

**FROM ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD: THE REPRESENTATION OF JOHN
REED IN JANE EYRE**

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Abstract

The article examines the representation of John Reed in Jane Eyre by employing the theoretical framework of John Tosh — a British historian and one of the most influential figures in Victorian Masculinity Studies. Because Tosh discusses the process of male gender identity formation as it occurs within the Victorian family, his ideas find a direct resonance with the selected domestic novel of Charlotte Brontë. In tracing John Reed's transition from adolescence to adulthood, the aim is to raise and answer the following queries: How is the fourteen-year-old boy represented through the male body in Jane Eyre (1847)? As he traverses across the private-public-private spheres and turns twenty-two years of age, what are some of the so-called appropriate masculine values that John Reed is expected to acquire in the course of this tripartite journey? Does he succeed in achieving and demonstrating these masculine values? Even as this discussion attempts to formulate answers to such questions, it is found that John Reed's bodily dissipation and subsequent suicide are a step away from Victorian manliness and, simultaneously, a step toward feminisation. Eventually, it is seen that John Reed's failure to conform to his mother's expectations of maleness, makes apparent the contradictions and challenges that most Victorian boys must inevitably face in the process of attaining manhood in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Boys, Family, Father, Masculinity, Victorian

Introduction

The character of John Reed in *Jane Eyre* (1847) does not directly occupy much narrative space in the novel other than in its initial pages. He is, nevertheless, invoked and re-invoked in the consciousness of the reader, kept alive as it were, through the accounts narrated by Bessie and

her husband Robert, as well as in the hallucinations of a dying Mrs. Reed. Piecing together these sporadic appearances of John Reed at various narrative junctures in the novel where he exists first as an adolescent performing his male role (Chapters 1-4), accorded as it were, with the power of the “master” of the house (Brontë 5), then as the embodiment of a “dissipated young man” (Brontë 78) unable to successfully transition to manhood (Chapter 10), and finally, in the fashion of a dead spirit which hangs over Gateshead Hall (Chapters 21-22) — the paper traces how Brontë directly relates the dismal prospects of the Reed family with the boy’s failure to negotiate the contradictions inherent in the construct of Victorian manliness. This construct is seen through the lens of the theoretical framework of John Tosh — a contemporary British historian engaged in unearthing the relationship that existed between Victorian men and masculinity, the private and public sphere, and manhood and domesticity in the nineteenth century. In reading John Reed’s character, the aim is to interrogate manliness as embedded between the stages of adolescence and adulthood. This aim is achieved by raising and answering the following research questions:

- How is John Reed, as a fourteen-year-old boy, represented through the male body in *Jane Eyre* (1847)?
- As he turns twenty-two years of age, what are some of the so-called appropriate masculine values that John Reed is expected to acquire in the course of his tripartite journey across the private-public-private spheres within Victorian society?
- Does John Reed succeed in achieving and demonstrating these masculine values?

John Reed as a Fourteen-year-old Boy

In the first set of scenes John Reed appears to exercise his male privilege through the subordination of Jane. This is how we are introduced to him:

“What do you want?” I asked, with awkward diffidence.

“Say, ‘What do you want, Master Reed?’” was the answer. “I want you to come here;” and seating himself in an arm-chair, he intimated by a gesture that I was to approach and stand before him.

John Reed was a schoolboy of fourteen years old; four years older than I, for I was but ten: large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities. (Brontë 5)

By employing terms such as “large and stout, “spacious visage”, “heavy limbs” and “large extremities” to define John Reed, Brontë squarely places the reader’s attention on his physical constitution, hardihood and enormity. The author perhaps resorts to a detailed description of such expansive bodily proportions for a boy who is merely fourteen years of age because Victorians’ perception of manliness in the nineteenth century, typically had bodily associations. In *A Man’s Place* (1999), John Tosh observes that for the Victorians:

Energy, will, straightforwardness and courage were the key requirements. Sometimes there was an implied claim to natural endowment [. . .]. This aspect was explicit in what was for the Victorians the key attribute of manliness— independence. . . First impressions of an individual were strongly conditioned by physical indicators — countenance, voice and hand-clasp could (and should) all be ‘manly.’(111)

Given these nineteenth-century conventions, it is almost inevitable that the reader first meets John Reed through an emphasis on his physical features. Brontë further emphasises the boy’s corpulent superiority by associating it with his perceived ascendancy over the household:

