

2022

Injustice in Childhood: Jane Eyre and the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Christian Barkman

College of the Holy Cross, cabark23@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barkman, Christian (2022) "Injustice in Childhood: Jane Eyre and the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2022, Article 8.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2022/iss1/8>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Criterion by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Injustice in Childhood: *Jane Eyre* and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Christian Barkman

College of the Holy Cross

'In the little world where children have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice.' (*Great Expectations*, Chapter 8)

Before a child grows to understand how rotten laws, doctrines, customs, and persons permit and promulgate wickedness, a child simply feels the raw sting of injustice—and feeling this sting in a state of ignorance and vulnerability only heightens the pain. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, are simultaneously autobiographies and novels with the fictional character of Jane Eyre serving as the narrator in Brontë's work and Frederick Douglass himself — statesman, orator, and abolitionist — being the voice of his own story. Each respective narrator highlights in vivid and dramatic detail those difficult, painful, and thorny moments of their upbringing. Jane and Douglass emphasize the alienation and solitude as well as the violence and cruelty that they endured in their respective childhoods. Physical abuse and deliberate neglect are the acme of injustice and manifest in the environments that Jane and Douglass grew up in.

Gateshead Hall and Lowood, the places in which Jane suffered through childhood and adolescence, are illustrated as brutal settings in Jane's narrative. At Gateshead Hall, Jane lives under the tyranny of her aunt, Mrs. Reed and her three cousins: John, Eliza, and Georgiana. Mrs. Reed displays clear partiality towards her own children and permits their ill-conduct and bullying of Jane. Mrs. Reed is truly a despot, and the servants of the house follow in her prejudice towards Jane; Miss Abbot's demeaning of Jane evinces that Jane is not on equal footing with her cousins, "you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep... And you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed" (Brontë 16). Mrs. Reed's antipathy towards Jane is brazenly enforced at Gateshead and Jane is left to ponder in despair and bitterness when such cruelty will ever abate, "Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Was it useless to try to win anyone's favour?" (18).

Perhaps the most heinous example of the injustice Jane suffers at Gateshead, beyond deliberate neglect, is in John Reed's blatant physical abuse. A particularly disturbing account of John's violence is when he hurls a book at Jane causing her to bleed, "the volume was flung, it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp" (13). John's trespasses are ignored by Mrs. Reed and the servants while Jane possesses no weapon for recourse: "I had no appeal whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions" (12). Jane lives in a state of profound anxiety in her day-to-day life:

He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, or once or twice in a day, but continually: every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near. (12)

Jane enjoys no rest at Gateshead: it is not a refuge of comfort or a haven of familial warmth but a prison of anguish in which she is treated as inferior to her cousins. Jill Matus states that *Jane Eyre* is "unique among the Brontë novels in its focus on the solitary, suffering child" (114). Jane is verily a stranger under the Reeds' roof and is subject to a different set of rules; her isolation is purposefully effectuated by her family rendering her injustice at Gateshead especially appalling.

Jane's beginnings at Lowood are saddled with similar tribulations that she had endured at Gateshead. This is due in part to Mrs. Reed's iniquitous feelings towards Jane being carried from Gateshead to Lowood in the form of slander. Mrs. Reed defames Jane's character to Lowood school supervisor, Mr. Brocklehurst and charges him to, "keep a strict eye on her [Jane]... guard against her worst fault, a tendency to deceit" (Brontë 41). Mrs. Reed's instruction is taken up by Mr. Brocklehurst. After a harmless mistake in which Jane drops and breaks a piece of slate, Mr. Brocklehurst seizes on the opportunity to castigate her:

My dear children...it becomes my duty to warn you that this girl, who might be one of God's own lambs, is a little castaway - not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example - if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse (78-79).

Mr. Brocklehurst wields judgment like a pharisee; he is merciless in his condemnation of Jane and purposefully alienates her from her peers by calling on students to "exclude her" and "shut her out"—echoing Mrs. Reed's ostracism. While Jane is able to prove her goodness towards Miss Temple and Helen and thus reverses some damage that Brocklehurst inflicted on her

reputation, she still must contend with the institution of Lowood itself — “The unhealthy nature of the site; the quantity and quality of the children’s food; the brackish, fetid water used in its preparation; the pupils’ wretched clothing and accommodations” (99). In addition to poor sanitary conditions and the meager rations of clothing and food, Lowood school perpetuated an environment of child abuse; Steve Davies writes that “Charlotte Brontë saw the novel as lifting the lid on an England built on violence to the young and helpless,” and that Jane’s narrative exposes the “hidden horrors of corporal punishment and the systematic starvation and exposure to cold and disease of helpless children in ‘philanthropic,’ ‘Christian’ establishments” (xiv). For Jane to witness the “flogging of Helen’s bare neck,” (xiv) and her subsequent death, is a severe tragedy for a mere child to observe. Jane is strengthened after enduring the injustices cast at her from both Gateshead and Lowood, but she can hardly look back at her childhood with happiness. The first ten chapters of Jane’s autobiography are dedicated to the first ten years of her life, “to the first ten years of my life I have given almost as many chapters” (Brontë 99), and the first ten chapters of Jane’s narrative are decidedly miserable. While Jane eventually gains “ascendency and power... kin, inheritance, personal refuge, and marital joy” (Matus 119), her childhood remains a black spot in memory. Jane’s declaration: “I cannot bear to be solitary and hated” (Brontë 82) is truthfully a characterization of much of her own childhood — what she cries out against is what afflicts her.

