

Rebellion against conformity

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



At first glance, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* seems to be a novel promoting tameness, preaching moderation and balance. This is shown through Jane's metamorphosis from a wild, passionate youth to a woman whose passion is tempered by logic. However, in Jane's inner psyche, the exact opposite holds true. Jane starts out as a child who longs for freedom, but she is too timid to seize it. All of her external actions, though they seem like courageous outbursts of passion, actually stem from this deep-seated want for liberation, which she is too afraid to express completely. It is only when her fears capsize that her wild side can be the victor. This revolution, this reformist and feminist attitude, is my definition of "wild." Radical and unconventional, Jane breaks free of class and sex-oriented barriers like a bird soaring from its cage. She appears tamer and more sober externally, but in her mind, the wildness that is freedom and defiance reigns supreme.

At the beginning of the novel, young Jane explicitly states that freedom is not worth sacrificing for. The germs for future contumacy are definitely present in her psyche, but the passion to attain liberty at all costs is dormant and undeveloped. When Mr. Lloyd, the apothecary who calls to Gateshead after Jane's traumatic night in the Red Room, asks Jane if she would rather live with her poorer Eyre cousins, Jane says no. The narrative, more experienced Jane recalls, "I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste" (20); because Jane reveres the glamour and comfort of the upper society, the prospect of poverty for the sake of freedom is too formidable to consider. Thus, Jane's passionate outburst is only a partial act of defiance, for though she condemns John (and his entire class) as "Roman emperors" (5), she is scared of the risk. If "wild" is equated with defying convention,

then the opposite, “tameless,” would be tractability. By fainting in the Red Room, Jane reveals her weakness: susceptibility to the fear Aunt Reed is instilling in her.

Aunt Reed’s influence keeps Jane at the mercy of the caste system. After Miss Temple leaves Lowood, Jane grows restless for change. She says, “For liberty I gasped, for liberty I uttered a prayer” (88). The yearning for freedom is evidently stronger than it was when she was a child. However, she is still too passive to approach and seize it because in her mind, freedom is for the rarefied upper class. Therefore, she “frame[s] a humbler supplication. For change, stimulus” (88). But even “stimulus” is too much to ask for. Finally, she settles for “servitude” (88). She tells herself that she does not deserve to have “Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment” (88); still the timid and quiescent child from the Red Room, Jane refuses to raze the class barriers that separate her from freedom because of her preconceived notions.

Another kind of freedom Jane yearns for is equality among the sexes. During one of her early days at Thornfield, Jane feels particularly restless; as she paces the battlement above the third-story attic, Jane says, “Women are supposed to be very calm generally... but they suffer from too rigid a restraint... precisely as men would suffer” (115). Jane’s thoughts, infused with the soul of Bronte’s own stifled opinion, promote the iconoclastic overthrow of male dominance. While in the past Jane was scared to risk poverty for equality, here Jane makes no attempt to downplay or justify her need for liberty.

Jane is actually the vocal manifestation of Bronte's opinions about the strict social hierarchy in England. Bronte explores the ambiguous position of governess, which is a source of extreme tension for Jane and the characters around her. Though Jane's manners and education are those of an aristocrat, she is treated more like a servant than an equal because she is a paid subordinate. Therefore, when Jane realizes that she loves Rochester, the social barriers crystallize; she sees that though she is Rochester's equal in intellect, she is not his equal in society. Unfortunately, this painful reality is strictly enforced by the upper class, as is evident when Dowager Ingram and Blanche are discussing their hapless history with governesses, half of which were "detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi..." (187). Lady Ingram says about Jane, "I noticed her; I am a judge of physiognomy, and in hers I see all the faults of her class" (188). Hearing this, Jane understands that though she loves Rochester dearly, she will never usurp Blanche's place as Rochester's wife because of her class. However, since Jane eventually supplants both Bertha and Blanche, Jane proves to herself that the class barriers she thinks are inviolable only existed in her mind. Thus, the freedom she attains by marrying Rochester is actually a matter of overcoming her fear of breaching the class barriers in her own psyche.

