



Charlotte Bronte's: Jane Eyre as Bildungsroman

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Life, believe, is not a dream

So dark as sages say;

Oft a little morning rain

Foretells a pleasant day.

Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,

But these are transient all;

If the shower will make the roses bloom,

O why lament its fall?

(Life by Charlotte Bronte)

As from the above lines we can see the view point of Charlotte Bronte about life in her poem "Life", which is also about life that bad things are only short lived and good things always follow them. Similarly in her novel, which belongs to the bildungsroman, genre deals with the same

aspirations. From unloved, penniless orphan to treasured, upper class wife, the story of Jane in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre is one of development and personal growth.

Originally published as Jane Eyre: An Autobiography is a novel that deals with many themes and literary motifs like Feminism, Romanticism, Morality and Gothicism. Bronte published her book using a male pseudonym name "Currer Bell" to avoid the prejudice based on gender. While speculation on the identity of the author was a factor in the popularity of Jane Eyre, the story of Jane's character kept the audience reading. As a novel in the bildungsroman genre, the narrative carries readers through the development of Jane and her "healthy self-interest and rebellious questioning of rules and conventions" (Watkins). Readers are introduced to Jane when she is a young girl living in the manor known as Gateshead.

As an orphan, Jane is isolated and unloved by the Reeds, the family of the house. The lack of compassion for Jane is evident when she is locked in the "Red Room," a haunting chamber where the last of Jane's known blood relatives died. Mrs. Reed's harsh punishment of Jane and the cruelty the orphan faces from the other children of the house leave Jane without a sense of belonging. Early in the story, Jane's questions of belonging connect the novel to the bildungsroman genre.

" I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am free human being with an independent will"
(Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre)

Jane's desire for better life is seemingly fulfilled when she learns that she would be leaving Gateshead for the Lowood institution, a charity school for girls. However, her dreams of better life is shattered when a cruel and abusive headmaster Mr. Brocklehurst leaves her wondering whether her situation will ever truly change. Mrs. Reed cautions Mr. Brockelhurst that Jane has a "tendency for deceit", which he interprets as her being a "liar".

Fortunately, a fellow student named Helen Burns befriends Jane. Her deep religious beliefs and ability to suppress anger show Jane a new way to view her situation. Through her friendship with Helen, Jane is exposed to an alternative point of view that helps her grow emotionally and mentally. Many critics are of the view that Helen who is an ethereal and oblivious soul brings forth the spiritual facet to Jane. The name 'Lowood' symbolizes the "low" point in Jane's life where she is subjected to physical suffering and pain.

What though Death at times steps in

And calls our Best away?

What though sorrow seems to win,

O'er hope, a heavy sway?

Yet hope again elastic springs,
Unconquered, though she fell;
Still buoyant are her golden wings,
Still strong to bear us well.
Manfully, fearlessly,
The day of trial bear,
For gloriously, victoriously,
Can courage quell despair!

(Life by Charlotte Bronte)

Helen dies in Jane's arms due to consumption and poor conditions at Lowood but developing a Jane of more clear beliefs: "conventionality is not morality" and self righteousness is not religion". She transitions from pupil to an instructor. However, Jane soon finds her position unfulfilling; her longing for something more drives her to a governess position at Thornfield manor. During the Victorian era in which the novel was written, the position of governess was one of the only occupations available to women. In fact, Charlotte Bronte worked as a governess from 1839 to 1841. Bronte hated being a governess because she felt like an "inferior who was not 'considered as a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill'" (Homans). Contrary to Bronte's experience, Jane is described as excited and anxious at the new prospect of the occupation. There is a passionate directness in the Jane's narration and she comments on the role of women in society and the greater constraint imposed on them.

" I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendliness the more unstained I am, the more I will respect myself" (Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre)

At Thornfield, Jane teaches a French girl named Adele. Abandoned by her mother and cared for by Mr. Rochester, the owner of Thornfield, Adele is essentially an orphan like Jane. Luckily for Adele, she has been loved and cared for while at Thornfield. Mr. Rochester intrigues Jane, eventually becoming a love interest. This romantic interest is realized by Jane and by readers through the appearance of Blanche Ingram. As an attractive, upper class woman, Jane becomes convinced that Rochester will soon marry Blanche. The comparison in the novel of Jane and Blanche points out the class differences essential to social norms of the Victorian era. Jane's jealousy of Blanche and romantic interest in Mr. Rochester displays the evolution of Jane from a child to a woman who longs for more than familial love. When Rochester proposes to Jane instead of Blanche, she accepts.

