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Rachel Rackham

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Like a “Caged Bird”

Jane Eyre’s Flight to Freedom Through Imagery
in *Jane Eyre*

Rachel Rackham

Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* was written at the height of the British Victorian Age, a time known for its strict adherence to the social norms of the day. Though filled with mid-Victorian mannerisms and lifestyles, the novel takes on its own air of mystery—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 concept of the angel of the house and of the ideal or less-than-ideal woman. While some might try to fit Jane Eyre into one of these categories, Jane is more than a product of her time. Her character transcends the social 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 be domesticated. As an orphan left in the hands of relatives who did not care for her, Jane Eyre grew up like a “caged bird,” unable to truly make her own decisions. Though her physical, economic, and social movements are carefully controlled by her aunt, Jane’s mind is her own, carefully growing and maturing in a way unbeknownst to her until she leaves the situations chosen by her family for those she chooses for herself. Ultimately, she is able to reach the freedom she desires through the education, knowledge, social standing, and love that she acquires in the novel. It is through this

imagery of a “caged bird” that readers are able to see Jane Eyre as more than a product of the Victorian era; she is an individual that transcends the social norms of the day.

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 knows cruelty and hatred at the hands of relatives. Her inquisitive and different nature is represented from the beginning, as she did not acquire the “more sociable and childlike disposition” which her aunt attempts to impress upon her (Brontë 5). Instead, she is a reader, and far more interested in learning about the world outside her aunt’s home than her cousins are. In the novel, this is demonstrated through the theme of birds that is introduced early on, in Thomas 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—on the threshold and therefore on the verge of change. Jane is drawn to the way the birds live, identifying with their “solitary rocks and promontories,” “bleak shores,” and “forlorn regions of dreary space” (6). This connection to birds is further illustrated through her surname, Eyre, which is derived from “eyrie,” meaning “the nest of a bird of prey . . . on a mountain or cliff” (“Eyrie”). It is at this point in her life that Jane aligns her living situation with that of birds: solitary, bleak, and forlorn. Jane is incapable of flight at this time, however, the birds she identifies with have the capability to fly. It is this contrast that sparks Jane’s desire for freedom and her initial pull on the chain that secures her to her cage.

Shortly after this point, Jane is sent away to Lowood School, where she receives a classical education, but also gains 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 Lowood, 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. The kindness of friends and teachers at her school enable Jane to find herself and unlock the societal cage that had hitherto ensnared her. Miss Temple is an important character who teaches Jane that in order to be free, she needs to experience friendship, love, and a sense of home. Indeed, Miss Temple makes the school a place for Jane to call home, and “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” (Brontë 71).

This experience allows Jane to learn that life needs to contain more than just static living: it needs friendship and a sense of home or belonging. It needs love, an emotion that had not surrounded her upbringing. Additionally, Jane's acquaintance with Miss Temple acts as a taste of what she would ultimately need to be free from the oppressive cage she was still chained to, the cage of hierarchical social structures.

One of the key factors in Jane's growth is her decision to change her life by leaving Lowood School and finding a position elsewhere, for her "reason for tranquility was no more" and she remembered that "the real world was wide" (72). Without connections to help with the process, Jane puts an advertisement in the paper and then actively proceeds along her chosen path. This bold move enables her to receive another degree of flight and freedom through the opening of the door to her cage. However, though the door is open, she is still chained inside her cage. 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 gain freedom 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 is Jane's choice: and in that choice, Jane could more easily find her place in society and soars 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.

Mr. Rochester's return from his travels brought the intellectual stimulation Jane needed to develop the necessary courage to free herself from her cage. Upon Mr. Rochester's unexpected return to Thornfield, he learned 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 that "there is something singular about [her]" (112). Rochester is drawn to Jane's clear and unfiltered remarks and conversations, for her social situation is different from his. Most likely those of his own social standing were like Adèle, his charge: privileged, used to finery, and unwilling to compromise. This certainly meets the description of the eligible Miss Ingram.

