Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*: Working to Escape Feminine Exile

As a text enmeshed in the colonial system, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* depicts the struggle for independence from an oppressive, dominant power structure that places women in exile by virtue of patriarchy. Brontë maneuvers Jane through a series of circumstances that complicate an already intense exile, chronicling Jane’s growth towards independence from mastery and oppression, as seen within the confines of Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, and Moor House. Each of these stages offers Jane a glimpse into the workings of these power structures (as creating her exile), liberating her from the oppressive confines in which she finds herself: she recognizes the ability to choose her future and thus gains a semblance of independence and self-knowledge. In such a reading, *Jane Eyre* invokes Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in the stages of work Jane performs to achieve liberation from societal exile through her recognition of her oppression by dominant social structures. While Jane does achieve partial liberation through work, the independence attributed to Jane proves flawed and collapses on itself: the colonial system consumes both her character and her freedom, trapping her in the same exilic displacement she so nearly escaped. Thus, Jane fails to actualize true independence and instead of progressing to the next step and using the ability to choose as a method of gaining complete independence stemming from freedom of thought, she chooses to place herself in a situation where dominant powers retain mastery and influence over her thoughts, affording Jane a partial rather than a complete agency. The problem of this partial agency combined with Brontë’s dialectical form places *Jane Eyre* at the cusp of feminist criticism as a call for a new dialectic to take the foreground to enable freedom from the prevalent, yet archaic, feminine exile.

As a precursor to colonial and postcolonial theories of domination and oppression, Hegel articulates a theory of accounting for the manner in which people come into possession of conscious selfhood. Known as the master-slave dialectic, Hegel’s theory adopts binary distinctions similar to that of self-other in which the other verifies selfhood. Thus, the master has a self that dominates and oppresses, while the slave, or other, is a nonsubject lacking a dominant self. In such a dialectical operation, two binaries oppose one another in a process where, as Hegel describes, “one is merely recognized, while the other only recognizes…that it is fettered to no determinate existence” (231-2). Recognition enables the slave to discover self-consciousness through work and labor, part of which includes overcoming the master in the final stages of recognition. This recognition proves essential to the process: while the master requires recognition of mastery by the slave, the slave needs to realize that the master has conditional power only through dependant consciousness, after which time the slave gains a liberated sense of identity. The dialectical process that contains these essential forms of identity-development parallels the form of Brontë’s novel: she presents a series of oppressive situations in which Jane continues a dynamic process that embodies the struggle for identity.

Throughout the text, Jane encounters a series of oppressive life experiences that allow her to achieve a semblance of selfhood through work that enables her to recognize her oppression by various dominant powers. Brontë places the first of these stages at Gateshead, Jane’s childhood residence, where she experiences oppression and domination from the earliest years of her life. At this locale, Jane gains a burgeoning awareness of her inferior status within the household:
Mrs. Reed imposes her values not only as to how a child should behave but also as to how a child should be, dismissing Jane from her company with the decree that Jane must endeavor to “acquire a more sociable and child-like disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner—something lighter, franker, more natural, as it were—she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy little children” (5). Thus, Jane faces pressure to conform, invoking the problem of the slave who must harness her identity within the confines of the master’s rule, which envelops one in, as Jane mourns, “the dreariness of my hatred and hating position” (32). At this point, when Jane is a young child, she realizes the domination and oppression under which she lives. Adrienne Rich notes that, following the well-popularized Red Room scene, “It is at this moment that the germ of the person we are finally to know as Jane Eyre is born: a person determined to live, and to choose her life with dignity, integrity, and pride” (Brontë 465, my emphasis). The element of choice, as it applies to Jane, invokes and reinforces her internalization of two of Hegel’s main concepts: work and recognition. She recognizes oppression, realizes the need to separate herself from such a confining environment, and works proactively to afford herself a better chance at personal freedom of identity.

Like most of Jane’s choices, the decision to attend school is fraught with additional complications of the oppressed. She is given the option to either attend school or live with poor relatives, the latter option representing a return to her native roots. When considering the slave as other, Fanon notes that the oppressed lack the ability to return to their native roots and, paradoxically, also lack the ability to assimilate into the dominant culture. In recognizing her domination, Jane encounters a similar situation. To protect the embryonic sense of identity she has acquired, she must necessarily reject assimilation into the dominant culture. However, she has already absorbed enough of that culture to dismiss her native roots: she refuses the offer to live with relatives because they are poor. In her narration, Jane affirms her consciousness of making a choice that leaves her complicit with dominant power structures: “I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste” (20). The only remaining avenue open to her is a compromise in which she reconciles two impossible choices: she trades her position of complete domination at Gateshead for a less certain position at Lowood, where the possibility of fostering a liberated identity exists. Even as a child, Jane displays a type of emancipatory complicity (as discussed by Spivak in “The Burden of English”) that allows her to use the system to maneuver within it to uplift herself. As such, the young-Jane anticipates the “woman question,” where one investigates the “traditionally cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to gain freedom to live their lives on their own terms, if only in the privacy of their own thoughts” (Gilbert 74).

