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ENGH 500

13 December 2024

"A Free Human Being with an Independent Will": Victorian Women's Fates in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's revolutionary bildungsroman, *Jane Eyre*, broke the mold for female heroines. In an era of Victorian restraint and narrowly defined roles for women, Brontë created a character, widely recognized as the first female first-person narrator of a novel, who voiced her opinions unabashedly, declared herself and other women equal to men, and broke free from her servitude. The novel upended convention on multiple levels, prompting some critics to decry it as immoral and anti-Christian. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë draws on her own life experience as a governess to highlight not only the social ambiguity of governesses and the precarious nature of their position, but also to illustrate women's limited capacity for advancement in Victorian England through the female characters in the novel. Brontë boldly explores the prevailing gender constraints she experiences in her life through *Jane Eyre*, and in so doing, challenges the restraints placed upon women in both society and literature.

The Victorian feminine ideal required women to be focused on two main tasks: childbearing and marriage. After marriage, the perfect Victorian lady was a woman of leisure, leaving the tasks of parenting and childrearing to nannies and governesses. As a woman's status was "totally dependent upon the economic position of her father and then her husband" (Vicinus 9), an unmarried woman presented a financial burden to the household. Despite women in the lower classes needing to work, their ideal remained the upper-class lady. As Martha Vicinus

states, “the clearest characteristic of the mid-Victorian period was how few women of character fit the ideal lady” (11). With her family on the lower cusp of the middle class due to her clergyman father’s meager income, Brontë was one of the Victorian women who needed to work to contribute to her household’s earnings.

Having a gentlewoman work as a governess when the Victorian virtues she was expected to instill in the children of the family dictated that ladies were not supposed to work constituted a “status incongruence” (Peterson 11). Socially, governesses fit in with neither the servants of the house nor the family for whom they worked; they represented a muddled mixture of both. With the pay being low and the risk of unemployment high, the position was a risky one. The governess, unlike the household servant who may have been supported by her employer into old age, was “in danger of collapsing into working-class slavery or even pauperism if she was, as was often the case, summarily dismissed by her employers” (Bell 265). Brontë illustrates this when Jane runs away from Thornfield Hall and is driven into poverty. She begs for employment as a dressmaker, as a servant—needing to sink lower and lower in her social station. Finally, she must resort to begging for porridge from a pig’s trough. Were it not for her stumbling upon her cousins, she may have continued begging, taken ill and died, or, as was the case with some governesses who had fallen upon hard times, been driven to prostitution.

Elizabeth Gaskell writes about Brontë that “much as she disliked the life of a private governess, it was her duty to relieve her father of the burden of her support, and this was the only way open to her” (156). Brontë, while eager to obtain a situation, was unhappy in the households in which she was employed. She writes to her sister, Emily, “I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil. While she is

teaching the children, working for them, amusing them, it is all right. If she steals a moment for herself she is a nuisance" (Brontë 430). In creating a character like Jane Eyre, Brontë was able to give an authentic voice to governesses, to express what she herself may have been feeling as she straddled the worlds of the servant class and the master class. When Thornfield Hall needs extra hands in the kitchen, Jane finds herself in the role of a cook, "learning to make custards and cheesecakes and French pastry, to truss game and garnish dessert dishes" (Brontë 148). According to Lauren Owsley, "while the servant is cognizant of his or her lower class and is consequently able to socialize with those of the same status, the governess is uniquely alone and unable to affiliate with either of the social poles of the home" (60). Jane's nebulous role as governess, in addition to her being an orphan, adds to her isolation in the world.

One of the reasons Jane was a controversial character at the time, was that she expressed longing for more than the hand she was delt. After arriving at Thornfield Hall to serve as governess, Jane feels restless and longs to challenge herself intellectually and explore the world. She says, "[w]ho blames me? Many, no doubt, and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes" (Brontë 100). Jane consistently challenges her prescribed role in the world and in doing so, she boldly speaks not only for governesses, but all women:

> 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. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they

> seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 101)

Jane's controversial words could have been taken out of one of Brontë's letters to her sisters or her best friend, Ellen. In fact, she tells Ellen in a letter, "I shall soon be 30—and I have done nothing yet—Sometimes I get melancholy—at the prospect before and behind me—yet it is wrong and foolish to repine … I long to travel—to work to live a life of action" (Brontë 425). It is clear Brontë's aspirations were stifled by the lack of choices open to her.

