The unenslaved self: feminist enlightenment in jane eyre

Literature, British Literature

In Jane Eyre, each episode Charlotte BrontÃ« tells of Jane’s life recounts a new struggle, always featuring a man and his patriarchal institution: John Reed’s Gateshead, Brocklehurst’s Lowood, Rochester’s Thornfield, and St. John’s Moor House. In every circumstance, these men attempt to confine Jane to an inferior role as a woman. Looking back on her life she writes, “ I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings… between absolute submission and determined revolt.” Because of this tireless opposition against overwhelming power, Jane often uses images and descriptions of slavery to characterize these relationships. But her use of slavery as an analogy evolves. Beginning as a term of ironic empowerment, Jane soon rejects the perception of herself as a slave and eventually reaches a point of feminist enlightenment in which she realizes she is naturally free. Consequently, the metaphor of slavery depicts her own path of overcoming the oppression that threatens her inherent liberty. Jane first introduces the motif of slavery during her time at Gateshead, where, associating her own revolutionary passion with those destitute souls, she is proud to declare herself a slave. After a painful round of bullying, she yells at John Reed, “ You are like a murderer- you are like a slave-driver- you are like the Roman Emperors!” (11) She writes, “ like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved” (12) and “ all my heart [was in] insurrection!” (15) Jane’s dramatization of her struggle to an epic grand proportion and her sentimental description of how insurrection grips her heart both paint a romanticized picture of herself as a slave. She is absolutely enraptured by the role. The rhetorical use of inflammatory, exclamatory sentences also indicate the extent to which Jane derives power from this typically powerless condition. Indeed, when she

finally does stand up to her oppressors she feels her " soul begin to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph" (37). At this point in the novel, Jane refers to herself as a slave exultantly, indicating her own satisfaction as a dejected and abused loner. This also elucidates Jane's feelings towards her oppression as a whole at this stage in her progression: though it causes her great pain, it also satiates her, providing strength and direction. In the dusty, decrepit halls of Lowood, as the metaphor of slavery becomes suffused with a melancholy air, Jane's outlook on her cruel subjugation also shifts to a view of morose, desolate sadness. One incident demonstrates this most convincingly: Jane's unjust punishment at the hands of Mr. Brocklehurst. Forced by this tyrant of a schoolmaster to perch on a stool silently in front of the school, Jane is weary and ashamed. Yet, as Helen Burns passes by she remarks that " it was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit" (67). The image of our " slave" in this passage is completely different from that of Gateshead. The fact that Helen is portrayed as a savior figure who aids and impels Jane to strive on through her punishment shows that Jane lacks her previous " rebel slave" resolve. Now Jane is a struggling victim, not an impassioned rebel. It is also important to note that the powerful person in this example, Helen, is a character of marked passivity- suggesting it is Jane's tireless insurrection that makes her powerless. In either case, she no longer derives the same power from her slave status as she did at Gateshead. She has given up exclamations for quiet thoughts, writing, " I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing" (85). The division of this sentence into several

independent clauses separated by semi-colons indicates the desperate nature of her struggle. The brevity of the clauses forces them to be uttered in a breathy and tired fashion that suggests exasperation and hopelessness, as if the speaker were barely able to pull the thought together for expression. Yet, at the same time, the punctuation forces the sentence to be read somewhat quickly, suggesting an importunate nature to the thought. Jane's victimized sadness and desire for liberty suggest that the metaphor of slavery and her oppression have developed to become sources of depression and weakness; she is whelmed under their power. At Thornfield, Jane expresses more fervently than ever her desire to be free and independent from all tyranny and, in accordance with this, she denies the slave analogy. As Rochester and Jane return home from a day of shopping, she remarks that his " smile was such as a sultan might… bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (269). Jane reacts harshly: " I crushed his hand, which was ever hunting mine, vigorously, and thrust it back to him red with passionate pressure" (269). This example heightens the metaphor to a physical level: Rochester's treatment of Jane as a sexual slave is likened to the physical act of preying upon her. The ferocity of Jane's tangible rejection also represents the figurative passion with which she refuses Rochester's perceived attempts to enslave her. Though this slavery is one of monetary dependence, not cruel punishment, Jane still rebuffs it, saying, " I'll not stand you one inch of a seraglio… so don't consider me an equivalent for one" (269). This instance of slave imagery marks another change in the use of the metaphor: it is the first time that Jane herself does not portray herself as a slave; rather, she observes someone else making the connection. This

suggests that Jane has expelled the analogy from her own mind, or at least denies her position as a slave. It no longer even seems valid. Jane's discontinuation of regarding herself as a slave- and refusal to be regarded as one by others- can be viewed as a reflection of her disavowal of oppression because it accompanies a denial of Rochester's inferior treatment. The final evolution of the metaphor is Jane's realization that she is a naturally free woman- not a slave. When St. John proposes marriage, Jane is aghast, gasping, " Oh! It would never do!" (407) She would " suffer often, no doubt, attached to him" (407). Yet, her consideration of his offer to join him on missionary work prompts an important discovery: she writes, " As his curate, his comrade… I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings…" (407) As his wife, Jane would be oppressed and confined, but as merely his companion, her " heart and mind would be free" (407). Jane is not a slave, she has liberty. The only reason she could ever be considered a slave is because men attempt to restrain and abuse her with their power and money. Jane's decision not to marry St. John but rather to enter a marriage with Rochester that is ground on equality is a translation of her overcoming not only the figurative metaphor of slavery, but also the real, cruel treatment which has confined her life and pursuit of happiness. The development of BrontÃ«'s slave imagery throughout the novel reflects Jane's own progression towards transcendence of oppression. From John Reed to Brocklehurst, Rochester, and even St. John, men's tyranny and the harsh analogy follow Jane through every episode of her life. And though she begins reveling in her power as a rebel slave, the metaphor and her brutal subjugation grow to become sources of sadness and infuriation until she

realizes that both have been thrust upon her, against her will, and against common humanity. This feminist enlightenment is the very essence of the novel: it does not matter what harrowing oppression, impoverished means, or fettered life the various men attempt to thrust upon her. Jane knows she is not meant to be enslaved and will no longer accept such ill treatment. And, while the receipt of Jane’s inheritance, Bertha’s death, and Rochester’s maiming could be argued as requirements for the book’s happy ending, thematically, this realization is what allows for a viable resolution to the novel. 1 Charlotte BrontÃ«, Jane Eyre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 400. Further references will be parenthetical