

Reading and agency in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

The frequency with which the image of the female reader recurs in nineteenth century literary and cultural is striking but not surprising. At that time, middle class British women began to write novels and circulating libraries made written texts available to an unprecedented number of people. A heated debate that followed these developments was fueled by anxieties related to class, gender, and national character. While many Victorians considered unsupervised access to books harmful to middle-class girls' physical and mental health, major Victorian novelists, with Charlotte Brontë among them, were vocal supporters of female readership. This article explores the theme of reading in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's most popular novel, by focusing on the scenes of solitary or communal reading that mark pivotal points in the narrative. It proposes that the novelist relates reading, both in the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word, to the protagonist's search for selfhood and agency.

Keywords: female reader, reading, selfhood, empowerment

Introduction

The end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented growth of readership in England. Although access to books was still a function of wealth and leisure, serial publication, the shilling magazine, and the opening of circulating libraries made texts more accessible to people from various backgrounds. It was also in that period of time that women began to participate in the production and consumption of fiction. Describing the significance of this development Virginia Woolf compares it in *A Room of One's Own* to major events in European history. By the end of the eighteenth century, "the perception that the novel was a female field was already well established" (Ferris, 1991, p. 35) and the continuation of the trend lead to the nineteenth century being viewed as the "Age of the Female Novelist" (Showalter, 1977, p.13). Not surprisingly, these revolutionary changes sparked a public debate regarding the value and impact of literacy and resulted in a preoccupation with women as consumers of literature. Hence the presence of the figure of the female reader in a wide range of texts, from Gothic novels to conduct books and political and economic works.

From the very beginning, middle class girls found themselves at the center of a heated dispute over what, where, when and how they could read. As Jacqueline Pearson (1999) observes, "the argument about women's reading centered on the novel, with novel reading one of the most contested areas of cultural debate" (p. 196). And thus, for example, an essay "On Novels" published in August 1795 warns that for a young woman reading novels can become "a dangerous study, unless such persons have some kind instructor who can teach them, like the bee, to extract the honey, without being infected by the poison that often lurks beneath the foliage of many a seeming lovely flower" (*The Lady's Magazine*, p. 369). Those who read without such an instructor are "every moment liable to have their hearts perverted, or their tastes vitiated, by the weakness or wickedness of the authors they read" (p. 369). The age of Queen Victoria saw a continuation of this effort to regulate and censor female readership.

In general terms, the Victorian attitude to reading and the uneasiness about young female readers were to a large extent shaped by the prevailing attitudes to health, morality and the ideal of Englishness. To touch upon some of the common anxieties, it is well known that the Victorians were preoccupied with the topic of health and obsessed with work and duty. The worry about health was understandable and the way in which it was made part of the existing ideologies is very telling. Diseases and death were very much a part of the social reality and individual experience. Mortality rates for adults and children were high and the epidemics of cholera that plagued England periodically from 1830 to 1845 made an indelible imprint on the public consciousness. The century that saw the birth of medicine as science, considered mind and body as interdependent and governed by the same principles. At the same time, in the public discourse the health of the mind was given priority; in fact, it was believed that a healthy mind could compensate for bodily weakness. Furthermore, for an activity to be spiritually healthful, it had to include the component of work (Haley, 1978, p. 259). Likewise, working on staying healthy was perceived as not only a private concern and but also a patriotic obligation. This way of thinking, epitomized in Herbert Spencer's (1896) statement in *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, "The preservation of health is a *duty* ... all breaches of the laws of health are *physical sins*" (quoted by Haley, 1978, p.17), reflected the Victorians' concern about the health of the nation and its role in the imperialistic project of colonial expansion.

Like their predecessors, the Victorians subscribed to the view of female nature being more sensitive, imaginative, and more empathetic. Hence, women were regarded as expert readers of emotions, signs of illness and interpersonal communication. At the same time, this delicate, more refined nature was supposedly also a source of their vulnerability that made them prone to emotional imbalance leading to physical illness. In this context, it is important to remember the extent to which the Victorians were aware of affective domain of reading fiction. Ordinary readers and scholars alike responded to texts in a more emotional way than we would expect today. Displays of feeling were frequently witnessed during public readings; they were also recorded in private correspondence at the time as well as in critical reviews. For that reason, it was feared that “excessive” solitary and uncensored reading could affect both young women’s physical health and their moral character. Seduced by romantic tales, they would end up sick, confused, and depraved, with no chance for a good marriage or a happy married life. Countless public tracts, personal letters and novels themselves warned against selfish pursuits and dereliction of womanly duty that threatened the social order. These beliefs were reflected not only in literature, where it impacted the ways women readers were constructed within texts, but also in periodicals and the visual arts.

