Humans as Geological Forces of Nature: How *Jane Eyre* Establishes a Common Ground between the Natural and Social

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Abstract

This essay applies ecocriticism to Charlotte Bronte's presentation of landscape and society in Jane Eyre in order to address Victorian society's attempt to use the concept of nature as a means of naturalizing class and gender hierarchies and thus impose strict social rules and standards. Jane's interactions with nature and society serve to deconstruct the binary that opposes humans and natural environments. In so doing, the novel represents the ways in which Victorians manipulate nature to help make social structures appear natural, while simultaneously socializing and altering their natural environments in the process. Jane's collapsing of the human-made and the natural allows her to embrace her naturalized social subordination through her physical appearance and, ironically, achieve a degree of autonomy. While Jane's meditations upon her external environments offer romanticized interpretations of natural and social realms, Jane Eyre's underlying ecological awareness manifests throughout Jane's story and functions democratically to level social differences.

Keywords: Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, Nature, Society, Critique of Capitalism

The title of Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* instantly reminds readers of the abundance of nature and the inescapable air which perpetually surrounds us as inhabitants of the natural world. Numerous scholars have studied the novel's natural landscapes and Jane's consistently intimate relationship with her

environment. While Jane's thoughts and feelings seem to manifest most visibly in nature, there remains a natural standard implemented by the social world in which Jane desperately longs to be included. The novel suggests that the natural world is fixed and uncontrollable, while Victorian society is strict, sharp, and human-created. This essay will explore how Brontë deconstructs the nature-society binary in order to reveal the ways in which humans have become geological forces of nature – having the capacity to transform, and even destroy, our own conditions of existence. The Victorian manipulation of the natural world altered social environments by naturalizing them, resulting in a social model that appears timeless, ahistorical, and unchangeable. However, Jane recognizes the differences between the human world and the natural world and frequently resists the naturalized hierarchies of her society. While the natural world functions as an unchangeable and indefinite universe, Jane arguably obtains a sense of geological agency through her physical appearance in a society over which she otherwise has no control. As such, Jane romanticizes various aspects of nature in her external environment, which suggests the idea that just as the social world contains elements of nature, the natural world also contains elements of the social. Through Jane, Brontë successfully reconciles social realism with Romanticism, representing the transformative power of the human imagination through an exemplary individual's narrative that blends both mimetic truth and socially responsible fiction.

In accordance with the Romantic mode, which privileges the natural world, Brontë consistently depicts Jane's external environment as a vibrant and permanent presence, rich with inescapable emotion. In fact, upon initial arrival at Thornfield, Jane immediately gazes upon the lavish, extravagant chamber which she occupies as governess and describes the glorious location's ability to excite her: "I thought that a fairer era of life was beginning for me" (Brontë 95). She calls the chamber a "bright little place" and recognizes the remarkable ways in which the sun shines "in between the gay blue chintz window curtains" (95). The natural sunlight heightens the aesthetic quality of the human-made chamber, improving both Jane's mood and the appearance of the social world. Similarly, the sun shining through the window suggests that Jane's natural environment enhances her new social environment at Thornfield, despite the fact that the luxurious chamber itself represents a higher class of society to which she does not belong. Jane understands the ways in which social environments are structured according to

class status, noticing how the "papered walls" and "carpeted floor" of Thornfield are "so unlike the bare planks and stained plaster at Lowood" (95). Both dwellings are human-made and derived from extracted natural resources to represent a naturalized social environment. This comparison of Thornfield to Lowood demonstrates the naturalized hierarchy that Victorian society establishes: while Thornfield's high-quality environment is reserved for the rich upper class, the low standard of living at Lowood is associated with the poor and lower class. When Jane recognizes the stark differences between the two opposing social environments, she notes that her "spirits rose at the view" (95) of her new dwelling. Although Jane is aware of Thornfield's association with the upper class, she attempts to free herself from the confinements of her society's hierarchy. In order to do so, she looks to the natural world to find peace and freedom from Victorian social standards.

Since Jane is deeply affected by her environment, she takes comfort in the appearance of natural landscapes at Thornfield, and longs to connect with nature by looking pleasant in response. When she states, "I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit" (95), Jane demonstrates her need to conform to both the natural and societal standards of beauty. By adhering to a respectable standard of appearance, Jane conforms to the naturalized social hierarchies imposed on her, but she does so in order to be closer to a nature which she actually produces in her own image, rather than submitting to the human-made rules of society. In fact, Jennifer Fuller's "Seeking Wild Eyre: Victorian Attitudes Towards Landscape and the Environment in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*" suggests that Jane's conformity to the external environment through her appearance enables the young woman to bridge the gap between the natural and human worlds. To explain further, Fuller adds that "[w]hile the novel does portray the struggle for a female to escape the confines of Victorian society, it also illuminates the struggle to find a harmonious balance within the 'wildness of nature'" (163). With this statement in mind, it is possible to see that Jane also expresses power over nature because she cannot exercise her power elsewhere. For example, Jane finds freedom beneath "the warm and comforting 'embrace' of the hills that enclose the property, while the landscape itself "bespeaks order, tranquility, and prosperity" (157). Fuller's statement provides the reader with an exact definition of the natural world, which is fixed and uncontrollable, yet free and peaceful in Jane's imagination. We can apply the same reading to Jane in order

