

# Power Strife and Rebellion in “Jane Eyre” from the Perspective of Field

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**Abstract:** In the novel “Jane Eyre”, Jane’s rebellious personality endowed the text with much more charisma, and consequently, many critics have analyzed Jane’s rebellion in the novel. However, some critics are discontent with the end that Jane enters the aristocratic class and makes compromise with the social order that once repressed her, which, in their minds, is very different from the text’s more subversive parts. To offer a different explanation for Jane’s attribute of “being sometimes subversive but at other times submissive”, this paper analyzes Jane’s rebellion using Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory. This paper argues that rebellion is actually one of Jane’s strategies, which can help her deal with the difficulties in different social situations, and in fact, Jane chooses her strategy unconsciously every time, after her subconscious examines the social situation and the capital she owns.

**Keywords:** Jane Eyre; Power Strife; Rebellion; Field; Pierre Bourdieu

## 1. Introduction

About Charlotte Bronte’s “Jane Eyre”, one of Jane’s most discussed characteristics is her rebellious personality, which makes the novel much more inviting. Many critics analyzed Jane’s rebellion from different perspectives, and many analyses argued that this text was both subverting and supporting class ideology as Jane rebels against the aristocrats’ social exclusion in the first place yet joined the aristocrats at the end of the novel.

In 1980, Zhu Qingying, a famous Chinese translator, translated “Jane Eyre” into Chinese, and in the translator’s preface, she commented: “Jane Eyre entered the aristocratic class that she was once hostile to, and made compromise with the social order that had repressed her... This ending can hardly be called a bright one”.<sup>[1]</sup> Many Chinese readers resonated with Zhu Qingying’s comment at that time. Other scholars also discussed about Jane’s transition from a subversive character to a more submissive one. For example, Politi made comments in his paper, writing that “the girl-child will grow from revolted marginality to quiescent socialization”.<sup>[2]</sup> Bossche, however, had a different opinion. He thought Jane “deploys the languages of class in order to confront a series of social situations”, and Jane was “strategically deploying radical political discourse”.<sup>[3]</sup> This paper agrees with Bossche’s interpretation of Jane’s rebellion as a strategy, but this paper also argues that Jane’s rebellion is an unconsciously chosen strategy under the impact of “habitus” and “capital”, and this strategy is employed in the power strife within different fields.

This paper employs Bourdieu’s theory of “field” to analyze Jane’s rebellion. A “field” can be defined as a network of objective relationships existing at various locations.<sup>[4]</sup> Fields are like smaller autonomous societies, which have their own logic and rules. Once the social actors enter a field, they acquire the special code of behaviors and expressions peculiar to this field, which is the entry charge they have to pay.<sup>[4]</sup> In addition to “field”, another two key words must also be clarified. One is “habitus”, which was explained by Bourdieu as “some persistent but also changeable systems of disposition”,<sup>[5]</sup> and it “usually works at the subconscious level”.<sup>[4]</sup> The other is “capital”, which does not only involve the economic aspect of meaning, but was further classified by Bourdieu as financial capital, social capital and cultural capital. There is always power strife within different fields, and to survive in the power strife, the social actors within these fields would often choose different strategies. Regarding the social actors’ “habitus” and “capital”, the strategies these social actors would choose in the power strife can be categorized as three types – conservative strategy, inheriting strategy, and subversive strategy.<sup>[4]</sup> In “Jane Eyre”, Jane also employs different strategies when encountering different situations.

Bourdieu’s theory offers a different perspective to look into Jane’s rebellion, and it may give a new

answer to “why Jane is sometimes subversive but at other times submissive”.

## 2. The Field of Gateshead: Subversive Strategy

Gateshead is one of the fields in the novel “Jane Eyre”, and as all fields have their own logic and rules, Gateshead is not an exception. According to Jane’s narration, John, Georgiana, and Eliza are favored children at Gateshead, while Jane is always excluded. In the Reeds’ hearts, that Jane owns no capital is one of the reasons that she should be excluded. In the book, when John Reed finds that Jane is reading a book from the bookshelf, he says: “You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us”.<sup>[6]</sup> John’s words explain one of the rules at Gateshead: only children who have capital deserve love and respect.

