



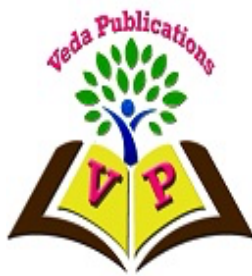
## RESEARCH ARTICLE



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**QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S *JANE EYRE***

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*(Senior Assistant Professor, S. Govt. College of Science Education and Research, Jagraon, Dist. Ludhiana, Punjab India.)*Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2017.333>**ABSTRACT**

Charlotte Bronte owes her reputation chiefly to *Jane Eyre* (1847) and of all the Bronte novels, the obsessional element is the strongest in *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* had something remarkable in it, the titanic struggle of the individual against the forces of depersonalising the individual. Her vigour and aspirations lend to her statement and urgency a new kind of realism. *Jane Eyre* is the picture of a suffering, lonely individual who is tortured mentally and physically at her aunt's household. This paper is a detailed analysis of Jane's quest for identity at different stages of her life.

**Keywords :** *Renunciation, Tenderness, Revolt, Individuality, Unconventional.*

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Charlotte Bronte, though a passionate and romantic novelist, was compelled to write as a realist because she belonged to an age bedeviled by the onslaught of industrialization. Her novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847) is based on a critical character, her experiences and the resolution of her fortune in marriage. Charlotte Bronte was an innovator and her novel *Jane Eyre* enriched the tradition of the English novel. The most important contribution that Charlotte made was 'intensity'. This is the intensity associated not only with love but also with 'religious ecstasy'. Charles Bukhart remarks,

"George Eliot is often said to be the first modern English novelist in her mastery of psychology, but Charlotte preceded her in this one respect, in her interest in transcribing continuously and circumstantially the interior life of her heroine."<sup>1</sup>

The world in which Jane lives is a completely hostile one and its forces are directed to subdue the individual. But Jane tries to preserve a sense of her own identity. The novel consists of five stages represented by the five places : Gateshead, Lowood, Thronfield, Moorend and Ferndean. Each place projects a condition of Jane's heart and a step in Jane's moral growth. The very first thing we learn about Jane, the oppressed orphan is the fact that she is subject to constant reprimands by the nurses and is painfully conscious of her inferiority to the Reed children. Her reserve and quite nature irritates Mrs. Reed who regards her as an unwanted burden foisted by her late husband whose niece Jane is. She gives vent to her frustration by punishing Jane and making her aware deliberately of her a doubtful position in

the Reed household. The underprivileged and unhappy child suffers a sense of deep loneliness and alienation. John Reed thoroughly spoilt by his mother constitutes a menace for Jane who is four years his junior. John treats her like an animal and subjects her to inhuman treatment. As a result, Jane falls seriously ill. When Mr. Lloyd the apothecary, suggests her going away to school at Lowood, she welcomes the thought of the complete break with Gateshead and feels that it will be an entry into a new life. Her first acquaintance at Lowood School is Helen Burns with whom she enters into a very meaningful relationship. Helen's patient endurance when she is punished or disgraced publicly amazes Jane, since her own attitude is one of rebellion. Jane feels that love or hate is mutual and no one should submit to undeserved punishment. But Helen feels that it is a very non-Christian attitude and hopes that Jane will change when she grows older. Once when Mr. Brocklehurst visits Lowood, Jane is deeply mortified when he announces in front of everyone that she is a liar and a cheat as Mr. Reed has told him. But Helen's eyes inspire and sustain her. She feels that 'a martyr' or 'a hero' has passed her. But Helen dies of consumption, symbolising only passive renunciation and therefore not being able to achieve this synthesis. She gives Jane two entirely new perspectives. As Mark Kinkead Weekes writes :

"The first arises from discovery of an inner conscience, a self-respect..., the second from a faith that the inner conscience is connected to a world of spirit, a God, a Heaven. Helen's own brief life is an enactment of the endurance and control



which comes from the strength these two convictions give the heart." <sup>2</sup>

Miss Temple has been like a mother to Jane and the latter depends greatly on her presence. But at that time Miss Temple also gets married and goes away. With her departure from Lowood there is a departure of the strongest restraint over Jane's emotions. Jane suddenly experiences a sense of weariness of the eight year long confinement at the school and she longs to be free. She decides to advertise in the newspapers for a job. She gets a response from a certain Mrs. Fairfax who requires the services of a governess for a young girl of about ten years at Thornfield Hall. Jane's reception at Thornfield is reassuring and Mrs. Fairfax's cordiality sets her at ease. She meets her ward the next morning and wins her over at once because she can speak the child's native tongue, French. Jane is able to implement all her plans for Adele's improvement as nobody interferes in her work. A deep affection springs between the two of them, and the girl's leaning towards her governess, and her love evokes tenderness in Jane's heart.

Jane is filled with curiosity about her absent employer and questions Mrs. Fairfax about him, his character and temperament. She learns that Rochester's name is a respected one in the vicinity, and Rochester is considered a just landlord by his tenants. He mostly stays away from home and travels to several foreign countries. In the beginning of their acquaintance, Rochester shows only a fitful interest in Jane, but basically she has ignited a deep desire in him to know her. Her plain appearance, accompanied by her plainness of speech appeals to him because he has paid too heavy a price for beauty and he hates

deceit. She is attracted to him even though he is not good looking. He holds himself in contempt when he recalls what a fool he made of himself over Celinevarens, Adele's mother, who not only exploited him because of his wealth but was also unfaithful to him. Jane, who herself is an orphan, realizes the insecurity inherent in Adele's situations and tells Rochester that she now feels more protective towards the girl.

