation and humiliation. Jane's education thus becomes paradoxical. The institution intends to produce obedient subjects, yet the experiences Jane undergoes contribute to the formation of her independent moral consciousness. Helen Burns provides an important counterpoint. Helen's patience and Christian endurance influence Jane, but Jane does not completely adopt Helen's philosophy of passive acceptance. Instead, she gradually develops a more active understanding of justice. Her moral identity emerges through a dialogue between restraint and resistance. The Lowood period therefore illustrates an important feature of developmental fiction: education does not simply transmit values. The learner evaluates those values. Jane receives instruction from teachers, but her character develops through her own interpretation of experience.

Jane Eyre and the Rejection of Social Inferiority

Jane's arrival at Thornfield introduces another major dimension of social hierarchy: class. As a governess, Jane occupies an unstable position between servant and gentlewoman. She is educated and intellectually capable, yet she lacks wealth and aristocratic status. Her relationship with Rochester challenges this hierarchy. Rochester possesses wealth, property, gender privilege, and social authority, while Jane has little conventional power. Nevertheless, Brontë constructs their intellectual relationship in terms of equality. Jane's assertion during the proposal scene is central to the novel's politics of individuality:

“I have as much soul as you—and full as much heart!” (Brontë, ch. 23).

Jane rejects the assumption that economic or social inequality implies human inequality. Her statement is therefore both personal and ideological. She does not deny the existence of class difference; she denies its moral legitimacy as a measure of human worth. The next stage of her declaration is even more significant:

“I am a free human being with an independent will” (Brontë, ch. 23).

This statement can be read as a concise formulation of the novel's conception of individual development. Jane has moved from being a child defined by others to an adult capable of defining herself. Her “independent will” is not simply freedom from physical restraint. It is the capacity to make moral decisions according to an internally developed sense of right and wrong. Her decision to leave Thornfield after discovering Rochester's existing marriage demonstrates the practical consequences of this principle. Jane loves Rochester, but love cannot completely determine her ethical choices. She refuses to remain in a relationship that violates her principles, even though leaving means poverty, uncertainty, and emotional suffering. The decision is therefore developmental in the deepest sense. Jane has reached a stage at which external rewards cannot override internal conviction. She does not resist Rochester because she lacks emotional attachment; she resists precisely because she recognizes that genuine love cannot require the destruction of self-respect. Jane's resistance also distinguishes independence from selfishness. After receiving her inheritance, she shares her wealth with Diana, Mary, and St. John. Her autonomy therefore does not result in rejection of human relationships. Instead, financial independence enables her to enter relationships on more equal terms. This is why Jane's eventual return to Rochester does not simply negate her earlier resistance. She returns after the circumstances of their relationship have changed. Rochester has lost his former social and physical

dominance, while Jane possesses economic independence. The relationship can consequently be reconstructed on a more reciprocal basis.

Gender and Patriarchal Social Order in Jane Eyre

Gender constitutes another major dimension of Jane's conflict with social order. Victorian society prescribed particular forms of femininity based on obedience, modesty, domesticity, and dependence. Jane repeatedly encounters expectations that women should suppress ambition and desire. Her famous refusal to accept a limited conception of female life occurs when she questions the assumption that women should remain passive and intellectually confined. She observes that women “feel just as men feel” and that they require opportunities for activity and intellectual engagement (Brontë, ch. 12).

This observation is important because Jane's rebellion is not limited to marriage or romantic relationships. She resists an entire system of expectations about what women should desire. She wants intellectual stimulation, meaningful work, emotional fulfillment, and moral independence. Yet Brontë does not construct Jane as someone who simply rejects society altogether. Jane wants belonging, love, and family. Her resistance is therefore selective. She rejects the forms of society that deny her humanity but accepts relationships when they can coexist with dignity. This distinction is essential to understanding the novel's developmental structure. Jane does not become mature by becoming completely isolated from society. She becomes mature by learning which social relationships can sustain her identity and which require its surrender.

