

**JANE'S STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE IN CHARLOTTE
BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE***

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Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* depicts the struggle for independence from a powerful patriarchal structure that places women in exile. On the one hand Brontë presents Jane's growth towards independence from mastery and oppression, as seen within the confines of Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, and Moor House. Each of these stages offers Jane a glimpse into the workings of these power structures, liberating her from the oppressive confines in which she finds herself: she recognizes the ability to choose her future and thus gains a semblance of independence and self-knowledge. On the other hand, while Jane does achieve partial liberation through work, the independence attributed to Jane proves flawed and collapses on itself. The present paper focuses on how Jane fails to realize real independence. We will see how she ultimately chooses to place herself in a situation where overriding powers retain mastery and influence over her thoughts, affording Jane a partial rather than a complete agency.

Throughout the text, Jane encounters a series of oppressive life experiences that allow her to achieve a semblance of selfhood through work that enables her to recognize her oppression by various overriding powers. Brontë presents the first of these stages at Gateshead, Jane's childhood residence, where she experiences oppression and domination from the earliest years of her life. At this locale, Jane gains a burgeoning awareness of her inferior status within the household. Mrs. Reed enforces her values not only as to how a child should behave but also as to how she should be, dismissing Jane from her company with the decree that Jane must endeavour to "obtain a more sociable and child-like nature, a more attractive and sprightly style... she really must ignore me from privileges..." (12). Jane, thus, faces the burden to follow, invoking the problem of the slave who must harness her identity within the confines of the boss's rule, which envelops one in. As a young child Jane realizes the authority and oppression under which she survives. Adrienne Rich notes, "It is at this moment that the germ of the person we are finally to know as *Jane Eyre* is born: a person resolute to live, and to choose her life with ... pride" (Brontë 460).

Like most of Jane's choices, the decision to attend school is fraught with additional complications of the burdened. She is given the option to either attend school or live with poor relatives, the latter option representing a return to her native roots. To protect the nascent sense of identity she has acquired, she must necessarily reject adaptation into the dominant culture. However, she has already absorbed enough of that culture to dismiss her native roots. She refuses the offer to live with relatives because they are not well off. In her narration, Jane affirms her consciousness of making a choice that leaves her complicit with dominant power structures: "I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste" (20).

In the second stage, which takes place at Lowood, Jane experiences a different kind of oppression and domination. Instead of being singled out as an inferior “subject,” Jane becomes one of many oppressed girls under the rule of Brocklehurst, who epitomizes the double standards of the chief. Rich expounds upon Brocklehurst’s mastery, declaring him to be “the embodiment of class and sexual double-standards and of the duplicity of the dominant, using religion, charity, and morality to keep the poor in their place and to oppress and humiliate the young women over whom he is set in charge. Within the domination and oppression of Brocklehurst’s rule, Jane articulates a “sense of liberty” that confirms a new stage in her struggle for liberation, although she still faces domination and oppression (47). In this environment, Jane expresses the value of her comparative freedom at Lowood as opposed to the material luxuries of Gateshead. Jane continues her work as a student and prepares herself for future encounters with oppression and dominion, arming herself with the necessary tools for the recognition that eventually can afford her the choice of freedom.

Inevitably, Jane’s residence at Lowood ends with another stage of dissatisfaction with her submissive station in life. She notes that her “reason for tranquillity was no more” and compares Lowood to a “prison-ground, exile limits” as she longs for a new subjection (74). At this phase, Jane manifests an uneasy consent to the dominant power structure but yearns to transcend that consent, at least in part, as she strives to gain a greater degree of freedom. She has long recognized the mastery inherent in her position at Lowood, even after Brocklehurst’s replacement, and she uses this dominant system to continue gaining knowledge through her education and involvement in the power structure as a part of it (she works as a teacher) that allows her to take the next step: she accepts the governess position at Thornfield Hall. By assenting to the system, she demonstrates a form of emancipatory complicity, since that acquiescence allows her to move beyond Lowood and to extend her growth towards a liberated identity.

