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CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S 'PROMETHEAN CINDERELLA', JANE EYRE

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse and trace the development of Charlotte Brontë's most famous heroine, Jane Eyre in the light of Karen Horney's theories of personality. The contention is that the central character is caught between contradictory impulses such as submissiveness and independence due to the 'basic anxiety' within her. She is ultimately able to control and outgrow all the morbid compulsive tendencies within to find a sense of health and self-realization at the end of the novel.

Keywords: Self-effacing, wish-fulfilment, love, rebellion, self-realization, etc.

David Lodge considers *Jane Eyre* to be "the struggle of an individual consciousness towards self-fulfilment...." (Gregor, 110), while R.B. Martin feels that: "In *Jane Eyre* the movement of the action is towards the maturity and self-knowledge of its characters" (Martin, 58). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar opine that "*Jane Eyre* is a work permeated by angry Angrian fantasies of escape-into-wholeness" (Gilbert and Gubar, 336) and Pat Macpherson believes that "*Jane Eyre* as heroine and Charlotte Brontë as writer rewrite Victorian woman into a whole, to include intellect and feeling, passion and reason, rebellion and propriety, transgressive desire and virtue" (Macpherson, 9) Émile Montégut describes *Jane Eyre* as "the ideal and poetic Charlotte" (Allott, 134).

These comments by various critics are pointers to Charlotte Brontë's concerns in her first published work, a work which catapulted her to instant success and renown. The intimacy of tone gained by the use of the first-person narrative helps Brontë to give us an insight into her entire inner life, to tell a tale that *Jane Eyre* talks about opening her inward ear to - "a tale that was never ended - a tale my imagination created and narrated continuously, quick with all of incident, life, fire, feeling that I desired and had not in my actual existence" (Brontë, 101).

Jane Eyre is a mature attempt at wish-fulfilment where Brontë tries to achieve self-realization by bringing about a merger of her 'ideal' and 'actual' selves through the character of Jane. Like Brontë, Jane is plain, small and melancholy looking- she also shares Brontë's general reserve and diffidence and is seemingly submissive. But she can be self-assertive when most necessary and possesses a talent for repartee that Brontë longed for. Gilbert and Gubar feel that "Jane is an Angrian Cinderella, a Byronic heroine", whose "way of confronting the world is still the Promethean way of fiery rebellion ..." (Gilbert and Gubar, 347) While this is partly true, what is more apparent is Jane's deep feeling of insecurity or "basic anxiety", (resulting both from the loneliness of her orphan state, and her consciousness of her lack of physical attractions). As Muriel Masfield points out: "Charlotte's Cinderellas need rescuing from themselves, from voluntary repression and lack of expectation bred by the want of 'natural advantages', rather than from tyrannical relations." (Masfield, 134) This brings with it a deep desire for friendship and affection to the extent where Jane feels that: "... if others don't love me, I would rather die than live - I cannot bear to be solitary and hated, Helen, ... to gain some



real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand from behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest -" (Bronte, 62). Such overdependence on love clearly indicates a type of character that is classified as "self-effacing" by Karen Horney.

Growing up in a loveless atmosphere at Gateshead, an atmosphere of hostility, and constantly browbeaten for being a dependent, Jane develops tendencies of submissiveness and self-effacement. Jane describes her habitual mood as being one of "humiliation, self-doubt and forlorn depression" (Bronte, 10). compounded by her being "humbled by the consciousness of her "physical inferiority to Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed" (Bronte,1). She finds solace in these surroundings by clinging to her doll, for "human beings must love something" (Bronte, 22). The only human being sympathetic to her is the servant Bessie, who however chides her for her submissiveness and unchildlike nature, for being "a little roving, solitary thing" (Bronte, 32). Bessie tells her that she "should be bolder" (Bronte, 32); and that people would only dislike her even more if she dreaded them. The degree of "self-hate" (as Horney terms it), generated by the humiliating treatment meted out to her is apparent when Jane makes the statement: "... nothing worse than myself haunted the shadowy room" (Bronte, 22) and sees herself in the mirror as "one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp" (Bronte, 8). John Maynard feels that her allusion to imps "emphasizes the non-human role she now sees herself in in any imagined personal relationship" (Maynard, 102). Self-hate and an extreme sense of rejection, combined with a great desire for affection from some quarter, cause her to conjure up in her imagination the ghost of her dead uncle, leading to an even greater sense of fear and claustrophobia that is responsible for her nervous breakdown in the Red Room. Jane's reaction on beholding the apothecary, Mr. Lloyd by her bedside is a perfect indication of her extreme sense of "basic anxiety." She tells us: "I felt an inexpressible relief, a soothing conviction of protection and security when I knew there was a stranger in the room, an individual not belonging to Gateshead..." (Bronte,12)

