

# Reconciling Conflict: Species Being and Spirituality in *Jane Eyre*

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## **Abstract**

Throughout Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, Jane struggles against the stringent, hierarchy of organized religion. Nevertheless, she strives to find a form of faith that appeals to her sensibilities concerning equality, fairness, and justice. By seeking solace in the natural realm, Jane begins to develop a sense of kinship with the larger world and those around her--although this is a sentiment she does not fully comprehend until the very end of the novel. In "The Climate of History: Four Theses," Dipesh Chakrabarty explores the anxiety of species being and the alienating impact of capitalist organizational structures. Institutionalized religion functions in *Jane Eyre* to isolate individuals and create dependency on the organization. By virtue of her own, independent nature, and coupled with the aid of Helen Burns and Mr. Rochester, who guide and challenge her along the way, Jane grows to fashion her own definition of faith. Jane Eyre's divine alliance is one that remains firmly grounded in the natural world, a realm free of societal hierarchies, class, and gender barriers. Through reconciling God and Nature, Jane comes to terms with the larger web of existence, eventually asserting herself to find love and happiness.

**Keywords:** Religion, Spirituality, Nature, Species Being, Society, Hierarchy, Existence

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* is fraught with tension. From its tumultuous environment, clashing social structures, and brooding love affairs, conflict persists within every dynamic of the story. Beginning in early childhood,

Jane is forced to wrestle between independence and succumbing to domineering figures of authority. However, as Jane's character develops, it becomes evident that she will not accept the socially imposed alienation preached by organized religion--the kind of faith propagated by Victorian religious institutions that is complicit with capitalism and fails to capture the connected state of being that Jane's faith seeks. Jane Eyre thus grows to place her belief in God within the realm of the natural world, creating a naturalized spirituality that moves alongside her throughout the novel to shape and influence her life decisions. This connection is further nurtured by Jane's relationship with Edward Fairfax Rochester, who himself rebels against the governing structures of organized faith. Their relationship, however, can only flourish once Rochester is stripped of his societal standing and humbled at the hands of a naturalized divinity. By combining her religious sensibilities with her bond to nature, Jane is able to fashion a form of spirituality that transcends the alienating barriers of Victorian institutionalized religion. Jane Eyre's spirituality is the purifying force that abolishes social divides, securing her happiness and establishing a closer connection to both God and nature.

In his essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses," Dipesh Chakrabarty outlines the humanitarian roots underlying the climate change debate. Before this discussion achieved any degree of sophistication, however, the discipline of history first had to reconcile the previously conflicting concepts of human and natural history (201). Human history narrates the cultural endeavours of civilization; however, this realm of knowledge and understanding was seldom combined with environmental events (202). Chakrabarty attributes this disciplinary blind spot to the tendency to consider nature the domain of God and thus out of the sphere of human understanding (201). The world of *Jane Eyre* rejects this state of separation. Throughout the novel, Jane's naturalized spirituality has great power in shaping events in her life, granting her an empowered engagement with the atmosphere (Pizzo 85). She does, however, first undergo a necessary process of reconciliation, adapting her understanding of religious faith to coexist with the natural world she holds dear.

As Chakrabarty argues, "species being" is not adequately captured through capitalism (221). The concept of species expresses the many instances of life collectively as an ideal or essence and therefore cannot be experienced directly. This gap between the individual and the categorical in turn leaves the human

being feeling alienated when attempting to grasp an awareness of life from the perspective of species membership or being. Entrenched within the unequal capitalist structures of Victorian society, Jane is confronted with a religious view that separates individuals on the basis of gender and class--yet she simultaneously registers a consciousness of how emergent species awareness underwrites her faith and identity as a human. For Jane surmises and therefore strives to have faith in a universal, species-level collective human identity that would overcome specific forms of alienation, such as class and gender; yet at the same time she reveals anxiety about the limitations of individual experience. This conflict is manifested in *Jane Eyre* through Jane's struggle with organized religion and the characters that espouse its doctrines.