Rochester, disguised as the gypsy, chastises this fear and prompts Jane to take action against society. Until now, Jane is passive about her destiny. She does not cross the threshold of Rochester's class because in her mind, the classes are impenetrable. However, in the library, Rochester tells her otherwise. Enigmatically, he says, "you are silly, because, suffer as you may, you will not beckon it to approach, nor will you stir one step to meet it

where it waits for you” (209). To the reader, it is obvious that Rochester is imploring Jane to overthrow society for the sake of love. For though “ the materials are all prepared, there only wants a movement to combine them. Chance laid them somewhat apart; let them be once approached and bliss results” (210). Clearly, the only hindrance is not the social barrier that Jane blames, but rather her timidity in “ daring the world’s opinion” (234). Though there are boundaries that exist in reality, it is more important to overcome those Jane has created for herself in her psyche.

Jane finally transcends all social barriers when she asserts her equality on the night of Rochester’s proposal. In this scene, there is predominant imagery of birds. Birds, symbolic of freedom of the soul, are in fact mentioned throughout the novel, but are concentrated most in this chapter, when Jane finally frees herself from the confines of her own consciousness. At the beginning of the chapter, Jane hears a “ nightingale warbling in a wood half a mile off” (266); this parallels the onset of Jane’s passionate outburst stirring in her mind. However, when Rochester says, “ Jane, do you hear that nightingale singing in the wood?” (271), Jane begins to sob “ convulsively” (271), finally allowing the “ vehemence of emotion... to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last: yes — and to speak” (271). At last, Jane defies both sex barriers and social barriers, and says, “ I have as much soul as you — and full as much heart!” (272). She is not talking “ through the medium of custom” (272), but as an equal. And though Blanche is Jane’s superior financially and socially, Jane regards her as “ inferior” (272) because she now understands that none of those qualities should be reason enough to get married. Rochester tries to pacify the “ overexcited” (272) Jane: “

Jane, be still; don't struggle so, like a wild, frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation" (272). Jane responds, " I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will" (272).

While birds are symbols of freedom, they are also symbols of transcendence because of their connection to the sky. After a lifetime of resigned acceptance to the situation she was born into, Jane asserts her freedom as Rochester's equal and transcends the barriers that prevent her from becoming his wife. Meanwhile, " the nightingale's song was then the only voice of the hour" (273); it is the song of Jane's mutiny against fate.

This newfound freedom, however, only brings her short-lived happiness, for she is forced to utilize it against Rochester when she discovers he has a living wife. Possessed with an " inward sense of power" (326), Jane asserts her feminist mindset to avoid the subjugation of becoming Rochester's mistress. Now, her freedom works against her. That night, Jane is transported back to the Red Room in a dream; she states, " the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears" (345). These fears parallel the fears she felt as a child, when she was ostracized for trying to defy her class. Here, it seems that the upper class (which is characterized by Bertha, whose rank and wealth were the catalysts for her union to Rochester), is rallying against Jane, again telling her that the classes are unyielding. Jane escapes from this incarceration, defending her integrity as a woman and refusing to bend to the dictum of her class.

In the end, Jane returns to Rochester, no longer a mere dreamer of freedom, but the embodiment of it. She has proven her strength by consistently

escaping confinement and seeking freedom within herself because she learns that there is no external freedom unless she achieves it in the mind. At his secluded home in the heart of the woods, Rochester tells her, “ my skylark! ... I heard one of your kind an hour ago, singing high over the wood; but its song had no music for me... all the melody on earth is concentrated in my Jane’s tongue” (478). Jane’s song, the song of freedom and liberation and transcendence, is the song of victory.

As Henry David Thoreau said in his essay “ Walking,” “ it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness.” While Jane appears more sober than she was in her youth, her psyche is emancipated whereas it was once too timid. Through the voice of this daring heroine, Bronte can express her views on the world. She wrote to a critic, “ To you I am neither man nor woman. I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me — the sole ground on which I accept your judgement.” The way Jane defies the world by marrying a man who is her superior in rank is the same way Bronte successfully publishes this novel under the noses of those who scorn women for contributing to literature. Thus, *Jane Eyre* is valued for its “ uncivilized free and wild thinking” because it is a symbol of revolution against conformity in all areas of life. Bronte’s final caveat to the world emphasizes her point: “ Conventuality is not morality” (xxiii).