



Exploring Confinement and Independence in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Loredana Ilie

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

No. 11 Carol I Boulevard, 700506, Iași

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1509-108X>

Abstract: This article explores themes of confinement, individuality, and societal resistance in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a novel that provoked significant attention and mixed critical reception upon its publication. By examining Jane's experiences of social exclusion, psychological imprisonment, and her struggles for self-assertion, the analysis delves into the symbolic significance of the red room as a recurring motif of oppression and emotional trauma. The article discusses how Gothic elements, such as the interplay of supernatural imagery and color symbolism, enhance the narrative's exploration of gender dynamics and Victorian societal expectations. It further highlights Jane's journey toward independence and self-respect, emphasizing her resistance to patriarchal figures like Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, and Mr. Rochester. The discussion also reflects on critical perspectives of the time, contrasting praise for the novel's realism with critiques of its perceived immorality and unorthodox portrayal of a flawed, feminist heroine. Ultimately, this study underscores the enduring relevance of *Jane Eyre* as a bold narrative that challenges 19th-century norms and advocates for individual autonomy and equality.

Keywords: feminist themes; patriarchy; colour symbolism; gender relations; Victorian society; female protagonists; literary realism; feminist literature.

How to cite: Ilie, Loredana. "Exploring Confinement and Independence in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*". *LiBRI. Linguistic and Literary Broad Research and Innovation*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.70594/libri/11.1/1>



1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was a tendentious novel when it first came out, generating a huge amount of attention and earning mixed reviews both from its readers and from the critics, just as Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" did. They are two outstanding stories that have many things in common. While Gilman writes about a depressed woman who is imprisoned in a room for treatment by her spouse, Brontë introduces us to the story of an orphan girl, who is being looked after by her fierce and prosperous aunt. Two of the similarities between the two stories are the protagonists' social exclusion and the setting. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the protagonist's name is not even made known, as she is only presented as John's wife. This demonstrates how irrelevant women were considered in nineteenth-century society, while they lacked self-control and were helpless. Her husband confined her life and limited her actions all throughout the story. The woman was unable to express her free will and was ruled by John. In Brontë's novel, Jane, the primary female character, was likewise an outcast in society due to her orphan status, at the same time being helpless and having no wealth. Her aunt and relatives were behaving cruelly towards her.

2. The Symbolism of the Red Room

If we are to address the setting, an important symbol in *Jane Eyre* is "the red room". Jane starts examining the red room once Bessie and Miss Abbott have shut her in. It is the mansion's largest and greatest room but it is seldom used due to Uncle Reed's death there. Jane examines herself in the mirror and notices that she resembles an odd fairy.

Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers. I returned to my stool. (18; ch. 2)

In this chapter, Jane's personality is further established. She portrays herself as a "little ghost, half fairy, half imp" (18) from one of Bessie's stories, a human soul who emerges from "lone, ferny dells in moors" (18) into the eyes of "belated travellers" (18), as she stares into the red-room mirror. Her identification with a fairy will be echoed across the story, and her idea of emerging in the eyes of travellers suggests her first encounter with Rochester. Jane defines herself as a unique, wonderful creature, such as a fairy, and she warns the audience of the impact of

creative power in her life. She is taken aback by her look and continues to contemplate the circumstances that have brought her to this point. She recalls her Uncle Reed taking her to Gateshead after her parents died. His last request was that his wife swear to foster Jane as if she were her own. The girl has a strong sensation that her uncle's spirit is present in the room, believing that he has arrived to breathe vengeance on his wife for betraying their agreement. She starts screaming out in despair until she passes out from tiredness, while her aunt interprets her emotions as a desperate attempt to avoid her punishment. The next chapter begins with Jane awakening in her chamber, under the supervision of Mr. Lloyd. Bessie, who is also present, shows her concern regarding her mistress's mistreatment of Jane. Jane becomes fairly optimistic about her chances of escaping Gateshead as a result of a conversation between Mr. Lloyd and her aunt, where the benevolent apothecary advises her that the girl should be sent away to school. The author defines young Jane's characteristics in the opening pages through her conflicts with John and Mrs. Reed, which highlights the fact that Jane is honest and benevolent, yet a very stubborn girl. These paragraphs also set the note for the narrative, as we perceive a real sense of suspense and supernatural from Jane's incident in the red room. Brontë's story takes a lot of artistic elements from Gothic novels popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which were made to induce a scary feeling and a sensation of suspense. While *Jane Eyre* is far from a horror novel, it is the author's use of gothic motifs that make her story so interesting and popular among critics.

