

Jane Eyre as a Byronic Hero(ine)

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Abstract: *This paper aims to offer a new understanding of the Byronic hero through the character of Jane Eyre. By definition, the Byronic hero presents a potent individual who defiantly breaks the social norms of his time as they oppose his own moral philosophy. Ever since the archetype of the Byronic hero was created, prevalently male characters in literature have been characterized as such, from Byron's Childe Harold, Emily Brontë's Heathcliff, to Dumas' Dantes. Even though she was a female, Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë's title character, displayed behavior resembling that of the previously mentioned male characters. This indicates that Jane Eyre did not only break the social norms of her time but also the mold of the Byronic hero. On her journey from childhood to adulthood, many tried to suppress her wayward behavior. However, she always managed to rise above such plights and continued going off the beaten track, just like other Byronic heroes. Relying on the close-reading method, this paper follows Jane Eyre through different stages of her life in which she reveals her Byronic nature.*

Keywords: *Jane Eyre, Byronic, hero, female, quaint.*

Article History

Submitted: June 10, 2018

Accepted: July 13, 2018

INTRODUCTION

Jane Eyre, often considered Charlotte Brontë's most compelling novel, was published in 1847. From the moment of the book's publication up until the present time, Jane Eyre has been a frequent subject of criticism. What makes the novel so enthralling is its title character-Jane. Many critics of Brontë's time regarded Jane Eyre's character as unconventional and immoral.

In *The Quarterly Review* from 1848, Elizabeth Rigby, also known as Lady Eastlake, expressed her strong disapproval of Jane Eyre and lambasted her as:

the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit [...] She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature – the sin of pride. Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful, too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, penniless – yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him, for the food, and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth [...] On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling short of it. [...] Altogether the auto-biography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. (as cited in Mundhenk & Fletcher, 1999, p. 176)

Even though it can be said that Lady Eastlake was a little harsh on Jane Eyre, one must admit that Jane Eyre is indeed a quaint character. Her intelligence, rebellious nature, self-pride and –determination, as well as the peculiarity that pervades these traits, are almost Byronic. While describing the reception of Jane Eyre, more contemporary critics, such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, alluded to this understanding of Jane Eyre: "They (the audience) were disturbed not so much by the proud Byronic sexual energy of Rochester as by the Byronic pride and passion of Jane herself" (Gubar, 1977, p. 780).

However, this is not surprising if we bear in mind that the Brontë sisters drew heavily from Lord Gordon Byron's works and adopted some of the recurrent patterns, themes, and character types (Bloom, 2007, p. 1). Their fascination with Byron's persona and with the archetype of the Byronic hero is visible both in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as well as in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Nonetheless, in their novels and in literature up to date mostly male characters have been characterized as Byronic heroes.

It is unknown whether Charlotte Brontë purposely incorporated the traits of the Byronic hero into the character of Jane Eyre. Be that as it may, if one considers the features of Jane Eyre's character and the features of the Byronic hero that will be presented in the section that follows, it is evident that these two greatly overlap. Therefore, the aim of our paper is to offer a new understanding of Jane Eyre.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A growing body of literature has analyzed the notion of the Byronic hero. The very name 'the Byronic hero' is itself highly suggestive as it was derived

from the name of its instigator-Lord Gordon Byron. Some preliminary work that elaborates on the Byronic hero was carried out by Colwyn Edward Vulliamy (1948) who defines Byronic hero and Byronism as

a state which originates in contempt and exasperation ... It is a protest of the individual against the rigid imposition of standards and a dogmatic assertion of moral authority...It begins with a declaration of war against the vulgar, the commonplace, the artificial, the stupid and the self-righteous (as cited in Misra, 1992, p. 182).

