

Jane Eyre and The Atmoscene: Early Expressions of Ecofeminism in Literature

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Abstract

This essay addresses the connection in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* between the protagonist and the atmosphere. Specifically, I address the issue of why Brontë associates the atmosphere with womanhood in the novel. My argument is that Brontë's novel offers an early example of an ecofeminist text or a "proto-ecofeminist text" as I refer to it within the essay. This essay explains how ecofeminism connects the exploitation of the environment with the degradation of womanhood and utilizes Justine Pizzo's article "Atmospheric Exceptionalism in *Jane Eyre*" to provide evidence. I use Jason Moore's work on *oikeios* to show how *Jane Eyre* rejects dualism by finding conceptual means of reconnecting humanity with nature. Elaine Freedgood's work on colonial exploitation of resources shows how Jane's ecofeminism does not extend to the colonial other and how it problematizes the text as ecofeminist in nature. Finally, I analyze Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Four Theses," with a focus on the second and third theses, and how they help illuminate Jane's own inner struggles with atmospheric influence and passivity in the face of colonial resource extraction. Ultimately this paper concludes that despite Jane's dilemmas, her womanhood and consciousness of connection to nature preserve her status as a proto-ecofeminist figure.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*, Ecofeminism, Charlotte Brontë, Ecocriticism

Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece *Jane Eyre* is widely considered to be a classic proto-feminist novel. Jane's struggle to maintain her autonomy and independence as a woman are challenged in her formative years of education and in the form of

her later suitors Edward Fairfax Rochester and St. John Rivers. However, there remain some important overlooked themes within the novel as well. Outwardly *Jane Eyre* does not deal with ecological concerns, but the effect of nature bears an important presence on the characters within the novel, which becomes especially evident in the power of the atmosphere and its impact upon Jane as the protagonist. Justine Pizzo's "Atmospheric Exceptionalism in *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë's Weather Wisdom", uses the term "atmoscene" to describe "an epoch that foregrounds the rise of meteorology as a way of apprehending the indelible imprint of air on literary representations of the human" (97). Pizzo's focus on the impact of atmosphere and air upon humans, and the empirical and rational connection of womanhood with the environment, provides us with an example of an early and undeveloped ecofeminism. Through analysis of Brontë's novel, Pizzo's article, Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses", and other selected critical texts, I will demonstrate that the deep connection of womanhood with the environment in *Jane Eyre* is emblematic of a proto-ecofeminism.

Before exploring *Jane Eyre* as an early example of an ecofeminist text or "proto-ecofeminist" text, it is important to understand exactly what ecofeminism is. Outwardly the term simply means the interlinking of feminism with ecology. More specifically ecofeminism is "a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (Mellor 1). Ecofeminism as a movement arose in the mid-1970s, so *Jane Eyre* cannot be considered ecofeminist; rather, we can regard the novel as a progenitor in terms of the connection of womanhood with ecology. Brontë does not directly deal with issues such as the exploitation of natural resources in her novel; however, there are many references within the novel addressing resource exploitation within the British Empire. Before looking at how Brontë addresses resource exploitation, we shall explore how Jane and the female body within the novel were affected by the atmosphere.

Jane's sensitivity towards the air around her is made apparent at the beginning of the novel, with her description of the bitter cold during her childhood at Gateshead Hall. Jane describes how "the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question" (Brontë 7). Jane has a deep consciousness of the presence of atmosphere in the Northern English climate into which she was born and raised. Jane's awareness of atmosphere saturates her sensory feelings and

her literary readings of Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*, where she describes scenery of "ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast" (8). Throughout the novel, Jane's hypersensitivity to the atmosphere serves as a form of foreshadowing or prediction of events to come, one of the most prominent examples being Jane's visions of Bertha Mason's eventual destruction of Thornfield Hall. Jane describes a foreboding scene as "On sleeping I continued in dreams the idea of a dark and gusty night...I dreamt...that Thornfield Hall was a dreary ruin" (264).

Lunar impacts upon the atmosphere also affect Jane and carry with them an image of the Moon as a maternal figure. When making the decision to leave Thornfield Hall, after discovering Mr. Rochester's terrible secret of keeping Bertha Mason locked away, Jane hears an almost supernatural voice call her. Jane notices "a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure...It spoke to my spirit: 'My daughter, flee temptation!' 'Mother, I will'" (298).