The concept of species being, according to Chakrabarty, produces an anxiety felt but not quite understood because it falls outside the mode of self-knowledge that involves both experience and reflection, which we call "historical consciousness" (220). Capitalism, by insisting on separation, classification, and quantification, alienates individuals from the larger collective and contributes to the anxieties that emerge with the concept of species being. Jane's adapted faith develops precisely from anxieties, unease and confrontation, arising in conflict with the experience of capitalism. *Jane Eyre* represents these tensions through the convergence of institutionalized religion with the aims of capitalism and its potential to alienate the individual from the collective and the rest of the natural world. For Jane this collective is represented in the larger community of Christians, divided and isolated from the larger context of existence--that is, from the environment and one another. Chakrabarty states that "one never experiences being a concept" (220), and thus individuals remain isolated and adrift, at best only able to experience specific effects that heighten awareness of the limits of understanding. This situation contributes to the rise of a new species awareness during the Victorian era that complicates human identity with a "knowledge that defies historical understanding" (Chakrabarty 221).

Within the context of *Jane Eyre*, the characters of Mr. Brocklehurst (the director of Lowood Institute) and St. John Rivers (who becomes an Anglican missionary) represent the different ways the Victorian institution of organized religion may assimilate a capitalist ethos. These characters, and the doctrines they espouse, advocate for a state of separation, one in which the natural world should not dare to influence the sacred, human soul. The institution of religion, therefore,

attempts to distance itself from the natural world, cementing a sense of alienation and estrangement. This conflict is one that Jane ultimately resolves with an adapted spirituality, blending an internalized religious faith with her sensibility to nature. This altered worldview opens up the scope of understanding, and allows Jane to develop her sense of identity through nature. This revised, spiritual lens allows Jane to grasp the world around her and place herself within it more adeptly. It is with a familiarity of the constraints she faces that she may eventually overcome them, finding herself at the conclusion of the novel as a woman of means, both financially rich (as an heiress) and emotionally independent (406).

Beginning in childhood, Jane's experience with religious authority is a negative ordeal. While Jane persists in adhering to a personal faith, she struggles to accept a hierarchy enforced by others. At Lowood school Jane must adhere to the strict rules imposed by Mr. Brocklehurst, who positions nature as an enemy of religion, and preaches a faith that is servile and alienating. When he singles out Jane at school, he proceeds to make an example of her, calling all others to "shun her example; if necessary, avoid her company" (63). While Jane's experiences at the institution leave her feeling rather disillusioned with religious faith, her spirits are maintained by her young friend Helen, who assures Jane that God is "My Maker and yours; who will never destroy what he created" (78). Helen helps Jane to see the inclusiveness of faith, but she also solidifies Jane's feelings that the natural realm should not be forgotten. Through her revulsion at Brocklehurst's hypocrisy, and lamentation of Helen's sacrificial nature, Jane grows to develop a manner of belief that best suits her worldview. Reconciling her love for the natural world with her love for God, Jane is able to develop a new type of spirituality. This faith, far from the disparate structures preached by others, does not alienate her from the natural world. Therefore, Jane discovers a faith that elevates her spirit while simultaneously bringing her closer to Earth. It is this spirituality that forms her character and allows her to achieve self-awareness and happiness by the end of the novel.

In the various traumatic episodes throughout her life, Jane consistently seeks solace in the natural world (Pizzo 88). What is evident, especially in her childhood, is that much of this distress comes at the hand of organized religion. *Jane Eyre* is a novel embroiled in a complex interrogation of religious faith. While by no means rejecting religious belief, Jane must constantly adapt and reconfigure her relationship with Heaven. In his analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Jeffery J. Franklin

acknowledges that the "novel embodies a contest between conflicting spiritual discourses" (458). This conflict is manifested in Jane's ongoing internal dialogue as well as in outward conflicts between various characters. Franklin further explains that "Christian discourse is represented in *Jane Eyre* primarily by four figures: Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, St. John Rivers, and Jane herself" (462). Brocklehurst clearly embodies an aggressively oppressive form of Christian discourse, one that seeks to eradicate individuality and connectivity to the natural world. Similarly, St. John Rivers embodies a version of organized religion that does not appeal to Jane. While by no means as cruel and malignant as Brocklehurst, St. John also seeks to suppress affinities towards the natural world. When faced with a natural attraction to a kind and beautiful woman, St. John represses his feelings because he does not believe her to be suited for the life of a missionary's wife. He laments that "While something in me - is acutely sensible to her charms, something else is as deeply impressed with her defects: they are such that she could sympathize in nothing I aspired to" (350). St. John's distaste for feeling and aversion to natural instincts represents a manner of living that Jane cannot understand. It is for this reason that she ultimately rejects his marriage proposal, saying to him "I scorn your idea of love" (381) and eventually returning to Rochester.

