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The Space In-between

Exploring Liminality in *Jane Eyre*

Megan Clark

From Mrs. Reed's house to Morton, *Jane Eyre* is always singled out as otherworldly. Throughout the novel, Charlotte Brontë creates different spheres and worlds, especially through the means of social class and the way people are perceived and treated. These worlds are presented in juxtaposed pairs, but Jane never belongs to either world. She remains in her own realm, always separated from the others. Throughout the text, she is compared to an elf or fairy, emphasizing the otherworldliness that defines her. While some look at Jane as a social outcast due exclusively to class boundaries and other limitations outside of her control, it is important to recognize her agency in the matter. Despite what critics, such as Sarah Gilead and John Peters, have said about her "gaining social membership" by the end of the book, there is extensive textual evidence that Jane is always a part of this otherworld, a liminal place that belongs neither to one world nor the other. During each stage of her life, Jane's reaction to her separation is the very thing that leads to her otherworldliness in the next stage. There are moments in the text where she seems to almost escape this liminal realm, but in the end she must remain there, with Rochester eventually joining her in the otherworld.

We see the beginning of Jane's separation and perpetual liminality during her time at Gateshead. She is singled out and excluded, made to feel lesser than her spoiled cousins. The importance of this separation

is made apparent by Brontë's emphasis of it on the first page of the novel. Within the first paragraphs, Jane has been "dispensed from joining the group" and described as unnatural (5). The Reeds, in the words of John Peters, "attempt to transform Jane into the other by excluding her from society and by labeling her as something other than human" (57). Jane then chooses to separate herself from the Reeds with a physical barrier, the red curtain, and encloses herself in her own realm of books and private thought. This is our introduction to Jane's world. It is a place of imagination and artistry where Jane can escape the labels imposed upon her and form "idea[s] of her own" (6). She tells us that in this state, in her world, she is happy. This peace of mind is broken along with the removal of the physical barrier that she had established between herself and her hard-hearted family. John Reed's arrival not only shatters Jane's feeling of contented isolation, but it also creates a new environment of pain and terror. This fear is augmented when Jane is locked in the red-room, which becomes yet another physical barrier dividing her from the others in the house. This barrier, however, was not self-imposed. Peters describes this separation as a representation of "the physical and spiritual solitary confinement to which the Reeds relegate her" (59). Despite her previous desire to be isolated, Jane is now embittered and hurt by her forced isolation. In this state, her imagination running rampant, she begins to apply non-human labels to herself as the Reeds had done previously. While looking in the mirror she thinks to herself:

All look colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp . . . (11)

One could interpret these thoughts and acknowledgement of her nature as "other" as a mere submission to abusive words and behavior from the Reeds, but as Sarah Gilead argues, "the consequence of each [liminal] episode is to strengthen Jane's selfhood" (305). Each life occurrence that seems only to isolate Jane from the group simultaneously allows her to further discover herself and to create her own world.

Jane's world is not simply a separation from the family, but a liminal sphere that is caught in between two worlds, that of the Reeds and that of the servants. Jane is not one of the Reeds as made consistently clear

by Mrs. Reed, and even by Jane herself. She recognizes a discrepancy in her character and that of her cousins when she defiantly states that “they are not fit to associate with [her]” (22). The servants also disown her, saying that she is “less than a servant for [she] does nothing for [her] keep” (9). Two societies have been established, and Jane belongs to neither. Although she has felt the most happiness when in her own world of imagination, Jane still desires to be loved. She does not wish to be like the Reeds, thereby joining their world, but she does hope to be cared for by them. The Reeds, however, cannot accept Jane in her otherworldly state. It is this disapproval that embitters Jane and causes her to lash out at her aunt. Because of her behavior, Mrs. Reed tells Mr. Brocklehurst that Jane is a liar, thus “obliterating hope from the new phase of existence which [she] destined [Jane] to enter” (28). Through her reaction to her separation, Jane perpetuates this state into the next stage of her life.

