Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.13.Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

If The Walls Could Talk: Thornfield Hall as a Character in *Jane Eyre*

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DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.13.3.391


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Article info
Article Received: 13/08/2025
Article Accepted: 04/09/2025
Published online: 08/09/2025

Abstract

This paper seeks to unearth and explore Thornfield hall beyond its role as a setting or a place in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. It argues that the hall is a character in itself, with layers of meaning attached that carry several gothic and psychological undertones. Thornfield Hall embodies the essence of gothic fiction and becomes a character that showcases and mirrors the character's innermost psychological landscape, while also serving as a medium through which their moral conflicts unfold. The burning of the hall in the end also serves as a symbolic moment of closure for the protagonist, helping Jane navigate her relationship with Mr Rochester on a more equal footing. Through the lens of theorists like Gilbert and Gubar, Bachelard and Eagleton, this study aims to show how Thornfield Hall acts as a living, breathing character that intensifies and complements the brooding gothic atmosphere of *Jane Eyre* while also paving the way for a more enlightened and insightful understanding of the novel's feminist critiques on gender and power.

Keywords: Gothic Literature, Thornfield Hall, Jane Eyre, character, Psychological

Introduction

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë is a gothic bildungsroman which traces the moral and psychological growth of its heroine amidst a very hauntingly dark, gothic atmosphere. Thornfield Hall serves as a pivotal character in shaping this brooding atmosphere and in carrying the narrative forward. The Hall becomes a reflection of its inhabitants while also affecting their thoughts, desires, emotions and inner conflicts. Far more than a backdrop, Thornfield functions as a dynamic character in the narrative, shaping events and reflecting internal struggles. As the Eyre Buds podcast frames it, Thornfield is at once "a gentleman's manor house, a cold and Gothic asylum, a place to call home," embodying contradictory meanings for different characters. There is a sense of secrecy, of confinement, of mystery within the walls of this Hall which acts as such

an integral element to the storyline that it takes a life of its own in the novel. The paper aims to study Thornfield Hall as a character through three unique but interconnected perspectives- as a gothic entity complicit in secrecy and confinements; as a psychological mirror that holds and reflects Jane's confusions and desires and Mr Rochester's turmoils along with his wife Bertha's confinement and loss of control and lastly, as a moral agent whose destruction paves the way for closure and a sense of autonomy and resolution for the characters.

Thornfield hall as a gothic entity

The initial description of Thornfield Hall is that of a very dark space, with very little light. There is only one light in one of the windows at the front of the house, everything else seems to be shrouded in darkness and shadows. Its "grey battlements" and interiors feel akin to the descriptions of gothic architectures in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Thornfield Hall feels like a mysterious character holding secrets, where Jane notices the "wide dark passages" and "large oaken doors". Jane even likens it to a church vault- "A very chill and vault-like air pervaded the stairs and the gallery, suggesting to my imagination the thought of a church vault" (Ch. 11). Thus, the place acts like a vessel of secrets, waiting to be unravelled. It even goes beyond that and actively withholds information, like a character, eventually disclosing the same at crucial stages of the storyline.

As though Thornfield itself were making fun of her, the "goblin-laughter" that Jane hears from above is disembodied. In their well-known interpretation of Thornfield as a symbolic prison, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) contend that it represents the patriarchal systems that imprison women: "Thornfield is Rochester's house, but it is also his mind, and the attic is the place where his secrets and his mad wife are hidden" (p. 342). Thornfield is not passive in this way; rather, it takes part in Jane's confusion and Rochester's concealment. Bertha Mason or the mad woman in the attic, thus becomes an extension of Thornfield Hall itself, both of them tied together in an inexplicable way, the voice of one echoing through the dark hallways of the other, sharing and disseminating a sense of supernatural atmosphere. This "strange laugh" echoing through the Hall transforms it into a sentient, almost supernatural presence. Jane describes the laugh as "tragic, as preternatural a laugh as any I ever heard… it passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber." (Ch. 11) and also "A demoniac laugh, low, suppressed, and deep, issued from the inner chamber." (Ch. 20)

Moreover, the Hall goes beyond being mere architecture when it acts upon the characters through acts of violence, especially the two incidents involving fire, the second of which leads to the killing of this character, ending the misery of its inhabitants and giving them a chance to start afresh.

Thornfield hall as a mirror of desire, fear and control

Thornfield Hall serves an important function of reflecting the true emotions of its inhabitants. The physical and psychological state of the mansion mirrors their emotional landscapes and the secrets they hold. Jane finds solace for the first time in the mansion, especially when compared to Gateshead and Lowood school. For her, Thornfield initially appears as a haven from the cold charity of Gateshead and the repressiveness of Lowood. Another interesting facet about the Hall vis-a-vis its relationship with Jane lies in the spatial duality she experiences. On one hand, Thornfield's gardens become a space where Jane experiences moments of freedom, liberation and expansion. For instance, she says "I went apart into the orchard: no nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like was there" (Ch. 23). However, she also feels the weight of the mansion's secrets, its heaviness rests like a palpable feeling for her, "The house is a fine

place, but it is melancholy: it has a very sombre air." (Ch. 11) she says. Another significant moment for Jane comes from her feelings for Mr Rochester. Many Gothic novels explore anxieties around sexuality and accordingly Thornfield is where Jane explores romantic passion with Rochester.