Helen Burns, in contrast, stands out to Jane as a champion of morality and kindness. She teaches Jane to live by a moral compass, saying "If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends" (66). The narrative describes Helen as angelically good and moral, often suffering in silence for what she believes to be a greater purpose. Though Helen's sacrificial piety fails to capture Jane's imagination, their friendship aides Jane to develop her own religious sensibilities. Helen depicts God as a figure of unwavering love. While first confronting this sceptically, Jane begins to warm to Helen's belief by virtue of her friend's own intrinsic goodness. Helen is an important marker of Jane's spiritual development. By introducing her to the peace of faith, Helen helps Jane to explore her own belief in God. Inversely, by exhibiting less desirable manifestations of her faith, Helen also teaches Jane what *not* to become. Much like St. John Rivers, Helen is far too subservient to faith for Jane's liking. While she sympathizes with Helen's patience and morality, Jane struggles when encountering situations where she deems it necessary to assert her own mind. Jane disagrees with Helen most when it comes to pursuing justice for committed wrongs. While Jane would wish

to dole out justice herself, Helen insists that she should be content with knowing that God loves her (66). Jane's spirituality is intrinsically attached to a solid knowledge of her own nature. She rejects any institution that discourages her from acting as she deems natural.

Jane Eyre's adapted spirituality is formed by both her kinship to the natural world and the solid sense of self she develops through interacting with various characters throughout the story, often manifest in her unwavering stubbornness and inclination to speak her mind. An unfaltering sense of self thus distinguishes Jane Eyre's character. Her personal dedication to remaining honest and sincere makes her behaviour and the way she presents herself to others appear natural, rather than a doctored facade shaped by societal rules and constraints. This is evident not only in her childhood, but in the relationship she pursues with Rochester. When she finally confronts her feelings for him she claims that "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, - as we are!" (238). Occurring in a lush and natural setting, this scene reveals that Jane recognises the inherent equality between herself and Rochester, which he acknowledges as well. What is also interesting to note is the emphasis on an incorporeal state of being. In this setting, Jane recognises that her spirit is equal to Rochester's, but the situation simultaneously acknowledges the obstacles faced by her physical body. While Jane may feel liberated in mind and soul, she still recognises that her body, classed and gendered, faces significant discrimination in Victorian society. In her essay analysing Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Hannah Freeman comments on a similar vein of thought as expressed through the character of Lyndall. Victorian women dealt with culture and society as experienced through body, gender, and class (19). Erasing the physical, or disposing of corporeal limitations, as Jane conceives at the end of *Jane Eyre*, opens the opportunity, according to Freeman (19), to experience a more unified existence with the environment and other people.

In opposition to the doctrines of hierarchy preached by religious institutions, Jane believes that all individuals are equal before God, and thus are equal in nature. Through this surprisingly modern lens, Jane recognises, with the help of her spirituality, that the societal limits placed on individuals are entirely human-made constructs. Brontë, like Schreiner after her, wrote the realities of their society into their characters. Freeman believes that Schreiner's "colonial and gendered experience fuel[ed] her literary vision of an existence freed from social

imperatives imposed on the body" (20). Jane entertains similar fantasies when envisioning a world rid of bodily limitations. Although her concluding fantasy is of a unified, natural spirituality, in which all individuals are equal in spirit and thus also in God's Heaven, the conundrum of natural spirituality exists as a constant tension throughout the novel, one primarily expressed through frustration as a child, and unease as an adult, encountering oppressive forces. Jeffrey Franklin describes Jane's characteristic anxiety as "a longing for a spirituality that was not entirely compatible with Christian doctrine" (458). Organized religion, as depicted in *Jane Eyre*, exists as a looming capitalist structure that seeks to distance the individual from nature as well as other people. Jason W. Moore describes the system of capitalism as "not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is *a way of organizing nature*" (2). Institutionalized religion seeks to do something similar in the novel, and it is an imposition that Jane will not tolerate. Jane's sense of spirituality as placed within nature implies that nothing exists in a vacuum (7); as Moore states, "everything that humans do is a flow of flows, in which the rest of nature is always moving through us" (7). Nature within *Jane Eyre* is depicted as a realm of equality, but also as an element of spiritual significance that connects the characters to their surroundings, their faith, and one another.