At Lowood school, Jane is singled out as a liar by Mr. Brocklehurst, thus separating her from the other students and reinforcing her liminality. He calls her a “castaway,” an “interloper,” and an “alien,” publicly marking her out as otherworldly. Although most of the teachers and students do not necessarily exclude Jane as Brocklehurst would have them do, she is still made separate from them by his declaration. In response to his speech, Miss Temple reaches out specifically to Jane, along with Helen. She treats them deferentially, giving them food and talking with them. Jane no longer belongs with the mass of Lowood girls, but becomes otherworldly yet again. Gilead recognizes this phenomenon when she says, “Jane is spoken to and treated as an adult. She enters a secret and largely hypothetical microcosmic society of intellectual and humane elite” (307). Thus, Jane is separated from the group both by Brocklehurst and Miss Temple, albeit in different manners.

There is another, however, who does not belong to the world of the rest of the students—Helen Burns; Helen occupies another world that, combined with that of the students, frames Jane’s liminal realm. Her saintly behavior is something that Jane cannot comprehend at this point, let alone exhibit herself. Jane still feels the old desire for human acceptance that she thirsted for at Gateshead. She passionately tells Helen, “if others don’t love me I would rather die than live—I cannot bear to be solitary and hated” (58). Helen gently chastises her and tells her to turn to God rather than rely on the love of people. This marks a turning point in Jane’s

need for approval. She begins to change, attempting to worry less about the opinions of others. Even with her efforts to reform, Jane is unable to become as angelic as Helen. Helen is raised above the rest, including Jane, by Miss Temple herself. When Jane and Helen leave Miss Temple's room "she let [Helen] go more reluctantly; it was Helen her eye followed to the door" (62). Jane is caught between the student body on one side and upright Helen on the other. Rather than lash out as she did at Gateshead, Jane's reaction in this stage is to emulate the exemplar of the better of the two worlds. She recognizes in Helen a willingness to take criticism, to suffer silently, and to look to God in all things. Jane sees that these qualities give her strength and allow her to live fully and happily without concern for human judgments. As she works to develop these qualities in herself, Jane cares less about the opinions of others and the labels that they place upon her—thus becoming further entrenched in her own world. These very qualities are the foundation for Jane's otherworldliness during her time at Thornfield.

When Jane first arrives at her new home, she is lonely and must find solace in her imagination. She has yet to meet Mr. Rochester, and the company of Adèle and Mrs. Fairfax does not excite her. When she feels this discontent, Jane walks along the third floor hallway in silence, recreating the solitude of her childhood hideaway behind the red curtain. Here she lets her imagination run wild and allows gleaming visions to come into her mind. She "open[s] [her] inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale [her] imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that [she] desired and had not in [her] actual existence" (93). Here we see Jane's active retreat into herself and her world. She has recognized this realm as a place where impossibilities become reality, and she revels in the power that she holds there. Her imagination is the driving force for the creation and continuation of her world. When Rochester comes home to Thornfield he acknowledges Jane's powerful and innovative mind. He looks over her art and comments, "the drawings are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar. As to the thoughts, they are elfish" (108). Susanne Langer recognizes the use of art and imagination as a way "to keep ourselves oriented in society and nature" (253). Jane uses her paintings as a vehicle to enter her world and find peace. Jennifer Gribble agrees that "in Jane's responses to events, in her drawings and her dreams, we see a mind actively creating its experience" (281). Jane is able

to not only enter her world through imagination, but she is also creating her world and allowing others to envision it. As Rochester looks at the paintings, he seems to be momentarily transported into Jane's world. There is a depth in her paintings that only he seems to perceive and feel. Despite Rochester not being a part of Jane's world, he has accepted her and given her peace of heart and mind. However, like John Reed disrupted her comfort in the past, visitors come to Thornfield to remind her of her perpetual liminality.

