

Using Language to Rage against Victorian Hierarchy: Self-constructed Feminist Identity in *Jane Eyre*

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Received: 24th August 2019

Revised: 1st December 2019

Published: 1st April 2020

Abstract

All human beings seek certain identities in order to understand their existence and position in society, the groups to which they belong, and the unique characteristics they have. This paper examines how, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte examines socially constructed institutionalism in Victorian England. This paper also explores how the protagonist, Jane Eyre, oppressed due to her social class and gender, struggles to live with equality, dignity, and freedom, and finally reaches independence and self-fulfillment. Jane successfully completes the stages of identity development, and, after acquiring a sense of competence, achieves happiness and intimacy in an equal partnership with her true love, Mr. Rochester.

Keywords: Victorian Hierarchy, feminist identity, social class, gender oppression, self-fulfillment

Introduction

In recent decades, more people have realized that all human beings are created equal, regardless of gender and social class. Many films and novels thus consider feminism and social status. The autobiographical novel *Jane Eyre*, written by English writer Charlotte Bronte, is one such work. *Jane Eyre* describes the experience of a ten-year-old orphan, Jane Eyre, and her psychological growth to adulthood under the double oppressions of gender and social class in Victorian England. As Showalter (1977) described, *Jane Eyre* is a story of a young heroine seeking her self-definition and female identity.

According to Burke and Stets (2009), identity theory belongs to social psychological science, through which people try to recognize themselves and understand their interaction with the society, and what qualities, beliefs, or roles they take on in order to negotiate with the outside world from a sociological perspective. All human beings seek certain identities in order to understand their existence and position in society, the groups to which they belong, and the unique characteristics they have (Burke & Stets, 2009).



The paper examines how, in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë examines socially constructed institutionalism in Victorian England. This paper also explores how the protagonist, Jane Eyre, oppressed due to her social class and gender, struggles to live with equality, dignity, and freedom, and finally reaches independence and self-fulfillment.

Method

This study uses gender-oriented literary criticism to analyze Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, exploring how the novel engages with dominant views about women and their objectification in male-centered society. The study scrutinizes how the social and cultural institutions of Victorian England furthered gender stereotypes, and thereby limited women's opportunity for development—in part by trapping them in concepts of domesticity created by and for the benefit of men. By exploring the psychological growth of the protagonist, Jane Eyre, who was oppressed due to her social class as well as her gender, the study questions male-dominated views of sexual identity. The paper shows how, in opposition to such sexist views and ideologies, Jane Eyre struggled toward a life of equality, dignity, and freedom, and finally reached independence and self-fulfillment.

Findings and discussion

Social Classes in Victorian English Society: Struggle of Human Rights

Jane Eyre, published in 1847, is set in the early nineteenth-century Victorian period (1832–1868), when social class was extremely important. The novel describes a ten-year-old orphan, Jane Eyre, who is raised and mistreated by her wealthy but cruel aunt, Mrs. Reed. In the novel, Jane struggles to find her self-definition and identity.

Nineteenth-century Victorian English society had a strict social hierarchical structure based on wealth, education, and working and living conditions. There were three classes, known as social stratification: the upper class, the middle class, and the working class (Michell, 2009). Social class influenced every aspect of life. People in different classes were expected to conform to the social class hierarchy, in which people in the upper class held powerful positions. They had better living conditions and more advantages compared to other social classes. Generally, they did not need to work, because their money came from inheritance and investment. In addition, tutors educated upper-class children. In *Jane Eyre*, Mrs. Reed, Jane's aunt, represents nineteenth-century upper-class English women: those women who did not need to work outside the home but spent their time supervising servants, attending parties, and travelling (Mitchell, 2009).