Scout Finch: Childhood and the Discovery of Social Contradiction

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* approaches the individual–society conflict differently. Scout Finch begins as a child who has not yet fully internalized the social conventions of Maycomb. Her childhood innocence enables her to ask questions that adults have learned not to ask. Maycomb initially appears to Scout as a relatively coherent community. Yet her experiences gradually reveal that its social order is structured by distinctions involving race, class, gender, family history, and reputation. The Tom Robinson trial is the central event through which Scout's consciousness develops. Before the trial, she understands prejudice largely as a collection of confusing social attitudes. During and after the trial, she begins to understand that prejudice is institutionalized within the legal and social systems of her community. This process distinguishes Scout's development from Jane's. Jane directly experiences social exclusion; Scout increasingly learns to recognize the exclusion experienced by others. Her development is therefore strongly connected to perspective. Atticus teaches Scout:

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view” (Lee, ch. 3).

The lesson becomes increasingly important as Scout encounters people whom Maycomb has categorized as inferior, dangerous, or strange. The ability to imagine another person's perspective becomes a form of resistance because it challenges the simplistic categories through which the community organizes social life. Scout gradually learns that social labels conceal individual complexity. Boo Radley, for instance, is initially represented through neighborhood stories as a frightening and almost monstrous figure. Scout eventually discovers that Boo is a vulnerable human being rather than the frightening “Other” imagined by the community. Similarly, Tom Robinson's trial demonstrates the destructive consequences of reducing an individual to a racial category. Scout witnesses a legal process in which evidence and humanity are overshadowed by racial assumptions.

Scout and the Resistance to Racial Conformity

Unlike Jane, Scout does not formulate a systematic political critique of her society. Her resistance emerges through questioning. This is significant because children frequently expose the irrationality of social conventions precisely because they have not yet learned to accept those conventions as natural. Scout's confusion about racial prejudice gradually becomes critical awareness. She cannot initially understand why people who behave unjustly nevertheless consider themselves respectable. The trial forces her to confront the contradiction between Maycomb's self-image and its actual behaviour. Atticus's decision to defend Tom Robinson also provides Scout with an example of individual resistance. He knows that the majority of Maycomb will oppose him, yet he accepts the responsibility because he considers the case morally necessary. His ethical position is summarized in his statement:

“The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience” (Lee, ch. 11).

This principle is central to the relationship between individual and social order in the novel. Majority opinion possesses social power, but it does not automatically possess moral authority. Scout gradually internalizes this distinction. She learns that being part of a community does not mean accepting everything that community believes. The developmental significance of the trial lies precisely here. Scout does not merely learn that racism exists. She learns that social institutions can reproduce injustice and that moral judgment may require opposition to the majority.

Gender Expectations and Scout's Developing Individuality

Scout's conflict with Maycomb's social order is not limited to race. Gender expectations also attempt to determine who she should become. Aunt Alexandra repeatedly encourages Scout to behave according to conventional ideas of femininity. Scout's preference for overalls, physical activity, and freedom conflicts with expectations concerning how a Southern girl should dress and behave. At first, Scout resists these expectations instinctively. Later, she becomes more capable of understanding the social forces behind them. Her development therefore involves negotiating gender identity without completely surrendering individuality. This creates an interesting parallel with Jane. Jane explicitly articulates the intellectual and emotional equality of women, whereas Scout initially expresses her resistance through behaviour and refusal to conform. Jane responds through conscious assertions of equality and autonomy. Scout responds through questioning, observation, and gradual social awareness.

Individual Conscience versus Collective Opinion

One of the most significant similarities between the novels is their distinction between morality and social approval. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane repeatedly discovers that what society permits is not necessarily what she considers right. Rochester's social position does not make his proposed arrangement with Jane morally acceptable. St. John's religious authority does not give him the right to determine Jane's emotional life. Brocklehurst's institutional authority does not make his treatment of Lowood's girls just. Jane's moral development consequently involves learning to distinguish authority from legitimacy. The same distinction operates in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The majority of Maycomb considers racial segregation and prejudice normal, but Scout learns that normality does not equal justice. The difference is that Jane is primarily concerned with the preservation of personal dignity, whereas Scout increasingly becomes concerned with the dignity of others. Jane's resistance begins from the question, “What must I refuse in order to remain myself?” Scout's development increasingly asks, “How should I understand people whom my community teaches me to fear or despise?”

