

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 1

Article 6

1999

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Recommended Citation

Jnge, Christina J. (1999) "Jane Eyre's Quest for Truth and Identity," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol1/iss1/6>

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Jane Eyre's Quest for Truth and Identity

Keywords

Jane Eyre, Victorian Literature, Identity



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Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* contains, in its opening pages, what is arguably one of the most remarkable confrontations in British literature. Young Jane resists the abusive treatment of her cousin John Reed, who is older and far more powerful, physically and especially socially, than she can ever be. John's eventual physical attack on Jane is "provoked" by her assertion that he is "like a murderer . . . like a slave-driver . . . like the Roman emperors!" (5). This negative description of her cousin reflects reality as the girl sees it. Her reality, though, is not recognized in the Reed household. By giving voice to her version of reality nonetheless, Jane is actively resisting the oppression she faces in the household. As punishment for her act of resistance, the eponymous heroine is confined to the frightful "red room" (5-14). This opening confrontation sets the stage for what will be the central struggle of the work. Jane's struggle to make her voice heard and to express the truth of her own experience.

Jane Eyre is very much the product of the specific time and place in which it was written, an environment in which a woman, especially an economically disadvantaged one, has to struggle greatly so that she might speak of her own vision of reality. According to the critic Maggie Berg, *Jane Eyre* reflects the contradictory nature of Victorian society, a society that was in transition, and one in which people were forced to discover new ways of finding and defining identity. The world that Charlotte Brontë inhabited was rife with dichotomies. While some women agitated for greater rights, society as a whole exalted the image of the saintly, self-sacrificing woman, happily confined to the home. While laws were passed to alleviate some of the appalling conditions to which many people, especially women and children, were subjected to in factories, poverty remained rife even among certain people, such as clergymen and governesses, who were engaged in professions that required a fair amount of education. That these social contradictions

manifested themselves in the author's own life has long been known. That much of her work is at least partly autobiographical is also known. These truisms are part of the Brontë myth. Although it would be a mistake to assume, as did one early critic, Mrs. Humprey Ward, that "Charlotte Brontë is Jane Eyre . . . you cannot think of her apart from what she has written" (qtd. in Levy 4), it is logical to assume that experience is essential to the creation of fiction, and that Brontë's work is no exception (Levy 1-5). It is quite a supportable proposition that, extraordinary though the specific events of Jane Eyre's story may be, the emotional reality of oppression and the struggle for identity that her story depicts is representative of the emotional reality of many Victorian women's lives. Virginia Woolf's belief that Brontë's work was decisively influenced by her experience as a nineteenth-century woman appears to be true, even if her assertion that this influence was highly negative, because "her imagination swerved from indignation" (76) may not be.

Jane Eyre, like many women in her time, is economically devalued and socially marginalized, largely because of her gender, but also because of her lack of an independent source of wealth. Living in a society in which she has few options for earning a living when she is obliged to do so, and in which women are considered inferior to men, she faces a considerable struggle to survive physically and psychologically. She faces perhaps an even greater struggle to be acknowledged as an equal by men and by persons of both sexes whose social status is above hers. Moreover, as a member of an oppressed class of persons, she faces a culture that does not generally reflect or even acknowledge her experience.

At Gateshead, her early mental development is influenced by the tales told to her by the servant Bessie and her own readings of such works as *Gulliver's Travels*. The fairy tales present her with conventional images of passive femininity, meant to condition young women to seek socially advantageous, idealized marriages, the usual fate of the fairy-tale heroine. Jane's own reading, in contrast, present her with masculine images of independence and adventure. These images influence her, even as she learns that expectations fed by fairy tales are neither practical nor fulfilling (Rowe 70-77). The truth of Jane's life is far from paradigms. She cannot and will not become a passive fairy tale heroine, but a masculine life of independence is neither practicable for a woman in her time, nor is its emotional isolation truly fulfilling. Thus, Jane cannot rely on conventional concepts and imagery to define herself.

However, others do attempt to define her in terms of conventional images. Mrs. Reed and her household view Jane very much as the stereotypical penniless orphan, who should be humble, meek, and grateful to her kindly benefactors. Even the maid, Miss Abbot, feels the need to tell her that:

You ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because missus kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them. (6)

That Jane refuses to conform to this image signifies to the Reeds some form of depravity. Rochester, too, although he loves and admires her, wishes in some ways to remake her in the image of an ideal wife. For instance, he attempts to coerce her into conformity to traditional concepts of female beauty by dressing her elaborately.

Jane is thus threatened repeatedly by various forms of oppression. A key aspect of this oppression involves pressure placed on her to conform to standard roles and to identify with the roles which others would have her assume. Such pressure is a direct threat to the integrity of her true self.

Jane's primary weapon for defeating the economic and gender-based oppression she encounters in order to maintain the strength and integrity of her identity is her voice. More specifically, it is her dogged insistence on using her voice to express the truth of her experience that helps her to resist.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer suggests that, while at Gateshead, Jane uses her voice to defend herself against the oppression and cruelty of the Reeds. She struggles to assert the "truth of her character" and verbally attacks Mrs. Reed as a means of self-defense (157). There is more, however, to Jane's use of her voice than this. Although she is too young to articulate or even understand the full ramifications of her situation, her verbal outbursts are more than the efforts of a child to protest or fend off cruel treatment. They also represent the use of truth as a weapon that the weak and disempowered can employ against their oppressors. Throughout the novel, speaking the truth is often Jane's only form of defense.