Jane's relationship with Rochester works alongside her spiritual outlook in two ways. On the one hand, Rochester helps Jane grow closer to her beliefs by dispelling stringent societal rules himself. Secondly, Jane's spirituality insists on their separation, only to bring the two back together when the time is finally right. Jane can only return to Rochester once she is no longer dependant, as she proudly informs him saying "I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (406). Rochester is a member of the privileged class. He is of the landed gentry, wealthy, and, of course, male. However, despite these clear advantages, he refuses to subscribe to the conceited pride of his fellows. When Rochester hosts a gathering at Thornfield, he consistently challenges social norms and customs by speaking his mind and bringing Jane into their company, despite her status as an employee. Much like Jane, Rochester acts *naturally*, expressing himself as he sees fit without qualms as to how his speech might be received. While Jane has always had this inclination, it is when she is with him that her individuality blossoms. Rochester, much like Helen, is essential to Jane's development. While Helen awakens Jane's sensibility to divinity, Rochester grounds her, and allows her to embrace her own nature as a character. With Rochester, Jane is finally able to

speak her mind without admonishment. Rochester encourages Jane to speak and think openly, a habit that she adapts to quickly. However, while Rochester is instrumental to her development, Jane must leave in order to complete her evolution.

Through Jane's final reconciliation with Rochester, we must recognise that the naturalized spirituality driving Jane also functions to redeem Rochester. The two are at first driven apart by Rochester's previous ties and Jane's firm decision to live in a manner that she can respect. Rochester's deceit taints their potential union with sin. Jane's decision to remain pure breaks her heart, but ultimately works to strengthen her character and faith. Rochester loses his previous wife, his hand, sight, most of his wealth, and social standing in a fire. Through this reckoning, it would seem that "divine justice pursued its course" (417). While his physical body may be forever marked, his soul is purified by his act of bravery. Fire strips Rochester of his bodily and societal advantages, bringing him closer to the Earth in a symbolic, and also very literal way. Rochester's fall from his place in society releases him from the enslaving bonds of custom. His proximity to nature is further emphasized by his new place of residence: Ferndean. When compared to the grandeur of Thornfield, Ferndean exists in a far more wild, natural setting. Rochester's new home and status present a stark contrast to his previous state, although it is one in which he is ultimately more fulfilled. Emerging from this experience forever altered, Rochester also begins to touch on the spirituality that Jane has been developing throughout the course of the novel.

By being reduced to his most raw and vulnerable self, Rochester is forced to grapple with the anxiety of species being described by Chakrabarty. Through the destruction of his physical and societal tethers, Rochester is forced to contend with the immensity of existence. It is from this void that he reaches out to connect with God through nature, exclaiming upon his reconciliation with Jane: "Now, I thank God! I know it to be otherwise. Yes, I thank God!" (418). Once Jane and Rochester have undergone this transformation of perspective, they are able to be together again. The fact that Rochester's liberation occurs at the hands of a fire is also significant, being not only an earthly element, but also a weighty religious symbol. Rochester is effectively reborn out of the ashes a better man of purer spirit. He recognises that "*His* chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me forever" (417). Not only has he been stripped of his societal ties, but he is marked clean due to his selfless sacrifice. Over the moors Jane hears



Rochester's voice whispered in the wind and, through her spiritual connection to nature, is led back to finally find a union that is moral and untainted.

As demonstrated throughout the story, Jane Eyre's personal history is intrinsically tied to the natural realm of her immediate environment. By placing God in nature, she produces a twin spirituality that is a force throughout her life. Jane's adapted faith brings her out of the alienation imposed by organized religion and leads her to find family, love, and happiness. Her spirituality develops throughout her life, with the help from the combined influence of Helen Burns, Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, and of course, Rochester. By rejecting the conventional practice of religion, Jane discovers a faith that suits her best and in reconciling the conflict between natural and divine elements she is opened to a greater understanding of the world in which she lives. It is through this lens that she recognises the artificial, manmade structures of class segregation and gender divides. Not only does her naturalized spirituality broaden Jane's scope of perception, but it does the same for those around her. While Rochester may fall in love with Jane's spirit, he can only fully grasp her nature once he himself is altered by the geological element of fire. Through this spiritual rebirth, Rochester is humbled out of his privileged position and brought closer to naturalized understanding of Jane's faith. It is through her spirituality that Jane and Rochester are finally made equal in spirit. It is only once this purification is achieved that they may find ultimate happiness and understanding in God and each other.

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