Physiognomy & Perception

Bailee, Mars & Alliyah
Thesis

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë uses the detailed physiognomy and keen perception of her characters to enforce the social conventions of the Victorian era by showing how attraction to certain physical aspects idealizes desired social standards.
Physiognomy

the assessment of a person’s character or personality from his or her outer appearance, especially the face
Background: Standards for Women

- Spheres of Domesticity
- Refined and possessing ‘accomplishments’
- Well-mannered
- High-class
- “Household Angels”
Background: Standards for Men

- Wealthy
- ‘Bread-winner’
- Possess a title
- Refined, gentlemanly
Gateshead
“....if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that” (19). - Ms. Abbott
“‘You are original,’ said he, ‘and not timid. There is something brave in your spirit, as well as penetrating in your eye; but allow me to assure you that you partially misinterpret my emotions.”’ - St. John (358)
Jane Eyre

“I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth: I desired to be tall, stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and marked.” (90)
“...her constitution was sound as a bell - illness never came near her; she was an exact, clever manager, her household and tenantry were thoroughly under her control; her children, only at times, defied her authority, and laughed it to scorn; she dressed well, and had a presence and port calculated to set off handsome attire.” (29)
“He - for it was a man - turned his head slowly towards where I stood, and having examined me with the two inquisitive looking gray eyes which twinkled under a pair of bushy eyebrows…” (25)
“... that girl’s hair must be cut off entirely; I will send a barber to-morrow: and I see others who have far too much of the excrescence…” (56) - Mr. Brocklehurst
Thornfield
“Tall, fine bust, sloping shoulders; long, graceful neck; olive complexion, dark and clear; noble features; eyes rather like Mr. Rochester’s, large and black, and as brilliant as her jewels. And then she had such a fine head of hair raven-black, and so becomingly arranged; a crown of thick plaits behind, and in front the longest, the glossiest curls I ever saw...” (148) Jane
Blanche Ingram

“She was very showy, but she was not genuine; she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments, but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature; nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment, but she did not know the sensation of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her.” (174)
Edward Rochester

“There was a smile on his lips, and his eyes sparkled… he looked precisely grim, cushioning his massive head against the swelling back of his chair, and receiving the light of the fire on his granite-hewn features, and in his great dark eyes; for he had great dark eyes, and very fine eyes”. (121-122)
Edward Rochester

“Strongly-marked horizontal eyebrows… a well-defined nose, with a straight ridge and full nostrils; then a flexible looking mouth… firm chin, with a decided cleft down the middle of it… some black whiskers were wanted… Now for the eyes: I had left them to the last, because they required the most careful working. I drew large; I shaped them well: the eyelashes I traced long and sombre; the irids lustrous and large.” (221)
Moor House
St. John Rivers

“St. John dresses well. He is a handsome man: tall, fair, with blue eyes, and a Grecian profile.” (422)
St. John Rivers

“... He is good and great, but severe; and, for me, cold as an iceberg…” (425)
Rosamond Oliver

“....innocent of the pride of wealth; ingenuous; sufficiently intelligent; gay, lively, and unthinking. She was very charming in short, even to a cool observer of her own sex like me; but she was not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive.” (351-352)
Rosamond Oliver

“....something else is as deeply impressed with her defects: they are such that they could sympathize in nothing I aspired to co-operate in nothing I undertook. Rosamond a sufferer, a labourer, a female apostle? Rosamond a missionary’s wife? No!” (357) - St. John
Conclusion

- The perception of the distinct physiognomy of the characters enforces Victorian standards by showing that attraction to certain physical features further divides classes and people.
  - Wealth and appearance sets people apart despite intellectual similarities
  - Ultimately, outward appearance dictates society

Brontë seeks to show that the innate desire of humans regarding physical beauty is what creates society's standards for beauty itself.
Works Cited