However, this is not the only reason for people’s bad treatment of Jane. From Mrs. Reed and the servants’ words, another reason is also revealed. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Reed says to Jane that she regretted to be under the necessity of keeping Jane at a distance until “Jane was endeavoring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner, - something lighter franker, more natural as it were”.<sup>[6]</sup> The servants also unconsciously follow the rules of the Gateshead field. Miss Abbot comments on Jane as “an underhand little thing” and she “never saw a girl of her age with so much cover”, even though Jane does nothing wrong.<sup>[6]</sup> However, when the servants are talking about Georgiana, they say “a beauty like Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition”.<sup>[6]</sup> Although Jane tries to become a liked kid at Gateshead, people still take her as a treacherous child. Jane knows if she had been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child – though equally dependent and friendless – Mrs. Reed would have endured her presence more complacently.<sup>[6]</sup>

All the evidence above suggests that the rule of the Gateshead field is: only beautiful, childlike kids who have capital deserve love and respect, and children lacking these attributes might be thought as treacherous and needing more discipline.

Clearly, Jane is opposed to the rule of the Gateshead field. When Jane is being bullied by John, she curses: “Wicked and cruel boy!”, “You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!”.<sup>[6]</sup> For several times, Jane also employs the power of words to rebel against Mrs. Reed. Jane thinks after Mrs. Reed defames her before Brocklehurst: “Speak I must: I had been trodden on severely, and must turn: but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist?”, and finally she gathered her energies “and launched them in this blunt sentence...”.<sup>[6]</sup> It is obviously that Jane takes a subversive stance confronting the unreasonable rules of the Gateshead field, but all the resource she has to combat the Reeds is her power of words.

In fact, the reason why Jane rebels so bluntly at Gateshead is that she has no capital, no matter it is financial, social, or cultural capital. After fighting with John, Jane thinks: “a moment’s mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I feel revolted, in my desperation, to go all lengths”.<sup>[6]</sup> With no capital in Jane’s hands, she uses the subversive strategy at the Gateshead field, as she has nothing left and she can risk it all. But also due to the lack of any kind of capital, Jane has no chance of winning in the power strife within Gateshead, so she is finally exiled to Lowood.

## 3. The Field of Lowood: Conservative Strategy

The field of Lowood also has its own discipline. When Brocklehurst is talking with Mrs. Reed, he stresses Lowood’s students’ humility, quietness, plainness and poverty. As the administrator of Lowood school, Brocklehurst sets the rule that only children who are plain, obedient, and humble are good kids. The teachers at Lowood also add some articles to the rule, which are: diligent and tidy.

Although at the beginning, Jane still owns no capital at Lowood, she decides not to rebel but to accumulate her capital. Actually, Jane’s opinion is influenced by Hellen. When Hellen is asked by Jane why she does not want to leave Lowood, Hellen answers: “I was sent to Lowood to get an education; and it would be of no use going away until I have attained that object”.<sup>[6]</sup> Maybe as a result of Hellen’s words, Jane begins working really hard at school. As Jane describes about herself in the novel, she makes an irksome struggle with difficulties in habituating herself to new rules and unwonted tasks, and the fear of failure in these points harassed her worse than the physical hardships of her lot.<sup>[6]</sup>

Nevertheless, Brocklehurst tries to interrupt Jane's accumulation of cultural and social capital, but fortunately, Jane is helped by Miss Temple and gets the chance of continuing her accumulation. Gradually, Jane realizes her objective and "would not now have changed Lowood with all its privations, for Gateshead and its daily luxuries".<sup>[6]</sup> In the text, Jane herself also explains why she takes a conservative stance at Lowood field. She thinks: "a fondness for some of my studies, and a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight in pleasing my teachers, especially such as I loved, urged me on".<sup>[6]</sup> From Jane's confession, it is easy to see that Jane is gradually getting included by the field of Lowood as she accumulates her capital bit by bit. As her amount of capital rises, she is more and more conservative towards the Lowood field's rules.