At Thornfield, Jane encounters a microcosmic culture that exemplifies dominant power structures in terms of what is right and proper in that ethos. Her first impression of Thornfield leaves her with the thought that nothing in short was wanting to complete the beau ideal of luxury which sets the scene for her later struggle with Rochester for independence (82). Within the illusion of native happiness, Mrs. Fairfax, a servant of a higher caste, articulates the ingrained master-slave relationship that is to haunt Jane throughout her stay at Thornfield: “John and his wife are very decent people; but then you see they are servants, and one can’t talk to them on terms of equality: one must keep them at due distance, for fear of losing one’s power” (80).

As her stay at Thornfield extends, Jane probes into her work not only with Adele but also within her own self, aiding her in the course of developing an independent sense of identity. The combination of work and recognition results in the ability to display a mind-set that denounces mastery in favour of liberty. Brontë imbues Jane’s character with an untiring ability to work as she manoeuvres Jane through the dialectical process towards liberty. Jane manifests the effects of her personal work when confronted with Rochester, who proves a unique type of dominance. When he probes Jane’s thoughts on servitude, he receives this: “...sir, you do not have a right to master over me merely because you are older than I ... or because you have seen more of the world than I have. Your privilege to supremacy depends on the use you have made of your time” (100). One notices here the intricacy with which Brontë pervades the master-slave binary. Instead of revealing Rochester as purely tyrannical, Brontë has him assume the role of a benevolent dictator, who engages Jane in conversation and, inevitably, stimulates her to think and

choose her stance (and perhaps her status) regarding his domination over her: she expresses disdain for a dominant power structure that strives to oppress.

The Thornfield episode gains centrality by raising both the reader's and, ultimately, Jane's awareness about the treacherous nature of Rochester's mastery that has the capability to present itself as benevolent. Rochester offers Jane friendship – an offer that on the surface implies equality – while simultaneously conspiring to manipulate her, as seen most blatantly when he assumes the guise of a gypsy-woman and when he courts Blanche to get a sense of Jane's feelings without revealing his own. Gilbert and Gubar note that "his trickery is a source of power" and further posit "sexual knowledge" as another form of the mastery Rochester imposes on Jane. Jane recognizes the unspoken label of subsidiarity and rebels as she works both physically and spiritually to evade Rochester's grip on her, ultimately solidifying her desire for freedom, a desire that she has been displaying in growing degrees. When discussing the centrality of Thornfield in the novel Adrienne Rich affirms: "Jane comes to womanhood and to certain final choices about what it means to her to be a lady" (460). She eventually recognizes the need for freedom to succeed in the struggle for a liberated identity, free from the oppression that a bigamous marriage to Rochester would afford her.

Within the recognition of her need for freedom, Jane shows a remarkably stoic will for a woman of her time and goes out from Rochester, enduring a traumatic traveling experience that indicates the extent of her desire to "work" as a part of the process of procuring a liberated sense of self. Jane's arrival at Moor House heralds the advent of a situation in which she has the opportunity to become wholly liberated. She is rescued by two sisters who not only "live as knowledgeable equals," with their brother as underlined by Rich, but also pass on that equality to Jane (471). During the formation of her brand-new relations, Jane continues to express a desire to work while simultaneously verbalizing her expanding recognition of the need for independence to foster her sense of self. She notes, "the fear of dependence with strangers entered my soul like iron" (315). Jane accepts a position as the mistress of a small school that is menial in comparison to the luxuries offered by a marriage to Rochester to avoid oppression. Jane exhibits maturity in her understanding of oppression by placing liberty above class and further demonstrates the necessity of fostering equal relations by sharing her inheritance with the Rivers and rejecting St. John's proposition to join him as a preacher's wife, where she would be submitting herself to his will. Rich applauds her recognition and rejection of an oppressed future: "Jane becomes soon aware—he will use her...and from this use of herself she draws back in strong aversion" (478). Jane shows both the acknowledgment and work necessary to liberate herself from oppression and to foster an independent identity, as she nears the end of her narrative.

