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Jane Eyre and Education

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë created the first female Bildungsroman in the English language when she wrote *Jane Eyre* in the mid-nineteenth century. Brontë's novel explores the development of a young girl through her educational experiences. The main character, Jane Eyre, receives a formal education as a young orphan and eventually becomes both a teacher and a governess. Jane's life never strays far from formal education, regardless of whether she is teaching or being taught. In each of Jane's experiences, she learns invaluable lessons, both in and out of the classroom environment. Jane excels in the sphere of formal education, which allows her to become a graceful and accomplished woman. However Jane learns the most important lessons of her life during crises. The moral and spiritual lessons Jane acquires in times of difficulty are the most important educational experiences she receives, and they allow her to progress from a lonely orphan to a happily married woman.

Keywords

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Comments

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Charlotte Brontë created the first female Bildungsroman in the English language when she wrote *Jane Eyre* in the mid-nineteenth century. Brontë's novel explores the development of a young girl through her educational experiences. The main character, Jane Eyre, receives a formal education as a young orphan and eventually becomes both a teacher and a governess. Jane's life never strays far from formal education, regardless of whether she is teaching or being taught. In each of Jane's experiences, she learns invaluable lessons, both in and out of the classroom environment. Jane excels in the sphere of formal education, which allows her to become a graceful and accomplished woman. However Jane learns the most important lessons of her life during crises. The moral and spiritual lessons Jane acquires in times of difficulty are the most important educational experiences she receives, and they allow her to progress from a lonely orphan to a happily married woman.

During the mid-nineteenth century, many young girls of the middle class were sent to boarding schools, and, like Jane's school, the conditions were well below average. The meager provisions and substandard facilities often deterred prospective students. In her book *The Brontës and Education*, Marianne Thormählen discusses the conditions of boarding schools: "As the many tales of horror schools in nineteenth-century literature remind us, badly run schools posed dangers to children's physical and mental health, sometimes to their lives. It was hard for parents to ascertain just how well managed a school was" (34). Despite the poor conditions characteristic of boarding schools in the 1800's, there were many middle class girls who were educated in

these institutions just as Jane was. Many females of the lower classes were unable to attend schools altogether, and were educated at home by their mothers in order to become proficient homemakers. A woman's job was to create a haven of a household that provided shelter from the turbulence of the immoral outside world, so many parents disliked the idea of formal education. Joan Burstyn explains, "Not only was it feared that higher education would encourage women to desert domesticity, but it would make marriage seem undesirable" (41). There was an intense fear that surrounded the education of young women, as parents believed their daughter's feminine qualities would be compromised through independent thought, making them incapable of successful marriage. Jane Eyre surpasses the limitations of the time period and receives a formal education as a poor and orphaned young girl.

Jane's first exposure to formal education is at Lowood School, an institution for orphaned girls. At Lowood, she discovers a life full of physical impoverishment and educational plenty. Lowood is a humble establishment that does not create an encouraging environment. Mr. Brocklehurst, the supervisor of the institution, describes Lowood by saying, "Humility is a Christian grace, and one particularly appropriate to the pupils of Lowood: I therefore, direct that especial care shall be bestowed on its cultivation among them. I have studied how best to mortify in them the worldly sentiment of pride" (656). This mortification of pupils leads to the cold rooms of Lowood School and inadequate supplies of food and proper clothing. The students suffer sickness and malnourishment as a result. A life of deprivation is not the ideal environment to cultivate young curiosity and learning, but Jane rises above the scanty physical provisions. Jane spends six years as a pupil at Lowood, and she receives a well-rounded education that includes sewing, piano, French, and drawing. Although Lowood unsatisfactorily attends to the

physical needs of its pupils, the institution manages to be academically acceptable. Thormählen examines the scholastic merit of Lowood: “Even then, its badness only extends to matters non-academic; Jane Eyre does not voice any criticism against the curriculum” (67). Jane Eyre receives a thorough education, despite all of the obstacles she faces. She spends another two years of her life at Lowood school as a teacher, where she is proficient and well-loved.