In the same vein, more recently, Michael Jones (2017) suggests that the Byronic hero is “defined by an internal classlessness that is deepened by his exile from any recognizable domestic life” (p. 19). In other words, the Byronic hero possesses intellectual giftedness, great self-pride as well as his own code of conduct which is in stark contrast with that of the society. According to Misra (1992), the Byronic hero is often lonely and ironical. However, as Misra further explains, the Byronic hero is courageous and strong-willed. Interestingly, he preserves all the above-mentioned traits even in suffering (p. 246). The indefatigable energy that the Byronic hero shows makes him both enthralling and repulsive to other people at the same time.

This archetype first appeared in Byron’s long narrative poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812). Its title character is a young man who defies the social norms and is haunted by his memories. The Byronic hero also appeared in other Byron’s works such as: *The Corsair* (1814), a tale written in verse, and *Manfred* (1817), a closet drama (The Norton Anthology of English literature, n. d.). Forina (2014) lists several famous Byronic heroes in literature: Edmond Dantes from Alexander Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Heathcliff from Emily Brontë’s *The Wuthering Heights*, and Mr. Rochester from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (p. 85). Even though the Byronic hero is a variation of the Romantic hero, a literary period to which Lord Byron belongs, the archetype of the Byronic hero was born out of Byron’s fascination by John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*’s (1667) main character-Satan. In essence, Milton’s Satan is not inherently evil. Quite the contrary, his Satan is a highly proud arch rebel. By presenting Satan as a larger-than-life figure, Milton in a way debunked the myth of Satan as a repugnant and devilish anti-Christian figure (The Norton Anthology of English literature, n. d.). By the same token, Jane Eyre was regarded an “anti-Christian” who “has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature – the sin of pride”.

Research by literary experts, such as that of Atara Stein (2009), contends the prevailing opinion that the Byronic hero is necessarily a male. In his *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* (2009), Stein draws out attention to Charlotte Brontë’s Catherine Earnshaw and Thomas Hardy’s Eustacia Vye whom he considers Byronic heroines. For Stein, the Byronic heroine is a woman who resists taking the inferior role in a male-dominated society. In her battle with societal restrains and conventions, the Byronic heroine displays a rebellious and a sort of obtrusively self-assertive behavior. Evidently, her behavior is on par with the behavior of her male equivalent (p. 171, 172).

Since *Jane Eyre* is an autobiography, a bildungsroman, its title heroine's character is gradually revealed throughout the book. Different stages of her journey from childhood to adulthood depend on the places she lived in. Therefore, *Jane Eyre* as a Byronic heroine will be analyzed based the stages of her life where she displays her Byronic nature most prominently. For the sake of providing an in-depth analysis of and understanding *Jane Eyre's* Byronic traits, we opted for the close-reading method. As Smith (2016) points out, although close-reading method is not an existent methodology, it proved to be viable in Anglo-American literary studies. It aids thorough analysis of a particular piece of work often related to some burning issues or questions of interest (p. 57, 58).

DISCUSSION

Gateshead

Jane's 'autobiography' begins significantly with her first moment of rebellion (Nestor 1987, p. 51), when she fights back Master Reeds: "You are like a murderer – a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors" (Brontë, 1864, p. 7). Jane is enraged by his treatment as she explains when grown up: "I was a trifle beside myself, or rather out of myself [...] I felt resolved [...] to go all lengths". Pauline Nestor suggests that Jane's fiery nature stems from "her refusal to allow her own victimization" (Nestor, 1987, p. 51), so Jane decides to go all lengths, as she says, and punch her cousin for trying to victimize her. To punish Jane, her aunt, orders for Jane to be taken into the Red room by the servants. While taking her to the Red room, Miss Abott comments: "For shame! For shame! What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress's son! Your young master." (Brontë, 1864, p. 7), and as a true Byronic heroine not letting nor admitting anyone to be superior to her, Jane replies: "Master! How is he my master?" (Brontë, 1864, p. 7). There, deeply frustrated and angry, Jane thinks of different plans to put an end to her problems:

"Unjust! unjust!" said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die. (Brontë, 1864, p. 12)

Her readiness to go to extremes reflects her Byronic nature, nature capable of putting oneself to great tortures just for the sake of self-pride and self-dignity. Not only does she express her opinion to people of approximately the same age or people from her household but even others as noticeable in the scene when Mr. Brocklehurst comes to see her and talks to her:

"No sight so sad as that of a naughty child," he began, "especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?" "They go to hell," was my ready and orthodox answer. "And what is hell? Can you tell me that?" "A pit full of fire." "And

should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there forever?" "No, sir." "What must you do to avoid it?" I deliberated a moment: my answer, when it did come was objectionable: "I must keep in good health and not die." (Brontë, 1864, p. 30).

