

Rebellions in Heterotopias: Jane Eyre's Path Towards Maturity

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Abstract

From a spatial perspective, this article argues that the three major spaces represented in *Jane Eyre* can be read as heterotopic sites in Foucauldian terms, each corresponding to a crucial stage in Jane's psychological, moral, and social development. Appearing successively throughout the narrative, these spaces do not merely function as physical settings; rather, they constitute disciplinary, transitional, and resistant structures through which Jane confronts different forms of patriarchal constraint and gradually negotiates her subjectivity. Among them, Ferndean Manor is particularly significant because of its narrative and ideological ambiguity. Instead of offering a straightforward resolution to Jane's struggle for autonomy, it exposes Charlotte Brontë's unresolved anxiety about the possibility of female self-realization within a repressive Victorian social order. Taken together, these three spaces map the trajectory of a Victorian woman who refuses to be fully assimilated into the roles and expectations imposed upon her by gender ideology, class hierarchy, and domestic discipline.

Keywords

Heterotopia, female maturity, Charlotte Brontë.

1. Introduction

As one of the most representative works of 19th-century Victorian English literature, *Jane Eyre* is renowned worldwide for its incisive social critique and its distinctive, profound gender perspective. Through the story of the orphaned Jane Eyre's personal development, the author Charlotte Brontë powerfully reveals the difficulties faced by women—particularly governesses—within society, and offers a multi-layered exploration of themes such as marriage, family, and education, all of which were central to the fate of women in the Victorian era. It is rightfully considered a feminist classic.

Over the years, critics and readers alike—both in Britain and in China—have shown great interest in Jane Eyre's pursuit of freedom and independence, making the feminist lens a dominant perspective in *Jane Eyre* scholarship. The critic Adrienne Rich argues that Brontë's narrative is neither purely a work of critical realism nor solely a psychological novel, but rather a fusion of both. In Rich's view, Jane's journey to maturity can be seen as a series of choices made in response to the temptations faced by women, through which she shapes her independent and freedom-seeking soul.

With the rise and development of postcolonial theory, many scholars have turned their attention to Mr. Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason, analyzing her in the context of Britain's expansive colonial enterprise during the Victorian period. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that Brontë deliberately employed the technique of "double" in her construction of the story world—using Bertha Mason, a woman marginalized by both race and gender, as a projection of Jane's repressed rage and desire. This repression, they argue, stems from the restricted social expectations placed on women and the unequal power dynamics between the male and female protagonists. These insightful critiques have laid a solid foundation for further academic exploration of *Jane Eyre*.

As interpretations of *Jane Eyre* have deepened, scholars have begun to focus not only on the novel's five recurring elemental motifs and the metaphors built around extreme heat and cold, but also increasingly on the role of spatial description. Ariadne Lewis, for instance, applies Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of chronotopes to analyze three recurring spiritual spaces in the novel: the Fairyland desired by Mr. Rochester, the Christian spiritual world proposed by Helen Burns, and the Christian afterlife favored by St. John River. Through this framework, she examines Jane's spiritual quest and expands the scope of spatial research in *Jane Eyre*.

Indeed, Jane's personal growth can be further illuminated through a study of space. The various spaces in the novel play an essential role in shaping the heroine's spirit of independence, rebellion, and yearning for freedom. This paper selects three key spaces to explore this idea. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopias, it investigates how these spaces are linked to Jane's rebellious behavior and autonomous maturity.

The analysis of these three spaces constitutes the three main sections of this paper: Lowood Institution, the Mirror, and Ferndean Manor. These spaces correspond to three critical stages in a woman's development—education, marriage, and domestic life. In the author's view, it is precisely within these spaces that Jane progressively explores significant questions about female growth and ultimately completes her journey toward independence and self-realization.

2. Lowood Institution as a Heterotopia

Subjected to her aunt's maltreatment, Jane Eyre was forced to leave Gateshead and was sent to Lowood School, which Mrs. Reed had arranged for her in advance. At this all-girls institution, Jane received a formal education and embarked on a new chapter in her life. The critic Adrienne Rich once described Lowood School as "a school for the poor controlled by the rich, an all-female world presided over by the hollow, Pharisaical male figure of Mr. Brocklehurst." Rich's comment precisely captured two essential characteristics of Lowood: it is an "all-female" space that is "presided over by a male figure." These very features are what enable Lowood to function as a heterotopia.

