Identity and Independence in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre

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In a time when women were considered little more than social adornments and bearers of offspring, Charlotte Bronte bravely contradicted society through her writing. Her novels speak volumes for the oppressed woman; thus establishing Charlotte Bronte as one of the first modern women of her time. Charlotte Bronte was progressive in her beliefs. In her novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte created the character of Jane of a slight woman, in all respects plain, modest, morally strong and intelligent. Like the author, Jane’s isolation created her persona, providing her with the necessary survival skills. Jane does not need a man to make her feel worthy; instead, she carries her self-worth in her mind and determination. Through Jane, Bronte exhibits resentment toward a society that has scorned her, while maintaining a detachment toward humanity as a whole.

When Charlotte Bronte published *Jane Eyre* she used a pseudonym that did not reveal the sex of the author, the name she used was Currer Bell, a name not distinctly masculine and yet not feminine. The character Jane Eyre can be seen as an unconventional female of the time, she is passionate and with a strong urge to fight injustice. Passion and a hot temper in a woman were not appropriate at the time and had to be repressed. The novel can be seen as a journey of Jane finding her true self. Jane fights convention by resisting the male dominance, on her quest for identity and independence she remains true to herself by putting herself first and caring for her own wellbeing, even though she is longing for love and kinship. It is a fact that woman authors during the time were not received as seriously as men; however, as Currer Bell, Charlotte had the freedom to create her characters the way she wanted. Concealed by anonymity, she created heroines with genuine ideas and erudite views, who, above all, respected themselves, and weren’t afraid to declare it. For Charlotte Bronte, it was the ideal emotional outlet.

Charlotte Bronte withdrew into the world she created. It was through her writing that she was allowed to breathe life into her suppressed self and dreams. Charlotte Bronte spoke of the evils of the condition of women, deep-rooted within the structure of the social system. Charlotte Bronte urged women not to linger on such problems; though the literary world must be grateful she did not heed her own advice. It was through her discontent that the character of Jane Eyre was born. When Jane ultimately falls in love, she embraces the notion of love itself, not the label or profits derived from it. However, Jane will not sacrifice her morals or self-respect for any man. In essence, she will not sacrifice herself. It is imperative to her to remain true to herself. Nothing can tempt Jane in this respect: wealth, status, or love.

“I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.” (Bronte 301).

Like Jane, Charlotte herself was determined to marry a man she respected. In fact, she refused several offers of marriage that would have afforded her a life of ease, simply because the offers did not come from men she
deemed her equal, or rather she felt them intellectually and morally deficient. She believed that a good woman, like any decent man, could not live without self-respect.

“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.” (Bronte 95)

This quote shows an unconventional and radical feministic view of men and women during the Victorian, patriarchal, time of Bronte. It displays Jane’s longing for equality and independence. The quote is also a way for the author to vent her repressed longing for a less restricted life and her feministic view through her protagonist.

Jane’s relationship with Rochester is complicated with a power imbalance. The relationship between Jane and Rochester is unequal on many points; he is twenty years older than her, much more experienced, he is from a higher social group, he is rich and she is poor and he is her master, inequalities that were a major barrier at the time. Due to their master employee relationship she only can talk to him when he calls for her and cannot seek his company whenever she wishes. During their evening conferences Jane shows strength by standing up to Rochester: “I don’t think, sir that you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience” (Bronte, 117). Even though Rochester makes it clear to Jane that he is older and more experienced, Jane still stands up to him and questions his right to command her during their discussions. Rochester, with his seniority of 20 years and his superior power, appears as a “father-man”. He could be the projection of the author’s longing for her ideal man which was a “father-surrogate” (Dooley 241). Jane’s unconscious could be looking for a father surrogate to compensate her fatherless childhood. Rochester tests Jane by spreading a rumour that he will marry Blanche Ingram causing Jane to feel insecure in regards to her looks. Blanche is a beautiful woman and Jane is aware of how the society and men rate women regarding how beautiful they are; beautiful women have a higher value than unattractive women. Beauty in a woman is regarded more important than intellect, because a woman was expected to be an ornament without much opinion.

Jane even though he already has a wife and is not able to enter another legally binding marriage it is a way of trying to exploit her. During the wedding preparations Jane realizes the great social difference and how she is to be financially dependent on Rochester; Rochester reminded her of a “sultan”, who “bestow on a slave his gold and gems” (Bronte 237). When the marriage is stopped Jane turns down a comfortable life as Rochester’s mistress because even though she loves him and wants to be with him she will be dependent and in a sense imprisoned as a slave. To Jane independence is very important and she will not sacrifice her integrity and dignity.

Jane finds her relatives and finally belongs to a family. After running away from Thornfield, Jane is homeless and without any possessions, she wanders lonely, freezing and hungry. I agree with Gilbert and Gubar that Jane’s situation symbolizes “the nameless, placeless and contingent status of women in a patriarchal society” (Bronte 364). Jane does however stumble on the home of her cousins at Marsh End, the name representing the end of her search; she will be able to find her identity and place in the world at last. The wailing infant
of Jane’s recurring dream (Bronte 194, 263) is finally silenced. The dream she had while at Thornfield could symbolize Jane that cannot be comforted, representing the suffering and loneliness she has experienced in her childhood which she carries with her into adulthood. Staying with her newly found good relatives helps her to heal and find a stable ground; she overcomes the anger she has regarding the abuse she suffered as a child living with her bad relatives; the Reed family. At Marsh End, some of her wishes come true; she finally belongs to a family, she is intellectually stimulated by studying together with her cousins Diana and Mary, and her dream of starting a small school comes true with the help of her cousin St. John Rivers, who seeks her company more frequently and to begin with seems to offer a viable alternative to the life offered by Rochester.