But Jane never tends to take the inheriting strategy in the power strife at Lowood. One reason is that at that time her capital only reaches an average level, which just keeps her from getting hungry or homeless, so Jane would not want to totally inherit Lowood's ideology. The other is that Jane's values are different from Lowood school's ethics in many ways, which can be seen in Jane's talk with Hellen. After seeing Hellen being scolded, Jane says "If I were in your place I should dislike her; I should resist her if she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose".<sup>[6]</sup> Jane's disagreement with the code of Lowood suggests that she would not use the inheriting strategy in the power strife, however, to cope with the difficult social situations, she has to take the conservative strategy.

#### 4. The Field of Thornfield: From Conservative to Inheriting

After going to Thornfield, some changes are also witnessed in Jane's strategy in the power strife. In the field of Thornfield, one of the most important rules is class ideology. Because of the influence of class ideology, marriages are usually based on money and position. According to Jane's observation, Miss Ingram, who is Rochester's fiancée, "cannot truly like him; or not like him with true affection!"<sup>[6]</sup> When Jane believes that Rochester must be going to marry Miss Ingram, she thinks "he was going to marry her, for family, perhaps political reasons; because her rank and connections suited him".<sup>[6]</sup> From Jane's narration, Miss Ingram wants to marry Rochester because of his property, and it seems that Rochester also wants to marry Miss Ingram for her rank.

At Thornfield, Jane's cultural, social, and financial capital come to a stable level, so at the beginning, she takes the conservative strategy. The reason why she abandons the inheriting strategy can be seen from her attitude towards Rochester and Miss Ingram's marriage. Clearly, Jane has a disagreeing attitude towards Rochester and Miss Ingram's marriage. In the book, Jane says to Rochester that: "wed to one inferior to you – to one with whom you have no sympathy – whom I do not believe you truly love... I would scorn such a union".<sup>[6]</sup> Jane's disagreeing attitude determines that she would not like to use the inheriting strategy.

But at the same time, Jane would neither use the subversive strategy, as she does not actively pursue a relationship with Rochester, and she tries to empathize with Rochester for his choice. She has "not yet said anything condemnatory of Mr. Rochester's project of marrying for interest and connections", and she thinks: "the longer I considered the position, education, etc. of the parties, the less I felt justified in judging and blaming either him or Miss Ingram... All their class held these principles. I supposed, then, they had reasons for holding them".<sup>[6]</sup>

After inheriting great fortune from her relative, Jane, however, changes her strategy in the power strife, and about her fortune, she exclaims "it is a fine thing, reader, to be lifted in a moment from indigence to wealth – a very fine thing".<sup>[6]</sup> At that time, Jane's capital is at least at the same level with Rochester, so as a result, she employs the inheriting strategy. Some critics criticized Jane's final submission to class ideology, thinking that she makes a compromise with the aristocratic class that once repressed her. This paper thinks that inheriting class ideology is a strategy by Jane to cope with the social situation, just like when she employs the conservative or subversive strategies at other times, and she chooses this inheriting strategy in an unconscious way under the influence of habitus.

Habitus often "internalizes external forces and possibilities through social condition or regulation", and it "usually works at the subconscious level".<sup>[4]</sup> Living within the field of Thornfield and also the larger field of Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, class ideology is already internalized by Jane, but at the beginning, because of her lack of capital compared with Rochester, Jane would not want to take the inheriting strategy. As Jane rises to fortune, she unconsciously chooses the most suitable strategy for herself after her subconscious examines the social situation and the capital she owns, so she chooses to inherit. As a result, at the field of Thornfield, Jane experiences a shift of strategy from a conservative to

an inheriting one.

