



FROM JANE EYRE TO THE VANISHING HALF: REIMAGINING IDENTITY, RACE, AND FEMALE SELFHOOD IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE AND BRIT BENNETT

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Abstract

The representation of female identity in literature has undergone significant transformation as writers have responded to changing social, racial, economic, and cultural conditions. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020), though separated by more than a century and shaped by very different historical contexts, offer compelling explorations of women attempting to define themselves within restrictive social structures. Brontë constructs Jane Eyre as a woman whose struggle for selfhood develops through resistance to class hierarchy, patriarchal authority, emotional dependence, and gender expectations. Bennett extends the problem of identity into the complicated territory of race, colourism, passing, motherhood, sexuality, and inherited identity through the experiences of the Vignes sisters and subsequent generations. This paper comparatively examines how the two novels imagine female selfhood as a process of negotiation between individual desire and socially imposed categories. It argues that while Jane's struggle is predominantly structured around gender, class, morality, and economic independence, Bennett demonstrates that contemporary female identity cannot be adequately understood without considering the intersections of gender and race. The movement from *Jane Eyre* to *The Vanishing Half* therefore reveals both continuity and transformation in literary representations of women's search for autonomy, recognition, belonging, and authentic self-definition.

Keywords

Female Selfhood, Identity, Race, Gender, Passing, Intersectionality, Charlotte Bronte, Brit Bennett, Jane Eyre, The Vanishing Half, etc.

Introduction:

Questions of identity and selfhood have occupied a central position in women's writing because women have historically been required to negotiate identities shaped by social institutions that frequently restrict their freedom of self-definition. Literature provides an important space in which these restrictions can be questioned and alternative forms of female existence imagined. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* are particularly valuable for such a comparative inquiry. Although the novels belong to radically different historical moments, both are concerned with women who confront the identities society has assigned to them and attempt to determine who they will become.

Published in 1847, *Jane Eyre* emerged from a Victorian culture in which gender and class profoundly influenced women's social possibilities. Jane begins life as an orphan without wealth, social status, or conventional beauty. Her marginality makes her dependent upon institutions and individuals who repeatedly attempt to define her worth. Nevertheless, her development is characterised by a persistent assertion of moral and emotional equality. Her journey from Gateshead through Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, and finally Ferndean may therefore be interpreted as a gradual construction of autonomous female identity.

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, published in 2020, examines identity through a substantially more complex racial and historical framework. The novel follows identical twin



sisters Desiree and Stella Vignes, born in the fictional Louisiana town of Mallard, a Black community that privileges light skin. Their lives diverge dramatically when Stella begins passing as white while Desiree eventually returns to Mallard with her dark-skinned daughter, Jude. Bennett subsequently expands the narrative through Jude and Stella's daughter Kennedy, demonstrating that racial identity affects not merely social opportunity but family relationships, memory, embodiment, and psychological belonging.

A comparative reading of these novels consequently demonstrates an important historical development in representations of female selfhood. Brontë asks whether a socially and economically marginal woman can maintain an independent moral identity within patriarchy, whereas Bennett asks what happens when identity itself becomes unstable because race may be concealed, performed, rejected, or reconstructed. Both novels ultimately suggest that female selfhood is neither automatically inherited nor passively received; it is created through difficult negotiations between the self and the social world.

Female Selfhood and Resistance in *Jane Eyre*:

Jane Eyre's earliest experiences establish the relationship between marginality and self-consciousness. At Gateshead, she is constantly reminded that she does not properly belong to the Reed family. Her economic dependence becomes a justification for humiliation, particularly at the hands of John Reed. Yet Jane refuses to internalise completely the inferiority attributed to her. Her confrontation with Mrs. Reed becomes an early declaration of psychological independence. She tells her aunt that she is "deceitful" and refuses to continue pretending affection for a woman who has mistreated her (Brontë 39). The episode is important because Jane acquires selfhood initially through speech. She cannot control her economic circumstances, but she can reject the identity of the submissive dependent.

At Lowood, Jane encounters another institutional form of authority. Mr. Brocklehurst attempts to discipline girls through deprivation and religious intimidation. Jane's experience there teaches her endurance, but it does not destroy her individuality. Helen Burns offers an alternative philosophy based upon forgiveness and spiritual acceptance. Jane admires Helen but cannot entirely accept her passive response to injustice. This difference establishes one of the central features of Jane's character: she desires moral integrity without surrendering her right to resist oppression.

The question of gender becomes particularly explicit at Thornfield. Jane recognises that women possess intellectual and emotional desires beyond the domestic roles prescribed for them. She observes that women "feel just as men feel" and require opportunities for exercising their abilities rather than remaining confined by convention (Brontë, 112). The assertion challenges Victorian assumptions that female fulfilment should be limited to domestic obedience. Jane's identity therefore develops through an insistence upon intellectual as well as emotional equality.

