



Fall 2016

Jane Eyre and Education

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Gruner, Emma E., "Jane Eyre and Education" (2016). *Student Publications*. 473.
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Abstract

As the first female Bildungsroman in the English language, Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* focuses heavily on the theme of education. Throughout the course of the story, the character of Jane Eyre acquires a vast array of classical knowledge and ladylike accomplishments, facilitating her transition from a lowly student to a highly-respected teacher in true Bildungsroman fashion. Jane's impressive scholarly abilities, however, contrast sharply with the deep struggles she undergoes as she pursues a much more difficult "education" in her personal beliefs. In the end, though, Jane masters both her mind and heart. Emboldened and liberated by her formal education, Jane finally balances her conflicting moral and spiritual desires to become a content and thoroughly self-confident young woman.

Keywords

Jane Eyre, education, morality, spirituality

Disciplines

Literature in English, British Isles

Comments

Written for the First Year Seminar Shakespeare's Sisters (FYS-128).

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FYS 128-3 – Shakespeare’s Sisters

Professor Flynn

December 11, 2016

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As the first female Bildungsroman in the English language, Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* focuses heavily on the theme of education. Throughout the course of the story, the character of Jane Eyre acquires a vast array of classical knowledge and ladylike accomplishments, facilitating her transition from a lowly student to a highly-respected teacher in true Bildungsroman fashion. Jane’s impressive scholarly abilities, however, contrast sharply with the deep struggles she undergoes as she pursues a much more difficult “education” in her personal beliefs. In the end, though, Jane masters both her mind and heart. Emboldened and liberated by her formal education, Jane finally balances her conflicting moral and spiritual desires to become a content and thoroughly self-confident young woman.

Jane’s early childhood is by far the darkest period her life, as she faces a toxic social environment that consistently undermines her self-worth. When Jane is first introduced to the reader, she is a ten-year-old orphan living as a dependent of her aunt, Mrs. Reed. While her basic needs are met, Jane experiences considerable emotional abuse from both Mrs. Reed and her three children. In particular, the Reeds are careful to make Jane acutely aware of her social inferiority. According to Michael Vander Weele, the Reeds see Jane as “an orphan ‘pretender’ to the rights of the ‘legitimate’ children” (6). Jane’s cousin John confirms this mindset when he asserts, “you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen’s children like us” (639). Understandably, such degrading sentiments take a harsh toll on Jane’s

self-esteem. While she displays moments of resilience and passion during her time with the Reeds, Jane describes “humiliation, self-doubt, [and] forlorn depression” as her “habitual mood” (643). In short, while Jane’s home life does not totally defeat her, she still harbors a lingering sentiment that she is worthless.

Fortunately, this despondent mindset is called into question when Jane is presented with the opportunity to attend Lowood Institution, which for the time period would be quite an empowering development. As P.J. Miller describes, girls’ boarding schools faced a hostile attitude in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, for they threatened to dissolve the social classes that the Brits held so dear. The expansion of women’s education in and of itself was not as offensive as the idea that “a large number of girls from the ‘middling’ and ‘inferior’ orders were receiving an education to which their rank did not entitle them.” Despite the efforts of British educational leaders to keep schooling segregated by the class system, “education quickly, perhaps inevitably, became not only an avenue of social mobility but one of the more important symbols of social status” (302 – 313). Thus at the tender age of ten, the impoverished, orphan Jane is already surpassing the confines of the British social hierarchy, which hints at the impressive life she has ahead of her.

On a more tangible, personal level, though, Jane’s Lowood years introduce her to the thrill of educational accomplishment. As she recounts, “I toiled hard, and my success was proportionate to my efforts; my memory, not naturally tenacious, improved with practice: exercise sharpened my wits” (686). Jane’s education at Lowood reveals in her abilities that were hitherto unknown, and she develops a new sense of self-worth as a result. Ultimately, Jane’s accomplishments enable her to be “promoted” from student to teacher at Lowood, and her newly acquired skills, particularly those in French and drawing, are enough to impress her former

servant Bessie. Upon their first reunion, Bessie remarks, “Oh, you are quite a lady, Miss Jane!” (698). Both events serve as outward validation of Jane’s accomplishments, which necessarily marks a major turning point for her.

