
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the Mirror: Gaze, Resistance, and the Reconstruction of Subjectivity in *Jane Eyre*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the reconstruction of female subjectivity in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* through the lens of gaze theory, integrating existentialist, feminist, and Foucauldian perspectives. It argues that Jane's trajectory represents a radical struggle for visual liberation against the pervasive social and institutional control of nineteenth-century Britain. The study examines Jane's initial suppression under the disciplinary surveillance of Lowood School and the romantic objectification she encounters at Thornfield Hall. By developing a defiant perspective, Jane evolves from a fragmented object of observation into a self-determined subject. The analysis focuses on her resistance to the various ways men attempt to categorize her, such as Edward Rochester's mythological framing and St. John Rivers' instrumental approach. A pivotal moment occurs during her declaration of equality, which functions as a direct challenge to traditional power hierarchies. Finally, the research suggests that Rochester's physical blindness and Jane's economic independence signify the total collapse of oppressive visual structures. By assuming the role of the primary observer at Ferndean, Jane secures the right to define her own reality. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that true liberation is achieved when a woman moves beyond being a mere spectacle and asserts her own internal vision.

KEYWORDS

Jane Eyre ; Gaze Theory; Female Subjectivity; Male Gaze ;Resistance

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1. Introduction

In the rigid social landscape of nineteenth-century Britain, female identity was rarely a self-defined essence; instead, it functioned as a sophisticated construct maintained through a pervasive and disciplinary "social gaze." Central to this Victorian visual surveillance was the ideal of the "Angel in the House." As Nancy Armstrong argues, domestic fiction of this era functioned to "establish a domestic realm that was separate from the world of work," effectively using the domestic gaze to regulate female conduct (Nancy 25). Within this ocularcentric culture, women were expected to exist as silent icons of virtue. To deviate from this "look" was to invite social ostracization. Thus, the Victorian social gaze functioned as a powerful mechanism of patriarchal control, ensuring that women remained confined within the domestic sphere, effectively stripped of their status as autonomous subjects and relegated to the role of cultural artifacts.

To understand the intricate power dynamics at play in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, one must look to the intersection of existentialist and feminist theories of the gaze. Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "The Look" (*le regard*) posits that being watched by another results in a metaphorical "hemorrhage" of the self; Specifically, Sartre suggests that the self is established through the existence of the "Other," and this self exists only within the scope of the other's gaze (Sartre 345). For Jane, this ontological struggle means that her early identity is not hers to define, but is a construct held captive by those who observe her. It is further gendered and politicized in Laura Mulvey's seminal theory of the "Male Gaze." This is further gendered in Laura Mulvey's theory of the "Male Gaze," which suggests that in a patriarchal visual economy, the man is the active "bearer of the look" while the woman is the passive "spectacle" (Mulvey 6). This paper argues that *Jane Eyre*'s trajectory represents a radical pursuit of visual liberation against these pervasive scopic regimes.

Furthermore, this visual oppression in *Jane Eyre* extends beyond romantic objectification into the realm of institutional regulation. By incorporating Michel Foucault's theory of "panopticism," we can perceive how the Victorian educational and religious systems functioned as a "panopticon"—a space where bodies are regulated through the constant threat of an invisible but omnipresent observation. For a marginalized protagonist like Jane, who is both socially "invisible" due to her poverty and physically "plain" by conventional standards, the act of being looked at becomes a site of trauma. From the disciplinary eyes of Lowood School to the possessive scrutiny of Thornfield Hall, Jane's existence is initially defined by the oppressive gazes she inhabits. Her journey, therefore, is not merely a search for romantic fulfillment, but a radical struggle to dismantle the visual prisons constructed by class, gender, and religious dogma.