Brontë was unafraid to express her opinions regarding the position of the governess. She writes to a reader at her publishing company that "The Governesses' Institution may be an excellent thing in some points of view, but it is both absurd and cruel to attempt to raise still higher the standard of acquirements. Already governesses are not half nor a quarter paid for what they teach" (Brontë 433). Jane echoes Brontë's sentiments about the position of the governess throughout the novel. After she learns that Diana and Mary Rivers are to take positions as governesses, Jane says that their future employers were families "by whose wealthy and haughty members they were regarded only as humble dependents, and who neither knew nor sought one of their innate excellences, and appreciated only their acquired accomplishments as they appreciated the skill of their cook or the taste of their waiting-woman" (Brontë 315). As Jane contemplates her new position of headmistress in Morton, she says, "compared with that of a governess in a rich house, it was independent; and the fear of servitude with strangers entered my soul like iron: it was not ignoble—not unworthy—not mentally degrading" (Brontë 317). Brontë shows us that what Jane values most is freedom from the bondage of servitude—that she would rather degrade herself socially for the sake of a semblance of independence than be subjected to being a dependent governess for a wealthy family.

Through the female characters in the novel, Brontë illustrates the limitations imposed upon women as they struggle for survival in a world where "the structure of the Victorian labor system as demonstrated in *Jane Eyre* makes moot any attempt by women to gain personal agency" (Owsley 57). Brontë shows us that women can only survive with the help of male relatives, husbands, or employers. She illustrates the dire consequences of male-preference inheritance laws that favored the eldest males in a family. Jane's cruel aunt, Mrs. Reed, suffers a fatal stroke following her son's squandering of their family money, and her two daughters are left to figure out their survival on their own. As befitting their personalities, Eliza Reed becomes a Roman Catholic nun and Georgiana Reed makes an "advantageous match with a wealthy worn-out man of fashion" (Brontë 218).

At Thornfield Hall, we learn that Blanche Ingram is unmarried, as neither she nor her sister have large fortunes since their eldest brother inherited their family's estate. Blanche is exposed for the gold-digger she is and must resort to be, when Mr. Rochester—dressed as Sybil the fortuneteller—lies and tells her that he does not have a large estate. Consequently, Blanche and her mother become cold and distant as Blanche's entire future depends on Mr. Rochester's wealth. Céline Varens, Mr. Rochester's French former mistress, uses Mr. Rochester for money and abandons her illegitimate daughter, Adèle. Mr. Rochester, wishing to atone for past sins, takes her on as a ward and rescues her from the "slime and mud of Paris" (Brontë 132). Adèle is completely dependent on Mr. Rochester and would otherwise have been on the streets or in an orphanage. Brontë shows us women's lack of agency and the desperate lengths they must go through if they are not lucky enough to be endowed with wealth due to a man.

Brontë critiques the prevailing social norms by highlighting the stringent limitations placed upon these female characters that prevented their advancement in society and by creating

an unprecedented female heroine in response—a passionate woman who declares herself "a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë 228) and asserts herself against powerful figures such as Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, and Mr. Rochester. In her own life, Brontë also had to forge her own path, as her true passion was writing—an occupation not acceptable for women at the time. She wrote to the Poet Laureate Robert Southey to ask his opinion of her writing, and while he did acknowledge her literary gifts, he told her, "[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it" (Gaskell 123). Brontë replied, saying, "I have endeavored not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I'm teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself" (Gaskell 125). Brontë reveals the tragic discord between society's expectations of her and her innermost desires. Thankfully, not only did Brontë not give up writing, but true to her character and despite setbacks, she pursued it with fervor under a male pseudonym. When H.G. Lewes suggested Brontë tone down her writing and follow the lead of a more docile writer like Jane Austen, Brontë "rejected her as being elegant and confined, 'a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers.' Bronte herself did not wish to submit to pruning and miniaturization" (Showalter 102). This indomitable spirit and refusal to fulfill society's vision of a proper Victorian woman is evident not only in the trajectory of Brontë's life, but in the character of Jane Eyre.