Lowood was a charitable institution established for orphaned girls, many of whom had lost both parents and had become marginalized members of society—including the protagonist, Jane. The school was located in a remote area, and Jane once recalled her arrival: "...descended a valley, dark with wood, and long after night had overclouded the prospect I heard a wild wind rushing amongst trees." In Michel Foucault's discussion of heterotopic space, he defined such places as:

real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.

In *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*, Kevin Hetherington further defines his "badlands" as "places of Otherness, sites constituted in relation to other sites by their difference." Both scholars imply that heterotopias serve a unique role within society: they are marginal spaces that gather those who live on the fringes—just like the orphaned girls of Lowood.

But Lowood is more than a place of containment. Hetherington further argues that "the margins have come to be re-evaluated as the space for the empowerment of the marginalized, and of the importance of marginal practices." He uses the Palais Royal as an example, describing how this lavish aristocratic palace became a critical hub for the French Revolution and a center for the dissemination of Enlightenment ideas.

The Palais Royal was not, however, defined by everything that was Other to the Court and to Versailles, but through its mingling of the old of the aristocratic order, courtly manners and interactions with the new of bourgeois commerce, philosophy and politics.

Lowood functioned similarly for Jane Eyre—it became the key to her awakening, inspiring her to pursue freedom and independence.

At Lowood, Jane encountered a group of educated women who were the true administrators of the school. These female teachers not only imparted knowledge but also taught the students self-discipline. Among them, Miss Temple was the most admired by Jane. She embodied the new Victorian woman, combining strength and gentleness. When confronted by Mr. Brocklehurst's accusations, she appeared calm and respectful, replying to his questions quietly; yet later, she ridiculed his hypocrisy and fussiness in private. Even the students' expressions betrayed their scorn for him. Jane quickly saw through Mr. Brocklehurst's futile attempt to exert full control over the school: "he would perhaps have felt that, whatever he might do with the outside of the cup and platter, the inside was further beyond his interference than he imagined." As a figure who resembled a stone pillar, Mr. Brocklehurst symbolized the rigid patriarchal structure of Victorian society, and his eventual impotence represented the collapse of male authority in this specific space.

Miss Temple also revealed her strength and courage when she took it upon herself to buy food for the girls, who had been suffering from poor-quality meals. Even when reminded that such action was against school policy, she insisted on doing what she believed was right—demonstrating her decisiveness and resistance to authority. However, Lowood is not an unattainable utopia. Its very existence reminds us that, like many other Victorian institutions, it remained under male control and aimed to cultivate obedient, docile women. This paradox was reflected even in its female teachers. Though Miss Temple secretly despised Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy, she still had to comply with his rules, as he was the school's official authority. Other female teachers, despite their "father-like" discipline of the girls, were essentially reinforcing patriarchal norms—for instance, Miss Scatcherd's scolding of Helen was aimed at suppressing her free and easy-going nature. In this way, while these women helped shape new female identities, they also played the very roles that patriarchal society had assigned them.

Indeed, a new group of women that emerged in the Victorian era—the governesses—played a similar dual role. These women were highly educated, earning their living through intellectual labor, demonstrating both independence and intelligence. Yet the societal expectations of Victorian women left them in an awkward and constrained position, subtly disciplining their desire for freedom and autonomy. Nevertheless, their presence laid the groundwork for the emergence of independent female consciousness and foreshadowed the feminist movements to come.

In this sense, Lowood is much like the Palais Royal. Tucked away in a remote location and occupying a marginalized position in society, it silently resisted the gaze and discipline of the outside world. For its students—especially Jane—it offered an alternative set of values and ideologies distinct from mainstream attitudes. After her time at Lowood, Jane resolutely chose to become a governess, developing a character that was dignified, independent, and unafraid to seek freedom. Even Bessie, who visited her from Gateshead, marveled at Jane's broad learning. Though Jane lacked striking beauty, she nonetheless earned the respect and admiration of others.

3. Mirror as Mixed Spatiality

After leaving Lowood, Jane Eyre arrived at Thornfield Hall—the place of her new employment. There, she not only encountered Mr. Rochester and fell in love with him, but also came close to

entering into marriage with him. If her time at Lowood, where she received an education and was instilled the spirit of female independence, marked the beginning of her new life chapter and her pursuit of prospective goals, then her time at Thornfield represented a deeper exploration of female experience—especially in regard to the concept of marriage. This stage brought her further personal growth and a more profound understanding of freedom and autonomy.