With the arrival of Rochester's guests, Jane's social status identifies her as thoroughly other, but Mr. Rochester recognizes and is intrigued by this otherworldliness. The dashing gentleman and coy ladies are like a new species for her to examine; they are not of her world. Jane again finds herself in a liminal place between realms. She does not fit in with the upper class, and although she is paid by Mr. Rochester, as a governess she is not of the serving class. She finds herself isolated, yet Jane's perennial need for acceptance has been almost entirely eliminated, and she regards the party as an aloof observer, neither expecting nor desiring their attention. The only exception to her new philosophy of contented detachment is Mr. Rochester. However, she does not look at him as an eligible and rich bachelor, but as a kindred spirit. She compares him with his guests and decides, "he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine;—I am sure he is,—I feel akin to him . . . though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him" (149). Jane recognizes Rochester as having qualities of the "other," despite his being a part of a world different from her own. Rochester also recognizes these qualities in Jane almost immediately after meeting her. He tells her that she has "rather the look of another world," comparing her to elves and fairies (104). As he continues to learn about her, he seems more convinced that Jane is otherworldly. She is quiet, obedient, and moral. Her ethical likeness to Helen Burns at this point is pronounced. Beyond that, her character and intelligence both surprise and challenge Rochester. He marks Jane out as different from the majority, telling her when she answers his questions boldly and honestly that "not three in three thousand raw school-girl-governesses would have answered me as you have just done" (115). Her candor captivates Rochester and draws him to Jane. He falls in love with this pure fairy and desires to make her a part of his world.

Edward Rochester does everything in his power to extract Jane from her world and plant her firmly in his. He compares her to a captive bird that “were it but free, would soar cloud-high” (119). In Rochester’s mind, he has the power to set her free, giving her wealth, position, and the ability to live according to her will. He plans to marry her, to make her his wife. Initially, Jane does not believe that this plan will come to fruition. She tells Rochester that nobody gets to enjoy complete happiness in life and that she “was not born for a different destiny to the rest of her species: to imagine such a lot befalling [her] is a fairy tale—a day-dream” (220). Jane sees that this marriage could only happen in a world of imagination—her world. Rochester swears, however, that this is a dream that he “can and will realise” (220). His determination to be with Jane drives his endeavor to pull Jane into his world. He attempts to buy expensive clothes and give Jane elaborate gifts, transforming her, in his mind, into an elegant lady. Jane, in spite of her deep love for Rochester, resists these attentions, recognizing that she is truly free only in her own world and would be caged by societal expectations and judgment in his. Her subconscious acknowledges the impossibility of her leaving her world for another when she dreams of “some barrier dividing [them]” (240). Owing to her devotion to Rochester, Jane decides to marry him, hoping that she can remain a “plain, Quakerish governess” as well as a bride (220). However, Rochester’s dark secret is disastrously revealed, making Jane who was “almost a bride—a cold, solitary girl again” (252). Rochester, who was so akin to her, has been taken away. Jane is again completely alone in her world, leaving her heartbroken yet determined. She knows that to retain her freedom and prevent Rochester from new attempts to extricate her from her world, she must leave Thornfield and her beloved master behind. She does so and sets out for the wild, leaving the cage of Rochester’s world behind her.

Jane spends days on an emotionally and physically taxing journey that demands all of her strength and further entrenches her in her otherworldliness. At this moment she is in a liminal place, caught between her pitiful past and her unknown future. This is another transformative moment, similar to Jane’s traumatic experience in the red room. However, there are no Reeds forcing her into the unknown. Gilead notes that “this most consequential of Jane’s liminal ordeals is self-devised” (307). Her agency is driving her forward, not the forces of society or labels placed

upon her. By the end of her journey, “not a tie holds her to human society” (275). Then, when she finally arrives in Morton, Peters notes that Jane still “does not fit into any recognizable category. She begs food but is not a beggar. She looks like a lady but has no money” (59). Jane remains in her otherworld, more isolated than she has ever been.