With regard to Jane's character and fate, Brontë creates a utopian ideal when it comes to her path to independence and marriage. Realistically, Jane's circumstances would have remained dire given her financial insecurity, lack of connections, and lack of opportunity available for financial or social advancement. In order for Jane not to decline any further in social status and

instead attain full independence, Brontë has to distance herself from the realism of the novel and apply the element of fantasy in the serendipitous rescue by Jane's cousins and the timely inheritance from her uncle. Given the constrictive nature of Victorian gender norms, Jane only gains full freedom because Brontë "circumvents the social order and rhetorically grants Jane the circumstances necessary to achieve irrevocable equality in her relationship" (Owsley 63). This financial freedom allows Jane to achieve full personal agency, reject St. John's proposal, and go back to Mr. Rochester, this time on her terms. She tells him, "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (Brontë 387).

As in her own life, Brontë rejects Victorian ideals through Jane's character. Just as Jane does not settle for St. John's domineering proposal or for the wealth and safety net being Mr. Rochester's mistress would provide, Brontë herself refused to succumb to marriage as a means to an end. She states in a letter to one of the two men whose marriage proposals she rejected, "I will never, for the sake of attaining the distinction of matrimony and escaping the stigma of an old maid, take a worthy man whom I am conscious I cannot render happy" (Brontë 417). Rebecca Fraser writes, "[t]he character of Jane Eyre, as many who knew her would remark after reading the book, was Charlotte herself, struggling for independence, for recognition, and for love" (265). Jane asserts herself, professes forbidden love, equates women with men, and dares to make it acceptable for women to have passionate feelings. Through her writing, Brontë "was able to act out that passionate drive toward freedom which offended agents of the status quo" (Gilbert and Gubar 369). Much of Brontë's writing is infused with her own life experiences as two years prior to publishing *Jane Eyre*, she fell in love with a married man—her French teacher, Constantin Heger. In the internal struggles that ensue, Jane's unconventional, forbidden, and passionate romance with Mr. Rochester mirrors Brontë's own complicated, unrequited, and

socially unacceptable feelings for her married teacher.

Jane Eyre did not mince words. She listened to her feelings and was restless and passionate. As we observe St. John's relentless pursuit of her, Jane contemplates what life would be like with him: "always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—*this* would be unendurable" (Brontë 363). She rejects the prospect of a life of religious devotion amidst a loveless marriage, stating, "I broke from St. John, who had followed, and would have detained me. It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play, and in force" (Brontë 375). She chooses instead to pursue Mr. Rochester, not yet knowing Bertha Mason's fate, being fully comfortable simply following her feelings.

Critics praised *Jane Eyre*, which was an immediate commercial success, but as rumors swirled that the author was a woman, dissenting voices emerged. Elizabeth Rigby said Jane "has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature—the sin of pride. Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless—yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him… Altogether the autobiography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition" (Rigby 451). Jane was unlike any other female literary heroine who came before her. By wanting more for her life, refusing to be meek, and choosing love, she was rebellious. As Elaine Showalter writes, "[t]he influence of Jane Eyre on Victorian heroines was felt to have been revolutionary. The post-Jane heroine, according to the periodicals, was plain, rebellious, and passionate" (122). What Rigby referred to as "pride" could simply be described as a woman rejecting the shackles of a patriarchal society and wanting full personal agency. Through the heartbreakingly honest novel, *Jane Eyre*, we are granted a deeply personal glimpse into the life of one of the most influential literary trailblazers of all time.

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