

Writing the Female Experience

By Elizabeth Zehl



Works that fall within the genre of bildungsroman chart the "advancement and development of the individual," generally from childhood to, and sometimes through, adulthood (Kunz 2010). Encouraged by "Romanticism's interest in the phenomena of consciousness and memory," the genre took root in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Miles 1974, p990). Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, is a fictional, female bildungsroman firmly established in the canon of Western literature. Hettie Jones' *How I Became Hettie Jones*, published in 1990, serves as a non-fictional, modern, female bildungsroman. The nearly 150-year distance between the works' publications indicates the extreme divergence of the experiences of their authors; while Brontë's life was spent in nineteenth-century England, Jones grew up in New York City during the height of the beat movement. Joint consideration of the works reveals the ways in which *How I Became Hettie Jones* contributes to the body of literature about the female experience-and in doing so works indirectly to correct and complete *Jane Eyre* through providing a modern, fully autobiographical account of the intellectual and emotional development of a woman from childhood through adulthood.

Despite undertaking a similar effort, Brontë's novel and Jones' autobiography differ greatly in presentation and execution. *Jane Eyre* was originally published as *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, was written under a pseudonym, and is narrated in the first person. Brontë detached herself from the text at multiple levels, while also working to craft a piece of literature that approximated a reality deeply related to her own. How can a woman write intimately about the psychological maturation of a woman without drawing heavily upon her own framework of experience and memory. Indeed, several of the major characters and events within *Jane Eyre* had clear parallels to her life (Kunz 2010). The very character of *Jane Eyre* can be read as a radical female figure, expressing not only Brontë's own uncommon position as a female writer, but also potentially her belief that women should be permitted to engage more actively in the then male-dominated social structure. The ongoing popularity of the novel and its canonization also speak to Brontë's intricate rendering of a young woman's growth process, a complex subject she would know little about without her own experience as a female.

Brontë sought to write a fictional novel, while Jones chose to write a non-fictional account of her own life. This is a

major difference of form between the works that demands acknowledgement; yet beyond this clear distinction, Jones' expression of ownership of, and clear connection to, her bildungsroman increases its legitimacy as an accurate account of the development of an individual woman. How I Became Hettie Jones directly announces its purpose and origin: to explain the process by which Jones became Jones herself. This difference in presentation, aside from form, can also be understood in the context of the authors' placement in radically different socio-cultural realms and historical periods. Jones' life, while notably marked by sexism and racism, was unhindered by the rigid gender conventions of Brontë's world. This increased mobility gave Jones access to a wide range of experiences. She was not only able to form platonic and romantic relationships with intellectually and artistically gifted contemporaries, but to have shared experiences with male and female writers, artists, and musicians during a particularly charged period of American cultural and political history. Furthermore, Jones knew that readers in 1990 would not be alarmed by a bluntly personal account of the female experience, whereas Brontë's 1847 readership required at least a semi-didactic narrative framework.

Structural continuity between the works can be found in the emphasis placed on moments of self-conscious liminality, expansion, and change; events of departure and arrival serve as major structural units for each. Jones' autobiography is chaptered and placed within five sections, four of which are titled according to the location of her physical home within New York City: "Morton Street," "Twentieth Street," "Fourteenth Street," and "Cooper Square." Similarly, moments of geographical transition are highlighted in *Jane Eyre* when Jane leaves her childhood home at Gateshead to travel to the Lowood Institute, then to Thornfield Manor, Moor House, and Ferndean Manor. When change is manifested in physical movement, moments of introspection are sparked for both Jane and Hettie. After making the decision to leave Lowood for a job as governess at Thornfield, Jane explains to the reader that she "longed to go where there was life and movement" (Brontë 2001, p75). While she manages to lead a radically dynamic life despite tremendous gender and socio-economic restrictions-one which included education, paid work, travel, and marriage to a partner who respected and admired the complexity of her identity-Jane's experiences of "life and movement" simply cannot match those of Hettie. Jane's decision to accept the job at

Thornfield was partially influenced by the opportunity to be "seventy miles nearer London," while Jones led her life directly within a major urban center, steeped for decades in a stimulating environment Jane could only dream of (Brontë 2001, p75). The root of this difference in experience is contained primarily within the different periods the two women operated within; Jones' opportunity to carry the narrative directly into the urban center marks an arrival and period of growth that Jane desired but never fully accessed.

Although *Jane Eyre* and *How I Became Hettie Jones* are primarily organized chronologically, a sense of retrospective patterning is at work. The voice of older Jane breaks through the narrative to highlight important moments of internal development, as does the voice of older Hettie. Upon her arrival at Thornfield, Jane muses: "Externals have a great effect on the young: I thought that a fairer era of life was beginning for me, one that was to have its flowers and pleasures, as well as its thorns and toils" (Brontë 2001, p83). Hettie's older voice freely enters the text from its authorial present to weave careful prose that unites her past and present identity, illuminating the effects of the passage of time and space on identity: "From Fourteenth Street we'd have to salvage...even the kitchen sink. Which like me remains on Cooper Square but linked to an earlier time and place. So that tonight, at the dishes, though twice her age I can also see that person I was at twenty-seven, bathing in her kitchen sink, with all of downtown at her back, and the morning sun ablaze in the poverty trees" (Jones 1990, p164). In these instances, a heightened sense of perception shapes the text, adding depth and nuance to the process of growth that it tracks.

Despite the shared and sustained emphasis on growth and retrospection, there is a sharp contrast between the endings of *Jane Eyre* and *How I Became Hettie Jones*. Jane concludes the novel by directly addressing the reader and revealing that she has written the work ten years after her successful marriage to Mr. Rochester: "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 2001, p382). She goes on to tell of the birth of their first son, who Mr. Rochester was able to see after the impeccably timed and miraculous return of his vision. The conclusion to Jones' work is more protracted and far less of a traditional fairytale. Hettie writes of the dissolution of her marriage to Amiri Baraka (formally LeRoi Jones) brought about gradually by mutual infidelity, personal changes, and the stress of celebrity attention. Ultimately, Baraka's alignment with the

Black Power movement leads him to renounce Hettie and their mixed-race children and results in their permanent separation. Indeed, many of his most powerful plays and poetry are sourced from this hatred of that which is not black. *How I Became Hettie Jones* culminates in a state of confident separateness, while *Jane Eyre* ends with relieved union.

Jane Eyre and *How I Became Hettie Jones* are narratives of individual female growth that seek, in both gendered and non-gendered terms, to illuminate the journey of becoming. Shared structural elements—clearly designated locations and retrospective patterning—guide readers through the women’s processes of self-defining their physical and mental position. The interplay between chronology and retrospection further requires each female voice to contemplate the dimensions of identity and self-understanding revealed by the passage of time. The divergence of meaning in the works’ endings, however, discloses an important correction to *Jane Eyre*. Jane’s expansion beyond her social status forms her into a complex individual, but—with the aid of a simplifying Romantic framework—Brontë uses marriage to neatly reinsert her into the conventional social schema. The ending highlights Jane’s transformation into a wife—a person set in relation to another. The culmination of Hettie’s narrative is not marriage, but rather separation and single motherhood, emphasizing her self-oneness. This correction, as well as the reinforcement of authenticity provided by Jones’ presentation of her work as non-fiction, renders *How I Became Hettie Jones* a progression of *Jane Eyre*.

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