For Rochester, the hall becomes a representation of his emotional burdens and past secrets. When Jane roams the halls of Thornfield Hall, metaphorically, she is exploring Rochester's secrets and his complex past. Thus, the Hall becomes a sort of an important figure that helps Jane understand Mr Rochester in a bit more depth. The unkempt secretive third floor along with the locked attic serve as a physical manifestation of his fear. The strange noises, the fires, the mysterious incidents in the dead of the night- all work as physical and psychological embodiments of the Hall itself. The hidden aspects of the mansion symbolise the secrets and the fears that he harbors and him locking away his wife becomes an act of violence imposed on Bertha but also psychological torment imposed on himself.

For Rochester's wife, Bertha Mason, the Hall becomes an asylum, confining her in its gothic grasp, becoming a tool through which Mr Rochester exercises control over her. Another interesting way to view this subjugation of Bertha can be from the lens of feminist spatial theory which argues that domestic spaces can simultaneously provide shelter but also act as structures of control. The Hall ultimately strips her off of her personal identity, reducing her to a spirit, a shadow of her former self. Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* paints the picture more clearly. Antoinette (Bertha) says, "There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now…What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (Rhys 111). This haunting articulation of disorientation and erasure highlights Thornfield as a space that consumes individuality, reducing Bertha/Antoinette into the "madwoman" figure that Jane perceives only from the outside.

Thus, Thornfield Hall evokes different feelings for different characters and goes beyond the role of a setting. It leads to fermentation of feelings that the characters eventually have to come to terms with, almost as if another character were compelling them towards confrontation with their respective fates.

Thornfield hall as a moral agent

Thornfield Hall reflects Jane's internal conflict between principle and passion. She has intense emotional experiences with Rochester in the hall, but she also has to fight temptation when she realises the reality of his existing marriage. Jane uses the house as a stage to practise her moral decisions. A helpful lens for this is provided by Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958/1994), which contends that homes are not just inert dwellings but are "psychic topographies" that contain and mould human consciousness. Thornfield is a prime example of this idea, as its structure of secrecy and revelation reflects Jane's conflicted mentality.

One of the most crucial roles played by Thornfield Hall is in the way it enables closure through its own destruction. When Bertha sets fire to the mansion, it collapses, thereby releasing all the gothic energy it once contained and allowing for its inhabitants to be set free from their moral shortcomings and feelings of anxieties, fears and guilt from their past. The Hall, which acted as a repository of Mr Rochester's sins and secrecy is thus destroyed, culminating in a fire as a consequence of his own actions.

Thornfield's devastation into a "blackened ruin" and a "desolate wreck" has symbolic and narrative meaning. It makes room for Jane and Rochester's relationship to be rearranged. It stands for injustice because of Jane's weakness, Rochester's power and Bertha's oppression. After the house disappears, Jane returns to Rochester at Ferndean, where the social and physical scales are reversed: Jane is

financially independent, Rochester is blind and dependent and their union is restored on an equal footing.

Thornfield's collapse has been interpreted by critics like Terry Eagleton (1975) as a metaphor for the breakdown of gender and class structures. The manor's destruction marks the end of a patriarchal system that was unable to support its inconsistencies. Thornfield enacts narrative justice in this way: Jane's freedom depends on its demise.

Conclusion

Thornfield Hall remains a pervasive element in *Jane Eyre.* It acts not just as a passive backdrop for the romantic tension that brews between Jane and Mr Rochester apart from Jane's inner fears and anxieties and Mr Rochester's guilt and a haunting past, but also as a living breathing gothic entity that drives the narrative and shapes and moulds the thoughts, feelings and overall atmosphere in the book. It plays a pivotal role in deciding the trajectory of the plot and in sealing the fate of its inhabitants, its inevitable destruction by Mr Rochester's wife, Bertha Mason, setting the characters free and giving them a new beginning where the power dynamics die in the flames and both Jane and Edward are able to be together as equals.

Brontë innovates by placing the house at the centre of a woman's Bildungsroman, while also contributing to the Gothic tradition of animating the place by making Thornfield such an important presence. Thornfield's fall signifies the symbolic death of inequality as well as the collapse of a building, which allows Jane to reappear at Ferndean. In the end, Thornfield Hall is not a passive location but rather an active force, a haunted character whose agency makes sure that Jane's story is about mastering passions as much as it is about conquering spaces.

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