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Bachelor's thesis in English for teacher training students 8-13 grade

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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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The protagonist Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1874) and the character Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*-series (1997-2007) are two famous female characters of popular fiction. These characters are presumably different, as they are not commonly compared in a literary sense. The question is thus: what does Jane, the young girl growing up in 19th century England and the young witch Hermione who lives in the wizarding world, have in common? This paper argues that the characters Jane Eyre from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1874) and Hermione Granger from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*-series (1997-2007) both use education as a tool to establish agency. As famous intellectual female characters, they have had a great influence on the portrayal of the literary feminist heroine. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is classified as an early representation of feminism in fiction, as the novel influenced the early feminist debates, such as the suffragette movement in the late 19th century (Homans 27). Likewise, Hermione became a feminist icon of the 21st century for her representation of the intellectual female character and promotion of academic ambitions to young girls of current and future generations (Kniesler 94, 97, 102). The characters Jane and Hermione are not commonly compared, as they are from distinctly different genres and literary periods. However, the important role of education in both of their characters personalities and developments is apparent and similar. Both characters seek knowledge, which proves to be key for the two women in establishing their place in society and pursue their ambitions.

This thesis will explore the role of education in the agency of Jane Eyre and Hermione Granger through a close-reading analysis with a feminist perspective. In addition, this essay will do a comparison on the role of education in the two characters based on the findings in the analysis. Because education is a broad term, this thesis will explore three specific perspectives of education: formal education, reading activities and social education. Firstly, formal education refers to the education gained from schools and educational institutions. Secondly, there is knowledge and the educational value gained from reading activities and interests, which in this paper will focus on the woman reader and the female quixotic. Lastly, social education refers to the socialization of the characters and the education obtained

through life experience and social interaction. This perspective will be based on the female bildungsroman.

“I should indeed like to go to school” (Eyre 24), is an early expressed desire of Jane. Thus begins the journey of a formal education for Jane Eyre. The formal education in Brontë’s novel is considered a memorable exploration of female education and a reflection of the Brontë family’s interest in education (Wilks 266). The purpose of female education during the 19th century in Britain was to prepare girls for “nothing other than the ‘elegant leisure’ (...) and vapid emptiness of society talk (Flint 120). Meanwhile Jane desires an education that can open doors for a career and independence: “I had the means of an excellent education placed within my reach; a fondness for some of my studies and a desire to excel in all” (Brontë 82). After eight years at Lowood, she proves to be an educated woman; with experience of traditional female handwork, fluency in French, knowledge of literature, linguistics, geography, and history; all of which she builds a career of teaching (Brontë). Because of her broad education, Jane rapidly finds motivation to seek employment (Brontë 85); making her Lowood schooling a key tool for pursuing an independent and self-determined career: “: “I desired liberty (...) for change, stimulus” (Brontë 83). Thus, Jane represents the progressive view of female education in the Victorian period (Flint 120).

The knowledge of French proves to be of great value in Jane’s journey. French does not only add to her education but also to the perception of her as an educated woman, which is expressed with admiration from both Bessie and Mrs. Fairfax (Brontë). The French allows Jane to explore her identity as a woman and it functions as a “passport to freedom of speech” (Eells 2-3). Jane is also self-aware of these advantages that she gains from the language: “I had acquired a certain degree of readiness and correctness in the language” (Brontë 99). French is very present in the novel, acting as a manner of free expression for Jane and her interaction with Adele and Mr. Rochester (Eells 3-4). Jane’s knowledge of French is what secures her employment as governess and ultimately a relationship with Mr. Rochester, resulting in a relatively comfortable and satisfying position in society. Thus, showing that French acts as a factor in Jane’s acquisition of independence. Her hard work in school gives results, proving that when Jane uses her education, she gains respect and climbs in terms of social mobility illustrated through her becoming first girl, teacher, governess and later an independent teacher (Brontë 82, 85, ch.31).

“I took a book – some Arabian tales; * I sat down and endeavored to read.” (Brontë 37). Reading is an important part of Jane’s life from an early age. Jane is introduced as a reader, where she is reading Bewick’s *history of British Birds*, while hiding from her cousin

John (Brontë ch.1). Brontë's protagonist is considered one of the best-known women readers in fiction of the 19th century (Flint 40). The acquisition and possession of knowledge are central to Jane's character, which reflects the progressive reading practices of Victorian women (Flint 258). In addition to gaining knowledge from reading, Jane builds her own ethics based on reading varied literature. This reflects radical opinions of early suffragette women, who considered reading literature a process in developing ethical principles, understanding life and develop cognitive capacities to enjoy what they called "a vigorous, intellectual life" (Flint 94, 95, 293). Jane's moral principles are based on literary knowledge, as she recognizes fictional or historical scenarios in her own life experiences:

*"Wicked and cruel boy!" I said. 'You are like a murderer - you are like a slave driver - you are like the roman emperors!' I had read Goldsmith's History of Rome, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula &c. * Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud."* (Brontë 11)

This type of reasoning resembles quixotic reasoning. Jane shares some characteristics with the female quixotic, for instance when investigating the mystery on the attic; where Jane assumes there is some unreal creature rather than a human:

"What mystery, that broke out, now in fire and now in blood, at the dearest hours of night? - What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?" (p.205)

Thus, the combination of the gothic elements and Jane's counterfactual reasoning suggest Jane is a female quixotic (Kukkonen 50). Similarly, her quixotic reasoning proves to be effective in her talk with Mr. Rochester about marriage in which she makes a logical and reflected case based on her prior knowledge: "I have observed in books written by men, that period assigned as the farthest to which a husband's ardor extends. *" (Brontë 253) However, Jane separates herself from certain aspects of the female quixotic, in that she does not lack the ability to 'decouple' (Kukkonen 49). She has rather a reflected mind and is generally realistic in her reasoning; separating her from the stereotypical quixotic: ""No one would take me for love; and I will not be regarded in the light of mere money - speculation. And I do not want a stranger - unsympathizing, alien, different from me" (Brontë 377). Jane also engages in more factual literature, rather than just popular fiction, such as reading Schiller to learn German (Brontë 386). Hence, her reading interests and abilities are forces in Jane's agency.

" women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex." (Brontë 107)

Jane is a progressive woman of her time. She resembles the female protagonist of a female bildungsroman, who is described with an active agency and consciousness of her personal development with great ability to grow/develop and find/claim a place in society (Maier 318-19). Miss Eyre has a lot in common with this female protagonist of the bildungsroman, which is exemplified in the passage above. This passage presents her view and experience on developing as a woman in a patriarchal society. Like the bildungsroman, Jane leaves Gateshead to experience what the world has to offer (Maier 318); first in Lowood, then in Thornfield Hall and later her journey after leaving Thornfield Hall. Jane develops intellectually and emotionally through her interactions with people and experiences, resulting in a rather confident Jane who is conscious of her identity and place in society (Maier 318): "God did not give me my life to throw away" (Brontë 403), "I am an independent woman now." (Brontë 423).

Jane's life experiences and interactions act as a social education and contribute to Jane's building of moral, identity and finding a place in society. In the beginning, Jane has difficulties with constraining her anger, which makes her a victim to prejudice and discrimination from Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood (Brontë 65). However, through the education at school and in life she learns to use her courage, confidence and emotions as tools when encountering the many challenges in society: "I from that hour set to work afresh, resolved to pioneer my way through every difficulty: I toiled hard and my success was proportionate to my efforts" (Brontë 73). This personal growth is evident in the first encounter with Mr. Rochester, where Jane establishes her opinions and proclaims her rightful place in at Thornfield Hall: "I don't think sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have" (Brontë 131). Such personal development and growth are evident through Jane's whole story. The failed wedding with Mr. Rochester gives Jane a clear view on marriage in the future; giving her reason to decline St. John's proposal: "I don't want to marry, and never shall marry. No one would take me for love; and I will not be regarded in the light of mere money"

(Brontë 377). In the end, Jane analyses her life, which tells her the truth: Mr. Rochester makes her happy, which gives her agency to seek her true love (Brontë 409- 440). As a result, Jane creates a better life for herself than what would have been the first round with Edward, Mr. Rochester, as she at this point knows her rights and place, where she and Edward are equals. In addition, Jane finds what she has always searched for – a happy family and an equally intellectual and loving partner: “To be privileged to put my arms around what I value – to press my lips to what I love – to repose on what I trust” (Brontë 433), “I have now been married ten years, I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth (...) for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand” (Brontë 438-39). Hence, Jane’s education in the school of life gave her the abilities to find and establish her rightful place in society.

“You are the cleverest witch of your age I’ve ever met, Hermione” (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban* 382). Just as to Jane, education is very important to Hermione, and it shows through her impressive results. The School Hogwarts in the Wizarding World is Hermione’s only possibility to develop her magical abilities and pursue a career in the magical world, because she is a ‘muggleborn’ [born to human parents] (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* ch.1). Thus, education is essential to Hermione’s agency to pursue a career and a life in the magical society. Formal education is the main context in almost all the *Harry Potter*- books. In the first four novels, the main plot is based at Hogwarts. Hence, Hermione’s young life is influenced and shaped by her formal education. Equally relevant is Hermione’s academical ambitions. It is a motivator, and Hermione’s passion for knowledge plays a key role in the many adventures of Harry and his friends. Because of Hermione’s great knowledge and abilities, she turns out be crucial in the defeat of the main antagonist of the series – Voldemort (Foster 106).