As Bronte negotiates the early phases of Jane’s struggle for a liberated sense of identity that can be achieved through work and recognition, as described by Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, the dialectic form itself mirrors the master-slave dialectic and simultaneously begins laying a framework for a future dialectic. In the second stage, which takes place at Lowood, Jane experiences a different kind of oppression and domination. Instead of being singled out as an inferior “subject,” Jane becomes one of many oppressed girls under the rule of Brocklehurst, who epitomizes the hypocrisy of the master. Rich expounds upon Brocklehurst’s mastery, declaring him to be “the embodiment of class and sexual double-standards and of the hypocrisy of the powerful, using religion, charity, and morality to keep the poor in their place and to repress and humiliate the young women over whom he is set in charge. He is the absolute ruler.
of this little world” (466). Within the domination and oppression of Brocklehurst’s rule, Jane articulates a “sense of liberty” that confirms a new stage in her struggle for liberation, although she still faces domination and oppression (47). In this environment, Jane expresses the value of her comparative freedom at Lowood as opposed to the material luxuries of Gateshead, averring, “I would not now have exchanged Lowood with all its privations, for Gateshead and its daily luxuries” (65). At this stage, Jane continues her “work” as a student and prepares herself for future encounters with oppression and domination, arming herself with the necessary tools for the recognition that eventually can afford her the choice of freedom.

Inevitably, Jane’s residence at Lowood ends with another stage of dissatisfaction with her submissive station in life. She notes that her “reason for tranquility was no more” and compares Lowood to a “prison-ground, exile limits” as she longs for a “new servitude” (74). At this phase, Jane manifests an uneasy consent to the dominant power structure but yearns to transcend that consent, at least in part, as she strives to gain a greater degree of freedom. She has long recognized the mastery inherent in her position at Lowood, even after Brocklehurst’s replacement, and she uses this dominant system to continue gaining knowledge through her education and involvement in the power structure as a part of it (she works as a teacher) that allows her to take the next step: she accepts the governess position at Thornfield Hall. By assenting to the system, she demonstrates a form of emancipatory complicity, since that acquiescence allows her to move beyond Lowood and to extend her growth towards a liberated identity.

At Thornfield, Jane encounters a microcosmic culture that epitomizes dominant power structures in terms of what is right and proper in that culture. Her first impression of Thornfield leaves her with the thought that “nothing in short was wanting to complete the beau ideal of domestic comfort,” which sets the scene for her later struggle with Rochester for independence (83). Within the illusion of domestic bliss, Mrs. Fairfax, a servant of a higher caste, articulates the ingrained master-slave relationship that is to haunt Jane throughout her stay at Thornfield: “John and his wife are very decent people; but then you see they are only servants, and one can’t converse with them on terms of equality: one must keep them at due distance, for fear of losing one’s authority” (84, my emphasis). Here, Jane has no choice but to recognize the sense of mastery pervading the household – a recognition that serves her well when she finally meets the master of the house, Rochester.

As her stay at Thornfield lengthens, Jane delves into her work not only with Adele but also within herself, aiding her in the process of developing an independent sense of identity. The combination of work and recognition results in the ability to display a mindset that denounces mastery in favor of liberty. Hegel maintains that “Through work and labour, however, this consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself” (238). Brontë imbues Jane’s character with an untiring ability to work as she maneuvers Jane through the dialectical process towards liberty. Jane manifests the effects of her personal work when confronted with Rochester, who demonstrates a unique type of mastery. When he probes Jane’s thoughts on servitude, he receives this response: “I don’t think, sir, you have a right to command me merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience” (118). As Rochester and Jane continue to interact, the astute reader notices the amalgam of complexity with which
Brontë infuses the master-slave binary. Instead of portraying Rochester as purely tyrannical, Brontë has him assume the role of a benevolent dictator, who engages Jane in conversation and, inevitably, stimulates her to think and choose her stance (and perhaps her status) regarding his domination over her: she expresses disdain for a dominant power structure that strives to oppress.

