

# Treatment of the independant female in the portrait of a lady and jane eyre

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



Assignment: Discuss the treatment of female independence and the independent heroine in two Victorian novels. *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Bronte, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, by Henry James, both utilise the Victorian convention of the orphaned heroine that is forced to find her own way in the world. Treatment of female independence and the independent heroine in *Jane Eyre* is explored through the integrity of the self, the quest for truth and the journey to selfhood, while *The Portrait of a Lady* explores the destructive power of oppressive marriage and the need for a global education. Both novels represent a departure from the conventional Victorian heroine as articulated by George Eliot in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" and JS Mill in "The Subjection of Women". However, while *Jane Eyre* explores a domesticated conception of female independence and achieves a domesticised fulfillment, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* seeks a wider conception of liberty which is portrayed as ultimately unachievable. A central theme of *Jane Eyre* is the importance of integrity of the self for an independent heroine. This is apparent by Jane's need to resolve the dialectics of passion and reason within her self. Firstly, the consequences of excessive passion are explored through the character of Bertha. Bertha embodies a complete rejection of self-control, wherein she is in fact "mad... her excesses had developed the germs of insanity". This reference to excesses echoes Jane's unrestrained passion and foreshadows the fate that could befall her should she succumb to it. Indeed, the locking up of the young "mad cat" Jane in the Red Room after she declares passionately to Mrs Reed "I shall remember how you violently thrust me aside till my dying day" is a distinct parallel with the locking up of mad Bertha in the attic.

Hence, Bertha acts as Jane's alter ego, the side of her driven completely by emotion. Jane's restrained behaviour when refusing to enter a bigamous relationship with Rochester is contrasted with Bertha's implied promiscuity, the "woman at once intemperate and unchaste". Bertha is repeatedly associated with wild animals, "biting like a tigress...she snatched and growled", suggesting that lack of control is animalistic and restraint a particularly human virtue. The motif of fire associated with Thornfield is further indicative of the destructive power of unrestrained passion, firstly through Bertha's act of burning Rochester's bed and finally the eventual eruption of Thornfield in flames. Hence, through Bertha, Bronte is exposing the dangers of extreme emotion. On the other hand, Jane realises that complete self-control without any emotion is also destructive to her sense of selfhood. Her return to Thornfield from Moor House, for example, is a result of her realisation that she cannot simply ignore her passionate nature, but needs to balance the dialectics of reason and passion. Moor House is symbolic of coldness and duty, embodied by the "cold pillar...white marble...iceberg" character of St John. In contrast, Thornfield is symbolic of warmth and passion, embodied by Rochester and his "flaming, flashing eyes". Jane's return to Thornfield signifies the triumph of her passionate nature over her expected place in society. She refuses St John's proposal to become a missionary's wife claiming "if I join him, I abandon half my self...forced to keep the fire of my nature low...this would be unendurable". Here, Jane's placing of her own needs before her duty indicates her refusal to renounce her nature. St John and Rochester symbolise different aspects of her self and with both men, she struggles to maintain her identity. Where Rochester

tempts Jane to disregard reason and morality, St John tempts her to renounce her passion entirely. The parallels are made clear when she says “ I was almost as hard beset by him [St John] as I had been once before, in a different way, by another” . Jane realises that she needs to maintain her self-integrity in order to be independent. Bronte structures the novel around the binary oppositions of truth and blindness in order to highlight Jane’s quest for truth above everything. Jane’s refusal to commit adultery with Rochester demonstrates her high regard for her own consciousness. Indeed, the decision to leave Rochester is based on the fact that “ the attribute of stainless truth was gone from his idea; and from his presence I must go” . Bronte uses a sustained metaphor of darkness in order to convey Jane’s confusion at this time, wherein “ eddying darkness seemed to swim round [her], and reflection came in as black and confused a flow...the floods overflowed [her]” , indicating her temporary loss of her sense of self as a result of her blindness. The image of the flood gives the reader the impression that she is being engulfed and literally drowning in her anguish. The claim “ oh, how blind had been my eyes!...my eyes were covered and closed” further emphasises Jane’s realisation of the folly of her initial blind passion and her need for truth. Even when Rochester first proposes to her, it is the fact that she does not wish to be “ an ape in a harlequin’s jacket,-a jay in borrowed plumes” that gives her misgivings. These images of falseness are heightened by Rochester’s attempt to transform Jane into a “ delicate and aerial” Romantic figure of beauty through his flattery of her. Jane, however, rejects the Victorian role of women as beautiful angels claiming “ I am not an angel...and I will not be one till I die. I will be myself” , indicating