The definition of the middle class is more complicated. Basically, people in the class were defined by their careers rather than their incomes. That is, middle-class people might have had good jobs but low incomes. However, there was a distinction between the middle class and the working class. Most people in Victorian England belonged to the working class. People in the working class tended to be poor. Even though they had houses in which to live, their houses were rented or in disrepair. They worked twelve hours a day in factories or slaved in the houses of wealthy people. When the father of a family died, that family lost their main source of



income and eventually were forced to live on the streets. Due to their living conditions, some working-class families asked their children to work in order to earn extra money. Therefore, children in the working class had almost no chance to go to school (Bornschiefer, 1996; Michell, 2009).

Jane was born into a poor family. Her father was a clergyman. Although Jane's mother was from a higher class, she married against her father's wishes. Hence, Jane's mother was cut off from the Reed family, falling from the upper class to the lower class. Aunt Reed at Gateshead-hall thus thinks she and Jane belong to different levels of society. Therefore, after the deaths of Jane's parents, when Jane has no choice but to move into Gateshead-hall, Aunt Reed despises Jane and raises her without care and love. The death of her parents is a severe trauma for Jane, not only because of the loss of love and intimacy but also the diminished care and financial support for her food and education.

After her parents' and her uncle's deaths, Jane begins her miserable life under her aunt's roof and is upgraded to the margins of the upper class. Nonetheless, because Jane is an orphan from a poor family, her aunt and her cousins think that Jane does not deserve to live at the same high social standing they do. Therefore, they do not treat her as family but as a servant. A lonely, unwanted orphan living in the wealthy Reed family, Jane also fears her cousin John Reed, a fourteen-year-old boy. Jane endures John Reed's abuse, bullying, and punishment, "not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually, even calling Jane "bad animal!" (Bronte, 1975, p. 10). All Jane can do is to "resist all the way" (p. 12) to survive, staying "habitually obedient to John" (p. 10) in order to survive.

Once, when Jane is reading behind a curtain, John humiliates her by saying: "You have no business to take our books: you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us" (p. 10). Jane has tried to be submissive. However, when John hurls a volume at Jane, Jane uses her words to fight back, saying "wicked and cruel boy! . . . You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!" (p. 11). Jane uses language to justify her existence/identity and to fight the unfair treatment in the Victorian hierarchy. Unfortunately, her fighting against Victorian social institutionalism causes her more hardship: John runs at Jane, grabbing her hair and shoulder. Jane feels "a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent suffering" (p. 11).

Lacking parental love and protection, Jane tries to be powerful and independent to arm herself against physical and verbal attacks. Thus, when bullied by her cousins, Jane uses her language to defend against the hierarchy and to address her identity. Eager for love and care, Jane uses words to express her grievances and to court Mrs. Reed's motherly affection. However, Mrs. Reed punishes Jane for "fighting back" against John, her "master": Jane is caught by "four hands," "borne upstairs" (p. 11), and locked in the cold and scary red-room to learn discipline and submission. The cold red-room, where Mr. Reed (Jane's uncle) died, becomes Jane's exile from upper-class society and the intimacy of human interactions.

After shutting Jane in the haunting "red-room," Mrs. Reed cannot tolerate Jane; to get rid of Jane, she sends Jane to Lowood School, a charity school for orphans. Once again, Jane lacks the intimacy of any interpersonal relationship. On the day



she leaves for Lowood School, Jane makes a clear cut with Mrs. Reed's family, once again using language to address her unjust punishment and insupportable oppression, saying:

I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty (p. 36-37).

Jane should perhaps show gratitude for her aunt's financial assistance rather than rebelling against her aunt. However, to keep her integrity, Jane does not want to be the doll of rich people. She wants to decide the course of her own life instead of being under the control of her aunt or anyone else. Jane's rebellious behavior shows a feminist consciousness.

Jane's rebellion against Mrs. Reed and John, symbols of paternalism and the patriarchy, represents the rise of her feminist consciousness, rebellion against the institutionalized system of authority or male dominance. Although she is marginalized under Victorian institutionalism, Jane uses language to find her own voice and freedom, a language that reinforces her self-built qualities, beliefs, and identity in order to find an outlet in the female-unfriendly institutionalized system.