In respect to Rochester’s unique nature as master, the Thornfield episode gains centrality by raising both the reader’s and, ultimately, Jane’s awareness about the insidious nature of mastery that has the capability to present itself as benevolent. Rochester offers Jane friendship – an offer that on the surface implies equality – while simultaneously conspiring to manipulate her, as seen most blatantly when he assumes the guise of a gypsy-woman and when he courts Blanche to get a sense of Jane’s feelings without revealing his own. Gilbert and Gubar note that “his trickery is a source of power” and further posit “sexual knowledge” as another form of the mastery Rochester imposes on Jane: “Rochester, having secured Jane’s love, almost reflexively begins treating her as an inferior” (354-5). Jane recognizes the unspoken label of “inferiority” and rebels as she works both physically and spiritually to evade Rochester’s grip on her, ultimately solidifying her desire for independence, a desire that she has been displaying in growing degrees. When discussing the centrality of Thornfield in Brontë’s text, Rich affirms that “in it Jane comes to womanhood and to certain definitive choices about what it means to her to be a woman” (468, my emphasis). Through a rigidly disciplined and personal style of work, Jane eventually recognizes the need for independence to succeed in the struggle for a liberated identity, free from the oppression that a bigamous marriage to Rochester would afford her.

Within the recognition of her need for independence, Jane shows a remarkably stoic will for a woman of her time and leaves Rochester, enduring a traumatic traveling experience that indicates the extent of her desire to “work” as a part of the process of procuring a liberated sense of self. Jane’s arrival at Moor House heralds the advent of a situation in which she has the opportunity to become fully liberated. She is rescued by two sisters who not only “live as intellectual equals with their brother,” as noted by Rich, but also pass on that equality to Jane (473). During the formation of her newfound relations, Jane continues to express a desire to work while simultaneously verbalizing her expanding recognition of the need for independence to foster her sense of self, as she notes, “the fear of servitude with strangers entered my soul like iron” (312). To avoid oppression, Jane accepts a position as the mistress of a small school that is menial in comparison to the luxuries offered by a marriage to Rochester. Jane exhibits maturity in her understanding of oppression by placing liberty above class and further demonstrates the necessity of fostering equal relations by sharing her inheritance with the Rivers and rejecting St. John’s proposition to join him as a missionary’s wife, where she would be submitting herself to his will. Rich lauds her recognition and rejection of an oppressed future: “Jane becomes soon aware—he will use her…and from this ‘use’ of herself she draws back in healthy repulsion” (473). As Jane nears the end of her narrative, she displays both the recognition and work necessary to liberate herself from oppression and to foster an independent identity as given by Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.

Likewise, Brontë’s dialectical form that continually places the binaries of freedom and oppression in the foreground of Jane’s experiences mirrors Hegel’s master-slave dialectic as she strives towards liberty. However, the final chapter of Jane Eyre illuminates the failure of
Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and the dialectic created by Brontë’s form: Jane fails to gain true independence. Try as she might, Jane never fully breaks from the oppressive attitudes of the dominant power; the imposed values of dominant power structures remain ingrained in her mindset and she fails to achieve full liberation, although she experiences a Hegelian epiphany. She acknowledges St. John Rivers for what he really is, as shown when he tries to make use of her. Jane realizes that “To me, he was in reality become no longer flesh, but marble; his eye was a cold, bright, blue gem…” (361). As she loses her fear of St. John and recognizes his attempt to manipulate her, she attains Hegel’s final stage of the master-slave dialectic but then undermines this knowledge by hastening to answer Rochester’s mental summons.

Brontë undermines the successful completion of Hegel’s dialectic by introducing a new complication of Jane’s independence – a complication that Brontë foreshadows by providing evidence of the ingrained values of the dominant power within Jane’s character. Just prior to her “epiphany,” Jane contemplates the fact that, “I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters, antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt” (352). Ultimately, the master-slave dialectic fails Jane, since she is unable to escape the confines of oppressive thought patterns and remains entrenched in binary opposition that prevents her from procuring a completely liberated sense of self. Within this dialectical failure, Brontë’s own structural dialectic takes on a new meaning in combination with Jane as a character: the failure to craft an entirely liberated sense of self through the master-slave dialectic demarcates the need for a new dialectic – the dialectic of feminism.