her desire for complete honesty in a marriage. Bronte uses Jane's physical journey in order to parallel her inner journey to selfhood. The structure of the novel is that of a bildungsroman, in which the protagonist's growth is traced from childhood to maturity. The novel's setting alternates between atmospheres of fiery passion and icy coldness, eventually culminating at Ferndean, which functions as a site for the synthesis of Jane's divided self. Each stage in her journey marks a learning curve. At Gateshead, Jane learns that moral courage can give her the power to withstand moral oppression. The tone of this setting is wild and superstitious, highlighting the more irrational elements of Jane's character. Lowood is a direct contrast to Gateshead, with images of coldness such as the " cold church...bitter winter wind...snowy summits" representing a departure from the unrestrained passion demonstrated in Gateshead. The predominant colour of white echoes the frozen imaginations of the children in an atmosphere of religious and social restraint. Jane learns the value of self-control from Helen Burns as a new way of dealing with oppression, yet rejects the extremism with which the latter values religious restraint. Helen's initial interest in Rasseas echoes her actions of meekly resigning herself to her fate, as an ideal woman of the time should, as the book argues that only surrender and self-control enables people to bear life's difficulties. While Helen introduces a spiritual dimension into Jane's life and teaches her the value of Christian forgiveness, neither this meekness, nor complete submission to social custom, as embodied by the aptly named Miss Temple, satisfies her. This end of her childhood phase marks the beginning of her realisation that she needs a balance between reason and passion. The events at Thornfield rekindle the desire and warmth

that was extinguished at Lowood, whilst at Moor House the tone again becomes stifling as Jane feels the pressure of St John's urge to self-sacrifice. The novel therefore oscillates between the irrational (Gateshead and Thornfield) and the rational (Lowood and Moor House), reflecting the divisions within Jane herself, until resolution is achieved at Ferndean. Jane goes from being " disconnected, poor and plain" to gaining an inheritance and family, confronting Rochester with a new confidence declaring " I am independent as well as rich: I am my own mistress" . Indeed, Rochester realises that he must see Jane as this individual in order to win her hand. This dependence is enhanced through the bird imagery surrounding the relationship between Jane and Rochester. Rochester often likens Jane to " a little bird...with quivering wings" , implying that Jane is a fragile creature who needs protection. It is interesting that when he is maimed and blinded, he likens himself to " a royal eagle, chained to a perch...forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor" , indicating that the strong (himself) has been weakened and the previously weak (Jane) has become strong. This reversal of roles wherein Rochester is now dependent on Jane is what Bronte presents as the ideal situation for Jane to achieve happiness. Jane Eyre is not the conventional heroine of Victorian fiction. George Eliot, in her essay ' Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', describes this heroine as one whose " eyes and wit are both dazzling...[she is] lovely and gifted" . Jane is clearly none of these things, being rather " puny and insignificant" . The reader gets the sense from the very start that she is an outsider and even at the end, the image of Jane and Rochester in an enclosed forest implies insularity and a severance from the outside world. Her initial position as governess further