John had not much affection for his mother and sisters, and an antipathy to me. He bullied and punished me . . . every nerve I had feared him [. . .]. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired [. . .] the servants did not like to offend their young master by taking my part against him, and Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence . . . I wonder if he read that notion in my face; for, all at once, without speaking, he struck suddenly and strongly [. . .]. “Now, I’ll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years.” (Brontë 5-6)

Most critics have been inclined to interpret this passage as denoting John Reed’s physical assault of Jane, her ill-treatment by the Reeds, and her inferior position within the social hierarchy (Peters; Inge; Jaekel; Morris). The boy’s “physical sadism” (Showalter 70) notwithstanding, these critics have largely failed to contextualise Jane’s complaints in the light of John Reed’s maleness. Because the Victorians “placed a premium on physical prowess and readiness for combat” (Tosh 111), what stands out in these lines is John Reed’s readiness to strike at the smallest of (what he deems) Jane’s transgressions. John Reed is quick to defend his honour by quickly disposing of the challenger (in this case, a girl). In this instance, John Reed’s maleness is

shown to conform to Victorian notions of manliness so that on the whole, his masculinity can be said to be about defense against humiliation and shame, and underlying both these aspects, ironically, is John Reed's fear.

This nuanced representation of male corporeal masculinity serves two purposes. Firstly, such images conjure strong associations of what aspects of masculinity were perceived as normative in the mid-Victorian era. Secondly, such a depiction of John Reed leads the reader towards one of the most complex aspects of manliness in the nineteenth century — the contradictory ordering of a man's life in the context of the Victorian family. The contradiction was that even though physical health and strength were hailed as manly attributes by the Victorians, yet it was domesticity that was one of the major defining attributes of manliness. As John Tosh opines, this contrariness existed because a man's household — “the little world...of which he is the monarch”— answered to deep-seated masculine needs such as mastery, and a desire for control as well as respect (49). These were needs that otherwise found a direct outlet in the public sphere mostly through work, or even, through indulgence in manly sports with other men. So, even though domestic advice literature and household management was addressed exclusively to women, Victorian culture itself was determined by the needs of men (Tosh 48-9). Likewise, John Reed's masculine needs are met at home since Gateshead Hall (despite the novel's repeated avowals of John Reed being the master of the house) is, in fact, associated very closely with women in the form of the bustling servants, the proud sisters and the indifferent mother. John Reed is shown performing his male role strictly at home, in the women's sphere, unaware as he is, at this point, to the difficulties awaiting him in the public realm, the male sphere. Furthermore, femininity is counterpoised sharply to masculinity in a rather unfortunate way — the “abuse” inflicted by the man of the house (Brontë 6) is silently supported by the remaining members of the domestic unit, all of whom happen to be women (Brontë 1-7). In short, John Reed's physicality, his assumed male authority over the entire domestic unit, and his personal traits seem to enhance his masculine status right at the very beginning of *Jane Eyre*.

John Reed as a Twenty-two-year-old Man

The above being the case, does John Reed continue to occupy this normative position till the very end of his career? From this point onwards in *Jane Eyre*, there sets in a series of contradictions with respect to John Reed's evolving masculinity as he transitions from adolescence to adulthood. If the first four chapters of *Jane Eyre* are spilled with instances of his

“violent tyrannies” (Brontë 10), then, negating such initial illustrations of boyhood, is the ensuing process of John Reed’s ascent to manhood. His adolescence having graduated to youth, the reader is informed of John Reed’s progress when Bessie, in her conversation with the eighteen-year-old Jane at Lowood, describes the boy’s poor performance in the public sphere:

“Oh, he is not doing so well as his mama could wish. He went to college, and he got—plucked, I think they call it: and then his uncles wanted him to be a barrister, and study the law: but he is such a dissipated young man, they will never make much of him, I think.” (Brontë 78)