Spending time with Mr. Rochester gradually made Jane develop affection for this eccentric and unruly “master”. After numerous ups and downs, the two finally confessed their feelings and became lovers. Jane, who had never cared much about her appearance, found herself the morning after their engagement admiring her reflection in the mirror:

While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect, and life in its colour; and my eyes seemed as if they had beheld the fount of fruition, and borrowed beams from the lustrous ripple. I had often been unwilling to look at my master, because I feared he could not be pleased at my look; but I was sure I might lift my face to his now, and not cool his affection by its expression. I took a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me: because none had I ever worn in blissful a mood.

This passage vividly conveys Jane’s elated mood in the midst of romance. However, the narrative soon reveals that this love is far from the innocent and sincere connection Jane imagines. From the beginning, Mr. Rochester’s relationship with Jane is riddled with deception—not only because he conceals the fact that he is already married, but also because he manipulates Jane’s emotions by using Miss Ingram as a means of provocation. His performance at the ball, where he disguises himself as a gypsy fortune-teller to extract Jane’s true feelings, highlights his tendency to use disguise and charade to conceal reality and assert control. Yet at this stage, intoxicated by love, Jane fails to recognize these red flags. Gazing at her glowing reflection in the mirror, she feels genuine joy; this romance has forged for her a false utopia. Foucault once described the mirror as a kind of utopia:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror.

Foucault’s notion of the mirror as a utopia acquires symbolic meaning in Jane’s story. Jane fantasizes about a happy ending with Mr. Rochester, turning a blind eye to his deception. In doing so, she places herself in an illusory dreamworld—like the radiant Jane in the mirror, who is only a reflection of her infatuated state, not a representation of reality. The mirror’s utopia captivates her to the point where she cannot even recall her earlier rebuke of herself: “a more fantastic idiot had never surfeited herself on sweet lies, and swallowed poison as if it were nectar.”

But lies can only last so long. Jane, ever perceptive, begins to detect inconsistencies in Mr. Rochester’s behavior after their engagement. His suffocating desire for control and disregard for her own will cause her to feel that “his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched.” Mrs. Fairfax’s gentle warning only deepens Jane’s suspicions. She begins to instinctively reject this seemingly perfect but hollow marriage. In the week before the wedding, she dreams repeatedly of a crying child and unexpectedly encounters Mr. Rochester’s mad wife, Bertha Mason. These experiences lead her to question the validity of her impending marriage—revealing a deep anxiety and doubt regarding both the institution of marriage and Mr. Rochester himself.

Strikingly, this psychological shift is again expressed through the mirror:

‘Stop!’ she cried in French. ‘Look at yourself in the mirror: you have not taken one peep.’ So I turned at the door: I saw a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger.

Foucault described the act of looking into the mirror as a cross-boundary experience “between utopia and these quite other sites, these heterotopias.” He argued that the unreality of the mirror paradoxically helps us recognize the truth: “Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back to myself.” Thus, Jane, who had once joyfully admired her reflection, now begins to experience a fragmented sense of self. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar liken this moment to “a fragmentation of the self comparable to her ‘syncope’ in the red-room.” Standing before the mirror, Jane no longer clings to her idealistic fantasies; instead, she begins the process of self-recognition. She clearly anticipates that the identity of “Jane Rochester” would mean restriction and alienation.

In this moment, the dark and eerie face of Bertha Mason—seen in the mirror on that dreadful night—inevitably overlaps with Jane’s own. Although the face in the mirror is not literally hers, Jane senses that, should she marry Rochester, Bertha’s tragic fate could easily become her own. Moreover, Bertha, as Jane’s double, always emerges to fulfill Jane’s suppressed desires whenever social norms compel Jane to repress her true emotions. Thus, when Jane looks into the mirror and sees Bertha, she is, in a way, confronting her hidden, authentic self.

Through this layered use of the mirror motif, the author cleverly exposes the illusion constructed by patriarchy, dismantles the naïve heroine’s idealistic vision of marriage, and reveals the truth that love has obscured. In this dramatic contrast between illusion and reality, the heroine begins her journey of resistance and pursuit of freedom and independence—provoking the reader’s deep reflection on women’s issues.

4. Ferndean Manor—a Place of Nowhere

After enduring numerous hardships, Jane reunites with Mr. Rochester at Ferndean Manor. This place marks the end of her pilgrimage—a symbolic endpoint in her journey toward independence and self-realization. At the story’s conclusion, Jane, now possessing both familial love and wealth, marries Rochester, who has by then lost his fortune and much of his physical vitality. Scholars have offered differing interpretations of this union.