In view of such warnings, it became self evident that the joy of reading, with its potential for violating the ethic of work or leading to sexual transgression, had to be monitored and scheduled to serve the goal of self-improvement. However, just as private consumption of works of art was more acceptable than female public and critical viewing practices, communal reading (women engaging texts in the family circle), was perceived as less threatening to the patriarchal order. In brief, the female reading practice was justified when it was incorporated into the cult of domesticity, in itself subservient to the nationalistic vision of Englishness.

At the same time, one would be amiss to ignore the other end of the spectrum, with its more enlightened views of reading as a source of autonomy for women, “an assertion of individuality, a separation from societal restrictions and expectations, a ‘declaration of independence’” (Badia & Phegley, 2005, p. 5). In the words of a contemporary critic, “Beginning with extensive reading experiences, women came to challenge and refuse reductive views and construct their own narratives and other choices” (Cervetti, 1998, p.10). And more often than not, it is in this context that Charlotte Brontë’s work gets recognition nowadays.

Reading and Agency in *Jane Eyre*

As the Brontë story would have it, Charlotte was a solitary, emotionally starved spinster and a confessional writer reliving her unhappy love affair. It is true that her home, Haworth parsonage, was a gloomy place where death was a constant presence, and excitement in the sense of social life practically non-existent but the view of the Brontës as naive, unschooled, and morbidly isolated has long been refuted. Although in some areas Charlotte’s views were parochial or simply typical of her times, she was also a progressive thinker and a consummate artist.

Reading and writing were absolutely essential in the lives of the Bronte siblings. The father, Patrick Brontë, considered the purchase of books a luxurious necessity. His home library contained works by Homer, Virgil, Milton, Johnson, Hume, Goldsmith, a collection of medical texts, Fraser’s Magazine, and subscriptions to two newspapers. As children, the Brontës spent

their time spinning tales and “publishing” miniature copies of their manuscripts. Although the parsonage collection had no books by Fanny Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley or Jane Austen, and there is no indication that Charlotte was familiar with them, like her siblings, she was well read in the classics, science, biography, history, art, and current affairs. Her favorite texts were the works of Byron and Scott, and *Blackwood Magazine*.

In view of the climate Brontë grew up in, the pervasiveness of the narrated act of reading or the figure of the female reader in her fiction should not come as a surprise. Wherever one looks in her storyworld, one sees women perusing texts alone or in the company of friends, lovers or family members. There are many angles from which the preponderance of such scenes of reading can be approached. On the simplest level, it is very noticeable that the author frequently draws parallels between the reading habits of the inhabitants of her fictional reality and their moral character. Like other works by Brontë, *Jane Eyre* also shows skillful and sensitive interpreters and people who use books for other purposes. For example, Helen Burns reads *Rasselas* and the Rivers sisters read Schiller; it is also telling that John Rivers reads a grammar book, but Rochester reads Shakespeare. On the other hand, Lady Blanche Ingram does not really read the book she holds in her hands to pass the time in a fashionable manner and Georgiana Rivers falls asleep over the pulp fiction she attempts to peruse. Similarly, John Reed never touches a volume in his library except when it is to hurl it at Jane.

Critics and ordinary readers alike will agree that in the debate on female readership, Brontë sides with the progressive views. For the female inhabitants of her fictional world reading is associated with intimacy, comfort, independence, and self-determination. Understood metaphorically, in the sense of interpreting the immediate reality, it is posited as a skill required to stay well or even to survive. It is also intertwined with the theme of selfhood.

