

A Journey to Independence and Self-actualization

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Abstract: In writing the story of an orphan girl, Charlotte Bronte reflected that women in England were in a miserable plight but they wanted to free themselves from the constriction of men so Charlotte created Jane Eyre who dared to revolt against those unfair common customs and strive for the same equal rights as men. More than one hundred years later when this novel is read again, Jane Eyre is still counted as one of excellent literary works, bearing historical meaning and realistic significance. Jane's struggling growth journey, the theme and value of the novel are the main topics of detailed discussion in the present paper.

Keywords: Struggling; Journey; Independence; Self-actualization

1. Introduction

From childhood to maturity, Jane is always struggling against oppression, starvation and coldness, but she finally earns the approval and love through suffering, self-sacrifice and her help to others. From imprisonment to freedom, Jane is always eager to love and to be loved and to be a woman of achievement and integrity. Charlotte Bronte seems to show that plain yet confident, intelligent women may win their way, although oppressed in society because of their birth or fortune. When this novel is read today, Jane's struggling growth journey has greatly contributed to the women's independence and self-actualization.

2. Jane's struggling growth journey

2.1 At Gateshead

At the beginning of the novel, little Jane is sent to uncle's family. After her uncle dies, her aunt and her cousins are harsh to her. Because not a contented and happy child, Jane is excluded from the Reed family group in the drawing room. She takes refuge in a scarlet-draped window to read Bewick's book. Unfortunately, she is found by tyrannical John, who always reminds her of her orphaned position and this time when he hurls the heavy volume of Bewick at her, the little girl dares to strike back against him. As a result, she is imprisoned into the red-room.

In the red-room, her reason instigates some strange expedient like running away, never eating or drinking more and letting herself die. At that moment, the germ of adult Jane is born. She is determined to live and to choose her life with dignity, integrity and pride. Then she tells straight to her aunt's face that all of them are cruel, that she will never call her aunt, and that she hates all the people in the family except her uncle, and that she is tired of living in this family. These fiery words make Mrs. Reed afraid of this little fighter and sent her to Lowood.

2.2 At Lowood

Lowood is a charity school for the poor or orphaned girls, where they are starved and frozen because of all its privations. Mr. Brocklehurst, the ruler of this school, uses religion, charity and morality to keep the poor in their place and to repress and humiliate these young girls. If her rage's target is only limited to the Reeds, Jane must face a wider world to struggle at Lowood. She hates and looks down upon Mr. Brocklehurst. In spite of suffering his public humiliation, she still becomes more mature than before in the company of the noble Miss Temple and another admiring student Helen Burns. Helen and Temple comfort and feed Jane, their moral and intellectual force combine to give the young Jane a sense of her own worth and ethical choice. When she separates from Miss Temple, Jane moves forward into a wider realm of experience-Thornfield.^[1]

2.3 In Thornfield

The center of Jane's growth journey is, of course, her experience in Thornfield as a governess, where she comes to womanhood

and begins to reflect on the most essential for her whole life as a woman.

First in an icy twilight, when Rochester falls on the ice with his horse, Jane helps him and they meet for the first time. Rochester leans on her shoulder and admits that “necessity compels me to make you useful.” This is his first need for Jane, then Rochester needs Jane’s strength more and more. For example, she saves him from his burning bed and helps him save Mason from the wounds inflicted by “Grace Poole”. These rescues are helpful for their mutual sense of equality. At the same time, Rochester is more and more aware of Jane’s pursuit of equality. In the library at Thornfield, Rochester claims to have an advantage over Jane about his wider experience of the world, but Jane disagrees, reminding him of his superiority just because of his use of time and experience. At that moment, Rochester recognizes her physical and psychological similarities with his at some degree. Jane’s flesh and her social position is fettered but simultaneously her inward fantasy and spiritual space is free. Her interaction with Rochester is in spirit and in the sense Jane appears supernatural to him. Under the old chestnut tree at Thornfield, when Rochester tells Jane that he will soon marry Miss Ingram, a rich and beautiful lady, and at the same time, asks her to stay in Thornfield, Jane sharply retorts Rochester: my soul is as rich as yours and my heart as full as yours! She says that they are equal.

Although Jane is a passionate girl and woman, in her minds she distinguishes clearly between her intense feelings which can lead to a greater fulfillment and which can only lead to self-destructiveness. So when Jane knows that Mr. Rochester has a mad wife kept in Thornfield Hall, her heart struggles. The existence of Bertha makes a marriage of equality between them impossible. Rochester plays on every chord of her love, her pity and sympathy, but her own spiritual consciousness tells her that their marriage is not yet ripe, because it only makes her simply a dependent adjunct of Rochester instead of his equal. Her heart aches to think how Mr. Rochester will feel to find her gone. And also she knows her life will be much poorer and harder than ever if she leaves Thornfield. But Jane can not endure mutilation and drag out an ignoble existence. So she leaves Thornfield to set forth on foot to an unknown destination.

2.4 At Moor House

After leaving the Thornfield, Jane’s wanderings are a symbolic summary of the wanderings of the poor, starving and freezing and stumbling. Yet as Jane has an inner strength, “kind angels” finally bring her to a true home called Moor House, where she meets St. John River and his sisters. Here, Jane travels toward more maturity in her growth journey and knows which life style better suits for her. Mr. Rivers is a finely-observed and hard-studied man who turns his ambition to the service of religion. When Mr. Rivers makes a proposal to her, she refuses him. In Jane’s opinion, the reason why Mr. Rivers wants to marry her is that he thinks she is suitable to be the wife of a missionary. Although her accompanying Mr. Rivers as a co-worker but not wife would allow her to fulfill the aspiration and ambitions through missionary work, she still refuses such a loveless marriage for fear of losing her independence.^[2]

Also at Moor House Jane inherits twenty thousand pounds left by her uncle. Now she is more free to do as she pleases. Dividing her inheritance, she returns to Thornfield and discovers Bertha’s death and the ruined mansion. At that moment, Jane and Rochester respectively free from their own burdens. Though he has fettered by the injuries, these fetters pose no impediment to a new marriage. Because their social disguise of master and servant has been shed, they can speak to each other equally in reality, and they can afford to depend upon each other with no fear of one exploiting the other.

2.5 In Ferndean

Ferndean, old and decaying, sits in a dark forest with no flowers and no garden-beds. But it will be green and fertilized by soft rains as Jane tells Rochester and it will become a natural paradise.

3. Conclusion

At present, some women become fame-crazy and profit-crazy. Material and practical aspirations override their self-respect and independence. Jane’s growth is to warn women what is more important and her triumph is still beneficial to promote women’s inherent value.

References:

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