## 5. The Field of Marsh End: From Conservative to Subversive

Marsh End is another field in the novel. At this place, St. John expresses that he wants Jane to marry him for the call of mission. As the leader of the field of Marsh End, St. John actually sets the rule about relationships that emotions should be secondary to mission.

Jane's opinion about love differs from that of St. John, so it keeps her from using the inheriting strategy in the power strife. But she is almost persuaded by St. John at a time, so her strategy is neither a subversive one. As a result, Jane's strategy in the power strife at this moment is a conservative one.

Jane takes the conservative strategy because she is blinded by St. John's serious and arduous personality, and also, at that time, Jane's social, cultural and financial capital is close to that of St. John. St. John is as well-educated and knowledgeable as Jane, and after Jane shares her fortune with him, St. John owns as much financial capital as Jane does, and in addition, St. John's social capital is no less than that of Jane. As a result, Jane tends to be conservative towards St. John's ideas. Besides, Jane describes St. John as a "a very patient, very forbearing, and yet an exacting master".<sup>[6]</sup> St. John seems like an upright man with good intentions, so Jane does not totally see through the wrongness of his values about love.

Before St. John leaves, Jane is almost persuaded to marry him as she thinks: "my fears overcome – my wrestlings paralyzed. The Impossible – i.e. my marriage with St. John – was fast becoming the Possible".<sup>[6]</sup> However, she suddenly hears Rochester's voice crying "Jane! Jane! Jane!", and she decides to go back to Thornfield, which changes her decision.<sup>[6]</sup>

As she walks out of the field of Marsh End, she also gets rid of this field's influence. After arriving at Thornfield, Jane thinks: "Who would be hurt by my once more tasting the life his glance can give me".<sup>[6]</sup> Consequently, Jane finds that she still loves Rochester, so she later employs the subversive strategy and refuses to marry St. John. Jane's strategy in the power strife at Marsh End experiences a change from a conservative to a subversive one.

As is analyzed, Jane's choice of strategy is corresponding to the amount of capital she owns. The subversive strategy is often used when Jane owns almost no capital, the conservative strategy is often employed when Jane has a medium amount of capital, and the inheriting strategy is usually used when Jane owns a lot of capital. But Jane's subversive strategy at Marsh End is an exception, as she gets the chance of leaving the Marsh End, so the influence of this field cannot get control of Jane at this time, and she makes the choice to rebel against the rules St. John sets at Marsh End. As a result, in this particular situation, although Jane's amount of capital does not change, she still chooses to subvert.

## 6. Conclusions

Analyzing "Jane Eyre" from the perspective of Bourdieu's field theory, rebellion is actually one of Jane's strategies, which can help her to deal with difficulties in different social situations. Jane chooses different strategies in the power strife within different fields in an unconscious way under the influence of habitus and the capital she owns.

At Gateshead, regarding her special situation, Jane unconsciously chooses to rebel and subvert. At Lowood, Jane chooses to be conservative towards this school's rules. At Thornfield, Jane shifts from the conservative strategy to the inheriting strategy, which, as is analyzed, is also an unconscious behavior in response to the particular social situation. At Marsh End, Jane changes her strategy from being conservative to being subversive and rebellious.

In fact, Jane's choice of strategy is closely related to the amount of capital she owns. Jane uses the subversive strategy usually when she owns almost no capital. Except at Marsh End, Jane chooses to rebel against St. John's rules because she gets the chance of leaving this field and it is a particular situation. When Jane has some amount of capital, she usually chooses to use the conservative strategy, like what she does at Lowood and the beginning part of Thornfield. When Jane owns a lot of capital, she would choose the inheriting strategy, like what she does at the end of the novel.

As a result, Jane's being submissive to the class ideology that once repressed her is not a self-conscious act, but a strategy she unconsciously chooses after her subconscious examines the social situation and the capital she owns. By employing Bourdieu's theory of field, habitus, and capital, this

paper hopes to offer a different explanation for Jane's subversion and submission towards the rules set in different social situations.

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