Dugan Lentz

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Exploring Nature and Authenticity of the Self in *Jane Eyre*

The full title of *Jane Eyre* is *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography.* The illusion of realism is extended through use of first person and the presence of a narrator recording the events of her life ten years after the closing chapter. This is important because it establishes Jane's commitment to authenticity. We as readers see a definite shift in Jane's character from desiring freedom and independence– "I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon. I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer…" (Bronte, 102) –to her belief in principle over passion– "I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man" (Bronte, 365). By the end of the novel, Jane finds satisfaction with Rochester: "I will be your companion" (Bronte, 502). There are many ways to interpret how Jane comes to think of herself. This paper will explore the arguments of two critics: one who identifies *Jane Eyre* as a novel of providence, and the other a novel of power, each constructing their thesis around the language Jane utilizes as a character. I will then state my reasons for siding with one over the other.

In his article "*Jane Eyre* Cubed: The Three Dimensions of the Text," Jerome Beaty argues that the story evolves from one of rebellion to one of martyrdom, and that Bronte's use of 'serially disclosing' hints of Providence's intervention make *Janes Eyre* "a providential novel and its structure and strategies are designed to that end" (Beaty, 3). The structure and strategies Beaty mentions are complex, but serve to explain why there are 'misreadings' when it comes to analyzing Jane's *bildungsroman.* Beaty argues that there are three dimensions when it comes to reading a text (7). There's the temporal or linear reading, which emphasizes the aesthetic construction of the novel, the spatial reading that is applied once the reader has finished reading

that emphasizes the interpretive aspect of the text, and the intertextual, dimension: a "system of intelligibility" that incorporates social and literary conventions into the text (7). Such conventions would include the Fictional Autobiography, the *Bildungsroman,* the Gothic novel, and the governess novel, each one bringing to the table different, sometimes contrasting themes (8). For example, while the Fictional Autobiography tends to extoll individual rights and freedoms, the governess novel glorifies the "feminine and the genteel" (8). Beaty concludes that, because of so many values weighing the novel down, *Jane Eyre* is vulnerable to misreadings. Specifically, when it comes to Jane's character. According to Beaty, "For a good many readers now and then Jane Eyre is first and foremost the unloved, abused but independent, self-assertive and rebellious child at Gateshead and Lowood" (2). This is what Beaty calls the 'younger Jane', as opposed to the mature narrator who we learn much less about. "The reader hardly knows the Jane Rochester who has narrated her life-story" (2). So while a linear reading of text could bring the reader to identify with this younger Jane, a more spatial or holistic reading would illuminate spots in the book where there is "providential ontology" (3). Beaty presents the mature narrator–a voice that is easily overlooked compared to that of the younger Jane–as the key to marking Jane's journey to God's plan for her life (3).

Janet Freeman, author of the article, "Speech and Silence in *Jane Eyre*" has a different explanation for the inclusion of the mature narrator. Rather than an instructive force that makes readers experience the passions of her younger self only to enlighten them at the very end, Freeman argues that the mature narrator is proof that Jane has mastery over her voice after years of repression. Freeman gives an example from the beginning of the novel when Jane is being tormented at Gateshead Hall. Jane as a child could not answer the question: "Why I thus suffered" (Bronte, 12). The adult responds, "Now, at the distance of- I will not say how many years, I see it clearly. I was a discord at Gateshead Hall." This ties back to the greater subject of

Freeman's paper, which is, "The gift of speech - and silence, its counterpart - of uttering words and hearing them spoken…" (5). At the beginning of the novel, Jane's voice is constantly being overshadowed by those around her. At Gateshead Jane's identity is entirely defined by those around her. "You are a dependent," (Bronte, 8), "You are less than a servant" (Bronte, 9), "You are a strange child" (Bronte, 33) (2). For Jane, "speaking is the equivalent of self-assertion" (10), an argument that contrasts with Beaty's view which draws a clear line between the behavior of Jane Eyre and Jane Rochester and believes the latter to be the true manifestation of maturation. So why then does Freeman think it necessary for the narrator to address the reader over thirty times throughout the novel? Not only to prove her ownership of her story, but also as a way to "endorse" the validity of her words through our presence as readers (19). "For Jane Eyre's truth to be fully told, we are the ones who must hear it. "The eagerness of a listener quickens the tongue of a narrator" (Bronte, 175) (19).