“I have for the first time found what I can truly love-I have found you. You are my sympathy-my better self-my good angel- I am bound to you with a strong attachment. I think you good, gifted, lovely: a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my center and spring of life, wrap my existence about you- and, kindling in pure, powerful flame, fuses you and me in one.” (Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre)

Following the theme of difficulty throughout Jane’s life, the wedding ceremony does not go according to plan. It is revealed that Rochester is already married to a woman, as he later explains, who is mentally insane and who has been locked in the attic at Thornfield the entire time Jane has been governess. As a result of this new information, Jane rejects Rochester’s proposal to move away and get married. Instead, she abandons the love she has always longed for to preserve her self-respect. Leaving Thornfield opens the next chapter of Jane’s life.

After fleeing from Thornfield, Jane once again finds herself penniless and alone. Jane nearly circles back to having nothing and knowing nobody. Again, the difficulty of life for characters in bildungsroman genre novels applies to Jane. Luckily, the Rivers family takes her in and provides her with much more. When St. John, the head of the Rivers household, notifies Jane of an inheritance, it is revealed that the Rivers are cousins of Jane. By finally connecting with family, Jane finds a sense of belonging. Yet despite St. John’s proposal of marriage and life with him as a missionary in India, Jane decides to return to Thornfield.

Upon her return, Jane finds Thornfield burned to the ground. It is later explained that Rochester’s wife set fire to the manor and jumped to her death. Finding Mr. Rochester blind and injured in his new home, Ferndean, Jane rekindles the relationship. As a consequence, the infamous line “Reader, I married him” draws the novel toward closure. Jane then joyfully describes her life with a partially blind Edward Rochester and a son.

“Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own: in pain and sickness it would still be dear.” (Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre)

Psychological maturation is a typical trait of Bildungsroman genre. The German word “Bildungsroman” means “novel of education or novel of formation” is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age), and in which, therefore, character change is extremely important. The folklore tale of the dunce who goes out into the world seeking adventure and learns wisdom the hard way was raised to literary heights in Christoph Martin’s “History of Agathon”. The term was coined in 1819 by philologist Karl Morgenstern in his university lectures, and later famously reprised by Wilhelm Dilthey, who legitimized it in 1870 and popularized it in 1905. The birth of the Bildungsroman is normally dated to the publication Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in 1795–96. Although the Bildungsroman rose in Germany, it has had extensive influence first in Europe and later throughout the world. In the 20th century, it has spread to Germany, Britain, France, and several other countries around the globe.

The bildungsroman traditionally ends on a positive note though its action maybe tempered by resignation and nostalgia. Essentially, the bildungsroman genre demands internal movement in its protagonist- from innocence to maturity, from ignorance to knowledge. External movement mirrors this internal movement; these movements act as a sort of catalyst to introduce the protagonist to obstacles and challenges the rules of society.

Jane Eyre, certainly, does come of age in Charlotte Bronte's classic education novel. At the beginning of the book, Jane is a lonely dependent orphan girl, but she battles the constraints of her harsh upbringing and becomes educated, not only intellectually, but socially and spiritually, as well. She develops into a strong, confident and independent woman. She neither has to give up her spiritual beliefs nor her normal human desires for love to be genuinely happy. Jane becomes the epitome of the modern women, as she manages a perfect balance between both, the spiritual and the physical, which is what she really wanted in life. Ultimately Jane Eyre also proclaims the triumph of spiritual values over material ones, which is a leitmotif of all the Bronte novels. In Jane Eyre Charlotte Bronte found a means of universalizing the imaginative vision of Angria. The way the heroine tries to resolve various paradoxes give the novel a universal dimension. Jane wants to be overtly rational but yet trusts in intuition, imagination and vision. She wishes to remain passive yet enjoys the excitement of rebellion. She desires sexual satisfaction yet fears a life of passion.

Margaret Bloom in her book on Charlotte Bronte aptly pinpoints the immense appeal of the novel Jane Eyre: Charlotte Bronte's story of a plain orphan girl whose superior qualities are finally acknowledged and who gains the reward of love and power has become the modern version of the Cinderella tale; for Jane not only wins her Prince Charming but does so by steadfastly asserting her independence, becoming thereby not only his consort but his queen.

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