When Jane does erupt once against her aunt, her feelings immediately after the revolt are in keeping with the "self-effacing" type of character: "Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time. An aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy; its after flavour, metallic and corroding gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned" (Bronte, 31). Her desire for love is so great that she is even willing to rush back to her aunt and apologize, but she knows that she would be thrown out. This one desire for affection overrides all her other desires and drives her to suppress all feelings of hostility. As Helen Burns tells her: "You think too much of the love of human beings." (Bronte, 62). Even her progress at Lowood is motivated by this desire for approbation as is apparent from this statement – "... a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight in pleasing my teachers, especially such as I loved, urged me on" (Bronte, 76).

The simmering discontent which lies below the surface gives rise to a kind of restlessness. She talks of the harmonising, stabilising influence that Miss Temple's motherly affection and approbation had on her. But when Miss Temple leaves Lowood after getting married, Jane's feeling of insecurity resurfaces, leading to a feeling of claustrophobia (as in the Red Room), and she longs to escape from Lowood. She tells us: "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer" (Bronte, 77), and since this seems impossible to her humble notions of herself, she settles for a new servitude. This again is typical of the "self-effacing" type of character, who according to Horney believes that: "He should be content with little ..." (Horney, 218) But, at Thornfield, too, the restlessness persists when she tells us that: "Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot" (Bronte, 101). She justifies her feelings by advocating the cause of women, by appealing for a more active participation in the world, newer fields for work and freedom from restraint, showing the hidden streak of "expansiveness" in her nature. However, the only way for her to fulfil this desire for adventure is by fantasizing.



Out in the open world for the first time as an adult, her morbid fears of her physical unattractiveness resurface when she remarks that: “At eighteen, most people wish to please and the conviction that they have not an exterior likely to second the desire brings anything but gratification.” (Bronte, 83) and “... I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit...” (Bronte, 90) She questions herself as to why she desires this and confesses: “I could not then distinctly say it to myself; yet I had a reason, and a logical, natural reason too” (Bronte,90). And we can conclude that this reason certainly is the desire to have a lover - something perfectly natural in a young girl as she says - but something that becomes a compulsive drive for someone like her filled with self-doubt, whose chief means of fulfilment, therefore, lies in being loved.

Karen Horney mentions in *Neurosis and Human Growth* that erotic love is seen as the supreme fulfilment by the “self-effacing” type of person: “Love must and does appear as the ticket to paradise where all woe ends, no more loneliness, no more feeling lost, guilty and unworthy; no more responsibility for self; no more struggle with a harsh world for which she feels hopelessly unequipped. Instead, love seems to promise protection, support, affection, encouragement, sympathy, understanding. It will give him a feeling of worth. It will give meaning to his life. It will be salvation and redemption” (Horney, 239-240).

And this is precisely what happens to Jane from her friendship with Rochester. She tells us: “So happy, so gratified did I become with this new interest added to life, that I ceased to pine after kindred: my thin-crescent destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up; my bodily health improved; I gathered flesh and strength” (Bronte, 137). She, gradually, sheds her inhibitions and sense of inferiority and begins to care less about what others think of her. Of the supercilious treatment she receives at the hands of her cousins when she visits Gateshead, she is able to say: “A sneer, however, covert or open, had now no longer that power over me it once possessed.” (Bronte, 216). She is even able to forgive her aunt and cousins for the harsh treatment meted out to her in childhood, for Rochester's approbation diminishes the feeling of being unwanted and unworthy. As she explains: “I still felt as a wanderer on the face of the earth; but I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression. The gaping wound of my wrongs, too, was now quite healed; and the flame of resentment extinguished.” (Bronte, 215). After her engagement to Rochester, she even begins to feel that she is “no longer plain” (Bronte, 244)

The love element in *Jane Eyre* has a strong erotic colouring to it. Jane dreams about: “... the sense of being in his arms, hearing his voice, meeting his eye, touching his hand cheek, loving him, being loved by him...” (Bronte, 350). Horney feels that the origin of this longing comes in “the longing for surrender and the longing for unity,” the latter being of special importance to the neurotic with his “inner division” (Horney 240). This, combined with the belief that love can serve as a means of actualizing the “idealized” self, sums up perfectly, the reasons for this deep craving for love in Jane. Rochester's ability to penetrate through her external garb of conventionality, austerity, melancholy and submissiveness, thaws her reserve and helps her to emerge from her shell. He informs her that she is not “naturally austere” and that she can “laugh very merrily” and his description of her as “a curious sort of bird” shut up in a cage (Bronte, 129) is very apt. He is proved right when he states that “a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high” (Bronte, 129).