This paper argues that *Jane Eyre* serves as a profound subversion of these entrenched visual power structures. Jane's trajectory—from the suffocating enclosures of Gateshead to the eventual autonomy of Ferndean—represents a sustained rebellion against the repressive gazes that seek to define and diminish her. By consistently utilizing what can be termed a "counter-gaze," Jane evolves from a fragmented object of observation into a self-determined subject of her own narrative. She refuses to avert her eyes in submission, instead employing direct visual confrontation and artistic creation to assert her presence as an active "spectator" of her own life. Ultimately, Jane's journey proves that true subjective awakening is only possible through the defiant act of "looking back," thereby reclaiming the sovereign right to self-definition beyond the distorted mirror of societal expectations.

2. The Disciplinary Gaze: Institutional Oppression and Childhood Trauma

2.1 The Gateshead Period: Mirroring the "Other"

Jane's journey into selfhood begins at Gateshead Hall, a domestic space where she is subjected to a gaze that is both exclusionary and hostile. The pivotal Red Room scene serves as a profound metaphorical space for Jane's initial self-conception. When she gazes into the "great looking-glass," she does not encounter a familiar reflection of a child, but rather a "strange little figure" and a "tiny phantom" that resembles a "real spirit". This moment of self-alienation is the direct result of Jane internalizing the predatory gaze of the Reed family, who perceive and label her as a "discordant item"—a social and biological anomaly within their domestic sphere. In this cold, crimson chamber, the mirror does not offer Jane a sense of belonging; instead, it reflects back the "Otherness" that has been imposed upon her by those in power.

At Lowood, this evolves into a systemic form of surveillance. The school functions as a Foucauldian "panopticon," where Mr. Brocklehurst utilizes the threat of constant observation to regulate the girls' bodies (Foucault 200). However, Jane finds a "counter-gaze" through Helen Burns and Miss Temple. From a Sartrean perspective, this scene illustrates the "hemorrhage" of the self that occurs when one is reduced to an object under the Look of the Other. By viewing herself through the Reeds' eyes, Jane is initially robbed of her subjective reality; she becomes a ghost in her own life, petrified by the realization that she is an object being judged. This "mirroring" of external hatred demonstrates how the dominant gaze can fragment a child's psyche, forcing the marginalized subject to see themselves as inherently "wrong" or "alien." At Gateshead, the gaze is used as a tool of domestic exile, ensuring that Jane remains visually and psychologically isolated before she even enters the wider world.

2.2 The Lowood School: The Panoptic Gaze

As Jane transitions to Lowood Institution, the private oppression of Gateshead evolves into a systemic, institutionalized form of surveillance. The school, as described by Brontë, functions as a Foucauldian "panopticon"—a space where bodies are regulated through the constant threat of observation. Mr. Brocklehurst embodies this panoptic gaze; he is the supreme overseer who utilizes religious dogma to justify the "discipline" of the female spirit. The scene in which he forces Jane to stand on a stool in front of the entire school is a literal manifestation of this disciplinary gaze. By placing her on a "pedestal of shame," he attempts to "fix" her identity as a "liar" and a "sinner," transforming her into a public spectacle intended to warn and regulate the other students.

This public shaming represents the transition from personal dislike to structural control. In this institutional framework, the gaze is used as a weapon to strip the individual of her internal truth and replace it with a socially convenient label of deviance. Brocklehurst's scrutiny extends even to the girls' physical appearance, such as the cutting of their hair, signifying a desire to erase individual "spectacle" and enforce a uniform, invisible docility. However, by making Jane the center of this punitive gaze, Brocklehurst inadvertently acknowledges her presence. While he intends to annihilate her spirit through observation, he sets the stage for her to eventually recognize the power of the Look and, subsequently, the power of looking back.

2.3 Subverting the Discipline: The Counter-Gaze of Helen and Miss Temple

Jane's total assimilation into this disciplinary system is prevented by the emergence of a "counter-gaze" provided by Helen Burns and Miss Temple. Through these relationships, Jane discovers that the oppressive look of authority is not the only way to be seen. Helen Burns provides a gaze that transcends the physical and the punitive; she looks beyond Jane's perceived "sins" to recognize an eternal, intellectual soul. Helen teaches Jane to endure the harsh "look" of the world by looking toward a higher moral and spiritual plane, effectively devaluing the disciplinary gaze of men like Brocklehurst.

