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Secrecy is a powerful tool. All humans reserve the power to speak and interact with others as they wish, even if it's not necessarily truthful. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë is a Victorian novel in which the protagonist Jane goes through a series of life events that shape her development. One common theme ties together all her experiences, which is secrecy. Those around her are often not trustworthy individuals and the effects of their behavior on Jane becomes obvious as she develops through the course of the novel. *Jane Eyre* ultimately exemplifies that while damaging in the short term, secrecy has the capability to empower one's identity and shape their mindset for the rest of their lives.

Firstly, the prevalence of secrecy during Jane's time at Lowood is a shaping factor in her character, as she learns values like self-reliance and independence. Secrecy is used in Lowood primarily by Mr. Brocklehurst, in the form of his abuses. It is only late into Jane's time at Lowood that his actions towards his students became visible to the outside world. Before this, he was allowed a power that was heavily misused. "When the typhus fever had fulfilled its mission of devastation at Lowood, it gradually disappeared from thence; but not till its virulence and the number of its victims had drawn public attention on the school." Only after the typhus fever killed half of the students at Lowood was light shed on Mr. Brocklehurst's various other misdeeds, such as the "quantity and quality of the children's food; the brackish, fetid water used in its preparation; the pupils' wretched clothing and accommodations" to name a few.

Yet before this time, the effect of secrecy highlights the injustice and difficult situation Jane and others had to live through. One way abuse came across was through living conditions. Students were nourished to the bare minimum to keep themselves alive, which would not be acceptable if the school was in the public eye. But since it was all behind a closed door, students were fed "smoked basins of something hot, which, however, to my dismay, sent forth an odor far from inviting." Abuse also came across verbally. This type of abuse is only witnessed by other students and teachers, who for the most part could not do anything to remedy the situation. An example of such behavior is when Jane dropped her slate on the ground and was verbally attacked by Mr. Brocklehurst. He excessively verbally shamed her in front of the whole

class, saying “Who would think that the Evil One had already found a servant and agent in her?... you must shun her example; if necessary avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her from your converse”. He leverages his power, outside of the view of the public, to degrade Jane and turn her peers against her. This form of abuse is clearly unacceptable, but had to be endured until Jane grew up, or the environment of the school was improved.

The effects of this secrecy did have a positive side though, as Jane learned to stand up for herself, even if it was in small ways. When she gets old enough, Jane uses her power to leave the school, defying proper rules and using self-reliance instead. She follows her own gut instinct, and takes initiative to leave. “The next day she laid the affair before Mr. Brocklehurst, who said that Mrs. Reed must be written to, as she was my natural guardian... I might do as I pleased.” This quote shows how when Jane wanted to leave, she defied his orders and instead, did as she pleased, leaving the school shortly afterwards. She no longer feels the need to be submissive under Mr. Brocklehurst, and rather lives her life as she wants to. Additionally, her values of truth are solidified by living in this environment. When talking to Miss Temple about her backstory, Jane thinks “I resolved in the depth of my heart that I would be most moderate- most correct; and, having reflected a few minutes in order to arrange coherently what I had to say, I told her all the story of my sad childhood.” She does not try to exaggerate her situation and rather keeps it modest and correct. Though secrecy caused hardships for Jane, it was a guiding factor in gaining her trademark resolute stature and independence throughout the rest of the novel.

The next phase of Jane’s life, living with Mr. Rochester, is also one guided by elements of secrecy. At this point in time, Jane is constantly being influenced by Mr. Rochester and his withholding of information: his secret marriage. Before the exposure of this secret, life is seemingly good to Jane. She falls in love with Rochester, and vice versa, or so it seems. Jane says “My future husband was becoming to me my whole world, and more than the world – almost my hope of heaven”. Yet this entire feeling was crushed in just a moment, when Mr. Mason exposes Rochester at their wedding ceremony. The huge secret falls apart, and with it goes Jane’s self-worth and mental state. In the short term, Jane is very negatively affected, as she begins blindly blaming herself for the situation. She thinks, “I would not ascribe vice to him. I would not say he betrayed me. Real affection it seemed he could not have for me. He would want me no more,” convincing herself into believing Rochester had done no wrong. Through the

influence of Rochester's secrets he managed to gaslight Jane into giving in fault and thinking negatively upon herself. Jane is launched into an episode of sadness, "the waters came into my soul; I sunk into deep mire; I felt no standing; I came into deep waters; the floods overflowed me," damaged on the inside.

But similar to her situation at Lowood, this becomes a shaping factor in her identity, guiding her principles for the rest of the novel. It is at this point that she breaks away from the secretive Rochester to discover herself more deeply. She first takes initiative by leaving in the night, without relying on Rochester for guidance. Jane initially thinks of Rochester, "He would feel himself forsaken, his love rejected; he would suffer, perhaps grow desperate," sympathizing with his feelings. But then she demonstrates how she's grown from the situation, "My hand moved toward the lock, I caught it back and glided on." Jane no longer sought to find reassurance in Rochester, but rather continued on with herself, and herself only. By breaking free from Rochester's secrecy, Jane is now on the verge of entering a new chapter in her life, with more chances to discover herself.

Moving forward from this point, Jane has a newfound appreciation for her own independence. Shaped by the effects of secrecy in her life, she no longer allows herself to be tied down by those around her, which is made evident through her relationship with St. John. Though he expresses romantic interest in Jane, she holds true to the values she's obtained, sticking with her gut and persisting in rejecting him. Her mindset has changed drastically as to when she first met Rochester, stating that "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself."

On one hand, the idea of secrecy has caused strong emotional trauma and hardships throughout Jane's life. From her times at Lowood, where Mr. Brocklehurst leveraged secrecy to treat his children poorly, to her times at Thornfield Hall, where her entire romantic relationship with Mr. Rochester was a lie, Jane is constantly influenced by secrecy. The danger of it is obvious, as it can be extremely damaging to one party when abused. On the other hand, the theme of secrecy was a guiding factor in Jane's development throughout the novel. While painful in the short term, if an individual has the resolve to make it through the difficulties, they will

grow stronger and move onto better things. This is clear through Jane's newfound independence from leaving Lowood and Thornfield, as she seeks out new opportunities on her own initiative. All in all, while hurtful in the short term, Jane Eyre exemplifies that secrecy can heavily impact the development of one's identity in the long term. While this effect is not guaranteed, it will surely shape one's character in some form. Secrecy is a powerful tool that can be used to build up or break down individuals, and it is absolutely essential that it is not abused.