Her relationship with Rochester intensifies this conflict between love and independence. Rochester possesses the social, economic, and gendered authority that Jane lacks. Nevertheless, Jane refuses to understand herself as naturally inferior to him. During their emotional confrontation, she insists upon their spiritual equality: "I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë 252). The statement constitutes the philosophical centre of Jane's selfhood. Her love for Rochester is powerful, but it cannot legitimately demand the destruction of her moral independence.

This principle becomes decisive when Jane discovers Rochester's existing marriage to Bertha Mason. Remaining with him would satisfy emotional desire but violate the ethical identity Jane has constructed. Her departure from Thornfield is consequently more than an escape from an unacceptable relationship; it represents the preservation of selfhood against emotional



dependence. Jane chooses uncertainty, poverty, and isolation rather than becoming an identity defined entirely through Rochester.

Her inheritance from her uncle later transforms the material conditions of this independence. Economic autonomy gives Jane the freedom to return to Rochester by choice rather than necessity. When she eventually declares, “Reader, I married him” (Bronte 452), the grammatical emphasis upon “I” is significant. Jane narrates herself as the active subject of marriage rather than its passive object. Her final union therefore becomes possible only after she has secured financial, moral, and psychological autonomy.

Race, Passing, and Fragmented Identity in *The Vanishing Half*:

Where Brontë concentrates primarily upon gender and class, Bennett places racial identity at the centre of female selfhood. Mallard itself illustrates the social construction of racial hierarchy. Although its residents are Black, generations have valued increasingly lighter skin. The community therefore reproduces colour-based hierarchies within Black identity. Desiree and Stella grow up in an environment where appearance influences social value even before they encounter the wider structures of American racism.

The twins respond differently to these conditions. Desiree eventually returns to Mallard after escaping an abusive marriage, bringing her dark-skinned daughter Jude. Her return exposes the contradiction of a community that has experienced racial marginalisation yet discriminates against darker Blackness. Jude becomes an outsider because her appearance challenges Mallard’s idealisation of lightness. Bennett describes the community’s reaction to her skin as a form of social scrutiny that follows the child throughout her early life (Bennett 83). Jude’s experience demonstrates that identity is not simply a private awareness of self; it is also shaped by how the body is interpreted by others.

Stella takes a radically different path by passing as white. Initially, passing provides access to employment unavailable to her as a Black woman. Eventually, however, the temporary performance becomes an entire life. Stella marries a white man, lives in a white neighbourhood, and raises Kennedy without revealing her Black ancestry. Her transformation illustrates both the constructed nature of race and the material power attached to racial categories.

Passing appears to offer Stella freedom, but Bennett simultaneously presents it as psychological imprisonment. To maintain her new identity, Stella must separate herself from Desiree, Mallard, and her own history. Her social privilege depends upon continuous concealment. As the narrative indicates, becoming someone else requires her to remain constantly aware of the person she is attempting not to reveal (Bennett 168). The apparent freedom of passing therefore produces another form of confinement.

Stella’s situation offers an instructive contrast with Jane Eyre. Jane seeks freedom by asserting continuity between her internal values and external actions. Stella seeks security by creating a division between her history and public identity. Jane’s selfhood becomes stronger as she refuses identities imposed upon her; Stella’s identity becomes increasingly fragmented because survival within white privilege requires the suppression of part of herself.

Race, Gender, and Intergenerational Female Identity:

Bennett extends the exploration of female identity beyond the twin sisters through Jude and Kennedy. The daughters inherit consequences from decisions made before they were born, demonstrating that identity is simultaneously personal and intergenerational. Jude grows up experiencing colourism but gradually develops an identity beyond Mallard’s judgement. Her relationship with Reese, a transgender man, broadens the novel’s exploration of embodiment and



self-definition. Both characters understand that the relationship between the body, social perception, and internal identity may be complicated.

Kennedy occupies a contrasting position. Raised as white and economically privileged, she remains unaware for much of her life that her mother is Black. When fragments of Stella's concealed history emerge, Kennedy must reconsider assumptions about herself. Bennett thus demonstrates that racial identity can be socially produced even when ancestry remains hidden. Kennedy's whiteness has been real in terms of lived privilege, yet the discovery of her family history destabilises the apparently secure categories through which she has understood herself.

These intergenerational relationships make *The Vanishing Half* especially relevant to contemporary theories of intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw argues that gender cannot always be analysed independently from race because women may experience overlapping systems of disadvantage (Crenshaw 140). Bennett's female characters illustrate precisely this complexity. Desiree's experiences cannot be reduced simply to womanhood because race, colour, marriage, class, and motherhood simultaneously shape her circumstances. Similarly, Stella's life demonstrates that acquiring racial privilege does not entirely eliminate the restrictions associated with gender or the psychological consequences of concealment.