Similarly, Miss Temple offers a gaze of validation and justice that restores Jane's status as a credible subject. By inviting Jane to tell her side of the story and truly listening—a form of "auditory gaze"—she counters the one-sided surveillance of the school. Miss Temple provides an alternative mirror in which Jane can see her intellectual and moral worth, rather than her social standing or alleged faults. These two women create a "subversive visual space" within the panopticon, planting the seeds of resistance by showing Jane that she has the right to be seen as a human being of merit. This shift from being a "liar" on a stool to a "scholar" in the eyes of a mentor is the first step in Jane's reclamation of her own subjective vision.

3. The Male Gaze: Objectification and the Struggle for Equality

3.1 Rochester's Romantic Objectification: The Mythological Gaze

As Jane transitions from the institutional enclosures of Lowood to the domestic stage of Thornfield Hall, the nature of the gaze shifts from disciplinary to romantic, yet it remains fundamentally objectifying. Edward Rochester's initial interactions with Jane are characterized by a "mythological gaze"—a tendency to strip Jane of her human reality by categorizing her with labels such as a "curiosity," "elf," "sprite," or "changeling". While these epithets appear affectionate on the surface, they function as intellectual tools of objectification that place Jane outside the realm of ordinary human agency. By casting her as a supernatural entity, Rochester avoids confronting her as an equal social and moral subject, instead treating her as a specimen to be studied and "read" by a master who prides himself on his worldly discernment. Joyce Zonana highlights that Rochester's tendency to view Jane through a "feminist orientalist" lens—likening her to a harem slave—is a strategy to maintain visual and social dominance (Zonana 594)

From a feminist perspective, Rochester's gaze is inherently possessive; he seeks to "collect" Jane's unique spirit much as he might collect a rare artifact, thereby reinforcing a patriarchal hierarchy where the male remains the active "bearer of the look" and the female remains the exotic "Other". This romantic objectification is perhaps more insidious than Brocklehurst's public shaming, as it is masked by the guise of appreciation and interest. However, the power dynamic remains one-sided: Rochester defines Jane's attributes and expects her to operate within this pre-defined, mythological framework. At this stage, Jane's existence is merely transferred from a "disciplinary prison" into an "aesthetic cage," where her subjective depth is acknowledged only insofar as it entertains the observer.

3.2 Resisting the "Spectacle": The Rejection of the Silk and Jewels

The tension between Jane's subjective integrity and Rochester's objectifying gaze culminates in the preparations for their aborted wedding. Rochester attempts to transform Jane into a "spectacle" of his own making, insisting on draping her in expensive silks and adorning her with jewels. This act of sartorial imposition is a literal attempt to "re-dress" Jane's identity to fit the conventional mold of a Victorian bride—a passive object of visual pleasure. Jane's visceral resistance to this transformation is a pivotal act of visual self-defense. Her declaration, "I shall not be your English Céline Varens," is a profound recognition of the danger inherent in the male gaze. By referencing Rochester's former mistress, Jane identifies the "Varens model" as the ultimate fate of a woman who becomes a mere object of male visual consumption. Her refusal to be "bejeweled" is a refusal to be commodified; she insists on remaining "plain" and "inconspicuous," thereby maintaining a visual presence that she controls rather than one curated for Rochester's gratification.

3.3 St. John Rivers' Cold Instrumentalization: The Colonizing Gaze

In stark contrast to Rochester's passionate, albeit possessive, scrutiny is the "chilling" gaze of St. John Rivers. If Rochester views Jane as a romantic curiosity, St. John views her through what can be termed a "colonizing gaze"—one that is purely instrumental and devoid of emotional recognition. To St. John, Jane is not a person with desires but a "useful acquisition," a tool perfectly calibrated for his missionary ambitions in India. His gaze is "hard," "searching," and "severe," functioning much like Brocklehurst's panoptic eye but under the guise of religious martyrdom. As Gayatri Spivak famously argues, St. John's missionary ambition views Jane as a "useful acquisition" for the imperial project, effectively stripping her of her emotional subjectivity to serve a "holy" cause (Spivak 248). He looks at Jane only to assess her utility, attempting to strip her of her emotional subjectivity and replace it with a duty-bound stoicism. By rejecting him, Jane refuses to be "harnessed" as a missionary instrument.

