
Is the Ending of *Jane Eyre* Out of Character?

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The 1847 classic of English literature *Jane Eyre* was written by English author Charlotte Brontë, the eldest of the renowned Brontë sisters, under the pseudonym Currer Bell, as women authors (and women in general) were neglected and dismissed during the Victorian Age. As a Bildungsroman, *Jane Eyre* takes the reader on a life journey as we are spectators of the protagonist's strife towards independence in a repressive environment. We are witnesses to every important event in the protagonist's life, but does she stay true to herself by the end of the novel?

We meet Jane Eyre when she is ten years old, leading an unhappy life with her aunt and cousins. She is constantly bullied, neglected, ignored and made to feel inferior, besides, not only does she have to endure psychological and emotional violence, but also physical. A moment comes when she has had enough, so she decides to defend herself against her cousin. This is the first time Jane rebels against injustice, the first time we see her stand up for herself and what she believes is right, and lets her "passionate" personality shine through. She then confronts her aunt in what is probably one of the most exciting passages of the novel, her pent-up anger and impotence finally explode and present to the reader a ten-year-old Jane asserting dominance over an adult in a position of power: "I am not deceitful: if I were, I should say I loved you; but I declare I do not love you (...). You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so (...)." (Brontë, 1847, p. 34) This serves as evidence to show Jane's personality is not inherently submissive, dutiful or easily malleable; she even states she feels "freedom" and "triumph" after those words leave her mouth. Another instance of her resilient personality is evident when Mr. Brocklehurst tells her naughty girls go to hell and proceeds to ask her what she must do to avoid that, to which she replies with "I must keep in good health, and not die." (Brontë, 1847, p. 30) This quote further demonstrates that Jane is sure of who she is, what she wants and in what way she should behave to preserve herself; Jane is not afraid to defy authority when she is convinced of something: she sees injustice and fights against it, no matter what society tells her to do. If she shall burn for that, then so be it.

At the beginning of her stay in Lowood, young Jane is very set in her ways, she is very headstrong and stubborn: "I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who punish me unjustly." (Brontë, 1847, p. 57) This quote is interesting to analyse, as adult Jane submits to very unfair, manipulative and damaging deeds in the hands of Mr. Rochester, who she ends up marrying without even questioning the mental torment he put her through. As Jane grows up in Lowood, its influence grows on her. Living in an enclosed environment for so many years, surrounded by girls who dress in the same way, listen to the same teachings, read the same books, and interact with the same people, she starts to believe that she has to bend herself in absurd ways to fit the Lowood and the Victorian archetype. Miss Temple and Helen Burns help to repress Jane's fervent nature, they help her navigate the world, "the child Jane begins to identify with her persona—the "mask" society expects her to assume at every turn, though stifling her larger, more complete Self." (Baumlin and Baumlin, 1997, p. 19). After an incident, Jane states the following: "(...) if others don't love me I would rather die than live—I cannot bear to be solitary and hated, Helen." (Brontë, 1847, p. 70) We can assume that this is the reason why she forgives Mr. Rochester so easily: she had been told her whole life that she was

insignificant, plain, unwanted, so at the first sign of interest someone else (who is a figure of authority not only because of age but also because of status) shows in her, she yields and lets herself be persuaded by him. In Lowood, Jane receives the education she so much desired. She finds her passion there and, later on, starts teaching. The girl who had always been put down and humiliated had now become a self-reliant woman with a bright and promising future.

When she meets Mr. Rochester, he is rude, brusque, condescending and commanding: "You are dumb, Miss Eyre. (...) I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years' difference in age and a century's advance in experience." (Brontë, 1847, p. 139) Mr. Rochester only sees Jane as his vehicle to reformation for his past mistakes and uses her to redeem himself. At this point, Jane still maintains her independence-hungry flame shining, maybe it burns less brightly but it remains a part of her: "I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high." (Brontë, 1847, p. 145). However, Jane succumbs to her master's influence: "an influence that quite mastered me,—that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his." (Brontë, 1847, p. 183) This is the beginning of her downfall as a woman with her own dreams and aspirations. Indeed, at the beginning of her time in Thornfield she expresses that her utmost desire is "to save money enough out of my earnings to set up a school some day" (Brontë, 1847, p. 208), nonetheless, when she inherits a large sum of money and has the means to open up a school, she decides to dismiss those ambitions and dedicate her life to take care of Mr. Rochester, fulfilling a role that assimilates more that of mother and child than a romantic relationship.

