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Like a “Caged Bird”: Jane Eyre’s Flight to Freedom through Imagery in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* was written at the height of the British Victorian Age. Though filled with mid-Victorian mannerisms and lifestyles, the novel takes on its own air of mystery, for a governess catches her master’s eye, and a strange person wreaks havoc in the household. Themes related to the Victorian period fly throughout the novel, such as the idea of the angel of the house and of the ideal or less-than-ideal woman. While some might try to fit the character Jane Eyre into one of these categories, Jane is simply more than a product of the Victorian period in Great Britain. Her character transcends the gender roles of the period and soars to new heights as a result. One way that this is demonstrated is through the analogy of the life of pet birds, locked inside a cage to domesticate them. As an orphan left to the care of relatives who did not care for her, Jane Eyre grew up like a “caged bird,” unable to truly make her own decisions. As Jane grew, her interest in knowledge freed her from her feelings of entrapment, enabling her to begin a growth to freedom previously unattainable due to her uncertain status as an orphan. Though her physical, economic, and social movements were carefully controlled by her aunt, her mind is her own, carefully growing and maturing in a way unbeknownst to Jane until she leaves the situations chosen by her family for those she chose for herself. Jane Eyre is like a bird, striving for freedom from the social hierarchies and standards of her day in which she is caged, and doing all in her power in order to reach the freedom she desires.

Jane's desires to gain freedom and knowledge stem from an early age. Raised as an unwanted orphan in her aunt's household, Jane only knew cruelty and hatred at the hands of relatives. Her inquisitive and different nature was represented from the beginning. She was therefore labeled as a naughty child, as she had not acquired "a more sociable and childlike disposition" due to her naturally inquisitive personality and outbursts (Brontë 5). In the novel, the theme of birds is first introduced early on, in Bewick's *History of British Birds*. As Jane sits in the window seat reading this book and gazing at the outside world, she is at an in-between point—neither in the house or outside—but on the threshold and therefore on the verge of change which is symbolized by the book on birds. Jane is drawn to the birds and the way they lived, identifying with their "solitary rocks and promontories," "bleak shores," and "forlorn regions of dreary space" (6). It is at this point in her life that Jane aligns her living situation with that of birds: solitary, bleak, and forlorn, but also capable of flight.

Shortly after this point, Jane is sent away to Lowood School, where she receives a classical education to be a teacher or governess, but is also able to gain knowledge and new experiences that become stepping stones for her future life and growth. This knowledge becomes important to Jane's freedom as it gives her the power to define herself. Before this point, Jane was only what others made her to be; she had no say or voice in any matter and was subjected to punishments due to how others defined her and her actions. It was the kindness of friends and teachers at her school that enabled Jane to find herself and break open the cage that had hitherto ensnared her with no hope of escape. Miss Temple was an important character that taught Jane that in order to be free, she needed to experience friendship, love, and a sense of home. Indeed, Miss Temple was what made Lowood a home for Jane, though "from the very day [Miss Temple] left [Jane] was no longer the same: with her was gone every settled feeling, every

association that had made Lowood in some degree a home” (71). This feeling resulting from the friendships she made allowed Jane to learn that life needed to contain more than just static living: it needed friendships and a sense of home or belonging. It needed love, an emotion that had not surrounded her upbringing. This experience at Lowood with Miss Temple was a taste of what Jane would ultimately need to be free from the oppressive cage she was still chained to, the cage of hierarchal social structures.

One of the key factors in Jane’s growth was her decision that it was time for a change in her life, to leave Lowood School and to find a position elsewhere. Without connections to help with the process, Jane put an advertisement in the paper, hoping for responses so that she might leave her situation, for her “reason for tranquility was no more” and she remembered that “the real world was wide” and “awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils” (72). Upon determining this, Jane actively proceeded along her chosen path. This bold move enables her to receive another degree of flight and freedom. At this point, Jane finally moves out of the situations set up for her by her relations, namely her aunt’s household and Lowood. While she does consult briefly with her uncaring aunt about taking a new position, the decision is ultimately left to her. Here, after eighteen years, Jane finally breaks free from the chain holding her to her cage, enabling her to break free from the oppressiveness of her mostly unfeeling familial and social relationships. This decision ultimately leads to further freedoms that are not fully realized until the novel’s end.