to find similarities within the physical presentations of what is natural and human. Like nature, her physical appearance is static and naturally produced, which Jane confirms when she declares, “I was still by nature solicitous to be neat" (Brontë 95). As with the static and uncontrollable aspects of the natural world – like the inescapable sun shining through the chamber’s window – Jane’s appearance is neat “by nature” (95), and she remains true to her plainness as a result. Although she finds herself torn with the desire to be "handsomer" (95), Jane understands that she cannot change her appearance, since she looks the way nature intends. Through Jane’s reflections, Brontë depicts Jane’s internal struggle with the naturalized standards of Victorian beauty, but also shows the comfort and sense of belonging that Jane feels within the “wildness” (Fuller 163) of nature, allowing her to access her imagination and connect with her most nonacculturated self, free from class and gender oppression.

While Jane finds reassurance in her own appearance through a romanticized representation of nature, there remains a visible conflict within the naturalized societal standard of beauty. For example, when Jane reminds the reader that she has "a logical, natural reason" (Brontë 95) to long for different traits of appearance, the text emphasizes her constant struggle between what she believes is natural and what is socially constructed. Jane admits that she occasionally desires the traits of other Victorian women, such as “rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and [a] small cherry mouth” (95). These gendered characteristics reflect the social constructs of the ideal beauty standards prominent in Victorian upper-class society. Although Jane recognizes that the socially constructed identity of her environment is far from real, she still struggles to resist its allure, claiming that it is “natural” (95) to desire the physical aspects of gender conformity. The struggle to determine what is truly “natural” demonstrates the clash between Jane’s naturalized social hierarchy and the natural world.

Charles Burkhart’s "Another Key Word for *Jane Eyre*” helps further explore how the world of nature constitutes the value of what is “natural” to Jane. When it comes to Brontë’s text, Burkhart argues that “[w]hat is natural comes from nature, and is therefore ‘right’” (178). His suggestion explains how Jane’s decision to do what is natural to her expresses the idea that nature is at work within the human world. Therefore, Jane’s “logical, natural reason” for having these “aspirations and these regrets” (Brontë 95) about her physicality greatly expresses how she views the natural world around her: she associates the beauty of nature’s environment with

the beauty of the social environment. Returning to Fuller's text, she explains that Jane cannot separate the two realms due to the "humanized landscape" (158) of Thornfield itself, which showcases how the natural world mingles with aspects of the social. Since Thornfield is directly in between "the sublime landscapes of the Romantic past and the disordered-but-cultured city of the Victorian present" (Fuller 158), it is natural for Jane to subconsciously merge the two together. Fuller further explains the idea of Jane's freeing nature through romanticism, stating that "Thornfield and its environs contain all the romanticism of nature in England's golden age" (157). With this in mind, Jane romanticizes the natural landscapes around her using her imagination, which gives her a sense of freedom as a lower-class woman in high-class Victorian society. However, since the natural environment of Thornfield is inextricable from the upper-class society she wishes to escape from, Jane may still be doomed to capitulate to social and cultural standards.

Directly after observing the magnificence of her external environment at Thornfield, Jane notices the inferiority of her simple, plain appearance in comparison to the lush new setting and experiences a moment of insecurity. The bittersweet realization of her chamber's noticeable beauty brings forth the impression that Jane's natural self is incomparable to what is man-made: "I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked" (Brontë 95). On the one hand, Jane's physical beauty is both naturally and socially-created, incorporating aspects of her biology and Victorian societal standards. The chamber, on the other hand, is also a product of the social, but incorporates materials from the natural world, which are then transformed and manipulated to make them seem natural. For example, the "blue chintz window curtains" (95) are human created and positioned in such a way that natural sunlight can shine through them; the "papered walls" and "carpeted floor" (95) are also man-made representations of nature that are transported into the social world. Jane's chamber represents the concept of human labour and how it works to reproduce nature, which echoes Karl Marx's reflections upon the relationship between society and nature in "Estranged Labour." Marx's anti-capitalist text argues that the worker's creation solely depends on nature, since nature provides "the *means of life*" (72). Through this lens, we can understand Victorian society's reliance on nature for the sake of creating social surroundings. Marx also establishes the differences between socially-created environments and natural

environments in his comparison of human and animal production. For instance, he explains that an "animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature" (76). This idea manifests within *Jane Eyre's* presentation of Thornfield's lavish chamber as a way of expressing the overindulgence of the Victorian aristocracy. Whereas animals naturally produce only their immediate needs, humans reproduce nature beyond their physical necessities, until it "forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty" (76). With the knowledge that society imposes unnecessary standards of beauty on nature, we can apply Marx's "Estranged Labour" to the character of Jane so as to present her own estranged selfhood. Since Jane wishes to embody an unnatural Victorian extravagance in her own appearance, such as "rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and [a] small cherry mouth" (Brontë 95), Jane herself fights a self-estrangement from nature. The desire to physically comply with society's standards of beauty pushes Jane further from her natural self, which thus alienates her from nature.