With her ingenious answer, Jane shows a trait of a Byronic heroine, a heroine who possesses a shrewd nature and is not prone to submitting into the mass. Due to her rebellious behavior at Gateshead, one of the house servants previously mentioned, Miss Abbot, describes her as "a sort of infantine Guy Fawkes" (Brontë, 1864, p. 30). Guy Fawkes is one of the best-known participants of the Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy against King James VI & I that took place in 1605. This implies that the figure of Guy Fawkes remained popular almost two hundred years after. Besides, how fiery and combative a ten-year-old girl must be to be compared to Guy Fawkes". The kind of life she had at Gateshead underpinned her sense of justice and helped her self-consciousness to develop. In the stages of her life that followed Gateshead, Jane again stays true to herself and nothing and nobody can change neither her nor her personality.

Lowood

Not only at Gateshead but even throughout her life at Lowood does Jane show her strong will against injustice. In a scene when her friend Helen Burns is mistreated by one of the employees at Loowod, Jane explains how she would react if someone tried to subdue her: "And if I were in your place I should dislike her; I should resist her." (Brontë, 1864, p. 55). Like a typical Byronic hero, Jane has old head on young shoulders and is ready to give a lesson to those who oppress her. Equally, as seen from the aforementioned example, she is willing to encourage others in doing so. Jane Eyre, just like "the contemporary Byronic hero is much more likely to take on a successful leadership role in the battle against oppression" (Stein, 2004, p. 10), especially if that oppression comes from the authority. As Stein points out, "the defiance of institutional authority" (Stein, 2004, p. 2) is what a Byronic hero, just like Jane, passionately supports. In the above-mentioned quote, it is visible that Jane wants others to be involved in that fight against institutional oppression. She is not a passive observer, but rather an active doer. Interestingly, in this scene Jane displays another trait of the Byronic hero: kindness to those who are oppressed. As Misra (1992) explains, the Byronic hero takes no "delight in the suffering of other people [...]. The Byronic hero is capable of tenderest feelings and kindest sympathy" (p. 210).

In addition, it cannot pass unnoticed that Jane is a type of a person who takes matters into her own hands. She does not wait for anyone to tell her what to do, but when push comes to shove, she rather does it herself, as we can see from the next episode of her life. After residing for eight years at Lowood, Jane decides she must change her surroundings and advertise for a new job, again showing how courageous and acumen she is: "I then ordered my brain to find a response and quickly [...] for as I lay down it came quietly and naturally to my mind: Those who want situation advertise: you must advertise in the shire

Herald..!" (Brontë, 1864, p. 89). Here her self-determination to pursue her happiness crosses the boundaries of what was expected of a woman by the Victorian society. While crossing the boundaries expected to be respected by women of the age, Jane is fitting herself into the frame of the Byronic heroine. Jane finds a job as a governess at Thornfield, which some critics regard as rather difficult; because she does not belong either to the family or the servants. Therefore, Jane is put in a rather confusing position, somewhere between a servant and a peer. Yet, she still chooses independence over dependence on somebody else and becomes a governess in the time when most women saw marriage as a solution.

Thornfield

After arriving at Thornfield, Jane somehow feels stagnant and usually goes for a walk in the fields. One day she meets Mr. Rochester, the master of Thornfield, there who falls off a horse, so she helps him to rise. Their first meeting is memorable and unique bearing in mind that women were helped to rise when they fell down, and Jane does the opposite and therefore inverts the notion of a damsel in distress. When she first meets Mr. Rochester, the master of Thornfield, Jane refuses to speak on his command but instead scolds him for assuming an attitude of superiority (Michie, 2006, p. 90).