The position that Jane takes upon leaving Lowood is unique; though hired as a governess, she is treated by the master as a social equal. This approach is far different than any that Jane has previously experienced. At her aunt’s, Jane was an orphan and less than a servant. Though she felt love at Lowood, Jane was stuck socially, unable to change the situation that had been

impressed upon her by her aunt. Going to work at Thornfield was Jane's choice: and in that choice, Jane could more easily find how she fit in, and soared in her attempts at doing so. Her main companion, Mrs. Fairfax, "turned out to be what she appeared, a placid-tempered, kind-natured woman, of competent education and average intelligence" (92). But eventually even Thornfield felt to her a "return to stagnation" (99). While Jane enjoyed living in this new situation, and though Mrs. Fairfax was kind, and her society and company a welcome change, Mrs. Fairfax was not the right person to encourage Jane's departure from the cage for she did not have the intellectual stimulation which Jane required to leave her societal cage.

This departure was helped along by Mr. Rochester's return from his travels, for he brought the intellectual stimulation Jane needed to grow. Upon Mr. Rochester's unexpected return to Thornfield, he learns of how she was able to situate herself amongst the household and with Mrs. Fairfax, and he could see that there was something quite different about her. As a result, he frequently desired her company in the evening, and declared her to be "not so unsophisticated as Adèle: she demands a 'cadeau' clamorously, the moment she sees me: you beat around the bush" (103). Rochester was drawn to Jane's clear and unfiltered remarks and conversations, for her social situation was different from his. Most likely those of his own social standing were like Adèle: privileged, used to finery, and unwilling to compromise. This certainly meets the description of the eligible Miss Ingram.

Miss Ingram was certainly a product of the Victorian period, for she stood tall in the same cage that Jane continuously tried to break free from. Brought up as a member of the social elite, Miss Ingram was considered by many, Mrs. Fairfax and Jane included, to be the perfect match for Rochester. However, Rochester had other ideas in mind. At a point in the novel, he discovers that Jane can draw well, and asks to see her work. Upon bringing it, readers learn that

she drew birds, one of which was a cormorant, which some critics see as her self-portrait. This is then seen as connecting with “the instances in the novel in which she articulates a hunger for intellectual, creative, and social outlets denied her because of her class and gender” (Taylor 10). While Rochester appreciated her work because he was also caged down by his own social expectations and private life, those visiting from his social sphere did not deem the drawings as anything special. Each was busily living in his or her sphere, wrapped up in social contrivances and expectations. The moment they falter in their social privileges, however, is when a gypsy appears and they choose to listen to their fortunes, despite the Dowager Ingram’s misgivings. She could not “countenance any such inconsistent proceedings” (Brontë 164). But the youth proceed, and this is a turning point in the novel, for Jane in particular. Those who received their fortunes returned, some subdued and others thrilled. Jane almost does not go, but the gypsy will not leave “till she has seen all” (166). Jane’s meeting with the gypsy then demonstrates how much Rochester truly has seen of Jane, for the gypsy was Rochester, who “stepped out of his disguise” (172). He knew of her desires for freedom and for more, of the fire that was within her, though closely watched and monitored. Rochester could see and feel Jane’s passion for life, though curbed by her childhood and upbringing at Lowood. Most importantly, Rochester could see how Jane felt about him, even though it was hidden to her in some cases. This hidden nature of Rochester, though, eventually becomes problematic to their relationship, because the man that she is meant to marry is still in disguise.

Through the novel, readers learn that Jane also needs love in order to be free, as can be seen in the freedom that she felt upon entering Lowood and meeting Miss Temple. But the love that she received from Rochester was not yet freeing, because he was still in disguise. Rochester chose to go about marrying Jane in the wrong way, for had their marriage proceeded, it would

have been illegal even while filled with passion. Jane could not live in that sort of situation, for she knew that in order for her truly to be free, she needed legality, love, and candor. Had Jane not gained the knowledge she did of his marriage, all efforts on her part to break free from her cage would have been pointless, for she would have entered into a situation that was not fully liberating.