The four-year age difference between the cousins which had earlier been highlighted in the opening chapter (Brontë 5), immediately makes the reader aware that John Reed has by now attained the age of twenty-two. The reader’s realisation of his newly-begotten age is brought home alongside a hard fact implicit in Victorian culture — how boys become men may usually take on the appearance of the natural, or at the very least becomes the social norm. Yet the reality, as portrayed through Bessie’s disparaging remarks, is anything but routine. Becoming a man, for the Victorians, involved “detaching oneself from the home and its feminine comforts. It required a level of material success in the wider world, and this depended on the recognition of one’s manhood by one’s peers” (Tosh 110). In the case of John Reed, this would have meant completing his education, becoming a lawyer, and thereby, making a place for himself in the public sphere. Vanden Bossche observes that at age twenty-one, heirs would take possession of their property and guardianship would end (qtd. in Tosh 82). In this context, the “‘coming of age’ was an important ritual” intended to signal that a male had crossed the threshold of adolescence into manhood (qtd. in Tosh 83). The change from “cloistered adolescent to debutante was often compared to the butterfly’s emerging from its chrysalis, and the corresponding notion of a metamorphosis from dependency to autonomy was at the heart of the Victorian idea of adolescence” (qtd. in Tosh 83). However, the achievement of manhood was not an easy process. The difficulties inherent in attaining manhood are described by a popular Baptist writer of the Victorian period, William Landels, who, in a pamphlet entitled *How Men are Made* (1859), declares that men “do not simply grow”, they are made “not by passively yielding to an internal pressure, but by putting forth of an internal force which resists and masters, if it cannot change the outward” (qtd. in Tosh 111). John Reed, in this sense, cannot be made a man (by his uncles or otherwise) because, by this point in the novel, he lacks the internal force necessary to resist and master the material world. If Brontë had carefully delineated John Reed’s supposedly innate masculine attributes in the opening pages of the novel, she now

nullifies any rigid understanding of masculinity as a standardised norm by moving a step further to suggest that attaining manhood cannot blandly be described as a natural process. It is, instead, an externally induced process that involves competition (with other men), conflict, challenge and exertion — in short, it requires what Tosh describes as “masculine socialisation” (110).

If men are indeed ‘made’ through social processes, then there are also various stages to this ‘making’ Tosh observes that in Victorian England the journey to manhood “began with domestic dependence and ended in domestic authority” (122). In between these two versions of domesticity, “a young man needed to demonstrate to himself, and his peers that he could live without the comforts of home and the ministrations of its female inmates, so that when he came to form a household of his own, he would do so on the right terms” (122). Notably, it is through marriage that a young man could associate himself with the two key markers of coming of age — embarking upon a career and defining himself in relation to other men rather than to his birth family (Bossche 84). In this sense, the ‘making’ of John Reed’s manhood, then, constitutes his non-performance as prospective lawyer in the public sphere. This non-performance then becomes the cause of his non-accomplishment as prospective patriarch in the domestic sphere. It is also how the public and the private realms become interconnected in the representation of John Reed. There exists a tripartite cyclical link between the private-public-private domains in *Jane Eyre*, whereby John Reed is expected to complete this journey across the private realm (by living as the dependent but dominating little boy with his mother and sisters), public arena (by prospering professionally as a young man in the absence of the women of his birth family), and private zone (by returning to the domestic sphere as the legitimate patriarch with his wife). Even as he remains unmarried, John Reed not only fails to attain worldly success in the male-sphere, but he also fails, by extension, to be a responsible son, brother and finally to take on the mantle of his father. Once he leaves college, John Reed is never able to return to his domestic fold as the head of the family. Hence, within the private-public-private trajectory, the first component of this cycle is reflected in boy’s the initial victory and domination over the household inmates at the age of fourteen. The absence of second (professional success) and third components (patriarchal ascension) within this trajectory at the age of twenty-two are gradually made evident through second-hand narrations given by other characters in the novel. These narrations, in turn, chronicle John Reed’s collapse into an abyss resulting from the dereliction of duties that were seen as part and parcel of the Victorian male role.

