Phrenology and Autodiegetic Narration in *Jane Eyre*

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Introduction¹

Charlotte Brontë is famous for her 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*. This novel is the story of orphaned Jane's growth from dependence on her uncaring aunt and harsh school, to her career as a governess at the foreboding Thornfield Hall, to her love for her employer, Mr. Rochester. Perhaps the most renowned scene in *Jane Eyre* is the revelation that Mr. Rochester is already married to Bertha Mason, a supposedly-insane woman whom he has locked in the top floor of Thornfield. While Jane at first runs away from Mr. Rochester to her cousin, St. John, she eventually returns to find that Bertha has died in a fire that burnt down Thornfield. Jane returns to Mr. Rochester, who was badly hurt by the fire and has moved to the modest Ferndean Manor. The novel ends with Jane happily married to and caring for Mr. Rochester.

This paper examines how Charlotte Brontë's belief in phrenology influences the narration of *Jane Eyre*. By placing *Jane Eyre* within the historical context of the rise of phrenology, I explore the ways in which Brontë's phrenological representation of Jane's mind informs and parallels the autodiegetic narration of *Jane Eyre*. My analysis focuses on moments when Jane draws attention to the fact that she is a first-person narrator telling the story of her own past experiences. I argue that these moments are comparable to those when Jane's experiencing-self is segmented into phrenological faculties. Concomitantly, I trace how Jane's narration changes as she moves between the locations of Thornfield, St. John's house, and Ferndean. I suggest that the shifts in narration draw attention to these locations as metaphors for varying degrees of restriction on Jane's faculties. I conclude that Brontë uses her narration style to criticize phrenologists who promote an excessively restrictive control of the faculties. Brontë's

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presentation of this critique of phrenology through the new medium of the novel corroborates historian Kate Flint's description of Victorian reading as "an apparently simple way of practising social investigation."² *Jane Eyre* is an example of how novelists could use their art form to bring serious debates about social beliefs to the supposedly unintellectual masses of Victorian England.

Autodiegetic Narration in the Context of Phrenology and the Victorian Novel

Brontë's novel uses a form of narration called autodiegetic. Phillipe Lejeune, a scholar of literature and genre, describes autodiegetic narration as a narrative style in which the protagonist narrates a story that happened to them in the past.³ This first-person narration from the protagonist's future splits the protagonist into two identities: the one that is experiencing the past story and the one that is currently narrating the story.⁴ Throughout *Jane Eyre*, there is a distinction between Jane's narrating-self and experiencing-self.⁵ Jane's narrating-self often highlights this distinction between her two selves. She does this in three ways: she reminds the reader that the protagonist is only a product of her memory, she directly addresses the reader, and she provides information that her experiencing-self does not yet know.

Delia da Sousa Correa, a scholar of Victorian (1837-1901) literature, suggests that this "multiplicity of narrative voice... is augmented by the psychological fragmentation figured in the

² Kate Flint, "The Victorian Novel and its Readers," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

³ See note 15 in David Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a better understanding of the distinction between the narrating-self and the experiencing-self see Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, 8. To see how Herman's theory built on Philippe Lejeune's "The Autobiographical Pact," see note 15 in Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, 19. For a discussion on the terminology "narrator-Jane," see Charlotte Fiehn, "The Two Janes: Jane Eyre and the Narrative Problem in Chapter 23." *Brontë Studies* 41, no. 4 (2016), 312-321, doi:10.1080/14748932.2016.1222698. I use "narrator-Jane" interchangeably with the term "Jane's narrating-self."

text.”⁶ I use literary scholar Dorrit Cohn’s formalist narrative theory of direct and indirect speech — that is, speech that is represented with or without quotation marks — to show how Brontë creates divisions within experiencing-Jane’s mind.⁷ The divisions of Jane’s mind are a reflection of the nineteenth-century belief in phrenology. Phrenologists argued that each “individual... [is] made up of perpetually warring physical forces” which are housed in parts of the brain called faculties.⁸ T. M. Parssinen, a historian who has published multiple papers about Victorian scientific beliefs, describes how there were multiple phrenological societies dedicated to the idea that the strength of each of these faculties could be determined based on the skull’s shape.⁹ For example, if there was a protrusion over an individual’s “veneration” faculty, that faculty must be highly-developed, so the person would have a greater capacity for veneration, and so might be exceedingly religious.¹⁰ By framing people’s personalities as a result of physical parts of the brain, Franz Joseph Gall, the founder of phrenology, inspired his followers to think of their psychology as a matter of anatomy rather than of philosophy.¹¹ Such an anatomical basis made phrenology seem scientifically credible to the Victorians.¹²