Jane bravely addresses the wicked behavior and undeserved punishment of John and Mrs. Reed. Jane declares that as a human, no one can force her to be subordinate in the institutionalized system, even with violence or punishment. As Jane says to Mrs. Reed, "punishment you made me suffer because your wicked boy struck me—knocked me down for nothing. I will tell anybody who asks me questions, this exact tale. People think you a good woman, but you are bad, hard-hearted. You are deceitful!" (p. 37). Despite suffering mistreatment, Jane uses her speech as power to fight back and to declare her subjectivity.

For Jane, language becomes a tool not only to retain her dignity and subjectivity, but also to release her emotions. Begging her aunt to "have mercy," Jane rebels against her aunt, who "roughly and violently thrust me [Jane] back—into the red-room, and locked me up there, to my dying day" (p. 37).

Being physically and spiritually imprisoned in the red-room, Jane realizes she is a "discord" at Gateshead-hall (a symbol of the upper class): "I was like nobody there: I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children or her chosen vassalage" (p. 15). Jane fails to win her aunt's love or care and is denied by her cousins. Jane has no identity at Gateshead-hall; hence, she must leave for the Lowood School to develop her identity, where she struggles for eight years to tolerate the "semi-starvation and neglected colds" (p. 77).

The Lowood School is a charity school for orphan girls; the stay at Lowood School causes Jane to sink from the margins of upper class to the lower social class. However, Lowood allows Jane to face her identity as an orphan girl of the lower class. For Jane, Lowood is a prison, with harsh food and clothes. She suffers cruel treatment in the form of food deprivation and humiliating punishment at the hands of Mr. Brocklehurst, the head of Lowood, and Miss Scatcherd. Jane reveals her feeling toward Mr. Brocklehurst:



I disliked Mr. Brocklehurst; and I was not alone in the feeling. He is a harsh man; at once pompous and meddling he cut off our hair; and for economy's sake bought us bad needles and thread, with which we could hardly sew (p124).

By speaking out about her disagreement with Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane negatively identifies with Mr. Brocklehurst.

However, at Lowood, she is inspired by her best friend, Helen Burns, and her teacher, Miss Temple. Jane says that Miss Temple's instruction gave her "the best part of my acquirements; her friendship and society had been my continual solace; she had stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and, latterly, companion" (p. 84). After her abuse in Aunt Reed's house, Jane is full of self-doubt and frustration. Nonetheless, with Miss Temple and Helen Burns as role models of loving mothers, Jane learns self-restraint; she learns how to control her actions and emotions, how to negotiate with the outside world, and how to use moderate rebellions against the unfair gender and class mechanism (Nestor, 1987).

During her eight-year stay at Lowood, in addition to love from Helen and Miss Temple, Jane receives sound education and professional skills, which qualify to be a governess. This in turn allows her to be financially independent. Before, Jane had encountered many economic and social hardships. Being a governess allows Jane to become more confident and independent and, to an extent, to reach her self-definition. In addition, becoming a governess upgrades Jane from a vulgar and uneducated woman of the working class to a well-educated and independent woman (Mitchell, 2009).

Even though being a governess lets Jane become independent, she is still penniless and powerless, for a governess receives minimum wages and is isolated from the household, stuck in the margin between servants and family members (Christ & Robson, 2006). While serving as governess at Thornfield, Jane must educate Adèle, Mr. Rochester's daughter. However, Jane is treated more as a servant than a teacher and the upper class remains contemptuous of her; as Blanche Ingram and her mother say, "don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice" (p. 179). As Peterson (1972) explains, as governess, Jane is in an ambiguous situation, neither in the upper class nor in the working class.