One night Jane is awoken by a sound outside her door and she opens it to investigate and finds a candle on the threshold. She decides to go to Mrs. Fairfax but just as she is crossing Rochester's door she gets a smell of burning. She pushes open the door and finds the curtains on fire. She pours water over them to extinguish the fire and saves Rochester who feels greatly indebted to her expresses his feelings to her.

Jane is delighted, because subconsciously she has been hoping for some such advance by Rochester. Jane who is even willing to give her life for him, assures him that she would always remain by his side. However, Rochester is aware of her rigid moral principles and he knows that if she learns about his first marriage, she will once again retire into her shell. Robert Leaven, the coachman of Gateshead comes to Thornfield in order to inform Jane that Mrs. Reed, who is very ill, is asking for Jane. John Reed has died, and it is supposed that he has committed suicide because he was up to his ears in debt. Jane does not hesitate, she puts aside all past grievances and prepares to go to her aunt when she hears of the terrible decline in the Reed fortunes. She seeks Rochester's permission to go to her dying aunt and her employer is surprised because he is unaware that



she has any relatives. Jane is too sensitive to ignore the wishes of a broken and dying lady and she is magnanimous enough to forgive her aunt.

When Mrs. Reed dies, Jane can't pretend to mourn Mrs. Reed's death and the sorrow she feels is due to the fact that the lady died with such a burden on her soul. Kathleen Tillotson writes. "the return to the theme of the first movement marks that passage of time and Jane's own progress, as well, as satisfying poetic justice."<sup>3</sup> Jane has deliberately broken the ties of kinship with the Reed family. Although this implies alienation, it also means improvement. Her relationship with Rochester might be socially unequal, but it is a step up in the social ladder. Rochester proposes to Jane and she happily accepts him. Rochester's love for Jane and pride of possession makes him want to shower Jane with beautiful clothes and jewels, But Jane feels insulted. She wants to preserve her own identity. The period between their engagement and marriage is one of anxiety for Jane. She is afraid of losing her identity. On their wedding day, just before the marriage ceremony is to be performed, Mr. Mason, Rochester's brother-in-law, arrives with a lawyer, Mr. Briggs and announces that Rochester is already married and has a living wife. Jane is in a state of shock because of the suddenness, significance and enormity of what she has heard. She is filled with remorse and is hurting him with her cruel resistance. She is tempted to yield but an inner resolve nourished by her Puritanical conscience persuades her that she must part with Rochester. As Charles Burkhardt remarks:"....at Thornfield she faces the severest test, sensual love at the expense of moral

and religious principle, but the latter does not fail her, and she flees her beloved master..."<sup>4</sup>

Jane chooses a life of conscience and duty and rejects a life of passion. She feels that her own needs are superior to everything else and she asserts her individuality. She leaves Thornfield at the dead of night and travels away from temptation. Alone in a cold and comfortless world, without money, Jane wanders in search of food and employment and at last she reaches Moor house. She seeks the help of the inmates as she is homeless and destitute. Although, the housekeeper is suspicious because she is a stranger and has appeared so late at night, the owner St. John Rivers takes pity on her and allows her to enter. The house gives her a sense of security and Jane feels: "Somehow, now that I had once crossed the threshold of this house, and once was brought face to face with its owners, I felt no longer outcast, vagrant and disowned by the wide world." (p.363)

Right from the beginning, Jane gets along very well with the Rivers sisters, Mary and Diana, they share the same interests and they grow very attached to each other. Initially, she doesn't grow close to St. John because of his frequent absences from home, and he also seems to be of "a reserved, and abstracted, and even of a brooding nature." St. John Rivers observes that Jane is polished and educated lady, so offers her the post of school mistress. But she cannot still dissociate herself from Rochester and his memories.

St. John Rivers, with his classical good looks is an utter contrast to Rochester and his temperament and reserve are also at variance with the latter's unconventionality. Rivers represents the



conflict in Jane between passion and reason. St. John had his suspicions that Jane Elliot is actually Jane Eyre, and his doubts are confirmed because he sees her name on a piece of paper, Jane has probably written it absent mindedly. He finds out the truth of her identity and tells her about her inheritance. She immediately decides to divide the money so that each of them would get his share. She also wants to repay the debt she owes them because of their kindness. Jane is convinced that she cannot submit to St. John's wishes. She has been vacillating between "absolute submission" and "determined revolt" but is now in full control of herself. It is inevitable now that Jane returns to Rochester.

She returns to Thornfield and finds it a scorched ruin, enquiries yield the information that Rochester is living at Ferndean Manor situated about thirty miles away from Thornfield. Rochester is overcome with joy and draws her close in order to be convinced. She is warm and spontaneous in the greeting of Rochester and becomes self conscious because she fears that she might be jumping to conclusion that Rochester will ask her to be his wife. Rochester is quiet because he feels that it is not right for blind man to marry a girl who has her whole life before her. Rochester is aware of the Christian reformation in himself. Initially, Rochester had been merely sensual so Jane didn't yield to him, but the suffering that he underwent after she left him has spiritualised him therefore he suits her now. Rochester proposes to Jane and they get married. Their marriage is not merely a physical union but also a spiritual one. Jane describes her marriage in Biblical terms, "No other woman was even nearer to her mate than I am, ever more absolutely bone of his

bone and flesh of his flesh." (p. 480). The crowing events are the birth of their son and partial recovery of Rochester's eye sight. This is the end towards which Jane has been moving throughout the novel, the culmination of her hopes and aspirations.

For Charlotte Bronte, the most significant aspect of the human being is essentially individual, personal and private life of the heart. The interest of the novel is psychological. In order to liberate the personal selfhood of the heroine it is necessary to cast off public and social restraints and discover moral and religious values within the heart.

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