St. John offers Jane to become his wife and helper as a missionary in India, however tempted Jane is to accept the proposal, she realizes that such a loveless union will shorten her life. The novel depicts Jane as a heroine with strong desires. When Jane is courted by St. John Rivers, she fears that if they married, he would ‘scrupulously observe … all the forms of love’ while the spirit was absent: he would offer sex, in other words, without romantic love. Jane feels this would force her ‘to burn inwardly and never utter a cry’ (ch. 34). Jane realizes that St. John is the opposite of Rochester in many ways. He is cold and without passion, and he aims to suppress Jane’s personality and independence. “I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him” (Bronte 352). Women at the time were brought up and conditioned that men were powerful and women followers that suppressed their own identity. Jane’s eagerness to please a product of that she has never before felt true belonging could be one of the reasons why she has such difficulties to fend herself from St. John’s increasing power over her. “I felt his influence in my marrow – his hold on my limbs” (Bronte 359). Jane agrees to follow him to India to become a missionary as his helper but not his wife as she feels that he does not love her, she feels as he rather hates her and marrying send her to a premature death (Bronte 365). His persistence is strong and she is getting “hard beset by him” but in a different way she had been by Rochester, to yield would have been an error of judgment (Bronte 370). St. John is using arguments such as “God and nature intended you as a missionary’s wife” (Bronte 356). His arguments of duty and service called by God are difficult to object to for Jane, conditioned by her years at Lowood where religion had an important role to educate the girls to obey patriarchal leaders. While on the verge to give in to St. John’s persistence, Jane is saved by Rochester’s call for her. His call which she imagines to hear, I interpret to be her unconscious protecting her from committing a terrible error of entering a loveless marriage and future leading to a premature death.

When Jane re-unites with Rochester she is independent and the power balance between them have shifted. During her stay at Marsh End Jane finds out that she has inherited a large sum of money after her uncle in Madeira. When Jane re-unites with Rochester she is financially independent and Bertha is dead. The fact that she now has relatives is another factor that makes her more equal because she is no longer alone in the world. Rochester hurt himself in the fire while trying to rescue Bertha and became blind and he now needs Jane to be his eyes and care for him. Jane and Rochester finally enter a marriage of two equals which was unheard of at the time. I feel that this could be the reason why they live isolated in the forest without any social life to speak of. I also think that it was clear that Jane did not care for the superficial social life she was forced to be an observer of at Thornfield when Rochester was putting on his show of courting Blanche. In the end Jane found her place in life: “No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am […] to be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company” (Bronte 399). Jane found the love and kinship she longed for without sacrificing her own identity and independence. Rochester adds interest to Jane’s life with
the intellectual stimulus of their evening conferences, which she was lacking before he entered the scene. Jane and Rochester can be considered quite equal intellectually, however to begin with many inequalities exist.

Jane stays true to herself during her quest for identity and independence. The frightening night in the Red Room causes her grow up overnight and having experienced true fear she is no longer afraid to stand up for herself against the patriarchal society. Miss Temple teaches her to repress her rage. Through the death of Helen and Bertha Jane is freed from the male ideal of female identity; the angel-in-the-house and the demon. Jane’s quest for identity and independence comes together at Marsh End. She finds her good relatives at Marsh and overcomes the injustices by the bad relatives at Gateshead. Jane finds a stable ground and overcomes the rage repressed in her unconscious.

To free herself in the patriarchal society Jane meets and overcomes: oppression by the Reed family and Mr. Brocklehurst, starvation at Lowood and during her wandering before reaching Marsh End, madness in the Red Room and at Thornfield and coldness by being lonely and by the way St. John treated her. Even though she longs for love she does not let Rochester or St. John exploit her and in the end she finds the equal relationship she longed for.

Jane returns to Rochester and finally offers her unconditional love to him when he essentially has nothing left. Blind and penniless, Rochester can only offer himself, proving that for Bronte love transcends the societal expectations of marriage, and is based instead on mutual respect and love. Bronte, in her subtlety, wrote of simple women, who relied upon the respect of themselves, rather than society, to provide fulfilment in their lives. Through her characters, Bronte gave the gift of the modern woman, a woman determined to make her own way, and live her life by her own set of standards, dictated not by society but by herself, and herself alone.

Jane surpasses all of the gentlemen in the novel to become the character with the truest qualities and the ability to deal with any situation presented to her with grace and dignity. She becomes a heroine in the true sense in that she not only saves herself multiple times, but she saves her hero from a life of desperate solitude. This evolution in her character would not have been possible, however, if it were not for the fact that there are no real gentlemen in the novel who would have taken Jane’s place and swept her off her feet. Thus she is equal to a gentleman if not above him, and that allows the reader to see her as the strongest character in the novel.

Charlotte shows her reader, the fallibility of men and the strength and resolve of women. They are not shrinking violets who end their stories in fairy tale weddings and live forever in the largest house in the county. They are women who look after their men, a stronger, more active version of the angel of the house. In breaking with this tradition, the reader is given a new hero, a feminine hero, to champion. For Charlotte, the power and honour of her women seems far more important than their living happily ever after.

**Works Cited**

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