Jane wants to make decisions on her own and not even Mr. Rochester is allowed to interfere – she confronts him and articulately explains "I am not a bird, I am a free independent human being with an independent will" (Brontë, 1864, p. 268). Her behavior and her longing for independence together with solitude coincide with that of Byronic heroes, which is visible when she says: "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (Brontë, 1864, p. 336). It seems to us that Stein describes Jane when he says that a Byronic hero: "He is a loner who often displays a quick temper or a brooding angst [...]" (Stein, 2004, p. 8). Her life decisions only augment her character towards fully acquiring prominent Byronic-like features: independency and valor, and to acquire something fully one needs to have predisposition for that, not everyone can achieve it.

Consequently, with this in mind Jane Eyre pursues her dreams and defies the norms of the time, makes decisions by herself and does not allow anyone to influence them, not even Mr. Rochester. In a true Byronic fashion, Jane warns him that she is her own decision-maker." [...] I shall advertise" (Brontë, 1864, p. 237), Jane informs Rochester when she finds out that Mr. Rochester wants to marry Miss Ingram. As noticeable, she immediately decides to leave him even if that would mean her spending a night in the woods all alone, hungry and what not. Even the love that she feels for Mr. Rochester cannot stop her from leaving him. She chooses pride over pity. Hence, her capacity for feeling and her pride and refusal to be victimized are just some of the qualities that make her fit into the mold of a Byronic hero.

CONCLUSION

As has been noted in the discussion, whenever the societal chains overshadow her paths, Jane rebels and establishes herself as an outcast and outsider again. The consternation of Jane Eyre's character compels the reader from the beginning of the novel where she exhibits a strong sense of resoluteness and honor. She affirms that later in her life while making decisions of substance, such as those of leaving Lowood, applying for the position of a governess at Thornfield, leaving Thornfield and leaving Marsh End. Jane's life cycle resembles the "wandering" pattern of behavior, again one prominent quality of Byronic heroes. Also, Jane's sanguinity coincides with that of other Byronic heroes in literature such as Childe Harold, Heathcliff, Edmond Dantes and others. Just like Childe Harold, whose name bears the title Childe which, according to medieval tradition, is a young man ready to become a knight, in this case Harold at the end of his pilgrimage/progress (Dizdar, 1999, p. 165), Jane Eyre also becomes a knight-like character at the end of her pilgrimage. She becomes Mr. Rochester's "eyes and ears", saving him one more time as if he were a damsel in distress and Jane his knight. In the end, it is Jane who is "[...] independent [...], as well as rich [...]" and her "own mistress" (Jane Eyre, 1864, p. 464) and Mr. Rochester the one who needs her help. While some of Mr. Rochester's Byronic qualities collapse during by the end of the novel, Jane's Byronic qualities are discovered and "Her authority over her psychic and economic self is assured" (Thomas, 1990, p. 168). According to Harvey (1969), characters' giving up their Byronic features is a common character development of Victorian age. (p.315). Therefore, no wonder that Jane has to wait for Mr. Rochester to lose some parts of his Byronic nature to be able to marry him. On the other hand, it is universally acknowledged that the opposites attract, thus the two Byronic heroes could not get married until one of them, Mr. Rochester, lost his Byronic nature.

As the focus of the paper was solely on Jane Eyre and her Byronic nature, there is some possibility that the social changes, circumstances and expectations of the time were not analyzed in-depth. For example, the position of the main character as an orphan deserves consideration in terms of orphans' treatment by the Victorian society and how this treatment influenced their identity. Besides, it is equally vital to consider how female characters from literature of the day relate to the present time. In other words, it is important to analyze whether the social expectations for women have changed over a few centuries. Studies, which take into account the above-mentioned issues, are deferred to our future work.

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