Ramifications of a Failed Masculine Trajectory

The second and third set of scenes (Chapter 10; Chapter 21-22) focusing on John Reed in *Jane Eyre* betray some of the repercussions of the non-fulfilment of the male role both on the Reed family, as well as on John Reed himself. One of the consequences of John Reed's failure to effectively transition to manhood is the unconventional economic set-up at Gateshead Hall. Significantly, Brontë devotes much of the narrative space to the financial prospects of the family through the reports of Bessie and Robert, the household servants who, much like John Reed, are also Mrs Reed's dependents. Bessie informs us that "Mr. John's conduct does not please her — he spends a deal of money" (Brontë 78) while Robert tells us that "he got into debt and into jail: his mother helped him out twice . . . but he returned to his old companions and habits" (Brontë 194). Upon successful completion of the journey across private-public-private, the patriarch of the family in Victorian England was presumed "to govern, to inform, and most importantly, to provide" (Tosh 85). On the contrary, John Reed, because he is unable to advance in the material world, continues to remain financially dependent on his mother. In this way, he is denied a fully adult masculine status even at the age of twenty-two. There is also an element of unconventionality in this economic dependency. Tosh mentions that "fathers controlled the purse-strings and hence were able to determine their son's personal incomes, their access to education and training, and their place of residence" (121). However, in a reversal of gender dynamics, Brontë places the control of these purse strings in the hands of the mother — Mrs Reed. The transfer of management of the family's finances from the father to that of the mother is directly challenged by John Reed — a challenge in which he fails miserably, thereby, drawing the reader's attention to his subservient status vis-à-vis his mother. As a result of this economic arrangement, it is the ageing mother who comes to represent masculine characteristics (because she is the one vested with the power to distribute money to her dependents), while on the other hand, the grown-up son becomes feminised (because he is the one placed in the position of a dependent asking her for money).

Beginning with Bessie's disapproving rendition of his professional advancement, to documenting the household finances, Brontë finally completes framing this arc of John Reed's downfall by employing a trope with which she had earlier familiarised the reader: Robert's description of how John Reed "ruined his health . . . among the worst of men and women" (Brontë 195) serves as a reminder of the erstwhile contrasting and awe-inspiring bodily endowments of the "master" of the house (Brontë 5) who had once been the epitome of restless

energy, obstinate will and a robust demeanor (Brontë 1-6). Because Brontë had begun her portrayal of John Reed by casting him in primarily physical terms, it is customary for her to yoke his elimination from the Reed family, and eventually from the novel, with his physical deterioration. It is telling, therefore, that the manner of John Reed's death is suicide — a self-induced final blow to the whole enterprise of the making of manhood. In the final instance, John Reed's death is brought about by an insightful self-recognition of his failure at laying a claim over what he believes to be his rightful share as the only heir of his deceased father:

He came down to Gateshead about three weeks ago and wanted missis to give up all to him. Missis refused: her means have long been much reduced by his extravagance; so, he went back again, and the next news was that he was dead. How he died, God knows! — they say he killed himself.” (Brontë 195)

The fading health of Mrs Reed is likewise crouched in monetary terms: “Missis had been out of health herself for some time [. . .] and the loss of money and fear of poverty were quite breaking her down” (Brontë 195). Significantly, it is not so much the loss of money as it is the degeneration of her son that becomes the cause of Mrs Reed's illness: “The information about Mr. John's death and the manner of it came too suddenly — it brought on a stroke” (Brontë 195).

The ailing body of Mrs Reed, then, like the corporeality of her son, also functions as a literary trope. It is not only that John Reed's non-fulfilment of his masculine role is blamed for his mother's death; Brontë employs Mrs Reed's dying hallucinations as a prism through which to comprehend the full impact of her son's failure in one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, which functions as the climax to the devolution of John Reed. When Jane arrives at Gateshead to bid farewell to a dying aunt, Mrs Reed, in one of her delusional moments, dwells upon the various versions of masculinity that she had been exposed to during her lifetime:

I had a dislike to her mother always; for she was my husband's only sister, and a great favourite with him: he opposed the family's disowning her when she made her low marriage; and when news came of her death, he wept like a simpleton. He would send for the baby; though I entreated him rather to put it out to nurse and pay for its maintenance. I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it [. . .]. Reed pitied it; and he used to nurse it and notice it as if it had been his own [. . .]. In his last illness, he had it brought continually to his bedside; and but an hour before he died, he bound me by vow to keep the creature. I would as soon have been

charged with a pauper brat out of a workhouse: but he was weak, naturally weak. John does not at all resemble his father, and I am glad of it: John is like me and like my brothers — he is quite a Gibson. Oh, I wish he would cease tormenting me with letters for money? I have no more money to give him: we are getting poor. I must send away half the servants and shut up part of the house; or let it off. I can never submit to do that — yet how are we to get on? Two-thirds of my income goes in paying the interest of mortgages. John gambles dreadfully, and always loses — poor boy! He is beset by sharpers: John is sunk and degraded—his look is frightful — I feel ashamed for him when I see him. (Brontë 204)