Soar high she does, when freed from restraint by his informal behaviour, and especially when she is sure of his love. As Mark Kinkead-Weeks puts it, it is Rochester's “rupture of social convention that sets Jane's selfhood free.” (Gregor, 83) We find Jane's character blooming and springing to life in the presence of Rochester, being perfectly natural with him, displaying the spirit and vivacity he detects in her. She is able to actualize her “idealized” self. As she tells us in the closing pages of the novel after her reunion with Rochester: “There was no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity with him; for with him, I was at perfect ease, because I knew I suited him; all I said or did



seemed either to console or revive him. Delightful consciousness! It brought to life and light my whole nature: in his presence I thoroughly lived: and he lived in mine.” (Bronte, 418). The concept of total surrender and unity is often repeated, and at the end, she says: “I know it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest – blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am; ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.” (Bronte, 431).

We find in Jane the sense of attraction and admiration that a “self-effacing” type of person feels for people who seem strong or superior. One sees this in Jane’s preference for a strong, balanced character like Miss Temple, in a certain feeling of awe she displays for Helen Burns (although she avers that she could not understand nor sympathize with Helen’s forbearance), and even to a certain extent for St. John Rivers (although in his case, her revulsion for him far exceeds her admiration). One sees complete proof of Horney’s statement in Jane’s admiration for the hero, Edward Fairfax Rochester.

Both Rochester and Rivers belong to the category of persons seeking the “expansive” solution. Horney explains that the “self-effacing” type overrates persons belonging to the “expansive” masterly type for “they all seem to possess attributes which he not only bitterly misses in himself but ones for the lack of which he despises himself” (Horney, 243). Horney feels that what accounts for the compulsive element in such an infatuation is the suppression of “expansive” drives in persons belonging to the “self-effacing” type. They externalize their own “expansive” drives and admire them in others. It is the pride and arrogance of the “expansive” type which appeal so much to them. To put it in Horney’s words: “To love a proud person, to merge with him, to live vicariously through him would allow him to participate in the mastery of life without having to own it himself” (Horney, 244).

The grand scale on which Rochester is created can be accounted for by this fact. Rochester is an extremely virile specimen, endowed with all the attribute of maleness – he is “dark, strong and stern” (Bronte, 107); there are repeated references to his manliness – “his look of native pith and genuine power” (Bronte, 164), the “sonorous voice” (Bronte, 156), his athleticism, the “daring stride” (Bronte, 413), the broad chest and strong shoulders, the “muscular hand” and “long strong arm” (265), and the “manly cheek.” (Bronte, 425). He has a “colourless, olive face, square massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth - all energy, decision, will.” (Bronte, 163); he has a “decisive nose more remarkable for character than beauty” and “full nostrils” denoting “choler” (Bronte, 111), eyes- “dark, irate and piercing.” (Bronte, 112).

Jane is absolutely fascinated by his masculinity; she talks about it as “an influence that quite mastered me - that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his.” (Bronte, 163). Even with his harsh features and melancholy looks, when Rochester smiles: “his stern features softened; his eye grew both brilliant and gentle, its ray both searching and sweet.” (Bronte, 164). It is obvious that Jane is bestowing on him, both, real and imagined qualities (in Jungian terms - projecting her “animus” on him), idealizing and idolising him. Horney mentions that total surrender makes it necessary to glorify the partner (Horney, 252). Jane is aware of this tendency in herself to glorify him. She tells us: “I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had an idol” (Bronte, 260-261). He is designated as “Hercules” and “Samson” (Bronte, 247), and there is more than one reference to him as “idol” and “star”, and she also talks about “the sunshine of his presence” and the “shelter of his protection” (Bronte, 233).