This "white-cold" gaze seeks to freeze Jane's spirit, demanding that she sacrifice her internal truth for his external, "holy" cause. Under St. John's observation, Jane is once again reduced to a functional object whose value is determined solely by her place in a colonial and patriarchal map. By rejecting St. John's proposal, Jane performs her most significant act of resistance against the instrumentalizing gaze; she refuses to be "harnessed" as a missionary instrument, asserting that her heart and her sight are hers alone to direct. This rejection marks the final step in her refusal to be defined by the utilitarian needs of the men who seek to "view" her, setting the stage for her final transformation into a self-determined visionary.

4. Returning the Gaze: The Turning Point of Subjective Awakening

4.1 The "Equal Souls" Manifesto: Shattering the Visual Hierarchy

The pivotal moment of Jane's subjective awakening occurs during her defiant confrontation with Rochester in the garden at Thornfield. When Jane declares, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will," she is performing a radical act of "returning the gaze." For the first time, she refuses to be the passive recipient of Rochester's scrutiny; instead, she looks directly at him, stripping away the external trappings of his wealth, rank, and "customary" masculine authority. By asserting that they stand "at God's feet, equal—as we are," Jane shatters the traditional visual hierarchy that defines women as decorative objects. This is not merely a verbal demand for equality but a visual coup d'état; she forces Rochester to see her not as an "elf" or a "sprite," but as a sovereign soul. In this moment, the "spectacle" looks back, and in doing so, deconstructs the very framework of patriarchal observation.

The "Equal Souls" manifesto is Jane's "visual coup d'état." She looks directly at Rochester, asserting, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me" (Brontë 252). This act of "returning the gaze" shatters the hierarchy that defines women as decorative objects. Her subsequent inheritance provides the "economic agency" to turn her vision inward, fostering an "internal gaze" that no longer seeks external validation.

The resolution at Ferndean, marked by Rochester's blindness, signifies the total collapse of the "Oppressive Male Gaze". By becoming "his eyes," Jane reverses the power dynamic. As she secures the "right to see," she proves that true liberation requires the dismantling of the observer's throne.

4.2 Economic Agency and the Development of the "Internal Gaze"

Jane's eventual reclamation of her subjecthood is sustained by her newfound economic independence. The inheritance from her uncle John Eyre provides the material "room of her own" necessary to foster an "internal gaze." Throughout her life, Jane's self-worth was mediated through the hostile or objectifying eyes of others—the Reeds, Brocklehurst, and Rochester. However, with financial self-sufficiency, she is no longer forced to perform for the approval of a "master" or a benefactor. This economic agency allows her to turn her vision inward, validating her own experiences and desires without external mediation. Her "internal gaze" is a form of self-recognition that marks her transition from a fragmented "other" to a unified subject. She returns to Rochester not out of a desperate need to be "seen" and supported, but as an autonomous individual who chooses to see and be seen on her own terms.

4.3 Rochester's Blindness and the Symbolic Power Shift

The novel's resolution at Ferndean offers the most profound symbolic inversion of the entire narrative: Rochester's physical blindness. In the economy of Gaze Theory, Rochester's loss of sight signifies the total collapse of the "Oppressive Male Gaze". By losing the ability to observe and categorize Jane from a position of visual dominance, the traditional power dynamic is fundamentally reversed. Rochester is stripped of his "mastery," and his survival becomes entirely dependent on Jane's mediation of the world. As Jane famously notes, she has literally become "his eyes".