Nor are her later assertions of the truth, as Bodenheimer suggests, entirely the efforts of an author/protagonist to tell the story of her experience in a manner that is consistent with authenticity and accuracy (155-167). When Jane writes, "I dared commit no fault; I strove to fulfill every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaky" (Brontë 9), she is describing a situation in which those with power over her are in control of what is recognized as the "truth of her character" and her circumstances. It is to this situation that she must respond by asserting the truth as she knows it. This pattern is repeated at Thornfield. Rochester initially permits her to be frank with him (Bodenheimer 159), but when the two become engaged, he begins to try to dress her lavishly in an attempt to transform her into an ideal wife: decorative and obedient. He thus attempts to subvert and ultimately control her identity, thereby effectively silencing her (Brontë 252-257). Bodenheimer suggests that he is attempting to involve her as a character in his

own fantasy world, as indeed he is (164-166). However, this attempt has more to do with his desire to compel her conformity to a traditional gender role than with his desire to shape reality.

Indeed, as the couple set out for Millcote to buy Jane her new clothes, the dynamics between them begin to change. Jane reflects: "I half lost the sense of power over him. I was about mechanically to obey him, without further remonstrance . . ." (252). She does not mechanically obey Rochester, but it is a near thing. Rochester, for his part, speaks of his future "possession" of his fiancée: "I mean shortly to claim you-- your thoughts, conversation, and company-- for life" (252).

These incidents, in which Jane's resistance falters, are temporary moments of conformity. Her resistance remains strong, and perhaps can even be said to become stronger as she recoils from her lapses in strength. After the shopping episode at Millcote, she becomes "determined to show [Rochester] divers rugged points in [her] character" (259), ostensibly to be fair and give him a chance to break the engagement. Yet it becomes clear that her actual agenda is to remedy the power imbalance within the relationship. Again, by expressing aspects of her nature deemed rugged (i.e., not socially acceptable for a woman), she seeks to induce Rochester to acknowledge the truth of her character as she sees and expresses it. To recognize her true self would be to cede her considerable power. Rochester, although in some ways vexed by Jane's intransigence, is also partly relieved by this chance at release from standard gender roles:

He was kept, to be sure, rather cross and crusty; but on the whole I could see he was excellently entertained, and that a lamb-like submission and turtle-dove sensibility, while fostering his despotism more, would have pleased his judgment, satisfied his common sense, and even suited his taste less. (260)

Her power struggle with Rochester by necessity involves less than transparent behavior. Yet her attempt to assert power within the relationship is grounded in her assertion of "the truth of her character."

Jane thus resists Rochester's efforts at domination, declaring that she will not "stand in the stead of a seraglio," and indeed would, if he were to acquire one, "go out as a missionary to them that are enslaved--your harem inmates among the rest" (Brontë 255-256). Here again, she speaks the truth in order to resist a more powerful individual's attempt to oppress her by obliging her to conform to a standard role and thereby deny the truth of her own identity. However, despite having once said, "I am a free human being with an independent will" (240), she comes close to losing that will by permitting Rochester to choose her clothes, those important outward symbols of identity, for her. Despite her efforts to resist his domination, he is too

powerful by virtue of his stronger social position. She cannot ultimately be stronger than he is until he has been weakened and she strengthened.

She escapes from Rochester's impending domination when she flees Thornfield. During her sojourn with the Rivers siblings, she acquires a fortune and a family, the two things she needs in order to have a place of her own in society. This sojourn, although in some ways a detour in the plot, is more than a convenient means of providing her with these necessities. Rather, this segment of the work illuminates many important aspects of the novel's themes. For instance, Jane does not face oppression in this environment, and as a consequence she does not need to speak out about her experience as a means of resistance. Eventually acquiring a fairly independent existence as a schoolteacher, she does not even have to explain who she is. Even so, however, she must ultimately employ the truth in order to remain free.

As at Thornfield, she faces domination by a potential husband. Like Rochester, St. John Rivers is a man who is not willing to face the truth of his own existence, let alone Jane's. Refusing to acknowledge such truths is linked with oppression throughout the novel. St. John's offer of marriage and a life as a missionary is somewhat attractive to her. Although it would be difficult, it would provide her with a purpose in life. However, it would also mean submission to St. John.

His offer of a marriage of convenience would entail deceit, for the couple would be married in outward appearance only. This deceitful arrangement would be inextricably linked to Jane's loss of identity. And loss of identity would lead to loss of freedom:

As [St. John's] curate . . . I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings. . . . There would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine, to which he never came; and sentiments growing there, free and sheltered, which his austerity could never blight. . . . But as his wife--at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked--forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low . . . this would be unbearable. (389)

Jane must reject this arrangement by confronting St. John with her reality. He is reluctant to accept this reality, but she continues to resist until he does.

Finally, revealing the truth of her identity quite literally provides her with the money and status that make her "an independent woman," (416) able to live on her own terms. When she proves to be the long-sought heir (an interesting pun on her name), she claims the material rights that have always belonged to her. But more importantly, she always claims the human rights that are due her, regardless of her social status.

Thus, Jane Eyre finds better weapons to use in fighting to preserve her

personal integrity than “silence, exile, and cunning” (Joyce 247). For silence and cunning, she substitutes voice and frankness. Although she does briefly choose exile as a defensive weapon, she returns from it when she gains the means to coexist peacefully with Rochester and the world as a whole, secure in her identity and free to tell her truths and have them be heard.

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