emphasises her role as a social anomaly. Governesses were in an awkward social position during the Victorian era. Whilst they were not servants, respectable young ladies were not supposed to work for their living. Blanche Ingram's mother remarks at Rochester's party "Governesses! Don't mention the word...in her [Jane] I see all the faults of her class", highlighting Jane's inferior position. Jane is, however, a quintessentially English heroine. Jane's major temptations are to become Rochester's mistress or to marry St John and it is interesting that each involves a man tempting her to leave England. There is a distinct sense of either move being wrong for Jane, who ultimately turns her back on a world of adventure. France is associated with decadence and adultery, the site of Rochester's amorous affairs, whilst Jane is convinced she will not survive in the "rancid heat" of India. Essentially, Jane achieves fulfillment in the English domestic milieu. Unlike Jane, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* seeks a liberty which is far larger and more intangible, what she terms a "free exploration of life". Isabel is much more like the "beauteous, rich...witty" heroine of George Eliot's essay who travels in a "lofty and fashionable" society. Yet unlike the conventional heroine, these attributes are not "intended to increase [her] chance of a husband", as John Stuart Mill puts it in his essay 'The Subjection of Women'. Indeed, Isabel appears at first to be vehemently against the idea of marriage. She is a heroine who actively seeks her own destiny. Unlike "most women [who] did with themselves nothing at all...[but] waited for a man to furnish them with a destiny", Isabel repeatedly refers to her "liberty" and "independence". The reader's expectation that she will do something grand are further raised after she rejects two eligible suitors, claiming "I don't want to give up...I

want to be open to new possibilities, not of marriage, but of life...” . There is a self-consciousness about Isabel’s actions, highlighted by the motif of spectatorship carried through the novel, wherein Isabel appears aware that others are observing her every move. As Ralph Touchett says, “ we shall hang on the rest of your career...I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won’t marry an English Lord” . Here, Ralph, like the reader, is eager to see what Isabel will do next and indeed, this becomes the question of the novel. With all the foreshadowing of an illustrious career, it comes as something of a shock to the reader when Isabel opts for convention by marrying Osmond, arguably the worst of all her suitors. Marriage represents a painful stage in Isabel’s journey. While Jane Eyre’s marriage is symbolic of her coming to terms with her self, Isabel’s marriage is rather unconventionally placed in the middle of the plot. There is an atmosphere of foreboding surrounding Isabel’s relationship with Osmond, particularly when he claims that “ she had too many ideas and must get rid of them” . Everything about Osmond’s character appears contrary to the vision of freedom that Isabel previously propounded for herself and it is thus frustrating for the reader that she accepts him. He makes the claim that “ one ought to make one’s life a work of art” , which carries distinctly sinister overtones of Browning’s ‘ The Last Duchess’, wherein a husband wishes to possess his wife as a work of art, as Osmond does Isabel. Isabel perceives that her real offence was “ her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his-attached to his own...” . The questions of aesthetics and art are foregrounded by the title of the novel. The “ portrait” refers to the various ways a lady can be constructed as an artwork. Isabel herself has largely



novelistic ideas of what a lady should be, implying that her character is essentially a copy of someone else's. The disastrous effects of a bad marriage upon Isabel's character are evident by the contrast between the young Isabel's reaction to arriving in London and her reaction after her marriage. When Isabel first walks away from London station, the " world was before her...in her positive enjoyment, she lost her way on purpose..." . The allusion to Milton's Paradise Lost reflects her thirst for knowledge and desire for adventure. However, the older, married Isabel senses " something terrible in arriving in London...a nervous fear" , implying that she is afraid of what she had previously embraced and has lost all confidence in herself. James utilises the technique of ellipsing scenes in which Isabel chooses to value social custom over her independence, such as her acceptance of Osmond's proposal. These narrative ellipses create for the reader a sense that in these moments, Isabel is no longer accessible to them, that she is lost and without a voice. It is hence significant that after marriage, James refers to Isabel as " Mrs Osmond", implying that " Isabel Archer" is dead. Isabel's desire to be an original heroine has roots in her early education which was characterised by English novels. Part of the reason for her rejection of Lord Warburton is likely that her destiny would have been too novelistic. Upon first hearing of his presence, Isabel declares " Oh, I hoped there would be a lord...it would be just like a novel" . George Eliot refers to the plot device of the " legacy" or inheritance" which enables a young heroine to express her desires. Jane's inheritance materialises late in the novel, when she is near the end of her journey. However, Isabel receives her legacy before she has done anything other than reject Lord Warburton's proposal and thus the