Miss Ingram is certainly a product of the Victorian period, for she stands tall in the same cage that Jane continuously tries to break free from. This is demonstrated through the "lightness and buoyancy" of the actions of Miss Ingram that remind Jane "of a flock of white plummy birds" (145-6). Brought up as a member of the social elite, Miss Ingram is considered by many, Mrs. Fairfax and Jane included, to be the perfect match for Rochester. However, Rochester has 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 draws birds, one of which is a cormorant, which some critics see as her self-portrait. This "connects her character with Bewick's textual characterizations of the species through two areas of voraciousness and hunger in Jane's life: her passion for Rochester and her desire to surpass the limits assigned to her gender and social class" (Taylor 9). It is this connection to the cormorant that brings together the dueling aspects of Jane's life which strive to be resolved, but which are hindered due to the social norms of the day. Further, this connects "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" (10). While Rochester appreciates her work because he is also caged down by his own social expectations and private life, those visiting from his social sphere do not deem the drawings as anything special.

Unlike Jane with her desires for freedom, each of Rochester's visitors was busily living in his or her sphere, wrapped up in the social contrivances and expectations of their day. The moment they falter in their social privileges, however, is when a gypsy appears and they choose to listen to their fortunes. This is a turning point in the novel for Jane in particular, as she realizes Rochester's feelings for her and her feelings for him. Those who choose to

visit with the gypsy and receive their fortunes return, some subdued and others thrilled. Jane almost does not go, but the gypsy will not leave “till she has seen all” (Brontë 166). Jane’s meeting with the gypsy then demonstrates how much Rochester truly has seen of Jane, for the gypsy is 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, due to not only her innate temperament, but also due to the societal norms of proper relationships between master and servant in that time period. It is the hidden nature of Rochester, however, that eventually becomes problematic to their relationship, because the man that Jane 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 receives from Rochester is not yet liberating, because he is still in disguise. Rochester chooses 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, aspects that had not been a part of her upbringing before Miss Temple and were not always considered by society when it came to finding someone to marry. Many, Rochester’s family included, solely desired the dowry gained in a wedding. This desire for the “thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed,” led to aspects of Rochester’s marriage being hidden from him (260). In contrast, Jane had no dowry, which therefore resulted in a transparency between her and Rochester that broke the social norms of the day. Even with this transparency, had Jane not learned 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.

Jane’s desire to be free on her own terms flies forth at this point, shown in her decision to leave Thornfield, for Jane felt that while “birds were faithful to their mates” and “emblems of love,” she had no place with Rochester (274). After a long distance traveled, Jane ends up outside the home of St. John. Here, he and his sisters take her in and help her heal, for the sisters have “a pleasure in keeping [her] . . . as they would have a pleasure in keeping and cherishing a half-frozen bird” (297). The family, consisting of two sisters and

one brother, is kind to her, and Jane feels at home, similar to how she felt at Thornfield. As time passes and Jane stays 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). Shortly following this discovery, St. John determines that Jane should be his wife, for she now meets the prerequisite temperament and class level he desires in order to consider someone eligible to marry.

However, St. John and Jane's views of a marriage governed by society differ, for St. John considers marriage to be a social marker while Jane views it as further trapping her in her societal cage. This idea has been further 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 confining as to marry someone who is already married. She would return to the cage that she was so close to fully escaping, and that was unacceptable for Jane. She chooses 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 restricted 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 she was ready to join him and share his freedom. Thus began Jane's return to Thornfield and to the man who held the key to her freedom.

Her arrival is unexpected, but brings about the culmination of her break from the cage-like institutions that have heretofore been established and oppressively placed on Jane. She finds Rochester "helpless, indeed—blind, and a cripple" with an arm amputated, an eye inflamed, and an eye knocked out (365). However, he is free from the marital cage that had bound him, though "in his countenance [she] saw a change" for "the caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson" (367). Though Rochester's experiences had changed him, Jane is able to look past his outward appearance, for now they are able to

free each other through marriage. 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 loves ultimately gives Jane the freedom that she desires, which is later echoed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epic 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 gilded cage. 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.

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 reaches the freedoms symbolized by the birds throughout the novel through the knowledge she obtains and for the love that she finds. Jane would have remained a “caged bird,” forever having tasted of freedom but unable to attain it, were it not for her ability to transcend the social norms of the day and become more than what society dictated. By breaking free from the oppressiveness of society, her actions enable an escape from the cage that truly renders it uninhabitable for the future.

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