In relying on the trope of reading Brontë is not unlike other Victorian writers. The use of the term “reading” in the sense of interpreting immediate reality was part of the dominant cultural discourse in the nineteenth century. Obviously, the metaphors of people as “living books” and the world itself as a book, “the great book of the world,” are much older. The former can be traced back to early Judeo-Christian society and the latter to the Middle Ages. Prominent in Shakespeare, reinforced by John Locke, they were the basic way of thinking in the eighteenth century. As Juliet McMaster (2004) observes, eighteenth-century people “were trained to be intensely conscious of the process of reading bodies and, alert to the mind-body connection ... took seriously the business of interpreting the one through the other” (p. 11). The admonition to read the mind through the body is as forceful in the Earl of Chesterfield's *Letter to His Son, Philip Stanhope* (1774) as it is in conduct books for girls, where for example, (learning from Rousseau,) James Fordyce (1766) exhorts young women “your business chiefly is to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful” (p. 273).

As Vrettos (1995) reminds us,

Many Victorians were deeply interested in reading bodies as texts. They developed elaborate theories for decoding physical details, symptoms and gestures – theories that assumed that people spoke through their bodies and interpreted the bodies of others in particularly structured, usually gendered ways. (p. 21)

It is a well-known fact that Brontë was deeply interested in phrenology and physiognomy. Her protagonists pride themselves on being able to read faces to read minds. More often than not,

their reading becomes another set of signs for us to interpret. This technique plays a crucial role in the author's last novel, her masterpiece *Villette*, but it is also important in her earlier works.

Before we focus on the theme of reading in *Jane Eyre*, let us touch upon one more characteristic of Victorian readerly sensibility. In his book *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* Meisel (1998) argues that in that period "writers, painters, and dramatists shared a common pictorial narrative style" (39). In his words,

The Victorian experience of reading was heavily visual: books, newspapers, journals, and other printed things were in fact multimedia events, heavily dependent upon images. The proliferation of visual images – illustrations, engravings, paintings in galleries, advertisements, photographs, and more – turned the Victorians into visual fanatics. (p. 39)

In other words, the Victorians believed that just as the visual phenomena should be read as well as seen, so should literary fiction be visualized when read.

Brontë's writing definitely has a pictorial quality. Herself an aspiring painter in her youth, she often included the act of viewing pictures in the plot of her novels. Although she rejected the proposal to have *Jane Eyre* illustrated, she composes her scenes with a painter's eye, which makes it easy for a reader to imagine such illustrations. Moreover, it appears that in *Jane Eyre* she relies on a series of vignettes embedded at pivotal points in the narrative to punctuate the development of her theme. If, like many would agree, the main theme in Brontë's novel is Jane's journey towards selfhood, at its center lies struggle for interpretative authority (Bock, 1992, p.102). From being marginalized and denigrated, the protagonist moves to the central position where she can redefine herself, tell her own story, and be in command of its interpretation.

The topography of the storyworld and movement in it serve to mark the protagonist's transformation - from a helpless abused orphan, to a governess, to a financially independent person who finds her family and marries on her own terms the person she loves. The four phases in Jane's life are linked to four different localities: Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, and Moor House. Interestingly, they are also allied with different types of reading and interpretation. It seems worthwhile to trace this progress.

The very first lines of *Jane Eyre* drop us in medias res. Beginning with the simple statement "There was no possibility of going out that afternoon" (p.3) the first person narrator proceeds to paint a scene of solitary and consolatory reading. In a window seat, hidden behind heavy curtains that frame it like a picture, Jane bends over Bewick's *History of the British Birds* (a copy of which, by the way, also stood on the shelf of Patrick Brontë's library). The bleak pictures the protagonist is looking at serve as an objective correlative for her life of emotional deprivation. Jane's contemplation of Bewick is soon interrupted. Her cousin, John Reed, the family bully, invades her secluded spot, assaults her and questions her right to read the books that he calls his property. The scene immediately establishes not only Jane's vulnerability but also her strength. She refuses to be beaten into submission. The understanding she has gained from her readings allows her to transcend the limitations of her position – of an impoverished orphan – and a girl at the mercy of her relatives. Drawing a parallel between John and Roman

tyrants, she exposes him for what he is and asserts her right to resist abuse. Even when she faces punishment for her defiance – being locked up in the red room and being publicly slandered, she holds on to the truth about herself and her basic rights. Thus from the outset Jane's private reading is posited as a source of inner strength and self-preservation rather than escapism or dangerous daydreaming.