This shift represents a radical departure from the "Angel in the House" ideal. Jane is no longer a passive object to be curated for male pleasure; she is now the primary visionary and the "guide" of their shared existence. Their union at Ferndean is not based on the superficial "spectacle" of beauty or status, but on a deep, non-visual mutual recognition of souls. In the quiet, isolated woods of Ferndean, the former "object" of observation has become the defining subject of her own reality. By becoming the eyes for the man who once sought to "collect" her spirit, Jane secures the ultimate "right to see," proving that true subjective awakening requires the dismantling of the observer's throne.

5. Conclusion: The Triumph of the Female Subject

Jane Eyre's narrative arc is fundamentally a trajectory of visual reclamation, tracing her arduous evolution from a fragmented object of observation to an integrated, autonomous subject. Her journey, which begins in the stifling psychological enclosure of the Red Room, captures the initial trauma of a child whose identity is a mere "phantom" reflected in the hostile glass of familial and institutional rejection. However, through the successive crucibles of Gateshead, Lowood, and Thornfield, Jane systematically dismantles the objectifying gazes—be they disciplinary, romantic, or instrumental—that seek to fix her as a passive spectacle. By the time she reaches the secluded sanctuary of Ferndean, Jane has effectively transitioned from the periphery of others' vision to the center of her own. This evolution is marked by a profound shift from being "seen" by the world to seeing for herself, culminating in a union where her subjectivity is no longer a site of contention but an essential component of her shared reality.

Jane's journey is one of visual reclamation, from a "phantom" in the mirror to a self-determined subject. Her rebellion paved the way for a new model of feminine identity. As Gilbert and Gubar emphasize in their seminal work, Jane's survival depends on her ability to generate her own "internal light" rather than being consumed by the "social gaze" that destroyed tragic heroines like Anna Karenina (Gilbert and Gubar 362). Ultimately, Jane's legacy proves that a woman's identity is not a reflection in the eyes of a man, but a sovereign flame kindled from within.

Beyond the immediate confines of her personal history, Jane's persistent act of "returning the gaze" serves as a profound challenge to the broader Victorian ocularcentric power structure. In a society that utilized pervasive visual surveillance to enforce the "Angel in the House" ideal, Jane's refusal to avert her eyes constitutes a radical political act of defiance. She exposes the "social gaze" not as an objective or moral truth, but as a calculated mechanism of patriarchal control designed to ensure domestic submission. By asserting her inherent right to observe, judge, and define her own reality, Jane disrupts the established visual economy of the nineteenth century. Her rebellion paves the way for a new model of feminine identity—one defined by internal intellectual depth and moral conviction rather than by the superficial reflections offered by a male-dominated society.

The significance of Jane's triumph becomes even more striking when situated within the wider nineteenth-century literary canon, particularly in contrast to tragic heroines such as Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. While Anna is ultimately consumed and crushed by the relentless, judgmental gaze of a high society she cannot escape, eventually internalizing its exclusionary light to her own destruction, Jane Eyre survives. Jane's resilience is predicated on her ability to generate her own "internal light," a self-validating vision that renders external judgment obsolete. She does not seek a reflection of her worth in the eyes of a judgmental world; instead, she meticulously builds an interior sanctuary that remains impenetrable to the "chilling" or "possessive" looks of men and institutions alike. Unlike her tragic counterparts, Jane recognizes that the gaze of the Other is not an absolute authority, but a boundary to be crossed.

Ultimately, Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece suggests that a woman's true liberation begins and ends with the eyes. Jane's legacy proves that a woman's identity is not a flickering reflection in the mirror of male desire or a fragile construct of social expectation, but a sovereign flame kindled from within. By reclaiming the gaze, Jane Eyre ceases to be a "discordant item" in a world designed by others and becomes the primary visionary and narrator of her own life. Her story illustrates that the ultimate power—the power of existential sovereignty—lies not in the hollow vanity of being looked at, but in the profound and enduring courage to look back.

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