

Re-reading Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1847, *Jane Eyre*, has been one of the most widely read English novels. Charlotte Bronte's imagination transmutes the romantic and passionate story into an interesting tale with shades of Gothic elements. This paper proposes to highlight the romantic element brought about by the supernatural and the mysterious. The entire novel gives the reader an eerie feeling, such is the power and charm of the novel that it keeps the reader occupied and creates a strange and unforgettable atmosphere.

KEYWORDS

Jane Eyre; Supernatural and Gothic elements.

Introduction

Reading *Jane Eyre* once again, after years, opened up a new world before me. The first time I read it was a rare piece of Bronte's imagination reflecting the romance of Jane and Rochester and the portrayal of a spirited and intelligent woman to accept a dignified place in society. But of late, as I re-read the book my imagination was gradually drawn to the 'supernatural', the 'mysterious' and the 'gothic element' that pervades the novel.

A gothic novel is associated with elements of terror, mystery, supernatural, doom, death, haunted houses, hereditary diseases and so on. Gothic novels were becoming popular in England during the late 1700s and early 1800s. Their plots centred around mysterious and supernatural events are intended to create an eerie feeling in the reader. The gothic element in *Jane Eyre* enhances the already mysterious storyline by adding more twists and turns to the plot.

It is hard to forget the striking opening of *Jane Eyre* with its creation of cheerless November outdoors and a correspondingly wretched emotional climate for the unloved child Jane, taking refuge from a hostile world behind the curtain while consoling herself with Bewick's British Birds. This particular book provides the child with images of the storm, shipwreck and disaster, Arctic desolation and Alpine heights, death and mysterious evil – images which seem to express her own bewildered sense of what life is like, since they strongly correspond with her own state in the home of the Reeds, cruelly oppressed, both physically and mentally and above all suffering in her isolation from a passionate sense of injustice. She cannot of course explain this, but concludes: 'With Bewick on my knees, I was then happy: happy at least in my own way.'

The Gothic element

The story begins as Jane suffers life under Mrs. Reed who hates her and treats

her shabbily. The use of the 'supernatural' comes into play as ten-year-old Jane is locked in a room called the 'Red Room' for misbehaving. In this room, her Uncle Reed had died and as she knew this she came to believe that the light she saw floating across the wall was her dead uncle, who has come to avenge her ill-treatment. The terror the red room holds is not that Uncle Reed died there, but that to the child it is the permanent home of death – obviously, since it is blood-coloured and ghastly white, striking horror into the child's soul by that and by the always-drawn blinds, the bed standing like a tabernacle and the prominent white easy-chair, with a footstool before it like a pale throne of death. In addition, there is the chill, the ominous silence and the superstitious avoidance of the room by the maids. Jane's conscience intensifies the ominous atmosphere of the red room: 'all I said was wicked and perhaps I might be so.'

Jane's courage ebbs with the daylight, and the sense of being in disgrace turns into fear of being punished by supernatural elements. The first opportunity for emancipation from this family and custom comes with the introduction of Mr. Brocklehurst, the clergyman who brings a new kind of oppression, hell-fire and the Evangelical attitude to life and into the child's world. Jane arrives at his school, Lowood Institution as an outlaw from Gateshead:

'Rain, wind and darkness filled in the air and as she enters, the door in the wall locked behind her for nine years more.'

Jane has now to start all over again in a larger unit, a working community, specifically religious in that it is governed by the doctrines of Mr. Brocklehurst, whose creed she loathes and instinctively disbelieves.

Thornfield Manor

After years of schooling, Jane decides to leave and finds a situation as a governess at Thornfield Hall. The

architecture and location of Thornfield Hall help confirm the idea of a desolate setting. Thornfield Hall is located on an extensive area of land owned by Mr. Rochester. The majority of the events in the novel take place in Thornfield Manor – a huge gloomy mansion, with dark corridors and secret chambers. Such a setting gives an eerie feeling and allows the imagination to travel far and wide. The novel is sinister, yet surreal with images of mystery and secrecy. Whether it is the occult Grace Poole or the demoniac laugh – low, suppressed and deep uttered, there is a haze of mystery in *Jane Eyre*. There are in *Jane Eyre* such events that are Gothic in nature as when Bertha escapes from her room, comes down to Mr. Rochester's and sets fire to his bed in the dead of night. In another incident, Bertha (Mr. Rochester's wife) who has a hereditary disease that makes her insane attacks her own brother and takes out a chunk off his arm with her teeth. Here again, we find shades of a gothic novel – madness, hereditary problems, terror and mystery.

The chapter devoted to the day before Jane's wedding recaptures the heightened tone of the scene in the orchard. The majestic 'iron-garthed' chestnut tree, split by storms, is symbolic of the relationship between Jane and Rochester. In the 'Eden – like orchard' by the moonlight, free from the restraints of mundane life, Jane finds a lover, someone whom as she says, she can live 'a full and delightful life.' But even as she contemplates 'the paradise of union', darkness falls, the wind roars, the giant chestnut tree which is 'circled at the base by a seat' groans as the storm breaks and the newly declared lovers are drenched in rain. In the morning, the tree is found to have been struck by lightning and half of it split away. Visiting the blasted tree, she reflects on it in terms that prepare us for the coming disaster in her life. Even Mr. Rochester's state is forecast when after the fire he is struck, blind and maimed.

The entire chapter is a wonderful poetic sequence of ominous and pregnant experiences, particularly the first dream of being burdened with a little wailing child she cannot put down and the second dream that Thornfield is a ruin that crumbled under her.

The handling of Jane's flight from Thornfield after the symbolic storm over her, at the altar, is simply remarkable. She inevitably reverts to the condition of the insecure child deprived of love, so that in a 'trance-like dream' she imagines herself back at Gateshead in the 'red-room' where she suffered terror beyond endurance. There she sees the moon looking 'as though some word of doom were written on her disc' – and in obedience to the dream-vision, she exiles herself from Thornfield.

WORKS CITED

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Conclusion

Bronte uses many elements of Gothic literary tradition to create a sense of suspense and drama in the novel. She employs Gothic techniques which set the stage for the entire narrative. Although *Jane Eyre* is by no means a true Gothic novel, it embraces many features of Gothic literature. It transcends the boundaries of Gothic convention. We wander, thus, through the world of *Jane Eyre*, confronted at every step with living symbols, windswept images, meaningful similes and gigantic metaphors; we can hardly take a single step or make a single turn without confronting the omnipresence of the supernatural.