The next stage in Jane's life begins when she is sent away to the school at Lowood. This part of the book continues the motif of "hostile readers and a disempowered audience" (Bock, 1992, p. 77). Put in the care of an abusive, hypocritical principal, Jane is introduced to the school community by being made stand on a chair with the sign "Liar" pinned to her body. Meant to be shunned and broken, she becomes "an abused text" to use Bock's term. Lowood is a traumatizing place that represents much of what was wrong with nineteenth century educational establishments, but Jane manages to survive it. Within the confines of the degrading communal life at the school she gains access to an inner circle. Helen and Miss Temple see past the slanderous label and offer their friendship and intellectual companionship. The sessions in Miss Temple's room offer Jane sustenance in literal and metaphorical meaning of the word – they revolve around food, warmth, and "an act of joint textual interpretation" (Bock, 1992, p. 79). Thus by contrasting reading as a mindless institutionally controlled activity (what the students are routinely required to do), with meaningful engagement with texts, the Lowood chapters posit that the latter builds space for introspection, spiritual growth, comfort, and intimacy. Jane leaves the place wiser and more sure of who she is.

When she starts working as a governess at Thornfield and falls in love with her employer, Mr. Rochester, Jane finds in him a skillful and sympathetic reader. This is the closest she gets to being acknowledged, understood, and loved. It is true that even in this relationship the protagonist is at a disadvantage as a reader of herself and others. She is still an inferior transcending social class and difference of experience. For all her mind reading skills, she is unable to correctly decipher the signs around her and resist manipulation. Privileged by social class and gender, Rochester, initially has an upper hand in the relationship. When Jane secretly perused *The History of British Birds* or was confined to Lowood, Rochester read Shakespeare and traveled in Europe. Thus, with his knowledge of the world and sexual experience, he can plant false clues and place Jane in a situation where she is in full view, open to his scrutiny while her vision is obscured and incomplete. For a while, the protagonist is caught in the web of half-truths. However, in the end, Rochester's plot unravels. Jane learns about the mad wife in the attic and she rejects the script Rochester is proposing. Even if nobody in the world cares about her, she cares about her integrity and refuses to become Rochester's mistress. Consequently, the part of the novel that explores the awakening of Jane's emotional self ends with her fleeing from it.

The Moor-House segment of the narrative begins with Jane at the most critical moment of her life, when she becomes a nameless fugitive whose very survival is at risk. It also marks the final phase of her personal growth. The scene that encapsulates this pivotal moment is worth a closer look in juxtaposition to the opening image in the novel.

Nearly dying of physical and emotional exhaustion, Jane manages to drag herself in the direction of a light emanating from a lonely house in the moors. Then hidden in the dark, she

watches a scene of blissful domesticity, the River sisters in the warmth of their kitchen, reading and discussing a text in German, a language she does not know. The scene presenting “ut pictura poesis a static image framed by the window casement” (Bock, 1992, p. 90) symbolizes everything she always was deprived of: a loving family, a comfortable home, and intellectual companionship. At first taken for a vagabond and sent away by a servant, Jane is soon given shelter by the kind inhabitants of the Moor house, who - as she will find much later- are in fact her long lost relatives. When she joins the reading circle at the Moor house, the extent of her self-knowledge and ability to resist manipulation or misinterpretation are challenged by the very opposite of a family bully, an abusive school principle or a Byronic figure. She encounters St. John Rivers, is being “read” by John Rivers, a principled ascetic man, shrewd and thorough, able to “leisurely read (her) face, as if its features and lines were characters on page” (p. 452). St. John does not read for pleasure. Passion is something he denies himself and others. As Jane observes, St. John uses the literal act of reading as a subterfuge for intense observation of others. Here is Jane reading St. John reading her:

Ostensibly engaged in studying his Hindustani textbook he “appeared ... quiet and absorbed... but that blue eye of his had a habit of leaving the outlandish-looking grammar, and wandering over, and sometimes fixing upon us with a curious intensity of observation. (p. 506)

Despotic and manipulative, St. John uses his skills to make Jane abandon German, learn Hindustani and consider his marriage proposal. He does not love Jane, but sees in her good material for a missionary’s wife, “a useful tool” (p. 168). For a short while, Jane is tempted to let him bend her to his will, “to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence and there lose (her) own” (p.370). After all, St. John’s reading of her is not incorrect. But it is incomplete. There is a reservoir of readiness for self-sacrifice in the protagonist but there is also self-assertiveness. In their final confrontation, notably another “window” scene, Jane acknowledges her emotional self. Imagining she hears her lover’s voice calling her name, she rushes to look for him.