In addition to the confidence boost it provides her, Jane’s formal education also enables her to become an educator herself, providing her with a reliable stream of employment and satisfaction for the majority of the novel. Such autonomy in a female character was unusual for the time; Karen E. Rowe postulates that “in leaving Lowood Jane Eyre participates less in a feminine fairy tale and more in a masculine adventure, because she acts upon her own initiative” (76). While Jane does technically begin her teaching career while still at Lowood, her independence truly solidifies when she secures the positions of governess for Adèle Varens at Thornfield Hall and later of schoolmistress for working-class girls in the village of Morton. These positions all provide Jane with a source of income and, to some extent, social importance. Teaching was a fairly respectable profession at the time, and the occupation of governess in particular was regarded as “the prerogative of gentlewomen who had fallen upon hard times” (Miller 307). In addition to these outward, concrete benefits, Jane’s teaching career also fosters a sense of personal accomplishment, most notably pride in the educational development of her students. When at Thornfield, Jane remarks that “I felt a conscientious solicitude for Adèle’s welfare and progress” (710). Much later in the novel, she makes a similar statement regarding the girls at the Morton village-school: “the rapidity of their progress, in some instances, was even surprising; and an honest and happy pride I took in it” (896). These sentiments prove that, no matter the circumstances, Jane is consistently able to find fulfillment in imparting her knowledge to others.

Having fulfilled her need for physical security, self-worth, and a purposeful existence, Jane is free to devote herself to the more complex education of her heart and soul. One significant moral challenge for Jane is learning to uphold her own high standards while at the same time maintaining a compassionate, forgiving mindset towards those that have wronged her. Jane first encounters this idea while conversing with her friend Helen Burns at Lowood. Helen explains that, by putting her faith in the higher power of God, “I can so clearly distinguish between the criminal and his crime; I can so sincerely forgive the first while I abhor the last” (674-675). In this instance, Helen is attempting to convince Jane to relinquish her hatred of the Reeds, which at that point in her life she finds utterly impossible. She insists that, “I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me” (674). To young Jane, seemingly, to forgive Mrs. Reed’s injustices is to approve them.

Years later, though, when Mrs. Reed is on her deathbed, Jane proves her maturity when she returns to her aunt, nursing hopes of reconciliation. This task is not an easy one for the fiery-hearted Jane; as Vander Weele states, “she never does forget Mrs. Reed’s severity or deny the passionate emotions it excited” (13). Furthermore, Mrs. Reed continues to berate Jane for her troublesome disposition, even expressing a wish that Jane had died at Lowood. While Jane is understandably angry and hurt by these sentiments, she still brings herself to give Mrs. Reed her wholehearted forgiveness. Jane recognizes the remarkable change she has undergone since leaving the Reeds, in reflecting that “I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression. The gaping wound of my wrongs, too, was now quite healed” (796-797). Jane’s improved self-esteem, therefore, has liberated her from crippling dependency and its consequent bitterness, enabling her to view the Reeds with untainted sympathy.

The moral predicament Jane faces with the Reeds, however, pales in comparison to the crisis she ultimately must confront in her relationship with Rochester. Jane's compassion, which allowed her to triumph in her interactions with the Reeds, now becomes potentially harmful, as it threatens to overrule her own instinct for self-preservation. In this situation, Rochester has offered Jane the opportunity to travel to France with him as his mistress, even though he has just revealed the existence of a mentally ill yet still-living wife locked on the third floor of his manor. While this secretive behavior and his willingness to engage in a sinful lifestyle is troubling to Jane, forgiving him is not the issue for her. After Rochester affirms his continuing regard and love for her, Jane admits that "Reader! – I forgave him at that moment, and on the spot" (848). Jane's sympathy for Rochester's plight, not to mention her own romantic and sexual attraction for him, create quite the frightening situation for her, as Rowe so eloquently describes:

As surely as Rochester clothes Jane in silk and gossamer veils, he just as insidiously masters her spirit by fulfilling her internalized fantasy in which a beast turns dazzling prince. Those traits of rebellious independence, outspokenness, and high moral principles that distinguished the young Jane seem gradually preempted, as she... falls under a hypnotic spell. (81)

In other words, Rochester's flattery manipulates Jane into a dangerous state that threatens both her autonomy and her sense of right and wrong.

While Jane's pity and passion for Rochester threaten to overwhelm her, she refuses to yield to his pleas. She ultimately tells him, in no uncertain terms, that "I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man" (861). Jane's refusal of Rochester subscribes to the popular eighteenth and nineteenth century literary theme of "the subordination of the bad self to the good self, of passion and impulse to reason and conscience", as articulated by Daniel Walker Howe

(qtd. in Vander Weele 12). By this point in her life, having established herself as such a proper, diligent young woman, Jane has developed too much self-respect to allow herself to give in to such degrading temptation, even when sympathy might direct her otherwise.

