



## Reason in the face of passion: emotional freedom in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre

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### Abstract

This research proposes an interpretation of Jane Eyre, novel written by Charlotte Brontë (1847) in which are found different meanings of freedom. Jane's narrative supposes an emotional freedom desire, related as much with the conflict between reason and emotion as with the conflict related to the individual's autonomy in face of organic determinations. Following this thought, this research intends to connect these subjects with the moral philosophy and mind sciences that circulated widely during the beginning of the XIX century, such as frenology, physiognomy, psychology, alienism and philosophy, that tried to comprehend the connexion between the individual, his character, his personality, his autonomy and his characteristics that were determined biologically.

### Key words:

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë, victorian literature

### Introduction

*Jane Eyre*, written by Charlotte Brontë (1847) was and still is a work very studied by the academy through diverse approaches. Its relation with psychology was highly studied, but with little emphasis on the context in which the novel is published. With this in mind, this research makes an attempt of focusing on this context, bringing up the mind sciences that were in vogue during the XIX century, trying to comprehend how these elements are articulated in the plot and the character development, relating them with the thematic of passion, reason and emotional freedom, in search of some kind of conflict between this freedom and the organic determinism supposed in these sciences. Besides that, this research tries to articulate different elements, such as the author's life, her contact with these sciences, her work's reception and the fact that her protagonist is a woman, alongside the psychological and psychiatric knowledge about women during the Victorian Era.

### Results and Discussion

This research is based on three topics, with the objective of organizing bibliography and data: author's life, the novel's reception and the study of mind sciences.

On the author's life, based in Elizabeth Gaskell's book *The life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), I attempt to relate some characteristics of Jane Eyre with author's personal experience that could be incorporated in her writing.

In what concerns to the work's reception, I analysed the literary criticism contemporary to the novel, searching of the subjects of freedom, reason, passion, female gender role or moralism, especially with four reviews, two of which were anonymously published in *American Women's Magazine* (1847), and *The Era* (1847), and the others that were written by George Henry Lewes (1847) and Elizabeth Rigby (1849). In these reviews, it was possible to conclude that they converged in the opinion that the novel presents the mastery of reason over passion.

Besides that, there was a study of mind sciences that circulated during the XIX century, such as psychology, alienism, phrenology and physiognomy, with data

collected from both primary and secondary sources. To do so, three main books were used: *Familiar lessons on phrenology designed for the use of children and youth in schools and families* (1847); *Elements of phrenology* (1846) and *The pocket Lavater or the science of physiognomy* (1832) alongside other contemporary articles about the relation between *Jane Eyre* and the victorian context. By studying these books, it was possible to find information about these sciences and their relation with morality, religion, the maintenance of social order and their view on the so called "passions", violent emotions that affected the human beings' rationality and morality and should be suppressed for moral growth.

Amidst these books, it was possible also to find two main concepts that can be found also in *Jane Eyre*: the moral management and the physician's gaze. The first one is strictly connected with Combe's phrenology and asserted that people should take knowledge of their mental faculties through the measure of their skulls and try to improve the faculties that were less used and avoid the ones that were morally bad. The second one is linked with physiognomy and alienism, with the doctor holding the power to look inside the most intimate part of his patients and seeing the madness in the recesses of people's personalities.

### Conclusions

Studying Jane Eyre proved to be a task that demanded a dialogue with various scientific areas, from literary theory and analysis to popular medicine and the mind sciences that were in vogue at that time, making possible to realize the importance of these fields in the nineteenth century for the society as a whole, as well as for literature. Besides that, the novel showed to be an ample source of interpretations and relations with the subjects of freedom, passion and reason, as far as it brings a deep and complex psychological construction of its characters and its narrative. Thus, it was possible to conclude that nothing in *Jane Eyre* should be simplified as a plain conflict or opposition, for there are a lot of more complex meanings in this novel, even contradictory ones, demanding a variety of approaches.