While Jane’s eight years at Lowood grant her a suitable education, she also learns many important moral and spiritual lessons through her experiences at school. Jane’s first spiritual advisor comes in the form of a friend, Helen Burns, another Lowood student. Jane is drawn to Helen’s deep spirituality and understanding immediately. In his article “The Merging of Spiritualities: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love,” J. Jeffrey Franklin claims, “Helen Burns represents an ideal within the Christian discourse of the novel... Indeed, Helen represents an ideal that the novel suggests is too good to live” (465). Helen is a devout Christian who can look beyond worldly struggles, while Jane is deeply affected and impassioned by the wrongs she witnesses. Helen explains to Jane,

“Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity, or registering wrongs. We are, and must be, one and all, burdened with faults in this world: but the time will soon come when, I trust, we shall put them off in putting off our corruptible bodies; when debasement and sin will fall from us with this cumbrous frame of flesh, and only the spark of the spirit will remain.” (674)

As a young girl, Helen meekly accepts the struggles that are thrust upon her at Lowood and in life. Jane eventually masks her passion and adopts a more Christian aspect resembling Helen’s. In her dying moments, Helen informs Jane, “I am very happy, Jane: and when you hear that I

am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day, and the illness which is removing me is not painful; it is gentle and gradual: my mind is at rest” (691). Many of her years at Lowood are left out of the novel, but, by the end of her time there, she becomes a good, patient Christian, in the model of her purely Christian and angelic friend.

Although Jane follows the humble and kind guidance of her friend Helen, she also seeks instruction from the graceful Miss Temple, the head teacher at Lowood. Miss Temple is a beacon of light in the darkness of Lowood. In her book, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature*, Laura Morgan Green acknowledges, “Miss Temple is the nurturing mother Jane has not had” (32). During their time together at Lowood, Miss Temple becomes Jane’s companion, role model, and caretaker. Jane describes Miss Temple’s influence by saying, “To her instruction I owed 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” (692). Miss Temple is the ideal woman of the time. She is kind, meek, and accomplished, and Jane follows her example when they are together. She emulates Miss Temple’s goodness, and she strives to improve herself on a moral and spiritual level in response to her presence. Green discusses the influence of Miss Temple on Jane and Lowood: “Liberated from Brocklehurst’s patriarchal rule, Lowood and Jane flourish under Miss Temple’s maternal guidance; but Miss Temple’s departure immediately reveals Lowood’s community of teachers and students as static and narrow” (33). When Miss Temple leaves Lowood and her influence disappears from Jane’s life, Jane becomes discontent with her surrounding and decides to leave.

When Jane emerges from Lowood, she does so with a strong moral compass that resembles the patience of Miss Temple, not the hot temper of a young and inexperienced Jane.

Jane uses the extensive educational experience she attained from Lowood to begin her successful career as a governess at the lavish Thornfield Hall. Jane finds immense pleasure in the progress of her pupil, Adèle, who shares many similarities with a young Jane. Green explains, “When Jane meets her, Adèle is, like Jane herself, a child both orphaned and disowned” (40). Jane’s sympathy for Adèle’s unfortunate and parentless situation along with Jane’s pride in her duty as an educator helps to form a bond between them. Jane takes immense pride in her role as a teacher and strives for Adèle’s improvement. After Mr. Rochester’s praise of Adèle’s improvement, Jane says, ““Sir, you have now given me my ‘cadeau’; I am obliged to you: it is the meed teachers covet; praise of their pupil’s progress”” (720). Jane finds satisfaction in the process of being an educator, and she finds fulfillment in her relationship with her pupil and the progress Adèle consequently achieves.

Although Jane finds solace and purpose in her work at Thornfield, she learns monumental spiritual lessons as she faces a moral crisis. As Jane and Rochester’s whirlwind romance dissolves when Jane is made aware of Rochester’s living wife, Jane faces a spiritual and moral dilemma. She must decide whether to stay in comfort as a mistress, a position Jane abhors, or leave the only love she has ever known to save her self respect. Jane becomes spiritually aware of her needs and desires and her own sense of morality as she chooses to leave Thornfield and Rochester behind. As she is contemplating her decision Jane says, ““I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when

I was sane, and not mad—as I am now” (861). Although it would have been easy to stay with the married Mr. Rochester as a mistress, Jane is guided by her spirit, religion, and strong morals to abandon simplicity and comfort and seek a situation that would appeal to her morally. Franklin discusses Jane’s moral decision to leave Thornfield: “Jane’s ‘naturally supernatural’ mother-self gives birth to Jane and warns her from ‘temptation,’ merging in that word with the discourse of Christianity” (473). The voice that urges Jane to leave her immoral situation guides her to be an upstanding and moral Christian, building on the foundation of Christianity that Helen Burns initially granted her. From her experience at Thornfield, Jane learns to transcend physical and worldly comfort to seek a path that enables her to respect herself as both a woman and a Christian.