Horney, further, elaborates on this trait in the “self-effacing” type by telling us that: “Both her need to idealize him and her need to surrender operate in hand. She has extinguished her personal self to the extent of seeing him and others through his eyes” (Horney, 252). Jane admits to worshipping Rochester and is partially aware of the subjective nature of her perception when she admits: “I was growing very lenient to my master. I was forgetting all his faults, for which I had once kept a sharp



look out ... Now I saw no bad. The sarcasm that had repelled, the harshness that had startled me once, were only like keen condiments in the choice dish: their presence was pungent but their absence would be felt as comparatively insipid" (Bronte, 176). This accounts for the strange ambivalence of Jane's nature - the remarkable perception that she shows at times, and the extreme blindness at other times, especially with anything pertaining to Rochester.

Jane welcomes Rochester's arrogance and incivility towards her for this gives her a sense of intimacy and equality. She tells Rochester: "... I like rudeness a great deal better than flattery. I had rather be a thing than an angel" (Bronte, 249). Margaret Oliphant feels that "this furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the 'Rights of Woman' in a new aspect" (Allott, 119) Elaine Showalter observes that what Mrs. Oliphant meant by this statement was that "the brute flattered the heroine's spirit by treating her as an equal rather than as a sensitive, fragile fool who must be sheltered and protected", for "... women need love but hate to be weak." (Showalter, 143) Without making such sweeping generalisations about female psychology, we can well explain this as another trait of the "self-effacing" type. Karen Horney has actually reproduced a patient's words in explaining this streak in the "self-effacing" type: "If he can insult me, then I am just an ordinary human being" (and only then can I love, adds Horney) - (Bronte, 246). As Mark Kinkead-Weeks puts it, Rochester "allows her to be a person" (Gregor, 83)

Thus, we have in Jane a character caught between two contradictory compulsive drives. While Jane is normally meek and submissive, we see in her, throughout, a fierce streak of independence which she displays rarely but which lies below the surface. While she does not mind the emotional dependence, she is touched to the quick when it is a question of financial dependence. We find this conflict, to some extent, during the period of courtship, and it is the chief reason for her leaving Rochester when he begs her to be his mistress.

As Ruth Yeazell asserts: "... Jane's strong desire for independence is a central cause of her marriage's disruption" (Yeazell, 134), because it is her desire for financial independence which had made her write to her uncle, John Eyre. Yeazell feels that Jane is "obsessed with two central longings - to be independent and to be loved." (Yeazell, 129), and since Jane encounters the man she is to love not as his equal, but as his employee", "in her relationship with Rochester, Jane thus faces her most crucial and agonizing test, for his presence arouses and sets in potential conflict the two deepest needs of her psyche" (Yeazell, 131).

And it is to Jane's credit that she emerges triumphant through the test. Pat Macpherson puts this in a rather extreme form when she states: "Jane realises the necessity of her own self-protection from such slavery to love, really a fate of prostitution for women outside marriage." (Macpherson, 50) Her flight helps her get over her morbid dependency. If the sight of Bertha Rochester [whom Gilbert and Gubar consider "Jane's truest and darkest double"] (Gilbert and Gubar, 360) and Rochester himself to a certain extent, showed her the dangers of a life of self-indulgence, her close study of St. John Rivers shows her the dangers of a detached temperament. When Jane is finally reunited with Rochester, it is a healthier kind of love that she feels - more tranquil and devoid of infatuation. The two men in Jane's life, both of whom threaten to snatch away her independence, have a role to play in Jane's growth towards an integrated, healthy personality.

If Rochester gives her self-confidence and a sense of worth, St. John has the very opposite kind of effect - he freezes and reinforces the self-effacing tendencies, bringing out the kind of submission we see in the first ten years of her life. As she tells us: "I know no medium. I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters, antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one up to the very moment of bursting sometimes, with volcanic vehemence, into the other" (Bronte, 382). Jane puts up with St. John's despotism for quite a long time and is even willing to placate him after a



quarrel with him, for she still believes that “I would always rather be happy than dignified.” (391). Jane also admires him for the heroic streak in his nature, as she acknowledges: “His friendship was of value to me...” (Bronte, 394). But she finally does summon up the courage to break away from him.