Jane's interplay with this supernatural spirit seems to argue a supernatural nature to Jane's sensitivity to the atmosphere. As Pizzo explains, however, this is not the case. For Pizzo, Jane's sensitivity to weather should not be analyzed through the supernatural lens, but should be acknowledged through the climatological science of the Victorian Era, which seemed to confirm ideas that women were perhaps more sensitive to weather. Lunarism, or the idea that cycles of the moon controlled atmospheric tides as much as they did ocean currents, was not a fully established concept within early meteorology. Pizzo argues that regardless of the debate over the veracity of lunarism, "Jane Eyre's prophetic responses to the air and her psychic affinity with lunar events bespeak a sophisticated capacity for rational thought and embodied knowledge that Victorian climate science implicitly upheld." (Pizzo 86) Rather than uphold the traditional supernatural alignment of womanhood with nature, "the novel engages" according to Pizzo, "with contemporary popular discourse, scientific study, and medical belief to represent the female body's affirmative sensual alliance with the surrounding air and this alliance's connection to a masterful authorial power." (87) Pizzo supports her argument with the evidence of vigorous debate on various superstitions and the analysis of whether there was empirical scientific validity to them during the Victorian Era. Walter L. Browne, a natural philosopher, best explains the attitude of the period towards ideas such as

lunarism: “[I]f the moon’s influence be a superstition or a fallacy, then let it stand its chance with other revived superstitions and fallacies, and let it be examined in the light of modern science” (91). Ultimately meteorologists did not come to a conclusive answer on the merits or demerits of the lunarist hypothesis, but came to agreement on one aspect: meteorologist William Bayley Webster’s proposal that lunar influence “positively bespeaks recurring monthly periods” (91). Therefore, *Jane Eyre*’s atmospheric phenomena, however seemingly supernatural, are representative of scientific consensus. Thus, this puts Jane’s own womanhood in biological alignment with the atmosphere, and creates a connection between the feminine and the environment.

The alignment between womanhood and the environment is especially fascinating considering the common Victorian division of humanity and nature. Brontë, by aligning Jane’s womanhood with the environment, bridges the wide gap between nature and humanity. This unification between human and nature is interesting in the context of what Jason Moore refers to as the *oikeios*. This term used by Greek philosopher Theophrastus describes “the relationship between a plant species and the environment” (Moore 2). Moore analyzes the term *oikeios* in the context of capitalist world-ecology or, as he describes it, the “patterned history of power, capital, and nature, dialectically joined.” (Moore 8) Moore used the *oikeios* as a means by which a bridge can be established between humanity and nature. Moore explains his use of the *oikeios* as such: “Rather than presume humanity’s separation, in the recent or distant past, the *oikeios* presumes that humanity has always been unified with the rest of nature in a flow of flows. What changes are the ways in which specific aspects of humanity, such as civilizations, ‘fit’ within nature” (12). Moore’s argument suggests a parallel to Brontë’s depiction of Jane’s unity with nature in the novel. Both Brontë and Moore posit that humanity has never truly been removed from nature by the process of industrialization. Moore tries to dispel the dualities of the capitalist world-ecology through his analysis of dialectics. Brontë uses Jane’s femininity and her connectivity to the atmosphere to show womanhood’s inherent and timeless connection to nature. Both cases subvert the anthropocentric argument that humanity is somehow disconnected from the natural world and that there is a fixed divide between humans and the natural world. Now we shall return to the previous connection between the novel and resource exploitation.

Resource exploitation within the novel specifically occurs within the context of two extractions. Those extractions are of trees for making mahogany furniture and the extraction of human labour through the use of African slaves in the Caribbean colonies. Elaine Freedgood has shown how references to mahogany furniture in the novel provide evidence of extraction of natural resources. Mahogany in the Victorian-era was a highly-polished form of furniture and served as a marker of the extravagance and wealth of Britain's upper classes. While at Gateshead Hall, Jane describes the luxuriousness of the furnishings of "the red room". She states: "A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep red damask, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre...the chairs were of darkly polished old mahogany" (Brontë 13). Freedgood comments that the "old mahogany" described by Brontë was "in the early decades of the nineteenth century, furniture made in the age of mahogany, 1720-1760, when this wood, and furniture made from it, was still being imported in large quantities from those islands." (Freedgood 32) "Those" islands were of course Madeira and the Caribbean, home to large slave plantations, which relied on deforestation and exploitation of nature to make a profit. Mr. Rochester's wealth primarily comes from trade in both Madeira and Jamaica. Freedgood points out that Jane's world is abundantly decorated with the proceeds of exploitation attached to Atlantic trade. Freedgood writes of Madeira and Jamaica that they were both "deforested of mahogany and planted with the cash crops that allow Jane Eyre to furnish her world with souvenirs, in the form of mahogany furniture, of the original material source of her wealth" (35).