Phrenologists promoted self-control of these faculties.¹³ Now that humans were aware of how their brains were split into faculties, they believed that they had the responsibility to cultivate their intellectual faculties and control their more brutish instincts.¹⁴ In *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s

⁶ Delia da Sousa Correa, “Jane Eyre: Inside and Out,” in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Realisms*, ed. Delia da Sousa Correa (London: Routledge, 2000), 125.

⁷ For example, “‘I love you,’ she said” is direct speech, while “she said that she loves me” is indirect speech. See note 10 in Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, 258.

⁸ Da Sousa Correa, “Jane Eyre: Inside and Out,” 124.

⁹ T.M. Parssinen, “Popular Science and Society: The Phrenology Movement in Early Victorian Britain,” *Journal of Social History* 8, no. 1 (1974), 2. www.jstor.org/stable/3786523.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Da Sousa Correa, “Jane Eyre: Inside and Out,” 12.

¹⁴ Parssinen, “Popular Science and Society,” 5.

two suitors, St. John and Mr. Rochester, represent opposite extremes of self-control. St. John wants Jane to apply herself to duty regardless of her natural inclination. Mr. Rochester urges her to accept her nature without trying to control it. Jane's choice to marry Mr. Rochester suggests that *Jane Eyre* is a critique of people like St. John who focus on restraining their faculties. Such a criticism of phrenology would have been potentially divisive, since many eminent Victorians — including the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, who called anti-phrenologists “ungodly”— wholeheartedly supported phrenology.¹⁵ I suggest that Brontë's autodiegetic narration draws attention to these two suitors — and the locations where Jane meets them — as metaphors for varying degrees of restriction on Jane's faculties. Through an application of nineteenth-century psychological studies, I conclude that Brontë uses her narration style to criticize phrenologists who promote an excessively restrictive control of the faculties.

While it is important to contextualize *Jane Eyre* in the historical moment of the rise of phrenology, it is equally important to read *Jane Eyre* in the context of the rise of the novel. Kate Flint, a Victorian scholar and literary historian, describes reading during the Victorian era as “an apparently simple way of practising social investigation.”¹⁶ So, perhaps Brontë's readers would have been prepared to look for social commentary in her prose. Yet, many Victorians saw novels as cheap entertainment made for the masses and not deserving of intellectual consideration.¹⁷ “[R]eading fiction was associated, above all, with the domestic environment,” which was separate from the public world of commerce and intellectualism.¹⁸ By criticizing phrenology

¹⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹⁶ Flint, “The Victorian Novel and its Readers,” 18.

¹⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁸ Ibid, 24.

through the medium of a novel, Brontë brought serious social criticism into the homes of a wide audience.

Brontë's Use of Autodiegetic Narration

For Victorian readers, fictional “characters comprised a kind of extended family.”¹⁹ *Jane Eyre*, therefore, would have fostered an intimate connection between readers and the eponymous heroine. Victorian readers might have felt especially close to Jane Eyre, as Jane is both the protagonist whom the reader can see as “extended family” and the narrator who is telling the story to the reader.²⁰ But, narrator-Jane often reminds her reader that the protagonist is a product of her memory. These reminders emphasize the distinction between Jane’s narrating-self and experiencing-self. Charlotte Fiehn, an expert on the nineteenth-century British novel, describes Jane’s narrating-self as a “reader or critic” who shapes her narration based on her knowledge of the narrative’s conclusion.²¹ I agree with Fiehn that narrator-Jane is remembering and interpreting the past events of her life. However, I disagree with the comparison to readers and critics. A reader or a critic is one who stands at some objective distance from the narrative, whereas narrator-Jane is emotionally affected by what she knows. For example, narrator-Jane reflects on the moment when her experiencing-self attempts to trade a glove for half of a bread cake. She laments, “[r]eader, it is not pleasant to dwell on these details. Some say there is enjoyment in looking back to painful experience past; but at this day I can scarcely bear to review the times to which I allude.”²² This confession, that she is scarcely able to review her story, conveys the emotions that elsewhere inspire her to “condense” the narration of certain

¹⁹ Ibid, 28.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Fiehn, “The Two Janes,” 318.

²² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin English Library, 2012), 395.

events simply because she is “sick of the subject.”²³ Jane’s inability to narrate from a critical distance results in the intermingling of the time in which she narrates the event and the time in which she experiences the event. When Mr. Rochester starts to look over Jane’s paintings, narrator-Jane says, “[w]hile he is occupied, I will tell you, reader, what [the paintings] are.”²⁴ Narrator-Jane’s description of her paintings occurs at the same time as Mr. Rochester inspects them. This conflation of narrator-Jane and the story accentuates the fact that Jane fulfils a double role. She is both the remembered protagonist and the narrator who is reflecting on her past.

Narrator-Jane’s presence in the narrative is even more blatant whenever she addresses the reader. While experiencing-Jane struggles to ignore her love for Mr. Rochester, narrator-Jane insists that “the reader knows [she] had wrought hard to extirpate from [her] soul the germs of love.”²⁵ Jane turns to the reader for reassurance that somebody is witnessing her struggles, once again forging an almost familial trust between the reader and narrator-Jane.²⁶ Similarly, after St. John accuses Jane of breaking her promise to go to India, the narrator, does not immediately report her response. Instead, she appeals to her audience: “I never had, as the reader knows, either given any formal promise or entered into any engagement.”²⁷ The reader exists only in the narrator’s present. But narrator-Jane uses the reader’s confidence to bolster her experiencing-self. Experiencing-Jane is able to speak to St. John frankly because her narrating-self knows that the reader believes her. Narrator-Jane’s addresses to the reader simultaneously fulfill the novel’s identity as an autobiography. At the end of the novel, Jane quizzes her audience. She asks, “reader, do you think I feared [Mr. Rochester] in his blind ferocity? — if you do, you little know

²³ Ibid, 396.

²⁴ Ibid, 147.

²⁵ Ibid, 207.

²⁶ Flint, “The Victorian Novel and its Readers,” 28.

²⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 500.

me.”²⁸ Jane’s narrating-self expects the reader to understand her personality. The novel is not a mere narration of her memories. Rather, it is a series of past moments that show the reader how narrator-Jane became herself and encourage the reader to care for Jane as a member of “a kind of extended family.”²⁹

Brontë also emphasizes narrator-Jane’s presence in the narrative and closeness to the reader by providing information that Jane’s experiencing-self has not yet learned or considered. At the beginning of the novel, narrator-Jane is disconnected from her childhood self. She narrates events before she explains the context to her reader. For example, ten-year-old Jane accuses her cousin John Reed that he is “like the Roman emperors!”³⁰ After narrating the action of yelling at her cousin, narrator-Jane contextualizes it with the fact that “[she] had read Goldsmith’s ‘History of Rome,’ and ... [she] had drawn parallels in silence, which [she] never thought thus to have declared aloud.”³¹ It is as if, as an afterthought, Jane adds this explanation to make sure that her reader will understand why her younger self was thinking about Roman emperors. This distance between Jane’s two selves becomes smaller as experiencing-Jane approaches narrator-Jane’s present. When Jane first hears St. John’s sisters, Diana and Mary, speaking German, she cannot distinguish the language. Robyn Warhol, a literary scholar known for her work on feminist narrative theory, points out that narrator-Jane “is under no narrative obligation ... to clear up the mystery while it is in progress.”³² Yet, Jane still reports: “[a]t a later day, I knew the language and the book; therefore, I will here quote the line: though, when I first heard it, it was only like a

²⁸ Ibid, 523.

²⁹ Flint, “The Victorian Novel and its Readers,” 28.

³⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 6.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Robyn R. Warhol, “Double Gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no. 4 (1996), 862. doi:10.2307/450979.

stroke on sounding brass to me — conveying no meaning.”³³ Jane’s narrating-self invites the reader to be immediately aware of the “meaning” that she only understood afterwards.

Brontë’s use of autodiegetic narration corroborates Flint’s argument that Victorian novels stimulated an almost-familial relationship between characters in novels and their novels.³⁴ Narrator-Jane consistently addresses the reader as if they are a trusted person to whom she can turn for comfort and with whom she wants to share information that she is not narratively required to give. This closeness between Jane and the reader may have encouraged Victorian readers to be more open to the criticism of phrenology that Brontë presents through the beloved character.