In addition to honing her sense of morality, Jane must also come to terms with her spirituality as she learns how and where she can expect to find external fulfillment. From the beginning, Jane's relationship with God is somewhat strained. She has some knowledge of His teachings, as shown by her prompt responses to Mr. Brocklehurst's interrogation, yet she lacks a true understanding of His power and mercy. Jane's resentment of the Reeds' injustice proves that she is unable to put her full faith and justice in God. This attitude contrasts sharply with Jane's friend Helen Burns, who remarks that "injustice never crushes me too low; I live in calm, looking to the end" (675). While Jane eventually does learn the power of forgiveness, she does so more through the strength of her own self-esteem than through a true spiritual revival.

Thus for a long time, the value Jane places on her human relationships remains disturbingly high, a tendency seen most clearly through her relationship with Rochester. As Jane and Rochester's passionate romance blossoms and eventually becomes an engagement, Jane admits to herself that "my future husband was becoming to me my whole world... I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol" (831). Jane's idolatrous mindset continues until the reveal of Rochester's wife and his entreaty for her to become his mistress. At that point, Jane "did what human beings do instinctively when they are driven to utter extremity – looked for aid to one higher than man: the words 'God help me!' burst involuntarily from my lips" (852). This exclamation marks the first truly spiritual moment in Jane's life, as she finally comprehends the limited sustainability of human relationships. Dr. Shifra Hochberg further supports the significance of this event in Jane's spiritual education,

asserting that “in resisting the temptation to become Rochester’s mistress... she too has achieved spiritual salvation, as well as hard-won independence” (3). This spiritual epiphany resonates so strongly with Jane that she preaches it to Rochester, telling him to “do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven” (861). In doing so, Jane rejects the idea that she herself can save or transform Rochester, instead embracing the Christian doctrine that “each being finds redemption from God, not from earthly ‘angels’” (Rowe 84). Ultimately, this moment is doubly significant, showing that Jane possesses not only the faith in God’s power but the self-confidence to trust her convictions and impart them to others.

While Jane learns the necessity of spiritual fulfillment through her relationship with Rochester, she also comes to know its limits through her relationship with her cousin St. John Rivers. Unlike Rochester, St. John devotes himself to a truly spiritual existence, viewing the earthly world with utter disdain. Ultimately, St. John hopes to impose his sense of total spiritual devotion onto Jane, as he offers her the chance to accompany him in his missionary work – as his wife. By this point, Jane has come to value her religious faith, and she takes a sort of pleasure in the chance to “admire and emulate his courage and devotion” (926). Yet at the same time, she realizes that to be St. John’s wife would be to suppress her natural desire for a real human connection. This desire is a part of herself that, for all her faith in God, she cannot live without. She remarks that to accompany St. John as his wife, “forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low... *this* would be unendurable” (926). This encounter leads Jane to accept that, despite the benefits of moral restraint and spiritual fulfillment, “passion can be a necessary guide to self-assertion and an important element in forging a life worth living” (Vander Weele 13). Jane’s acceptance of her fiery nature as not a liability, but something necessary and healthy, is one of the last essential pieces to her self-education.

In refusing St. John's offer, Jane once again displays remarkable self-confidence. While St. John's arguments, particularly his accusation of grievous sin for denying her Godly calling, do take a toll on Jane, she ultimately stands her ground. Jane's resistance is rewarded when, shortly thereafter, she hears the voice of Rochester: an event that she interprets as divine approval for her choice. Indeed, Hochberg implies that Jane's relationship with the ostensibly human Rochester is more holy than a union with the unnaturally pious St. John could ever be:

The novel's repeated association of St. John with marble and ice contrasts with the organic metaphors linked to the flawed, but ultimately redeemed, figure of Rochester, whose relationship of spiritual equality with Jane contrasts with St. John's offer of a life of "servitude" that would obliterate Jane's "liberty of mind". (4)

Thus, Jane is finally able to leave the Rivers' household with a firm conviction that, contrary to St. John's preaching, she will be able to live a life of both spiritual devotion and human affection.

While *Jane Eyre* may be a novel of education at its heart, the experiences of the titular character prove that learning takes many forms. One's acquisition of knowledge does not cease upon the completion of one's formal education; in fact, the less tangible lessons that Jane learned about her conscience and spirit prove to be just as fulfilling to her as the knowledge gained through her schooling. Nonetheless, the significance of Jane's formal education is enormous in that it instills in her an unshakeable sense of worth. Her academic accomplishments are Jane's first encounter with her innate capabilities and, by extension, her innate humanity. Secure in this knowledge, Jane is able to resist the influences of others and pursue her "inner education" on her own terms, trusting that the lessons she learns and the beliefs that she forms will be right for her.

Honor Code: I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

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