Feminism Theory in *Jane Eyre*: Struggle of Women's Rights

Aside from social hierarchy, gender stereotypes were also a serious problem in Victorian England, and another factor that made Jane independent and rebellious. A social value of Victorian England was that men were superior to women. Jane disagrees with the male expectation that women are supposed to be silent and tolerated. Men expected women to never have emotions like anger or impatience, and to never be aggressive. Arriving at Thornfield, Jane is eager to be independent and be herself, and wants more interaction with the outside world. Jane reveals her restlessness:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged



fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags (p. 110-111).

Stuck in the Victorian gender stereotyping and social institutionalism, Jane believes that though women and men form their individual identities based on their social roles. But she expects gender equality, under which men and women have right to pursue their happiness and reach self-fulfillment. Jane believes there should be no differences between men and women. They should be equally treated in terms of access to education and opportunities to use their talents. Moreover, women should have access to high-responsibility jobs rather than simply domestic chores. However, in reality, Victorian women were living under a patriarchal ideology in which women were supposed to be subservient to men (Muda, 2011).

Though Jane has no chance at changing the patriarchal system of Victorian England, by speaking her feminist philosophy, she challenges traditional gender stereotypes and the rooted ideas about male superiority over women. By challenging traditional gender stereotypes, feminists attempt to deconstruct the stability of patriarchal system, to examine women's rights in the context of social, economic, and political forces, and to reach gender equality (Cuddon, 1998). Simultaneously, by speaking out about her belief that women should have equal rights to men, Jane releases her anger and depression about unfair gender oppression and frees herself from male domination.

Feminist theory aims to understand the core of inequality and focus on gender relations, authority relationship, and sexuality. Victorian women were deprived of many rights granted to men; hence women falling to lower social status. Therefore, women with feminist consciousness fought for equal rights to jobs, equal pay, education, and voting and political rights. Also, they argued for equal rights within marriage, where there should be no domestic violence, no gender discrimination, and even an equal distribution of housework (Carlson & Ray, 2011). By fighting for women's rights, feminist philosophers intend to deconstruct the socially constructed patriarchal culture and to claim gender equality in terms of social, economic, and political reform (Seldon, 2005).

In western countries during the nineteenth century, women and men were expected to live different lives. Men were meant to live public lives. They were free to do anything they wanted. For example, they could attend clubs, meetings, or bars and socialize with like-minded men, while women could only live their lives homebound. Even though women great capacity, they did not have opportunities to use their talents. They could only do the chores and take care of their children. They were like by-products of men. However, in the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, women began to fight for equal rights. They hoped that they could have the right to control their futures (Sailus, 2017).

Jane Eyre, in which Jane defies the rules of society and speaks out about her feelings, shows this situation. However, this phenomenon was rare at that time. In the early Victorian age, most women chose to be silent and tolerant, because it had been normal to believe that men were superior to women. Instead of being voiceless, Jane prefers to let her voice be heard and preserve her identity and freedom in a society that is governed by males. Therefore, in order to keep free of



patriarchal control, Jane decides to maintain the integrity of her identity by not getting married. Attempting to reach self-definition, Jane tries to recognize herself and interact more with the society, to ascertain which groups people belong to, and to give meaning to her existence (Burke & Stets, 2009).

After leaving Lowood, Jane serves as governess at Thornfield Hall for Adèle, daughter of her master, Edward Rochester. Jane soon falls in love with her master. Although she yearns for love and intimacy, Jane reminds herself of her social position at Thornfield and the great difference in social class between her and Rochester. As Shuttleworth (1996) suggests, as with Jane's stay with the Reed family, Jane is once again situated at an ambiguous social level: she belongs neither to the upper gentry nor the working class, but somewhere in between.

However, even with her lower social economic status, Jane would never sacrifice her freedom or subjectivity to subordinate herself to the patriarchal system; rather, she looks for equality with men.