To buttress their positions on *Jane Eyre* being a novel of providence/novel of power, Beaty and Freeman both identify Jane's refusal to accept Rochester's proposal as critical for her personal development. Intently focused on Jane's moral growth, Beaty acknowledges that a woman sacrificing her moral values to save the soul of her lover was not approved of in general society, rendering Jane's decision not all that revolutionary (13). We have seen signs of Jane's growing adherence to faith. Back in Lowood, Jane dismissed the Psalms as "not interesting" (Bronte, 35). However, on page 342, the end of volume two just after Jane discovers that Rochester has been hiding his marriage from her, she quotes Psalm 69 in a moment of distress. The mature narrator says of this time, "The floods overflowed me" (Bronte, 342) (11). We see Jane's brokenness here, and while Freeman would argue that Jane has freed herself from a manipulative man who was stealing Jane's voice, Beaty sees an example of Providence at work. Jane says "I care for myself . . . I will respect myself" (Bronte, 365), but Beaty warns the reader

not to take this declaration out of context (17). He cites a passage several pages later, with Jane strong in her conviction that she must leave Thornfield but uncertain of where to go, knowing she alone cannot sustain herself (17). "I had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self respect . . . Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step. God must have led me on" (Bronte, 370).

For Freeman, Jane's departure from Thornsfield isn't a matter of Providence but rather an internal decision to honor the authenticity of speech. "Words, to Jane Eyre, are the vehicle of truth . . . words, as Jane Eyre, defines them, can play no part in Rochester's game" (14). Rochester does not honor the truth, as is revealed to the audience when he dresses up as a gypsy to ascertain Jane's opinion of him, and, more seriously, when he dismisses Jane's vision of his wife standing in her room with the wedding gown as "figments of imagination" (Bronte, 250). So then, when Jane finally learns the truth about Bertha, she feels Rochester has committed the very worst of sins, because he did not tell her the truth (16). Jane only reunites with Rochester because she found him standing "mute in the rain" (Bronte, 380) (17). When Rochester asks repeatedly who is standing before him, Jane answers him, "I am Jane Eyre" (Bronte 381) (17). Later, Jane is described reading to Rochester, having at last found a place where her words have power (16).

After analyzing both critics' positions on Jane's personal journey, I find I side more with Beaty's view. Freeman's interpretation of the book as a journey from vocal repression to vocal assertion feels like a consequence of Jane's journey rather than the journey itself. I agree that words and how they're used in *Jane Eyre* are important but not "supreme" as Freeman claims (5). What I find to be supreme, that is, central to the meaning of the text, is how Bronte incorporates Providence and spirituality to teach Jane and Rochester self-control. For the number of times Providence is mentioned by name, it reads almost as a character unto itself. But it's not

as if Jane doesn't have free will. At Gateshead and Lowood, Jane's fiery passion is on full display. She discusses injustice with Helen Burns, arguing that she cannot possibly be good to those who show cruelty. Helen replies with, "You will change your mind, I hope, when you grow older: as yet you are but a little untaught girl" (Bronte, 68). Indeed, after eight years at Lowood, we see a change in Jane's temperament. Miss Temple had helped "regulate her emotions", making her "seem content" (Bronte, 100); that is, until Miss Temple left to be married, and "old passions" began to stir. There does seem to be this constant struggle within Jane between finding a home and finding liberty. She thinks she found both at Thornfield with Rochester, a man who values her independent thought. But when the truth about Bertha is revealed, Jane must exert self-control by choosing law and moral principle over passion, a lesson which Rochester still has to learn. After Briggs delivers damning evidence, Rochester says, "Bigamy is an ugly word! . . . I meant, however, to be a bigamist; but fate has out-maneuvered me, or Providence has checked me–perhaps the last" (Bronte, 336). As mentioned in Beaty's article, Jane refers to Psalm 69 on the road to the Moor House and then calls upon Providence to "Aid! –direct me!" (Bronte, 379).

I think Jane's willingness to be shown the way is indicative of how much her perspective has changed since Lowood. The passion of her youth has given way to a more mature idea of what it means to be free. And upon reflection, Jane states that she made the right decision in tempering her passions to preserve purity. "Yes; I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment. God directed me to a correct choice: I thank His providence for the guidance" (Bronte, 414). Ultimately, I think Jane returns to Rochester not because she saw him "mute in the rain" (Freeman, 17) and in a position where she could finally assert her authority, but because she knew his passion had been tempered as hers had been after losing his sight and mobility. Learning self-control had rendered them compatible, a lesson brought about by Providence.

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