In all the earlier revolts, we see the working of unconscious compulsive motivations, scarcely acts of free volition: in the scene with John Reed and later Mrs. Reed - the long-suppressed impulses of vindictiveness come to the forefront; in the “Proposal” scene where she makes her claim for equality with Rochester, it is again an outburst of passion, an act of desperation, not free will. The flight from Rochester, which she claims was based on principles, clearly shows an aversion to economic dependency arising from the cruel taunts received in childhood. But the triumph with St. John is of a different kind, coming from the sense of the correctness of her values. Her close study of St. John Rivers, her knowledge of the disparity between the “corrupt man” and the “pure Christian” (Bronte, 392), between abstract morality and real goodness, clear the “cloud of doubt” (Bronte, 392) as it were. Rochester's demand only seemed to threaten her self-respect, whereas St. John demands total self-sacrifice and is a threat to her life itself. If her experience with Rochester taught her to fear the insanity of passion, the one with St. John shows her the dangers of a cold, detached temperament, and a life of self-abnegation. As Nina Auerbach observes: “... it is important to the novel that St. John is Jane's cousin ... His ice is in Jane as well.” (Auerbach, 334) She realises that this is not the type of independence she desires, and that total self-surrender and selflessness are impossible for her. While refusing to take up the life of a missionary's wife in India, she firmly tells St. John: “God did not give me my life to throw away.” (Bronte, 395).

Jane is, thus, free of her compulsive drives. This growth clears her sense of self-doubt about her own imperfections, teaches her to value herself as is, and to value her personal creed of religion and morality based on concrete notions of love, a religion having its origin in the heart – “a different way to St. John's, but effective in its own fashion” (Bronte, 402). Rochester's call is symbolic of this recognition, for he too shares a similar creed. Mark Kinkead-Weeks feels that: “The cry she hears is her own name, the annunciation of full identity in the call to fuse sex, spirit and mind in the heart, and complete full womanhood in love” (Gregor, 84) This knowledge brings with it real self-assertiveness. Jane's financial independence also has a role to play in this newfound self-confidence. As Ruth Yeazell remarks, “Jane Eyre must become her own mistress before she can become Rochester's,” and also that “... she does not find passion despite her need for freedom, but because of it.” (Yeazell, 141) For the first time in her life, she is perfectly self-assured – “Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails” (Bronte, 402), is how she describes her manner of dealing with St. John.

Jane now clearly understands what she wants. St. John's statement: “... you are formed for labour, not for love” (Bronte, 384), shows her the value of Rochester's love for her, a rarity to be prized. Jane's acceptance of the blinded, maimed Rochester, totally devoid of his “expansive” tendencies and idealized appeal, are a measure of her self-confidence and self-valuation - no longer is there the need to glorify or value another for his superiority, to look for a means of vicarious living. It is, therefore, wrong to see Jane's act either as a supreme form of self-sacrifice, or alternately to see the marriage as Richard Chase sees it, as one in which “the woman has a strong advantage over her lover.” (Gregor, 88) While one can agree with Lee R. Edwards' observation that Jane “abandons action for love” and settles for “an idealized, but hermetic domesticity,” (Edwards, 88) it is difficult to agree with Elaine Showalter's contention that “... in feminine fiction, men and women become equals by submitting to mutual limitation, not by allowing each other mutual growth” (Showalter, 124) For the limitations occur only at the physical level, not at the mental level, where we clearly see a growth in both the central characters in *Jane Eyre*. Showalter, of course, acknowledges that “... the heroine Jane



Eyre achieves as full and healthy a womanhood as the feminine novelists could have imagined” (Showalter, 112).

Jane at last, finds her “real” self, closing the gap between her “actual,” and “ideal” selves. Love, of course, is still an important ingredient in achieving this self-realization, but it no longer possesses a morbid dimension, but is a healthier kind of love, based on a better understanding of herself and another. As M. H. Scargill remarks: “They marry, not in that first violent, physical anguish in which we saw them; but in a calmer, nobler mood, ‘all passion spent’” (Allott, 180) Or as Mark Kinkead - Weeks observes: “... the life of the heart can finally be consummated in marriage because it is founded, through deprivation and suffering, in a fuller and regenerate selfhood,” where love becomes “a completion of the self in relationship with another” (Gregor, 85) Ruth Yeazell feels that “Jane Eyre and Rochester ... eventually find a love which leads not toward mutual annihilation, but toward life, ” because it is a love that has learnt to acknowledge “the integrity and separateness of the individuals involved” (Yeazell, 133-134). Self-knowledge and their knowledge of each other allows them to find total fulfilment in each other’s company. Given the autobiographical elements in Jane's physical and mental make-up, mentioned at the beginning of the essay, it may not seem farfetched that Charlotte Bronte, in a sense, may have found fulfilment through Jane Eyre, finding both the self-realization and the perfect marriage that she dreamt of. Never again in her works do any of the characters attain the same state of bliss.

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