Identity and Self-fulfilment through Searching for Equality via Love

The same insistence of her subjectivity also occurs in Jane's response to Rochester's proposal, which shows her feminist philosophy regarding gender equality. After promising to marry Rochester, Jane learns that Rochester already has a wife, who is wild and insane. Jane finds her true love in Rochester and is eager to settle down, taking Thornfield as her home. Although knowing that Rochester has a wife, Jane, sympathizing with Rochester, almost persuades herself to become Rochester's mistress. Her love/passion for Rochester almost overcomes her reason, allowing her to relinquish herself to passion. Jane is torn between her conscience and her emotions:

'Oh, comply!' it said. 'Think of his misery; think of his danger—look at his state when left alone: remember his headlong nature; consider the recklessness following on despair—soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what you do?' (p. 321)

However, after thorough contemplation, Jane is not willing to compromise herself, because being a mistress, a type of slave, would mean putting herself in an unequal situation with Rochester (Boumelha, 1990)—not to mention that an affair is morally wrong. Responding to Rochester, Jane says, "If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress: to stay otherwise is sophistical—is false" (p. 308).

Although Thornfield and Rochester can provide Jane with the feelings of home and happiness, Jane knows that being a mistress to Rochester at Thornfield would be a type of self-imprisonment. Finally, to remain her moral integrity and her self-respect, Jane decides to leave Rochester, saying, "Sir, your wife is living" (p. 308). Even though she risks losing Rochester, Jane asserts her identity to Rochester, saying: "Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation?—a machine without feelings?" (p. 255). She claims to Rochester that though she is "poor, obscure, plain, and little," she has "as much soul as" him, saying that "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, — as we are!" (p. 255-256).



The passage portrays Jane's attempts to keep an equal sexual and loving relationship with Rochester. She is eager to jump outside the convention that society has attempted to set for women: subordination. Women were expected to be submissive to their husbands. Hence, they tended to hide their feelings when they were mistreated. Unlike the women disciplined in her institutionalized society, Jane thinks that a loving relationship calls for mutual respect, not a master-slave relationship. Upon leaving Rochester, Jane once again declares her identity and subjectivity: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (p. 321).

To remain her subjectivity, Jane also considers St. John's idea of love. She turns down St. John's proposal, refusing to sacrifice herself to being a missionary's wife. Jane's marriage with St. John would not be based on mutual love and equal social standing but self-sacrifice; she says that to be John's wife, she would have to devote all herself "on the alter—heart, vitals, the entire victim" (p. 409).

However, the reunion of Jane and Rochester is based on equal social standing and mutual love. Rochester responds to Jane: "I longed for thee, Janet! Oh, I longed for thee both with soul and flesh!" (p. 452) because Jane is Rochester's "second self, and best earthly companion" (p. 256). Jane also feels comfortable with Rochester. Although Rochester is blind and crippled, Jane feels that she is "absolutely bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh" (p. 456). Moreover, with Rochester, Jane does not need to squash her identity. She is free to be herself, because their marriage is based on an equal loving and sexual relationship, in which there is mutual dependency and subjectivity. Therefore, Rochester says to Jane that, "My bride is here because my equal is here, and my likeness" (p. 257).

Conclusion

This paper uses *Jane Eyre* to discuss about feminism and social status in Victorian England and to see how Jane goes through identity development to reach independence and autonomy. Jane's defiance of conventional institutionalism in Victorian England lets her question gender and social conventions and hence affects her behavior and identities. However, while questioning these conventions, Jane controls her anger and emotions about the unreasonable oppression and further uses reason to compromise with the outside world while remaining her dignity and subjectivity.

While going through the loss of her parents, childhood bullying at Gateshead, half-starvation and cruel punishment at the Lowood School, loneliness at Thornfield Hall, and self-exile after learning that Rochester has a wife, Jane goes through what Erikson (1980) calls the stages of identity development. In the stages of identity development, she fights against social class and gender domination to search for equality and freedom. Finally, Jane successfully completes the stages of identity development and acquires a sense of competence, to achieve happiness and intimacy with her true love, Mr. Rochester, in an equivalent partnership.



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