The final chapter of *Jane Eyre* illuminates how Jane fails to gain true independence. Jane never fully breaks from the oppressive attitudes of the dominant power; the imposed values of dominant power structures remain ingrained in her mind-set and she fails to achieve full. She acknowledges St. John Rivers for what he really is, as shown when he tries to make use of her.

Brontë undermines the successful completion of Jane's independence by providing evidence of the ingrained values of the dominant power within Jane's character. She herself admits she never in her life has known any medium in her dealings with confident, hard character, between absolute submission and determined revolt. She is powerless to escape the limitations of oppressive thought patterns.

Jane Eyre ushers in the need for a feminist dialectic by virtue of Jane's articulated desire for independence and her struggle to obtain that independence. While still confined by the

dominant mind-set, Jane gleefully proclaims the extent of her independence. For her era, Jane makes great steps away from the imposed and confining notion of women as inferior, forcing the woman question into the forefront. Rich observes that the ultimate marriage to Rochester operates, for Jane, as another form of emancipatory collusion. According to Rich, Jane's marriage glorifies the feminist message since it is not marriage in the sense of a "marriage that stunts and diminishes the woman; but a continuation of this woman's creation of herself" (Brontë 470). Jane embodies the feminist message by freeing herself from individual oppression while succumbing to the binary distinctions of the dominant power structure, which, as has been catalogued, is primarily male. She assents to certain aspects of that power while using that assent to further manipulate the dominant system to better her position. By responding immediately to Rochester's mental summons and serving him faithfully as both a domestic and a companion, Jane's complicity enables her to manipulate a power shift in her favour, thereby depicting a continuation of the emancipatory complicity she displays early in the text. She revels in his dependency on her as she reveals that "it was not himself that could now kindle the lustre of animated expression: he was dependent on another for that office!" (386).

Feminist theory discusses the process of overcoming the binary structure of self-other that implies inferiority and superiority. Feminism addresses the notion that the master and male, respectively, retain superiority by the very existence of other. Thus, Brontë's characterization of Rochester conforms to this structure. In the company of Jane and other servants, Rochester shows overt mastery in the form of superior attitudes and dominant authority. However, deprived of the other, Rochester discovers that it is not an independent, but rather a helpless consciousness that he has achieved. Rochester's physical deformities from the fire at Thornfield take on a symbolic significance. This reading shows his physical blindness, the "blindness" one experiences when lacking independent consciousness. Here Jane's return compares with the recovered sight of that one eye. Rochester gradually regains his vision of himself as well as his physical vision.

The otherness that is essential mastery in both Hegelian thought and feminism extends to the colonial aspects of Brontë's text. Colonialism works in a similar binary of superiority and inferiority, where the colonizer represents the superior. Rochester's fortune comes from marrying "into colonial wealth" (493) Terry Eagleton observes. Eagleton continues his discussion by invoking the complications of master-slave binaries, noting that Jane's "relation to him [Rochester] is a complex blend of independence and control" that affords Jane "the right to engage in the process of taming it" (494-496). The "it" Eagleton refers to embodies the superiority of the upper class that engages in domination and oppression of the other. This critique invokes "process," perhaps alluding to the process inherent in dialectic that exists throughout Brontë's text. The continually embedded dialectic that affords Jane fractional agency, but only a partial agency, indicates the need for a new dialectic that enables the other to engage in emancipatory complicity as a method towards gaining complete liberation.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë presents the beginnings of feminist thought. She anticipates the melding of inferior and superior by virtue of the fact that both Jane and Rochester's "fortunes spring from the same root" of colonialism (Eagleton 493). Jane's economic independence stems from an inheritance from her uncle who is colonial, thus illuminating yet another method of complicity, albeit one unknown to her. While this independence allows Jane to gain freedom from Rochester's mastery in terms of economics, she succumbs to the mastery of the colonial power that Eagleton attributes to the character of Rochester by virtue of the ingrained dominant mind-set that Jane retains. She evinces this mind-set at the end of the novel as she lauds the

imposition of Western ideals when relating St. John's career as a missionary. This ingrained colonial mind-set renders her a tool of that same system, and she becomes both a product of and producer for that system: the recognition and mastery that contain the ability to free her remains incomplete.

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