As this paper has previously discussed, *Jane Eyre* conveys the idea that humans disrupt and exploit nature for their own benefit, and set naturalized standards of beauty to which people must conform in Victorian society. Human exploitation of elements of the natural world arises through Jane's reflections upon Thornfield's striking, sunny chamber and her own appearance, which highlights how society represents nature in an unnatural way. Since Jane appreciates the beauty of a man-made environment, she incorporates aspects of Bronte's nature-society binary in her own appearance. Concerning this issue, Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses" discusses a new geological era called the "Anthropocene" (207), which regards the human species as a powerful, unstoppable force of nature which can change "the most basic physical processes of the earth" (206). If we apply Chakrabarty's argument to Brontë's text, it is possible to see that humans have "geological agency" (206) over their natural environments through the socially-manipulated aspects of nature within Jane's chamber at Thornfield. Chakrabarty suggests that human beings can acquire the status of a "geological force" (206) through their naturalized hierarchal domination, which occurs within Jane's social subordination and manifests most visibly through her appearance. Brontë's text exemplifies Chakrabarty's idea that humans have become a "natural condition" (214) through Jane's merging of the natural world with her presumed role in society. Furthermore, Jane claims "geological agency" (206) in her attempt to conform both herself to nature and

nature to herself. For example, the natural world – fixed and uncontrollable – shows that Jane is also a similar product of nature as she is "obliged to be plain" (Brontë 95). However, in accepting her plain appearance, she also reproduces nature in her own image by strategically employing her "geological agency" and exposing herself to nature, by way of connecting with the natural world. Though Jane is limited by her natural plainness, she recognizes her ability to manipulate nature to her benefit while resisting the imposed naturalized social structures. Consequently, while Victorian society favors the unnatural representation of nature, Jane manipulates her natural environment in a manner that is socially responsible by choosing to embrace nature in her own appearance, rather than exploit and corrupt nature for social profits.

Whereas Chakrabarty argues that humans are geological forces which greatly contribute to the destruction of the natural world, Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* suggests that capitalism is the underlying cause of the Anthropocene and shifts the blame from the human species to the economic system. Moore's work critiques the division of nature and society, suggesting that capitalism works *through* nature, rather than *against* nature, and thus becomes "*a way of organizing nature*" (2). Capitalism is therefore not merely an economic system alone. For Moore, human organization is co-produced by nature, and nature is co-produced by the social realm – if this holds true, then it is impossible to separate humanity from nature, and vice versa. Bronte's *Jane Eyre* demonstrates Moore's argument through Jane's co-mingling with both the natural and social worlds. Her various interactions with the two opposing environments deconstruct the nature-society binary to present the ways in which Victorians become "humanity-in-nature" (4) through their actions within the natural world. For example, Jane's luxurious chamber – both human-made and nature-made – represents Moore's idea of humanity and nature as co-produced, due to the chamber's hybrid creation. This concept of humans creating their own environments inside of nature demonstrates what Moore refers to as the "*oikeios*: the relations through which humans act—and are acted upon by the whole nature—in our environment making" (4). Moore reveals the problem of this intermingling of humans with nature: if individuals are "inside" nature, then social organization and capitalism thus occur naturally within nature as well, creating an unstoppable crisis of "capitalist world-ecology" (3). If we apply Moore's view to Brontë's text, we can find that Jane's attempts to resist social structures by

embracing the "natural" through her appearance is an inherently fraught or complicated venture, as humanity is "inside" of nature. Therefore, Jane can never entirely extricate herself from imposed social, cultural, and gender roles, since she is a part of the Anthropocene – albeit not willfully – and remains inseparably tangled within the bounds of nature and modernity.

In the considerable realm of ecocriticism, there have been various attempts to separate humans from nature as a way of discovering humanity's impact on the natural world. Instead of keeping these two realms separate, Brontë collapses the nature-society binary in *Jane Eyre* and represents the ways in which human involvement coincides with the natural environment. Additionally, Brontë's depiction of how the natural and social worlds co-exist provides the reader with a new understanding of how it is impossible to separate humans from nature. Through Jane's reflections on Victorian society and her physical appearance, we can gain insight into her complicated relationship with the natural world and discover how she romanticizes nature to free herself from her naturalized social hierarchy. However, the inseparability of Thornfield's natural environment and its accompanying upper-class society suggests that Jane may never be able to escape from the imposed societal standards. Nevertheless, Brontë offers both a social and ecological critique through her presentation of Jane as a child of nature: a character that resists societal norms and instead, dwells responsibly in nature in order to reconnect humanity with the natural world.

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