Resistance as a Form of Self-Formation

The most significant connection between the two novels is that resistance does not interrupt development; it produces development. Jane would not become the person she becomes without resisting the Reed household, Brocklehurst, Rochester's attempted control, and St. John's pressure. Each confrontation requires her to identify what she values. Similarly, Scout would not develop the same moral consciousness without encountering Maycomb's racial prejudice, gender expectations, class hierarchy, and social hypocrisy. Resistance creates moments of decision. These moments force the protagonist to choose between external expectations and internal judgment. This is where the Bildungsroman framework becomes particularly useful. Traditional developmental narratives often present the protagonist as moving from immaturity toward greater self-understanding. In Brontë and Lee, however, self-understanding is inseparable from conflict with the surrounding social world. The difference is important. Jane's development is more strongly centered on personal autonomy, while Scout's is more strongly centered on social perception. Yet both processes involve moving beyond inherited definitions of reality.

Resistance and Belonging

An important feature of both novels is that resistance does not ultimately lead to permanent separation from society. Jane's story ends not in isolation but in a form of domestic and emotional belonging. Her return to Rochester occurs after she has achieved economic independence and after the power relationship between them has changed. Her development therefore enables a more equal form of relationship. Scout similarly does not reject Maycomb completely. She remains connected to her family and community, but she now sees it differently. This distinction is crucial. The novels do not simply celebrate the rebellious individual who escapes society. Instead, they explore whether society can become a space of belonging without requiring the destruction of individuality. Jane's final position suggests that belonging becomes meaningful when it is freely chosen. Scout's development suggests that belonging becomes ethically meaningful when it is accompanied by critical awareness. The mature individual, therefore, is neither completely assimilated nor completely isolated. The mature individual is capable of belonging without surrendering judgment.

Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* present two historically distinct but conceptually related narratives of individual development. Both novels place young protagonists within social orders that attempt to regulate identity through class, gender, religion, race, family reputation, and communal expectations. The protagonists' journeys demonstrate that development is not simply a movement toward social conformity. Instead, it involves learning to evaluate the values of society and determining which of those values can be accepted, challenged, or rejected. Jane Eyre's development is fundamentally a struggle for self-definition. As an orphan, governess, woman, and economically dependent individual, she repeatedly encounters structures that seek to establish her inferiority. Her resistance to these structures enables her to develop an independent moral identity. Her assertion that she possesses an "independent will" summarizes the culmination of a developmental process in which selfhood becomes inseparable from autonomy. Scout Finch's development takes a different form. She begins with the openness of childhood and gradually encounters the racial, class, and gender divisions embedded within Maycomb. Her development is not primarily a struggle to escape

society but a struggle to understand it. Through the Tom Robinson trial, her relationship with Atticus, her encounters with Boo Radley, and her observation of Maycomb's social conventions, Scout learns that social consensus cannot automatically be equated with moral truth.

The comparison consequently reveals two dimensions of resistance. Jane resists the social forces that threaten to subordinate her individual identity; Scout learns to resist the prejudices of a community by developing an independent moral perspective. Jane's journey emphasizes self-respect and autonomy, while Scout's emphasizes empathy and social consciousness. Yet both forms of development depend upon the individual's capacity to question inherited values. The individual against the social order is therefore not simply an image of rebellion. It is a representation of the difficult process by which a person learns to distinguish social expectation from moral responsibility, conformity from belonging, and authority from justice. Through Jane and Scout, Brontë and Lee demonstrate that genuine development requires not merely learning how to live within society but also learning when, why, and how to resist it. In this sense, resistance is not the opposite of Bildung; it is one of its most important conditions.

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