Phrenology in *Jane Eyre*

So far, I have considered the distinction between narrating-Jane and experiencing-Jane. I have shown how Brontë uses three main strategies to emphasize this separation. She represents narrator-Jane thinking of her experiencing-self as a memory, addressing the reader, and reporting information that her experiencing-self does not know. All three of these strategies also help the reader to know Jane’s characterization better, which corroborates Flint’s point that many Victorian readers felt so close to fictional characters that the characters became “a kind of extended family” for readers.³⁵ Now, I will discuss how this narrative form, that segments narrating-Jane and experiencing-Jane, is paralleled by the phrenological sectioning of experiencing-Jane’s mind.

³³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 400.

³⁴ Flint, “The Victorian Novel and its Readers,” 28.

³⁵ Ibid.

Sally Shuttleworth, a specialist in Victorian literature, points out that phrenology “grounded man’s sense of identity in the experience of internal division.”³⁶ After all, phrenology urged people to see their brains as split into faculties and to judge these faculties one-by-one as either intellectual or brutish.³⁷ This internal division is especially evident in Jane’s experiencing-self while she believes that Mr. Rochester will marry the wealthy Blanche Ingram. Jane asserts “[t]hat a greater fool than Jane Eyre had never breathed the breath of life.”³⁸ Brontë’s use of indirect discourse places Jane’s thoughts within the narration. So, it is unclear if these words are from narrating-Jane or experiencing-Jane. This self-abuse might be the narrator’s paraphrase of her experiencing-self’s emotions. However, narrator-Jane goes on to report “[y]ou,’ I said, ‘a favourite with Mr. Rochester?’”³⁹ This statement includes quotation marks to clearly mark the statement as experiencing-Jane’s thoughts. This direct discourse emphasizes the fact that experiencing-Jane is speaking to herself as if she is a separate entity. Jane’s experiencing-self identifies with the chastiser, saying, “[l]isten, then, Jane Eyre,” as if she is not Jane Eyre, as if Jane Eyre is an unintellectual faculty in her mind that must be quenched.⁴⁰ In contrast, once Jane has left Mr. Rochester and is beginning “once more to know [her]self,” she identifies with the admonished Jane Eyre.⁴¹ Jane describes “the monitor” urging her to go to the inn before returning to Thornfield.⁴² The monitor is still in Jane’s mind, but it is separate from her identity as Jane Eyre. Her identity with her name still needs guidance, but it is not inherently bad like the animalistic faculties of the mind. This division of experiencing-Jane’s mind, in which one part

³⁶ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.

³⁷ Parssinen, “Popular Science and Society,” 5.

³⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 190.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 406.

⁴² Ibid, 512.

lambastes the other, reaffirms Shuttleworth's argument that phrenology dealt with ideas of internal division.⁴³

However, Jason Y. Hall, who studied nineteenth-century literature, points out that phrenologists believed that "struggling is important... not only within the individual, but also between the individual and the outer world."⁴⁴ This external struggle is apparent at the beginning of Brontë's novel, when Jane is expected to restrain herself mentally and physically. Jane describes how, at ten years old, "[she] attached [her]self to [her] seat by [her] hands" in the Red Room of her abusive aunt's house.⁴⁵ She can physically restrain her own body. This parallels the phrenological expectation that she controls her own mind.

Brontë presents a critique of this aspect of phrenology. As experiencing-Jane approaches her narrating-self's present, she starts to struggle against the internal and external forces that attempt to control her. Just after she starts her job at Thornfield Hall, she goes on a walk and ends up helping Mr. Rochester. Not realizing that he is the master of Thornfield, Jane imagines that returning to the Hall without him will force her "to slip again over [her] faculties the viewless fetters of a uniform."⁴⁶ Jane worries that a life which represses her natural faculties will render them blind and useless. Correa argues that Jane's cousin and alternate suitor, St. John, functions as another embodiment of repressed natural faculties.⁴⁷ So, it is no surprise that the image of fetters recurs repeatedly while St. John tries to convince Jane to go to India. Jane describes St. John's kiss as "a seal affixed to [her] fetters."⁴⁸ Similarly, she tells him: "Oh, I wish

⁴³ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 62.

⁴⁴ Jason Y. Hall, "Gall's Phrenology: A Romantic Psychology," *Studies in Romanticism* 16, no. 3 (1977), 316. doi:10.2307/25600086.

⁴⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 136-137.

⁴⁷ Da Sousa Correa, "Jane Eyre: Inside and Out," 121.