3. Gothic Elements and Gender Dynamics

Colour is significant once more, reflecting the scene's atmosphere and offering insight into the protagonist's inner part. Jane is surrounded by red curtains in the first chapter, and now she is trapped inside the red room. She recalls an unpleasant dream: "The next thing I remember is, waking up with a feeling as if I had a frightful nightmare, and seeing before me a terrible red glare, crossed with thick black bars" (24; ch. 3). Jane has turned red into the colour of a nightmare in which she is imprisoned behind unbreakable bars. She quickly understands that red is only the light from the nursery fire, and the negative association fades. This colour has been converted from a symbol of evil and infernal fires to a loving radiance. As a result, the meaning of symbols and colours changes throughout the narrative to portray Jane's socioemotional state. Jane's struggles to achieve independence, contentment, and the feeling of belonging to a group, are symbolised by the red room. The protagonist is in a position of being banned and held captive, but despite the fact that she is ultimately let out of the red room, she remains socially isolated, economically constrained, and without any form of love from her relatives. Her civil liberty and her feeling of self-determination are repeatedly challenged. Although the

physical pain has passed, she endures mental wounds from the traumatic event, meaning that the significance of the red room is maintained all throughout the story. It shows up as a flashback anytime Jane connects her status quo to her initial experience of being humiliated. After Rochester tries to persuade her to become a mistress, she also recalls the room the moment she chooses to leave Thornfield.

They spoke almost as loud as Feeling: and that clamoured wildly. ‘Oh, comply!’ it said. ‘Think of his misery; think of his danger—look at his state when left alone; remember his headlong nature; consider the recklessness following on despair—soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for YOU? or who will be injured by what you do?’ Still indomitable was the reply: “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. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation ... They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. (483-484)

Jane affirms her solid level of ethical dignity above instant impulses in this remark near the end of Chapter 27. Rochester has been attempting to persuade her to stay with him, even though he is still a married man and Bertha Mason is his wife. Jane is nearly convinced by his reasoning, bearing in mind that he is the first person who genuinely loves her. She recognises, however, that by accepting his suggestion she would be putting herself in a dangerous situation, where she would be his mistress and lover, and not his main wife. Whereas she demonstrates her value and self-love despite how other people behave towards her, she is aware that she would lose her self-respect by agreeing to his offer and that, eventually, she would lose Rochester’s respect too. Regardless of her strong feelings for Mr. Rochester, Jane is keen on ending the relationship with him. He is emotional and agitated, whereas she is calm and determined. Jane’s concept of religion is also revealed in this line. God, she believes, is the one who establishes the rules she shall follow. She refers to these values as a reliable point to help her make wise choices. Simultaneously, it is conceivable to interpret Bertha as a *doppelgänger* for Jane, due to the references to her “insanity” and “madness” that can provide a link between them, because Bertha Mason reflects everything Jane feels on the inside. Externalising interior feelings is one of the characteristics of Gothic books, elements that are found in Bronte’s novel. Here we meet with one of the several instances when Jane is linked with flames, as

she says that her veins run like fire. This fight allowed Charlotte Brontë to explore concepts such as individualism, morality, civil laws, and rationality.

An important theme in *Jane Eyre* is the one that highlights gender relations in the nineteenth century. Jane is constantly fighting for equality and freedom from injustice. She struggles to resist class hierarchy, as well as the system that is characterised by male dominance. She has to confront people who consider men superior to women and treat them thusly. Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, and Edward Rochester are three significant male figures who challenge her aspirations towards respect and equal opportunities for both males and females. All of them attempt to make her obey without arguing and prevent her from expressing her opinions, and her inner space. At a certain point, they all act misogynistic. Jane has to avoid Brocklehurst, refuse St. John, and therefore only go to Rochester with the condition of marrying under equal terms, all in pursuit of individuality and self-consciousness. During her time at Moor House, Jane has demonstrated that she is a woman worthy of equality and able to operate in a society and a family. Jane also illustrates what was a profoundly feminist perspective for her day in Chapter 12:

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. (167)

The wording highlights Jane's sense of constraint and her innermost desire for equal rights. Her statements have a major significance to Brontë's position as a writer, as well as the status of Victorian women in general. The book's main topic of confinement is represented by ideas of anxiety, experiences of "stagnation" (167), and "too rigid a restraint" (167). Besides these examples of physical incarceration, the protagonist must also free herself from the chains of society and the constraints of erroneous faith, love without morality, and morality without love, all of them illustrated by the three male figures we have talked about: Brocklehurst, Rochester, and St. John Rivers. In this chapter, Jane opposes their authority while they might intimidate her with patriarchy's restraints. Her sense of imprisonment spreads to other females whilst these phrases serve as Brontë's feminist ideology. The author finds fault with what she perceived to be suffocating Victorian ideals of traditional gender stereotypes: "Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot" (167). The Victorian wife is expressly

described as being symbolically locked up. A significant character that enforces this idea is Bertha Mason. Her restrained and ignored emotions develop into rage, insanity, and darkness. We can interpret that as a representation of the incarcerated female's struggle. It is also implied in this passage that the author may resort to writing to manage her fury, as Jane also talked about hiding in her own head as a way to break free from her thoughts. Such self-retreat resulted in Brontë's biggest achievement, but her protagonist's accomplishment was finding the right balance between her need for independence and her willingness to participate in the community.