Born into the evil institution of slavery, Frederick Douglass’ childhood was bereft of virtually all potential familial comforts. Douglass is intentionally kept separated from his mother, an action taken by slaveholders to “blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child” (Douglass 20). Black families were deliberately separated in the slave economy for the ultimate purpose of keeping the Black race down. In addition, the slave trade split up and jumbled African peoples and tribes so that a language barrier existed between slave populations on plantations. The destruction of family ties and a muddling of African language and culture was perpetrated in order to diminish Black cohesion; White plantation owners and the European slave market used their leverage to alienate Black persons on a collective and individual level. When the death of his mother reaches the ears of a young Douglass, he is not strained with stirring sorrow, “Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt the death of a stranger” (20). That Douglass is not exceptionally moved by the passing of his mother demonstrates that the institution of slavery has succeeded in alienating Douglass from his blood ties. Slave owners also endeavored to keep hidden the history of their slaves’ origins; Douglass affirms that he lacks a precise understanding of when he was born, “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By

far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (19). All slaves are dehumanized in the slave trade and are robbed of their origin and identity; Albert E. Stone states that “Under slavery, man possesses no such historic identity as name, date, place of birth” (68). When it comes time for Douglass to leave Colonel Lloyd’s plantation and to be transferred to another master, he does so without regret:

The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case. I found no severe trial in my departure. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it, I could not feel that I was leaving anything which I could have enjoyed by staying. (38)

Companionship is always under siege in plantation life as slaves can be traded away at any time; Douglass is thus unable to forge any lasting relationships in bondage — from one oppressor to another he is bartered and denigrated. The lack of a parental figure, the blotting out of his identity, and the oppressive nature of plantation life renders Douglass alienated from his own kin.

Violence was endemic to the institution of slavery, and as a mere child, Douglass too was a victim of slavery’s barbarity. Douglass received the greatest amount of physical violence under Mr. Covey who whipped him weekly: “scarce a week passed without his whipping me” (61) — “if any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey” (63). Douglass was just fifteen years old when he suffered his weekly whippings under Covey. Before adolescence, Douglass’ childhood was corrupted with his bearing witness to the whippings, beatings, and sadistic torture of his race. One of the most horrific scenes shared by Douglass in his narrative is the murder of the slave, Demby at the hands of Mr. Gore, an overseer to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. Hoping to escape the harsh punishment of Mr. Gore’s whip, Demby retreats into a creek in order to guard his already mutilated flesh from being further flogged. Mr. Gore gives Demby just three warnings before he discharges a musket ball directly at his face; Douglass recounts Mr. Gore’s ruthless killing of Demby:

Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood. (34)

Danjuma G. Gibson asserts that “The environment into which Frederick Douglass (and other victims of the slavocracy) was born was sadistic and

violent towards black bodies” (23). Mr. Gore’s murder is a display of Gibson’s statement in brutal fashion. Plantation life sanctions the institutionalized violence of Black bodies and permits the evil of Mr. Gore to go unpunished: “and thus the guilty perpetrator of one of the most bloodiest and most foul murders goes unwhipped of justice” (Douglass 35). Douglass’ remark that Mr. Gore “goes unwhipped of justice,” rightly states that the White slave drivers are the oppressors and that they are the guilty party deserving of retribution. Accordingly, the alienation and violence that beset Douglass is more severe than Jane’s due to the grievous torment of slavery. The comparability of Jane and Douglass’ childhood can only reasonably be examined by means of general descriptors of trauma that they both endured, such as “violence” or “alienation.” The uniqueness of each narrator’s suffering and the severity of their plight can not be equitably juxtaposed — specially for Douglass, who bore the abuses of slavery, which can have no compare — though both of their stories can be observed in light of childhood injustice.

Jane Eyre and Frederick Douglass grew up in environments that were unfairly set against them. Plantation life was intrinsically evil towards the Black race, and Douglass, on the mere fact of his being Black, was arbitrarily consigned to the fetters of slavery. The prejudice of Mrs. Reed towards Jane rendered her unequal to her cousins at Gateshead; Mrs. Reed’s aversion of Jane even followed her to Lowood, and though Jane succeeded in winning good opinion from her peers, she still had to bear the abuse that Lowood as an institution promulgated. Jane’s young mind is unable to identify why she is unjustly treated at Gateshead, but with the advancement of age, she is awakened to the truth of her injustice, “in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question - why I suffered; now, at the distance of - I will not say how many years - I see it clearly” (Brontë 19). Jane, like Douglass, is eventually illuminated on the nature of injustice and how it tainted her upbringing, but this knowledge does not erase the pain or the memory of suffering. The violence and alienation that beset Jane and Douglass’ early years can never be totally forgotten.

Bibliography

- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Edited with an introduction and notes by Steve Davies. Penguin Random House UK, Penguin Books, 2006. Original Publication 1847, pp. 12-82.
- Davies, Steve. Introduction to *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Random House UK, Penguin Books, 2006. pp. xiv.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Printed by Amazon, The Autobiography Classics of Frederick Douglass: The Original 1845 Edition, pp. 19-63.
- Stone, Albert E.. "Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*," From *CLA journal* 17, no. 2, Reprinted with the permission of the College Language Association. *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Edited by William L. Andrews. G.K. Hall & Co.. Original Publication, 28 December 19732, pp. 68.
- Gibson, Danjuma G.. *Frederick Douglass, a Psychobiography: Rethinking Subjectivity in the Western Experiment of Democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
<https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/f/10tg26t/oxfaleph022409709>. Accessed 10 November 2021, pp. 23.
- Matus, Jill. *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*. Chapter 5: 'Strong family likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Edited by Heather Glen. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
<https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/f/10tg26t/oxfaleph021395850>. Accessed 9 November 2021, pp.114-119.