As this paragraph illustrates, an integral part of manhood is to be constantly measured against other men. John Reed is first pitted against his father, and then his maternal uncles. However, Mrs Reed's vehement denial that the son does not bear any resemblance to his weak father but that, in fact, he is more like his mother and maternal uncles, only serves to underline how the concrete development of masculinity here is stunted—the young boy, in Victorian England, often had to separate from his mother's nurturing fold, and thereby, from his own proto-feminine identity; and eventually identify with his father (Tosh 112). But in *Jane Eyre*, it appears that fathering itself is deficient. The mother hastily refers to her own brothers as appropriate masculine examples for the son to emulate because Mr Reed serves as an inappropriate masculine model for their son. Be it in the nineteenth century or even today, “normative definitions of manliness face the problem that not many men actually meet those normative standards” (Connell 10). In this respect, both father and son appear to fall short of normative definitions of masculinity. Mr. Reed is somewhat feminised (in his propensity for tears and emotions usually associated with women), and the twenty-two-year-old John Reed comes to resemble the father in his feminine traits, as well as the mother in the eventual corruption of his male body. The adult John Reed is thus, a far cry from the picture of domestic authority and legitimation that we had witnessed when he was aged fourteen. The interpretation of John Reed's masculinity as a type that switches between displaying aspects of normative Victorian manliness on the one hand, and a feminised status on the other, is indeed a feature often overlooked by most literary scholars.

This being the case, the reader, like Mrs Reed, may conclude that both the Reed men fail in their role and duties as the head(s) of their family. Patriarchal domesticity in *Jane Eyre* fails to carry

out its chief function, that is, to make the home a safe haven for women. This failure is yet another repercussion of masculine non-performance. If Mr. Reed is given to too much emotion and neglects the upbringing of his children, then John Reed's degradation and death brings about the final disintegration of the family. In the absence of a father and brother, the women of the family are left with no choice but to helplessly seek solace outside the home. Eliza takes refuge in a nunnery, and Georgiana, after a failed attempt at elopement with a young lord, eventually ends up marrying "a wealthy worn-out man of fashion" (Brontë 213).

Findings:

It is through the character arc of John Reed from the age of fourteen to twenty-two that *Jane Eyre* ruptures the standard notion of domestic security, stability and protection of a home suffused by a man, as characterised, for example, in John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, where the man's power is seen as "active, progressive, defensive" (51). It is by means of this masculine power attained through "rough work in the open world . . . peril and trial," that a man protects a woman from "all danger and temptation" (Ruskin 51). Brontë counters such Victorian idealisations of home by showing how difficult it can be for a man to provide patriarchal protection. The link between the prevailing nineteenth-century construct of manliness and its relationship with domesticity as well as patriarchy becomes problematised when the reader recalls that not only is the failure of both Mr. Reed and John Reed constructed in terms that are either increasingly feminine or feminised, but also that neither the father nor son is given a voice of his own to map the trajectory of their individual lives, thereby, diminishing their stature in the scheme of things, and re-establishing them as indeed "weak, naturally weak" (Brontë 204) to tell their life-story. The Reed men's silence and the female usurpation of the narration of their stories is significant because it reveals how power and powerlessness, advantage and disadvantage, intertwine in the formation of Victorian manhood.

Conclusion:

This paper began by positing that John Reed's masculinity is constructed across the two poles of Victorian manliness and the feminisation of the Victorian male. In order to ratify this claim, it argued how the figure of the adolescent John Reed reflects standard Victorian notions concerning male authority and male corporeality through his domination over all the women within the Reed household. Taking Tosh's insightful observations on mid-nineteenth century male body-politics as the primary source of reference, the paper then underlined how the idea of

adult masculinity, at the time, depended upon the successful completion of the three phases of the private-public-private cycle. In doing so, the paper explained how, within this tripartite trajectory, the male child was expected to relinquish the comforts of the feminine 'home' for the rigours of the public sphere, and thereupon, to re-establish himself within his family as the new-found patriarch with a wife in tow. By evaluating John Reed's cyclical movement across this private-public-private divide, the paper emphasised his failure both in the professional world (as a lawyer) as well as that in the private sphere (as a prospective patriarch). Subsequently, the paper located this double failure in the eventual feminisation of the adult male body. In the final instance, such a feminisation was understood as a type of patriarchal failure that leads to the eventual disintegration of the Reed family.

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