Paradoxically this is the beginning of a stage in her life which is exemplified mostly by acceptance, yet still does not remove her from her own world. Gilead marks Moor House as a rebirth and the end of Jane’s separation, noting that “at this borderline place, she is multiply endowed with family and friends” (310). It is true that in the Rivers siblings, Jane finds kinship and happiness. But, in spite of this, her reaction from the last stage will still mark her as otherworldly in this new stage of her life. After leaving Rochester, Jane craves nothing more than love and approval. In many ways, the trauma of losing Rochester has shaken her newfound confidence in herself and increased her need for human acceptance. She does all in her power to gain the admiration and acceptance of her new family. Diana and Mary give their love freely, but St. John remains exacting. Jane tells us that she “daily wished more to please him: but to do so, I felt . . . that I must disown half my nature . . . He wanted to train me to an elevation I could never reach; it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted” (340). In her overwhelming desire to please, Jane separates herself from the other girls. Diana notices this differential treatment, saying to St. John, “you used to call Jane your third sister, but you don’t treat her as such” (339). St. John has chosen Jane for a higher task than that of mere sister, he has singled her out as a potential wife and missionary. In doing so, he attempts, as Rochester did, to remove Jane from her world and place her in his. In despair, Jane exclaims that she “could not receive his call” (343). She recognizes that she can never live in St. John’s world of ice and self-sacrifice; she must remain in her world.

During this time, Rochester has suffered terrible losses; these losses in turn will make him capable of joining Jane in her liminal world. His estate is in ruins, and his body is weak and disabled. Rochester is no longer the eligible gentleman that he once was, living alone in a “desolate spot” (366) with few servants. He, who was always so similar to Jane, has now left the world of high society and has been humbled and isolated. Peters realizes that “this isolation then qualifies him to engage in a relationship with Jane” (65) as a part of her realm. Rochester has finally

entered Jane's liminal world. Because Jane's world is one of imagination and impossibilities, it becomes completely logical for its two inhabitants to be able to communicate with one another in spite of the distance between them. When Rochester tells of their miraculous communication he says, "in spirit, I believe, we must have met" (381). This spiritual meeting leads to a physical one in the secluded manor-house of Ferndean. The couple is at last reunited, and Rochester's wish of being on "a quiet island with only [Jane]" is now fulfilled (174). His difficulties, both physical and emotional, had made him feel as if he were "pass[ing] through the valley of the shadow of death" (380), but in doing so he is able to enter Jane's world and find happiness with her.

The conclusion of the book reminds us that this is in fact an "autobiography" written by Jane herself; this literary work then becomes Jane's invitation for the reader to enter her world. She addresses us directly when she writes, "Reader, I married him" (382). In doing so, Jane shows that she has another form of world creation other than those of imagination and art. Janet Freeman recognizes that Jane has a "need to put her experience into words," and that in doing so she is both actively creating her world and sharing it with us (683). Jane's story is told repeatedly throughout the novel by those without authority. People like Mrs. Reed, Brocklehurst, and even Rochester and St. John label her and tell her about herself. Jane recognizes this as a way of marginalizing her and her world, and she chooses to take control of her story in writing it herself. Just as Rochester was able to see into Jane's world by looking at her paintings, we are able to momentarily enter her world through reading. Kathleen Tillotson reinforces this idea when she notes that *Jane Eyre* is "a novel of the inner life, not of man in his social relations; it maps a private world" (257). Although Jane writes of life, school, relationships, and social class, these subjects are not her focus. She is telling us of her world, and her growth within it. Her writing shows that her otherworldliness, although isolating at times, is a blessing that allows her to develop a deeper sense of self and to bring happiness to herself and the man that she loves. In the end, we see that Jane's agency not only perpetuates her status as otherworldly, but also drives her to share her world with us.

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