Her desire to be free on her own terms flies forth at this point, shown in her decision to leave Thornfield. After a long distance traveled, Jane ends up outside the home of St. John. Here, he and his family take her in, helping her heal and restoring her to full health. The family, consisting of two sisters and one brother, are kind to her, and Jane feels at home, similar to how she felt at Thornfield. As time passed and Jane stayed with the family longer, a sudden discovery alters Jane's social standing and position, further freeing her from her cage: she has an uncle, "Mr. Eyre of Madeira," who died and left Jane "all his property" (325). This discovery also brings to the forefront that Jane and the family who took her in during her destitute state are related—they are cousins. Subsequently, Jane leaves her position and moves in with the family, where St. John watches her carefully before coming to the determination that Jane should be his wife so that they might be missionaries in India. But this was not the liberation that Jane desired, and has been discussed by critics such as John Hagan, who stated, "For Jane, liberation without human love is impossible" (352). Jane did not love St. John, and after the childhood experiences that had shaped her knowledge of love and life, Jane knew that to marry without love would be just as bad as marrying someone who was already married. She would return to the cage that she was so close to fully escaping, and that was unacceptable for Jane. She chose to turn away from St. John and refuse his offer of marriage, for it was better to "break free of the successive glass cages into which convention and society's disdain would place her" (Marchbanks 12), such as

marriage, than to be confined to a cage. If Jane remained confined to the cage, she would be unable to gain the ascendancy brought about “each time Jane [would fly] free of her successive confinements” (1). This decision became the second turning point for Jane. She knew then that after Thornfield, her cage had not been just her own. Rochester shared her cage because he was confined to his marriage, unable to marry Jane for “a marriage was achieved almost before [he] knew where [he] was” (Brontë 260). But now he was free, and so was she. Thus began her travels back to Thornfield.

Her arrival was unexpected, but brought about the culmination of her break from the cage-like institutions that had heretofore been established and oppressively placed on Jane. She found Rochester “helpless, indeed—blind, and a cripple” with an arm amputated, an eye inflamed, and an eye knocked out, but free from the marital cage that had bound him (365). Some critics argue that “Jane’s finally and voluntarily delivering herself into matrimonial bondage at the story’s close undermines any sense of freedom she might have demonstrated” (Marchbanks 13), but this is not Jane’s view. Marriage to the man she loved ultimately gave Jane the freedom that she desired, which is later echoed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem *Aurora Leigh*:

She had lived  
 A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,  
 Accounting that to leap from perch to perch  
 Was act and joy enough for any bird.  
 Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live  
 In thickets and eat berries! (304-309)

Jane shares the poem's view that acting like a caged and senseless bird is silly, particularly when one can leave the cage as Jane did, finding freedom through education and marriage. Leaving her aunt's house to go to Lowood enabled Jane to escape the thickets, spread her wings, and fly from the nest, as described in her namesake, Eyre, which is derived from "eyrie," meaning "the nest of a bird of prey... on a mountain or cliff" ("Eyrie"). Upon leaving St. John and discovering Rochester's state, Jane was able to realize there was more joy to life than she had known before. That joy was brought about by the similarities Jane found with Rochester and through the knowledge and education she received and gained in each stage of life.

Traditionally, birds are characterized as symbols of flight and freedom, spreading their wings in order to soar. Thus, the continual references to cages and birds in Brontë's novel symbolize Jane's desires for freedom from the cage-like institutions to which she has been subjected throughout her formative years. Ultimately, Jane truly reached the freedom symbolized by the birds throughout the novel through the education, knowledge, and social standing she managed to acquire. Without these changes, Jane would have remained a "caged bird," forever having tasted of freedom but unable to attain it were it not for the knowledge she obtained and for the love that she found as she did.

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