Jane leaves Thornfield behind, carrying the lessons she learned with her as she faces new challenges at Marsh End. Jane continues her life of educational instruction with her new friends, Mary Rivers, Dianna Rivers, and St. John Rivers. She studies constantly, as the Rivers sisters expose her to new literature and the German language. Green confirms that when she is “taken in by the Riverses, Jane becomes again the disciple of female intellect, this time able to take a more active intellectual role” (34). The Rivers sisters guide Jane as her teachers, and St. John Rivers begins teaching her Hindostanee. She finds comfort in the role of pupil, as it is one she knows well. She finds equality and contentment in the new companionship that grows between herself and the Rivers family. With the help of St. John, Jane secures another job as an educator. Jane finds pleasure in her role as a humble parish schoolteacher. She describes her new pupils by saying, “The rapidity of their progress, in some instances, was even surprising; an honest and happy pride I took in it: besides, I began personally to like some of the best girls; and they liked

me” (896). Jane feels capable and content in her role as a teacher. Regardless of the situation, Jane can find value in herself and others in an educational environment.

Although Jane retains her role as a pupil and educator in Marsh End, she learns the most important lessons about her spirituality and morality as she faces another conflicting decision. Jane must decide whether or not to enter a hollow marriage with St. John and a tough but rewarding life of missionary work or reject his unappealing proposal. When Jane rejects St. John’s proposal of marriage, she says, “I scorn your idea of love...I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it” (927). Jane tells St. John that she cannot marry him if she does not love him; doing so would go against every principle that Jane holds dear to her heart. J. Jeffrey Franklin observes, “ St. John’s lack of ‘spirit’—and Jane’s own passion, expressed in terms of that spirit—gives Jane the reason she requires to not ‘abandon half [her]self’ but to claim her whole self” (468). Jane would be abandoning her personal morals and strong sense of self if she married St. John. She could not respect herself if she made the decision to enter a loveless marriage, and she knew she could never attain happiness. Jane learns to put her self respect and happiness above practicality and simplicity. Entering a loveless union is repulsive to Jane’s idea of love, and she demonstrates her evolving will and morality in denying St. John.

Each crisis that Jane must address and overcome, prepares Jane to return to Rochester and enjoy a life of prosperity. Jane acquires a level of self-respect and spirituality that enables her to happily love and live with Mr. Rochester. J. Jeffrey Franklin elaborates, “The culmination [of Jane’s conflicts] will be a spiritual love with Rochester that is heightened by its...affinity with the divine love of Jane’s revised Christianity. Jane’s trial in the wilderness...prepares the

way for these developments” (475). As a result of her many struggles, Jane learns the important lessons that allow her to happily love Rochester. If Jane could not respect herself as a moral and Christian woman, she would never have been able to feel content. She earned self-respect after she denies Mr. Rochester’s offer of an illegitimate and immoral union and denies St. John’s empty marriage proposal. When Jane finally reunites with her beloved Mr. Rochester, she does so on her own terms. The circumstances of their union appeal to Jane’s conscience and sense of morality because there are no impure obstacles. She has finally become the equal of Rochester, as he depends on her almost completely after he becomes physically impaired. Jane explains her happiness as a married woman by saying, “I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest” (957). Jane is capable of happiness in union to Mr. Rochester because of the lessons she learned in times of crisis that instill self-respect and a strong sense of morality in Jane.

Jane Eyre is a novel of development, as Jane learns important lessons throughout her experiences that lead her to evolve into an independent woman capable of love and happiness. Jane learns innumerable formal lessons throughout her life that expand her knowledge, while she simultaneously gains a spiritual education through the new people and situations she encounters. As a result of the many conflicts Jane faces, she learns spiritual and moral lessons that specifically prepare her for future. She loves and cares for Rochester as a humble and patient equal who has the respect of herself and others. The most important lessons of Jane’s life are given in the form of spiritual and moral guidance that shape her character and ultimately lead to prosperity and joy in her life and marriage.

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