The last pages of the novel show Jane in full control of her destiny and her story. Her journey ends when she finds Rochester blinded and maimed in a futile attempt to save his mad wife from the fire, and the words “Reader I married him” bring her story to its end. The rest is tidying up, tying loose ends. Much has been made of the reversal of roles evident in the novel’s end. Jane is no longer poor or lonely. Having found her family and received her inheritance she is financially independent. She becomes her husband’s guide and even though later Rochester regains some eyesight, he literally sees the world through her. But there is also emphasis on the understanding between them. It is their intellectual and affective affinity – the source of their attraction- the range and depth of their emotions that makes them such perceptive readers of each other and the world.

Concluding Thoughts

So what does this quick look at the scenes of reading in *Jane Eyre* tell us? Within the conceptual framework of *Jane Eyre* there is a parallel between the world of texts and the reality they are part of. Access to books is determined by class and gender. Texts – like people – and people like texts - can be ignored, misinterpreted or abused. They can also be understood and loved.

One of the most important themes in Brontë's fiction is the tension between reason and Romantic imagination, facing reality versus introspective dreaming grounded in delusion. Interestingly, female reading, whether private or shared, is never shown by the writer as dangerous. On the contrary, it is nourishing and empowering. In Brontë's fictional reality for an interpretation to be correct it should not be guided by flights of fancy, but neither should it be devoid of affect. Last but not least, the struggle for power and authority inherent in the act of reading does not preclude it from being a source of consolation and enrichment.

The fact that Brontë chose to create an unlikely Victorian heroine – a young woman who is plain - was meant to be revolutionary. More importantly in the context of the present discussion, she also created a female reader who resists male interpretative authority and who beats everyone at the reading game. Just as Jane does not read books to daydream or simply pass the time in a fashionable manner, she doesn't read men to please them. She reads them - and herself - to stay well.

In closing, let us consider one more point. *Jane Eyre* is Brontë's best-known book and one of the most popular novels even today. It scandalized some, enchanted others, but it never left anyone indifferent. Here is how two different readers describe their reaction:

... She rushes us through the entire volume, without giving us time to think, without letting us lift our eyes from the page. So intense is our absorption that if someone moves in the room the movement seems to take place not there but in Yorkshire. The writer has us by the hand, forces us along the road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her... Think of Rochester and we have to think of Jane Eyre. Think of the moor, and again there is Jane Eyre. Think of the drawing room ... what is all that except Jane Eyre?
(Woolf, 1925, pp. 156-57)

The writer of these words is Virginia Woolf and her comments seem to echo an earlier reader who simply says: "took up *Jane Eyre* one winter's evening ... sternly resolved to be critical but found that as we read we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning" (Clark, 1849, p.692). One of the reasons why the book sweeps the reader away is Brontë's careful handling of the distance between the fictional reality and the audience. In her first novel, *The Professor*, the writer's handling of the "Dear Reader" trope is clumsy and annoying. In her last novel, *Villette* the gradual movement from the initial intense involvement with the protagonist to the point where the Dear Reader is told to bid adieu to her from afar mirrors the trajectory in *Jane Eyre*. The difference is the narrating protagonist's ironic detachment from the very first makes identification with her difficult. To some extent this accounts for *Villette*'s lack of popularity with the common reader. In *Jane Eyre*, however, Brontë gets it just right. We **are** Jane and we read **with** Jane before we become aware of the increasing distance between the narrator and the experience she describes. Before the "Dear Reader" is given the signal to extricate herself from Yorkshire, she would have lived there – intensely and ardently. Isn't that what we all - as readers - always want?

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