Jane's life of luxury takes benefit of another form of extraction and exploitation, that of slavery. African chattel slaves, treated as property and a resource to be used by their white masters, tilled colonial cash crops, supplying a labour force that ultimately sustains Jane's life style. Brontë, however, creates distance between native Britons such as Rochester and Jane, and members of the Caribbean planter class such as Bertha and her brother Richard. Richard is depicted as sick and ineffectual, suggesting the negative feelings British people felt toward "creoles" from the colonies, despite that "those critical souls had not themselves earned their own wealth on a particularly level playing field" (Freedgood 42). Jane's own complicity in this exploitation, however indirectly, possibly is a means by which Brontë can hint at the failure of Victorian consciousness of exploitation outside of England. These displays of distancing by

Jane and Rochester are representative of the fact that many Britons often privileged their own ecological narratives before those of the colonized other in places such as the Caribbean. Thus, Brontë paints a realistic portrait of British attitudes toward colonial resource exploitation, without necessarily condoning those attitudes and thus not undermining the proto-ecofeminist narrative. Now we shall return to the topic of the atmocene and how it can be compared to the ecological idea of the Anthropocene, which in turn helps us understand *Jane Eyre's* ties to ecofeminism.

Dipesh Chakrabarty in his “Four Theses” essay poses as his second thesis: “The Idea of the Anthropocene, the New Geological Epoch When Humans Exist as a Geological Force, Severely Qualifies Humanist Histories of Modernity/Globalization” (Chakrabarty 207). Chakrabarty describes how as humanity’s impact upon the climate becomes greater; a globalized approach to sustainability must be tackled to address the issue. In addition, he asserts the need for “Enlightenment (that is, reason) even more than in the past” (211). Chakrabarty further argues that politics is often divorced from reason and that the idea of freedom could be sacrificed under the cloud of the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty points to Mark Maslin’s position that global warming “requires nations and regions to plan for the next 50 years, something that most societies are unable to do because of the very short-term nature of politics.” (212) This idea of the cloud of the Anthropocene reminds me of the cloud of the Atmocene which hangs over Jane throughout the novel. Just as environmental shifts motivate Jane to change even against her deepest desires, such as her decision to leave Rochester after she learns of his secret for the sake of her own independence, the Anthropocene may cause human freedom and choice to be sacrificed for the greater good of humanity’s existence. While the stakes are not as obvious in *Jane Eyre* as they are in our current context of global warming, the clash of politics and ecology remains apparent. Jane’s own proto-ecofeminism motivates her to ignore her own desires to maintain her self-determination as woman. In our present struggle to maintain a sustainable world, environmental concerns motivate some to call for restrictions on human freedom. The battle between ecology and free will in the twenty-first century is highly comparable to Jane’s personal battles over the course of the novel.

Chakrabarty’s third thesis returns to points I made in my earlier discussion of Elaine Freedgood’s analysis of *Jane Eyre*, and reconsiders them in our present-day context. Chakrabarty’s third thesis is titled: “The Geological Hypothesis

Regarding the Anthropocene Requires Us to Put Global Histories of Capital in Conversation with the Species History of Humans” (212). Chakrabarty analyzes the “species” concept, specifically human identity from the perspective of “species” life. Chakrabarty explains this humanistic outlook by quoting Edward Wilson: “Humanity has consumed or transformed enough of Earth’s irreplaceable resources to be in better shape than ever before. We are smart enough and now, one hopes, well informed enough to achieve self-understanding as a unified species....We will be wise to look on ourselves as a species.” (215) Thinking in terms of species history, Chakrabarty acknowledges, is problematized by “the story of capital, the contingent history of our falling into the Anthropocene, cannot be denied by recourse to the idea of species, for the Anthropocene would not have been possible, even as a theory, without the history of industrialization.” (219) Chakrabarty concedes that the history of western industrialization, has led to the catastrophe of global climate change. But he also insists that we recognize that this human tragedy is globally shared and does not discern between West and East. Freedgood’s arguments about Jane’s complicity (in her fortuitous inheritance at the novel’s conclusion) with the colonial enterprise which caused climactic change in the Caribbean is similar to Chakrabarty’s call to stop ignoring the past histories of capitalism, colonialism, and industrialization. However, Chakrabarty would ultimately argue that despite Jane being more complicit, arguably she is still fundamentally affected by the tragedy of climate change, which she registers in a heightened awareness of species belonging. Thus, regardless of her ignorance, her role as a proto-ecofeminist cannot be negated. Jane’s indirect contribution to the anthropocentric problem at hand cannot be ignored, but her agency leans on the side of proto-ecofeminism and that reading is not negated by the resource exploitation under her nose. Jane’s proto-ecofeminism, therefore, cannot be tossed aside, due to this oversight or lack of purity as a passive agent doing nothing to halt colonial resource exploitation.

Reading *Jane Eyre* as a proto-ecofeminist text adds a unique perspective highly relevant to our own era. As long as human beings are a geological force on our planet, concerns about the environment will force us to restrict our own freedom in the path towards sustainability. Just as Jane finds the forces of nature pushing her down roads which diverge with the desires of her heart, our own freedom may have to be restricted if we wish to save our species and the planet on which we live. The atmosphere as presented in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, serves as a

reminder that we are always beholden to nature, despite our attempts to control it. Analyzing the novel from an ecofeminist view makes this abundantly apparent and relevant in our own understanding of our path towards a sustainable future.

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