Freudian psychoanalytic critics argue that Rochester’s physical mutilation and diminished social standing “castrate” the formerly threatening masculinity he embodied, thus making the marriage possible. Prior to this transformation, it was precisely Rochester’s overwhelming masculine power that caused Jane to feel suppressed and imprisoned in their relationship. However, the critic Adrienne Rich disagrees. According to Rich, Jane longs for a marriage based on true equality—both spiritual and physical. A Rochester who has been metaphorically and literally “castrated” cannot be Jane’s equal partner in spirit, and thus their marriage still lacks true equality.

Rich contends that the marriage Brontë arranges for Jane—and Jane’s own account of their post-marriage dynamic—is not the romanticized conclusion typical of Victorian novels. While the couple does find happiness together in the end, their union is based on mutual respect and equality rather than on sacrifice or submission by either party. As Rich puts it, “It is not patriarchal marriage in the sense of a marriage that stunts and diminishes woman; but a continuation of this woman’s creation of herself.” Because of this, their marriage represents an idealized model—perhaps the best outcome Brontë could imagine for her protagonist and her readers.

Yet, many critics and readers continue to question whether this marriage is truly as perfect as it seems, and whether such an egalitarian union is realistically achievable. One reason for this skepticism relates to the actual setting of their reunion—Ferndean Manor.

As readers observe, Ferndean Manor exhibits even stronger Gothic characteristics than Thornfield Hall. It is situated deep in a remote forest, so densely shrouded in trees that Jane cannot even discern its presence when approaching it in the dark. In the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the house's name implies "it is without artifice—no flowers, no garden-beds—and yet, as Jane tells Rochester, it is green, ferny, and nourished by gentle rains."

This manor, inherited from Rochester's father, had long been uninhabited "in consequence of its ineligible and insalubrious sites." Earlier, when confessing the existence of Bertha, Rochester had hinted that the place was unfit for human habitation due to the miasma that had gathered in its surrounding wilderness. Strangely, it is in this remote and shadowy manor that Jane and Rochester receive their happy ending.

The eerie, untamed natural setting casts a shadow over the idyllic life Jane describes after marriage. It subtly undermines the seemingly perfect conclusion, as if Brontë has once again constructed a private utopia—a new Eden—for Jane and her partner, one that offers a renewed chance at intimacy akin to that between Adam and Eve. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that even Brontë herself could not fully envision a world in which a woman is wholly unshackled from social constraints. Her contemporaries provided no blueprint for such a world, and Brontë herself could not articulate its specifics.

Thus, although Brontë may have believed that Jane and Rochester's marriage had escaped the traditional forms of patriarchal repression, she could not clearly define the nature of this new kind of union. The spatial qualities of Ferndean Manor reflect this ambiguity and lend a layer of complexity and uncertainty to the novel's ending.

As a real, inhabited space that embodies the protagonists' marriage, Ferndean Manor expresses both indeterminacy and ambivalence. While the marriage forged there diverges from Victorian social norms and offers a critique of them, the uncertainty and indistinctness of the space suggest that Ferndean cannot truly serve as a timeless utopia. It remains a liminal, ambiguous site—one that mirrors the unresolved tensions at the heart of Jane and Rochester's union.

5. Conclusion

By applying Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia, the analysis of the three key spaces in *Jane Eyre* deepens our understanding of how spatial environments contribute to shaping the heroine's character and destiny. As an orphanage school, the Lowood Institution, though a marginalized space, offers Jane the opportunity to receive an education and to encounter early models of female independence. It lays the foundation for her later ability to remain true to herself and to resist injustice with courage. During the failed first marriage to Rochester, the recurring mirror imagery provides Jane with a means to reflect on her own situation, critically examine the nature of marriage, and ultimately reaffirm her commitment to independence. Ferndean Manor, which appears at the end of the novel, may be seen as Brontë's proposed solution for women's struggle within a patriarchal society. While it represents a possible path forward, we must also acknowledge that the limitations of the era render this vision both idealized and ambiguous, lacking in definitive clarity. In sum, the deepening and diversification of spatial analysis in *Jane Eyre* has greatly enriched readers' multilayered understanding of this literary classic. It also allows us to more fully appreciate Charlotte Brontë's profound concern and reflection on the fate and struggles of women in her own time over a century ago.

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