problem is that she does not know quite what to do with it. Isabel's self is not divided, as Jane's is, she is convinced she has a strong grasp of her sense of self at the start. James narrates that " Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem" . It is partly this pride which, in the end, will not allow her to turn her back on Osmond and admit she made a mistake. It could be argued that in fact all Isabel learns is that the independence she clung to was an illusion and that it was a mistake to set her sights too high, a rather dismal view of female independence. Yet the ending is, to an extent, fairly ambiguous, indicating that there is still hope for Isabel. Her final gesture of defiance in leaving Osmond to visit the dying Ralph indicates that Osmond has not yet robbed her of her point of view. The reader is only told in a peripheral conversation between Henrietta and Goodwood that Isabel plans to return to Rome, leaving the question largely open. Furthermore, it must be remembered that she marries Osmond out of her own free will. She mentions early in the novel that " it is better to judge wrong than not to judge at all" , indicating that she would rather any mistakes in judgment be her own than someone else's. However, there is certainly no sense of closure like there is in Jane Eyre and ultimately, Isabel remains unfulfilled. The novel relies on a certain moral geography, in which America represents individualism and capability and Europe represents sophistication, decadence and social convention. Feminist views at the time were much stronger in America and Isabel at first acts as the representative of the American woman's point of view. Henrietta Stackpole embodies the American doctrine of self-reliance, urging Isabel to " leave your husband before your characters gets spoilt" when divorce in Europe at the time was

unthinkable. It is interesting that Isabel keeps travelling east, from America to England and finally Rome, as if she is going back in history to eventually stagnate in the pseudo-feudal environment of Rome. She appears to be mirroring her surrounding, gradually losing her independence with each move. The two visions of selfhood reflected in the conflict between Emersonian philosophy and the European mode of self are foregrounded during Isabel's conversations with Madame Merle. The latter mentions that "there's no such thing as an isolated man or woman. Every man has his shell...one's house, books...these are all expressive of one's self", to which Isabel replies "nothing else expresses me. My clothes may express my dressmaker, but they don't express me". Isabel is propounding the transcendentalist philosophy that the self can transcend society, a mark of the newer, liberal America. In contrast, Madame Merle personifies the "old, old world", claiming to have been "born before the French Revolution", an obvious exaggeration, but James appears to be alluding to the ancien regime and deliberately associating his character with it. There is a theme of dislocation carried throughout the novel, specifically the sense that, as an American woman, Isabel is distinctly out of place. As Madame Merle declares, "an American who lives in Europe...that signifies absolutely nothing". The metaphor of the parasite is used to convey this, with Madame declaring "we're mere parasites, crawling over the surface, we haven't our feet in the soil", implying that they are alien creatures on 'foreign' soil. In an interesting parallel, women particularly are associated with this image, as they "[have] no natural place anywhere". Isabel's naive belief in the transcendentalist philosophy is exposed via her humility lesson in Rome.

Italy is the site for Isabel's realisation that there are in fact other things that can express her and that she is part of a shared history rather than an isolated individual. Rome gives her a "haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot", indicating that Roman history has given her a scale by which to measure human suffering. Images of "broken columns" and "dying gladiators" enhance her realisation that her suffering is not unique. Isabel's education hence becomes a mixture of American philosophy, English novels and Italian history, a wider, more globalised education than that of Jane Eyre. Thus, it is apparent that while both Jane Eyre and The Portrait of a Lady utilise the common element in Victorian fiction of the orphaned heroin who seeks independence, each novel presents a different scope of this liberty. Jane manages to obtain fulfillment in the domestic realm through her journey to selfhood and her quest for truth, while Isabel, who seeks something larger and vaguer, is ultimately disappointed. Both heroines however, undergo an educational journey in their effort to achieve independence and learn to resolve certain aspects of their selves.

Reading List  
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