⁴⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 481.

I could make you see how much my mind is at this moment like a rayless dungeon, with one shrinking fear fettered in its depth.”⁴⁹ The narrator places the fetters in the figurative space of experiencing-Jane’s mind, highlighting the phrenological implications of the image. Narrator-Jane also describes St. John speaking “almost like an automaton,” an emotionless machine that can only mechanically imitate humans.⁵⁰ This simile contrasts with experiencing-Jane’s accusation of Mr. Rochester, where she asks, “[d]o you think I am an automaton? — a machine without feelings? ... Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?”⁵¹ Jane makes it clear that she is more than a set of faculties that need to be controlled. St. John represents a degree of self-control which only sees Jane as a phrenological specimen.

Being with Mr. Rochester at Ferndean Manor is the happy medium between too much and too little control of Jane’s phrenological faculties. Mr. Rochester admits that his “principles were never trained ... they may have grown a little awry for want of attention.”⁵² Similarly, Shuttleworth suggests that “Thornfield gives free reign to nature, but doesn’t try to make it humanity.”⁵³ Jane does not desire St. John’s extreme self-restraint. But she does not want the extreme freedom of Thornfield either. In comparison, Ferndean is surrounded by nature but untouched by the lack of principle which Thornfield represents. Shuttleworth also describes Ferndean as a place where “[t]he divisions of self and other seem to break down, and inner and outer ... meld into one.”⁵⁴ Once she has married Mr. Rochester, Jane is “ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” and, “to talk to each other is but a more animated and an

⁴⁹ Ibid, 487.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 441.

⁵¹ Ibid, 303.

⁵² Ibid, 315.

⁵³ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 160.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 171.

audible thinking.”⁵⁵ Jane’s internal and external struggles become one through marriage. She is then able to balance between St. John’s self-restraint and Thornfield’s lack of principle. Excessive self-restraint threatened to repress experiencing-Jane’s nature. Narrator-Jane’s relationship with her husband and home enables her to overcome this oppression without losing her principles or giving in to her more brutish faculties. By the end of the novel, when experiencing-Jane catches up the narrator-Jane, Jane has rejected the character St. John, who would have her focus on stifling some of her natural faculties. The fact that Brontë presents this story in a novel might have been a strategy to make its inherent critique — of phrenologists’ penchant, like St. John, for controlling certain faculties — more palatable to her Victorian readers. In this medium, Brontë’s readers would have been used to caring about protagonists like Jane as if they were family members.⁵⁶ So, they would have celebrated Jane’s decision to leave St. John, and, by extension, to reject anybody who would have insisted on her excessively controlling her natural faculties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jane’s narrating-self balances between controlling and accepting her natural, phrenological faculties. Once she is married to Mr. Rochester at Ferndean, Jane no longer faces St. John’s dutiful self-control. But she is also free from the unprincipled freedom of Thornfield Hall. The phrenological sectioning of experiencing-Jane’s mind accentuates the distinction between Jane’s experiencing- and narrating-self. Narrator-Jane highlights the novel’s dual narrative voice in three ways: she addresses the reader, she reports information that her experiencing-self does not know, and she reminds the reader that the protagonist is a product of

⁵⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 546.

⁵⁶ Flint, “The Victorian Novel and its Readers,” 28.

her memory. Brontë consistently emphasizes the distinctions between and within Jane's two selves. She uses Jane's interactions with people and places to represent the existence of phrenological faculties while criticizing phrenologists' promotion of excessive self-control. Her novel ultimately suggests that such restraint can render the mind's faculties useless. Brontë's argument would have been all the more convincing to her contemporary readers, who were used to seeing novel characters as "a kind of extended family."⁵⁷ Thus, they would have been especially invested in seeing how Jane would escape the stifling control that St. John tries to hold over her.

This paper has shown how one nineteenth-century woman writer thought about and critiqued phrenology through the medium of novels. While many prominent Victorians unquestioningly believed in phrenology, Charlotte Brontë used *Jane Eyre* to represent how a nineteenth-century woman can live happily without phrenology's restricting tenets of self-control.⁵⁸ Future scholarship could further investigate Brontë's treatment of phrenology or use this project as a structure for exploring how other nineteenth-century novelists and women writers spurred Victorian novel-readers to reflect on phrenology and its precepts.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Parssinen, "Popular Science and Society," 1.

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