

The Fire and the Hearth: An Exploration of Gender Reversal
and Early Feminism through Pyrocentric Symbolism in Jane Eyre

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Abstract

This research looks at the symbolism of fire and hearths in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and argues that Mr. Rochester is the embodiment of unrestrained passion (fire) while Jane is the embodiment of restrained passion tempered by logic (the hearth). The research makes the overall claim that Brontë reverses traditional gender roles in the story to support feminist ideology through representing Jane as a woman who brings the man into domestic bliss by tempering his passion with her reason. The research draws mainly upon the primary source of the novel *Jane Eyre* but also references two articles from peer-reviewed journals.

Keywords: Literary analysis, *Jane Eyre*, Feminism, Gender roles, Symbolism

The pages of *Jane Eyre* are sprinkled with the ash of fiery emotions and the sufferings of those who find themselves burnt. Fire is an important symbol in the novel, signifying unrestrained passion, but even more important is the symbol of the hearth. Throughout the novel, the hearth represents the heart of domesticity, where one finds peace in the warmth of a fire restrained. A thorough analysis of *Jane Eyre*'s character development reveals not only that the symbolism of the hearth is important to the novel, but also that Jane's ability to temper her passion with reason makes her a symbolic representation of the domestically blissful hearth; this comparison is especially significant when contrasted with the unrestrained passion of Mr. Rochester, whose character symbolizes the headiness of a raging fire. Brontë's depiction of Jane as the hearth is particularly significant to a feminist reading of the novel, in that Jane, although a woman, is the only one who can temper the fire of Rochester's unwieldy passions and draw them into the domestic bliss

and rationality of the hearth. In a reversal of traditional gender roles, it is the woman who tempers the man's passion with her reason.

Although Jane develops into a well-balanced woman over time—a woman who controls her passionate nature with reason and propriety—this is not the case in the novel's earlier chapters. Indeed, when the reader first meets Jane as a child, she is as passionate and unrestrained as Rochester. One of the best displays of Jane's excessive childhood emotions happens during her time in the red-room. The red-room is where her Uncle John died, and the children of Thornfield believe it to be haunted by his ghost. Jane, being young and susceptible to fears and superstitions, panics upon being placed in the room and believes she sees a ghost. This causes her to scream, to cry, and to bang against the door of the room. Eventually, her passions overtake her, and she experiences an emotional breakdown of such extremes that she becomes unconscious.

The incident that leads to Jane's being locked in the red-room also shows the unrestrained emotions of her youth. Just before the red-room scene, Jane defends herself from being accosted by her cousin John; one of the maids witnesses the encounter and refers to Jane as "the picture of passion" (Brontë 6). This is not the only instance in Jane's childhood, however, where someone points out her passionate temper. As the maids take Jane to the red-room, the housekeeper, Ms. Abbot, berates Jane for her violent emotions, referring to her as "a mad cat" (Brontë 6). Jane's emotional breakdown in the red-room and the housemaids' comments characterize the unrestrained emotions of her youth—emotions that, with time and training, Jane will learn to temper with reason and restraint.

Shortly after the incident in the red-room, Jane is sent away to Lowood School. Lowood functions solely through restraint—denying the students all frivolity and valuing religious penitence above sufficient sustenance—and therefore goes against every aspect of Jane's young nature. Once Jane arrives at Lowood, she meets two people who become instrumental in teaching her the beauty of tempering passion with logic and virtue: Miss Temple and Helen Burns. Brontë uses each of these women to contribute to a different aspect of Jane's development. Miss Temple provides Jane with an intellectual framework for understanding life. As her teacher, she guides Jane and shows her how passionate emotions can be controlled through reason. Helen Burns shows Jane how to restrain her passion with virtue and spiritual principles. As readers progress through the novel, they can trace the influence of these women on Jane's character development.

Helen Burns is a fourteen-year-old girl who is wise beyond her years and takes special interest in Jane. She is also well-versed in spiritual principles and teaches Jane about the importance of virtue. When Jane is called a liar by Mr. Brocklehurst and is forced to stand and be mocked, she cries and wishes to die. Helen, however, hears her and offers a few words of wisdom that affect Jane so deeply that they foreshadow decision she makes later in life: "If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends" (Brontë 75). Jane, still young and passionate, does not realize how her friendship with Helen is teaching her to temper her emotions with bittersweet virtue. However, Helen's impact becomes clear when, after

Jane leaves Rochester, she states: "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man" (Brontë 368). Her words are almost identical to Helen's, thus showing the impact the young girl had on Jane's development into a morally restrained adult.

Under the guidance of her teacher, Miss Temple, Jane learns that knowledge is a useful tool for tempering one's passions. The significance of the hearth also begins to appear at this point in the novel when, after a frigid day of studies and inedible food, Miss Temple invites Jane and Helen to sit with her before the hearth in her bedroom. Jane has just had a passionate outburst upon being called a liar by the headmaster of the school, but Miss Temple gives Jane the opportunity to defend herself, urging her to tell the truth but "to add nothing and to exaggerate nothing" (Brontë 77). At Miss Temple's behest, Jane states, "I resolved in my heart that I would be most moderate—most correct" (Brontë 77). This quote is significant because, for the first time, the reader sees Jane attempting to temper her passion with reason—a direct result of Miss Temple's rational guidance.