4. Critical Reception and Feminist Interpretation

Another important theme is represented by social class, as the novel criticises Victorian England's severe hierarchical system. The protagonist works as a governess, a job that was extremely important in nineteenth-century fiction and society. They are one of the very few positions available to decent middle-class women, yet they are underpaid and frequently mistreated. Jane Eyre is a character who is on the periphery of society as a governess, but she is also an orphan. These statuses are able to expose important aspects of how society functions. Jane had aristocratic manners because Victorian governesses were expected to do so, as they taught little children the code of behaviour. Despite the fact that they were paid employees, they were treated as though they were servants. As a result, Jane stays impoverished and helpless while she is at Thornfield. When she acknowledges her passion for Rochester, she discovers the contradictory norm: they are intellectually equal, yet not socially. At many points throughout the novel, Jane herself makes comments about discrimination based on social status, an illustration occurring when she scolds Rochester in Chapter 27:

Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! ... I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal — as we are! (385-386)

Jane completely embraces her feminine power due to her confidence and imagination. "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you," (386) she says while expressing

her identity outside gender and class constraints. She realises that societal norms and standards do not determine the essence of her existence. Although she accepts her humble position as a woman in society, it does not decrease her dignity or her sense of individuality. By accepting a greater reality, she resists the limits established on her by Victorian society. I believe that the fact she rejected Mr. Rochester's offer to marry him because he was already married or the fact that she also refused to marry St. John because she loved someone else indicates her sense of freedom. She is full of confidence and she is not compelled to marry because of societal expectations. According to the final chapter of the novel, she eventually marries Edward Rochester. She considers him his spiritual residence despite the struggles she had to endure while she had a difficult time meeting people she could emotionally attach to. Her commitment to marriage provides her much joy, rather than oppressing her or representing her subordination to societal expectations. Her happiness is obvious as she writes:

I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh ... All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result. (688)

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that society's bounds are never pushed in *Jane Eyre*. The protagonist is only allowed to marry Rochester on equal terms since she has inherited money from her uncle. Previously, Mr. Rochester had made several expectations regarding their marriage, and Jane did not know better but to react. Despite his intentions to organise global excursions and buy extravagant presents for her, Jane states very clearly that she intends to stay loyal to herself. By standing up and maintaining her independence, notwithstanding marriage, the protagonist succeeds in contradicting traditional female gender roles in Victorian England culture.

Regarding positive criticism, George Henry Lewes praises *Jane Eyre's* realism in "Recent Novels: French and English." "Reality - profound, significant reality - is the book's great characteristic," he says (691). "It reads like a page out of one's own life; and so do many other pages in the book," he continues (692). According to Lewes, the novel's realism is most demonstrated in its portrayal of the governess, which is "not only accurate, but accurate in being represented from the governess point of view." (692) This statement implies that the author used the protagonist to bring a new era of female consciousness to British literature. To support this point, Jane is described as "a woman, not a pattern" (692). G.H. Lewes highlights the characters' excellent construction, stating that they are "drawn with

unusual mastery” and remarking on how distinct the novel is from previous works: “The style of *Jane Eyre* is peculiar” (693). On the other hand, Brontë’s novel was severely criticised for its immorality, cultural abnormalities, and storyline paradoxes. Lady Eastlake’s (real name Elizabeth Rigby) critique of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in a combined review of *Vanity Fair* and Brontë’s novel is possibly among the most scornful of all the evaluations:

The popularity of *Jane Eyre* is a proof of how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature ... Jane Eyre is throughout the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit. ... It is true Jane does right and exerts great moral strength, but it is the strength of a mere heathen mind which is a law unto itself. No Christian grace is perceptible upon her. She has inherited in full measure the worst sin of our fallen nature – the sin of pride. Jane Eyre is proud and therefore she is ungrateful too. ... It is by her own talents, virtues and courage that she is made to attain the summit of human happiness, and, as far as Jane Eyre's own statement is concerned, no one would think that she owed anything either to God above or man below. ... Altogether the autobiography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment – there is a proud and perceptible assertion of the rights of men, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence – there is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilised society in fact at the present day has to contend with. We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*. (505-506)

5. Conclusion

Rigby's major complaint of Jane's characteristics was that she was unchristian. She claims that making a flawed character fascinating, although described with tremendous authenticity, she commits the worst offenses. The ethical crime of Jane and Rochester's illegitimate relationship, as well as the fact that the novel's success is attributed to the reader's enjoyment of it, are both in violation of religion and moral rules. Rigby considers Jane unimpressive and contradictory, which she attributes to the author, who portrays her differently through the perspective of the reader from the perspective of the other characters, particularly through the contradictions between her thoughts and her actions. She does not have the typical heroine appeal. Jane's moral bravery in leaving Rochester would seem to

delight Rigby, but it enrages her even more because it appears to be motivated by ambition as well as her own standards instead of christianity. Due to Jane's freedom of thought and Brontë's descriptive language and powerful thesis, which were totally unexpected at that time, critics agreed that the novel was outstanding and captivating. The two reviews previously mentioned demonstrate the variety of attitudes from critics. Along with its strong feminist protagonist, and departure from society's expectations, Jane Eyre provoked a wide range of strong opinions.

6. References

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Bantam Classics, 1983.

Lewes, George Henry. *Recent Novels: French and English*. London, Fraser, December 1847.

Rigby, Elizabeth. *Vanity Fair – and Jane Eyre*. Quarterly Review, 1848.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977.