As Bonnie Zare wrote in her essay, "Before she meets Rochester, Jane never accepts dishonesty from others." (Zare, 1993, p. 207), but Jane keeps forgiving Rochester time and time again even when he does not deserve it. When Mr. Rochester's big secret of his bigamy comes to light, Jane thinks her life is void of purpose and hope. She is resolute in her decision and leaves Thornfield and Mr. Rochester behind and, after enduring harsh adversities, finds solace in the Rivers siblings. They revive in her that curiosity and yearning for knowledge, they protect her and make her feel valuable. St. John Rivers even opens a school for girls and requests Jane to be the mistress, a position which she accepts. This job poses new challenges for her, but as her students show improvement, she finds it gratifying. Jane is convinced she has made the right choice: "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." (Brontë, 1847, p. 382) During this period of her life in Marsh End, Jane reconnects with her old self, she starts acquiring new knowledge and creating healthy relationships with new people, which she did not get under Mr. Rochester's control. She also ends up discovering that they are blood relations, the family she always longed for. Jane states that she does not want to marry, as finding her family was enough for her. After St. John asks Jane to be his missionary wife, she rejects him as she is not going to let herself only grow in the light he allows her. Young Jane seems to be back.

Jane leaves Marsh End and decides to look for Mr. Rochester again. She is now an independent woman, sure that she is making the choices she wants and not the ones other people dictate her to. Nevertheless, when she encounters a maimed Rochester, this resolution and firmness end up crumbling: "I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion—to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you." (Brontë, 1847, p. 464) She once more relinquishes her own independence to serve him in every way, her whole life revolves around him and making him feel comfortable, making up for what he lacks, and he does seem to be kinder to her but this kindness arises from his need to be taken care of. Adèle is transferred to another school, which means Jane does not even stimulate

her intellect in this way anymore. Jane stops being her own person to become a nurse for her husband, even at the end of the novel there is no mention of her pursuing any individual projects or working towards her old dream of setting up a school. She resigns her intellectual development and nurturing to attend to his needs.

All in all, *Jane Eyre's* ending makes the modern reader feel disappointed. Despite the fact that it breaks with many of the rules of the genre, it does fall in the cliché ending of her only achieving happiness and fulfillment when she has a husband and a baby. Even if throughout the novel we thought she could be the exception (especially with young Jane, we sympathise with her struggles and find her stubbornness and strong personality a point of admiration as she fights for herself in a world that seems to be against her), Brontë seems to fall trap to the conventions of the time and considers it fit to end the story after Jane gets the classic “fairy tale ending” with a selfish man who has no consideration for her personal aspirations and dreams. It is true that Jane writes her autobiography but her story seems to stop the moment she reunites with Rochester (as she rushes through the events that happen afterwards) and citing Zare: “the fairy-tale closure falsifies women’s experience by suggesting that a married woman’s life is not worthy of testimony.” (Zare, 1993, p. 219) It is noteworthy that Jane *does* only marry Mr. Rochester on her own terms, after *she* decides to go back, but it is a pity to see all her intellectual potential go to waste. It appears to be that Charlotte Brontë had to make some concessions for her novel to be published and succeed; however, it is a misfortune that she chose to sacrifice Jane’s character development for it. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the historical context in which Brontë wrote this novel, it is a pioneer regarding women’s causes, their power of agency and feminism and it has been praised for “its insights regarding the heroine's complex psychological development” (Baumlin and Baumlin, 1997, p. 15), giving visibility to the mundane women of the times and maybe inspiring them to follow Jane’s journey of overcoming abuse, poverty and oppression, planting the seed for future generations living in less claustrophobic circumstances.

References

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