

What Selfies and Jane Eyre Have in Common

What do *Jane Eyre* and selfies have in common? One is a timeless work of literature from well before cameras were in common usage. The other is a much derided, and much practiced, modern form of narcissism.

And yet, a recent article in [The Atlantic](#) by Karen Swallow Prior connects the selfie to Charlotte Brontë's beloved novel:

"But before the [selfie](#) came 'the self,' or the fairly modern concept of the independent 'individual'... Perhaps the first novel to best express the modern idea of the self was Jane Eyre, written in 1847 by Charlotte Brontë, born 200 years ago this year."

Prior attributes the historical beginnings of the conception of "self" to the Protestant Reformation—its emphasis on personal will, conscience, and understanding rather than tradition and authority—long before Brontë's time. However, the authentic presentation of Jane's self in her own voice catapulted the notion into the consciousness of Brontë's contemporaries in a way no preceding work had done:

"It was the narrative voice of Jane—who so openly expressed her desire for identity, definition, meaning, and agency—that rang powerfully true to its 19th-century audience... It is exactly this willingness [of Jane's]—desire, even—to be 'at war with the accepted order of things' that characterizes the modern self. While we now take such a sense for granted, it was, as Brontë's contemporaries rightly understood, radical in her day."

Prior appears to contend that the "mold for the self" created

by Bronte's fiercely individual character of Jane is the genesis of our current celebration of self, of which one manifestation is our love of selfies.

The connection made in the piece between Jane Eyre and selfies is tenuous, but entertaining. Still, the fact that Bronte's work was so influential as to trouble critics of the time for causing an "alarming revolution" is an important and fascinating reminder of the far-reaching impacts of literature on culture.

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