This scene with Helen, Jane, and Miss Temple all sitting together in front of the hearth is particularly significant because it depicts Jane and the two figures most central to her moral and rational development in front of the novel's most powerful symbol of restraint. Clarke confirms the significance of Miss Temple and the hearth by stating, "Miss Temple's hearth provides the first home for Jane's intellect" (700). At this point in Jane's development, she is still a blaze of passion; however, with time—and with the influence of her two companions—she will grow to be just like the hearth: a restrained fire bringing warmth instead of the ash of destruction.

Jane leaves Lowood and meets Mr. Rochester, the man who will prove to be the greatest test of restraint she has faced in her life. This test is due in part to their conflicting natures: while Jane has learned to temper her nature with reason and virtue, Mr. Rochester has only fueled his passions his entire life. Jane is the hearth that keeps fire alive while restraining it; Rochester is the fire that rages wildly, mindlessly, and without regard to the resulting destruction. There are multiple instances in the novel that reveal how Rochester is like a fire, but the most notable is also the most tragic—his hidden marriage. Due to unfortunate circumstances, Rochester finds

himself married to a woman who is mentally unhinged; she bites her husband, behaves like a beast, and is incapable of even the most basic interactions. Rochester fulfills his duties towards his wife by providing her a place to live, then proceeds to live his life as if she does not exist. To cope with the tragedy, he throws himself into a long, wandering search for love. He takes three different women as mistresses, only to discard them when they leave him unfulfilled. Then, he meets Jane.

Rochester's interactions with Jane reveal his nature better than any other aspect of the novel. Rochester feels deep passion for Jane. His words to her make this clear: "Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own," and "if you were to leave, I'm afraid . . . I'd take to bleeding inwardly" (Brontë 303, 292). Even the way Rochester looks at Jane recalls thoughts of fire: "He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance . . . I felt as powerless as stubble exposed to the draught and glow of a furnace" (Brontë 369). Logic and morality do not temper Rochester's passion. Instead, he almost allows his emotions to bring moral and legal ruin to the woman he claims to love. By concealing his marriage from Jane and attempting to marry her anyway, Rochester is ready to break the law of man and God by committing bigamy. Were Rochester a man who knew how to restrain his passions, he would have been honest with Jane from the start, regardless what it would have cost him. Rochester's unrestrained, passionate nature clashes against the controlled burn of Jane's own passion.

Though Jane loves Rochester dearly, she leaves him in order to remain true to herself and her convictions; she does not let her passions run wild, but instead chooses to temper her emotions with logic and virtue—lessons taught to her as a girl by Miss Temple and Helen Burns. She returns to Rochester at the end of the novel only after praying for guidance. Even then, Jane does not return with the intention of marrying Rochester. It is only when the major moral impediment of his previous marriage is removed from the situation that she allows herself her great happiness—the privilege of living with Rochester and being his bride. Because Jane has tempered her desire to be with Rochester with knowledge of what is logically and morally correct, she is able to enjoy being with him legally and honestly, warmed by the happiness that is her reward for choosing delayed gratification.

Jane's symbolic representation as a hearth is especially significant when considered through the lens of

feminist theory. Traditionally, women in literature have been portrayed as emotional creatures who need the logic of a man to keep them sane, but in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë presents the reader with a female protagonist who supports the man and tempers his passion. Rochester would have caused himself legal and spiritual harm had Jane ignored reason and married him when he first proposed. Instead, she saves both him and his soul by embodying the pillar of wisdom and rationality that so commonly had been attributed to men in literature. Brontë uses Jane's character to show how woman can be the anchoring force that keeps the flighty, emotional man rooted in reality. As Solomon writes: "If their bodies burn, their minds must dampen the fires" (215). Indeed, Rochester could never have controlled the fire of his passion without Jane's strength of reason and will.

Jane Eyre is a story that attempts to answer an age-old question: Should one be ruled by head or by heart, by reason or by passion? Charlotte Brontë makes it clear, through the character of Jane, that it is best not to choose one or the other, but rather to rule oneself through a balanced incorporation of both. Brontë exhibits how this balance can be achieved through her portrayal of Jane's development from her passionate youth to her restrained adulthood, and in the contrast of Jane's noble restraint with Rochester's selfish passion. The strength of Jane's character is ultimately proven when she tempers her longing to be Rochester's wife with her firm stance not to err from what is logical and moral. Jane's character development is significant to a feminist reading of the novel because Brontë chooses to portray Jane as the guiding voice of reason for the man; indeed, Jane takes on the traditional masculine role in the story, tempering Rochester's passion and emotions with logic and reason. Brontë chooses to portray Jane as a female who controls her passionate nature in the same way that a fire within the hearth, when tended properly, will burn steadfastly without injuring another.

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