*Jane Eyre* ushers in the need for a feminist dialectic by virtue of Jane’s articulated desire for independence and her struggle to obtain that independence. While still confined by the dominant mindset, Jane gleefully proclaims the extent of her independence: “I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress” (383). For her era, Jane makes great strides away from the imposed and confining notion of women as inferior, forcing the woman question into the foreground. Rich observes that the eventual marriage to Rochester operates, for Jane, as another form of emancipatory complicity. According to Rich, Jane’s marriage glorifies the feminist message because, “It is not patriarchal marriage in the sense of a marriage that stunts and diminishes the woman; but a continuation of this woman’s creation of herself” (Brontë 475). Jane embodies the feminist message by freeing herself from individual oppression while succumbing to the binary distinctions of the dominant power structure, which, as has been catalogued, is primarily male. She assents to certain aspects of that power while using that assent to further manipulate the dominant system to better her position. By responding immediately to Rochester’s mental summons and serving him faithfully as both a domestic and a companion, Jane’s complicity enables her to manipulate a power shift in her favor, thereby depicting a continuation of the emancipatory complicity she displays early in the text. She revels in his dependency on her as she reveals that “it was not himself that could now kindle the lustre of animated expression: he was dependent on another for that office!” (386).

Like Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, feminist theory discusses the process of overcoming the binary structure of self-other that implies inferiority and superiority. Both feminism and Hegel address the notion that the male and master, respectively, retain superiority by the very existence of the other. As such, Brontë’s characterization of Rochester conforms to this structure. In the company of Jane and other servants, Rochester displays overt mastery in the form of superior
attitudes and dominant authority. However, deprived of the other (excepting two loyal servants), Rochester finds that, in Hegelian terms, “It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved” (Hegel 237). Without Jane, Mrs. Fairfax, Adele, and other inferiors, Rochester’s physical deformities from the fire at Thornfield take on a symbolic significance: in this reading, his physical blindness indicates the “blindness” one experiences when lacking independent consciousness. To further emphasize consciousness through dependency, Jane’s return correlates with the “recovered sight of that one eye” (397). In the presence of the other, albeit a partially liberated other, Rochester gradually regains his vision of himself as well as his physical vision, which further parallels Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.

The otherness that is essential mastery in both Hegelian thought and feminism extends to the colonial aspects of Brontë’s text. Colonialism operates in a similar binary of superiority and inferiority, where the colonizer represents the superior. Terry Eagleton observes that Rochester’s fortune comes from marrying “into colonial wealth” (494). Eagleton continues his discussion by invoking the complications of master-slave binaries, noting that Jane’s “relation to him [Rochester] is a complex blend of independence...submissiveness, and control” that affords Jane “the right to engage in the process of taming it” (494, 496). The “it” Eagleton refers to embodies the superiority of the upper class that engages in domination and oppression of the other. This critique invokes “process,” perhaps alluding to the process inherent in dialectic that exists throughout Brontë’s text in both form and content. The continually embedded dialectic that affords Jane partial agency, but only a partial agency, indicates the need for a new dialectic that enables the other to engage in emancipatory complicity as a method towards gaining complete liberation.

In Jane Eyre, Brontë shows the beginnings of feminist thought as she simultaneously indicates the failure of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. She anticipates the melding of inferior and superior by virtue of the fact that, as Eagleton notes, both Jane and Rochester’s “fortunes spring from the same root” of colonialism (494). Jane’s economic independence stems from an inheritance from her colonial uncle, thus illuminating yet another method of complicity, albeit one unknown to her. While this independence allows Jane to gain freedom from Rochester’s mastery in terms of economics, she succumbs to the mastery of the colonial power that Eagleton attributes to the character of Rochester by virtue of the ingrained dominant mindset that Jane retains. She evinces this mindset at the end of the novel as she lauds the imposition of Western ideals when relating St. John’s career as a missionary. She professes him to be “Firm, faithful, and devoted; full of energy, and zeal, and truth, he labours for his race: he clears their painful way to improvement” (398). This ingrained colonial mindset renders her a tool of that same system, and she becomes both a product of and producer for that system: the recognition and mastery that contain the ability to free her remains incomplete.

The many complexities in Brontë’s novel permit analyses relating to Hegelian dialectic, feminism, and colonialism. Because Brontë’s form mirrors the dialectical process and Jane’s experience conforms to the work and recognition necessary for the struggle through binaries to attain a liberated identity, the combination of author and protagonist invoke Hegel’s dialectic process. While conforming to this dialectic, Jane exhibits all the signs of gaining freedom yet at the final stage succumbs to the dominant power’s ingrained ideals; thus, the novel both anticipates and hails feminism as a new dialectic that, through an emancipatory complicity
similar to that displayed by Jane, may hold the potential to complete her freedom and remedy an agency that remains only partial. As such, Brontë’s text even approaches colonial binaries to emphasize the necessity of working through the opposing dualities that characterize dialectic to attain freedom not only within society but also freedom of thought. Jane’s struggle for liberation is indeed dialectical and more.
Works Cited and Consulted