From Jane Eyre to Stella Vignes: Changing Models of Female Freedom:

Reading Brontë and Bennett together reveal both historical change and striking continuity. Jane and Stella each attempt to escape identities that limit their futures. Jane resists the assumption that poverty, orphanhood, and femininity make her inferior. Stella resists the racial boundaries that restrict employment and mobility. Both women therefore recognise that socially assigned identities determine access to power.

Their strategies, however, are fundamentally different. Jane attempts to achieve freedom without abandoning her fundamental sense of self. Her decisions repeatedly insist that dignity requires integrity between personal conviction and action. Stella acquires social freedom through transformation and concealment. Her success reveals the arbitrariness of racial classification: society treats her differently not because her essential humanity has changed, but because she is perceived as belonging to another racial category.

The comparison also exposes limitations within *Jane Eyre*. Contemporary criticism has frequently examined the racial and colonial implications surrounding Bertha Mason. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar famously interpret Bertha as Jane's symbolic double, embodying forms of female anger that Victorian femininity suppresses (Gilbert and Gubar, 360). Postcolonial critics, however, have emphasised that Bertha's Creole identity and colonial background complicate any celebration of Jane's emancipation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the development of the European female individual in the novel must be considered alongside the marginalisation of the colonial woman (Spivak 244). Bennett's novel, written from a contemporary African American perspective, shifts precisely such racial questions from the margins to the centre.

Thus, the literary journey from Jane Eyre to Stella, Desiree, Jude, and Kennedy represents an expansion in the conceptualisation of female selfhood. The nineteenth-century struggle for a woman's moral and economic independence remains important, but Bennett demonstrates that gender alone cannot explain every woman's experience. Race, skin colour, sexuality, family history, class, and social perception intersect with gender to produce different possibilities of belonging.

Findings and Results:



The comparative analysis produces several significant findings. First, both novels represent identity as a process rather than a fixed condition. Jane develops through successive confrontations with family, institutional discipline, romantic authority, religion, poverty, and economic independence. Similarly, the identities of Bennett's characters change according to migration, racial passing, marriage, motherhood, family secrecy, and generational discovery.

Second, social recognition plays a decisive role in constructing female identity. Jane is treated differently as an orphan, governess, heiress, and wife even though her essential sense of moral worth remains comparatively stable. Stella's case makes this principle even clearer: the same woman receives radically different opportunities when society perceives her as white.

Third, the comparison reveals an expansion from an individual model of female emancipation toward an intersectional one. Jane's autonomy depends principally upon moral independence and eventual financial security. Bennett's women demonstrate that contemporary female autonomy must also be understood in relation to racialised bodies, inherited histories, colourism, sexuality, and social privilege.

Finally, neither novel presents freedom as simple escape. Jane must return and renegotiate love on more equal terms. Stella discovers that passing cannot erase memory. Desiree's return to Mallard involves confronting rather than merely escaping the past. Jude and Kennedy likewise construct identities through engagement with histories inherited from their mothers. Female selfhood consequently emerges as an ongoing negotiation between memory, social identity, individual agency, and belonging.

Conclusion:

Jane Eyre and *The Vanishing Half* belong to different literary traditions and historical periods, yet their juxtaposition illuminates the continuing struggle over who possesses the authority to define a woman. Charlotte Brontë constructs Jane as an individual who gradually refuses identities based upon dependency, gender hierarchy, and social inferiority. Her achievement of selfhood rests upon the conviction that love and belonging must not require the surrender of moral autonomy.

Brit Bennett revises and expands this question by demonstrating that female identity is also inseparable from race and its social meanings. Through Desiree and Stella, and subsequently Jude and Kennedy, *The Vanishing Half* explores how women negotiate identities that are visible, hidden, inherited, performed, and sometimes deliberately reconstructed. Stella's passing exposes race as socially constructed while simultaneously demonstrating the very real consequences attached to racial classification.

The movement from *Jane Eyre* to *The Vanishing Half* can therefore be understood as a movement from the assertion of the autonomous female individual toward a more intersectional conception of female selfhood. Jane asks to be recognised as equal despite gender and class; Bennett's women compel readers to ask how equality itself changes when gender intersects with race, colour, sexuality, ancestry, and privilege. Despite these differences, both novels affirm a fundamental literary insight: authentic selfhood requires the ability to negotiate inherited identities without allowing society to possess complete authority over the definition of the self. Their comparative study consequently demonstrates both the historical evolution and the continuing urgency of literary representations of women's struggles for autonomy, dignity, recognition, and belonging.

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