Hermione also acknowledges the importance of education because she sees the lack of it as a hinder for agency among the enslaved elves at the school: “That’s because they’re uneducated and brainwashed” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 201). Hence, she is aware of the importance of education to ensure herself a rightful place in society and a good life. A priority of Hermione is to ensure a good education and show her capabilities. Even though she meets many hinders, particularly from the discriminating Professor Snape, Hermione still finds agency in her knowledge and abilities to thrive in all her classes: “Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn’t a dunderhead.” (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* 146). Hermione is adored by most of her teachers, and even though Snape has a consistent distrust and unjust towards Hermione, she does not become

afraid as most of her classmates does. She rather finds motivation in proving that she is capable and intelligent (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 181).

Because of her active studying, Hermione takes more advanced classes than other students (Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*). Hermione's studying gives results as she climbs the hierarchal steps of Hogwarts in the pursuit for a good education, whereas by her fifth year she is elected prefect of her house (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*). Since education is so important to Hermione, one of the biggest threats she encounters is the loss of it. In her first year at Hogwarts one of her biggest fears is to be expelled: "We could have all been killed – or worse, expelled." (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* 173). Later in her fifth year, Hermione encounters Professor Umbridge, who threatens the quality of teaching, resulting in Hermione turning rebellious when freedom of knowledge is in danger (Foster 115). Hence, education is the biggest passion of Hermione and her will to protect and ensure education exemplifies the power of information (Foster 116).

"Oh, honestly, don't you two read?" (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone*, 236) is a famous quote by Hermione Granger. Hermione is a reader, and it is a key element to her agency. Throughout all the novels, Hermione is found reading a book and/or sitting in the library. The library is Hermione's safe space: "I'd better go and look through my books, there might be something useful" (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* 291).

Hermione gains information from reading, and it is part of her quest for knowledge: "I know all about you, of course, I got a few extra books for background reading, and you're in *Modern Magical History* and *The rise and fall of the dark arts* and *Great wizarding events of the twentieth century*" (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone*, 113). Because of her reading activities, Hermione is referred to as one of the cleverest students: "Hermione, of course, came top of the year" (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* 330). Meanwhile, her character also portrays elements of the female quixotic, particularly in the first three novels. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, she is told that "she reads too much" (Rowling 194), which makes her a typical female quixotic. This is also evident in her tendency to believe everything she reads and make assumptions based of her literary knowledge (Kukkonen 48), "I read up on the legend of the chamber of secrets" (Rowling 156). However, the literature Hermione reads is mostly non-fiction, which separates her from the typical female quixotic reader. Instead, she combines the literary-based assumptions of quixotic reading with facts: "please sir, don't legends always have a basis in fact?" (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 156). This way she portrays a more educated reader than that of the traditional quixotic while proving that information is the key to agency.

As Hermione grows, her reading skills evolves, whereas she becomes more critical and practical in her use of literature, particularly in her activism: “I’ve been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can’t believe no one’s done anything about it before now.” (Rowling *Goblet of Fire* 189). Reading adds to Hermione’s personal growth, while she actively uses her new experiences when engaging with literature. In the end, reading turns out to be key to the various conflicts of the plot. In the last novel, Dumbledore leaves a book to Hermione, because he knows that her reading abilities and intellectual gifts will make her decipher the codes, thus helping Harry in the last big fight (Foster 120). As a result, reading is not only a tool for Hermione’s personal agency, but an overall key tool in the main conflict of the all the novels.

“She’s got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know what a man’s like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 443). Hermione’s reading ability goes further than just literature. She has a great ability to read people and tackle various scenarios (Foster 116). She has clear morals and standards, and when they are challenged her inner activist is activated. For instance, in the case of the house-elves at Hogwarts: “I was going to put a stop to the outrageous abuse of our fellow magical creatures and campaign for a change in their legal status” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 188). The various encounters and experiences that Hermione goes through build her character and moral standards. She goes through a personal journey in her many adventures on Hogwarts and in the Wizarding World. These adventures and experiences shape her character, which embodies that of the female bildungsroman (Maier 318). Hermione is placed in Gryffindor house rather than Ravenclaw, which confirms and promotes her traits of courage, bravery, and determination, in addition to her intellectual gifts: “You might belong in Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart, Their daring, nerve, and chivalry (,) set Gryffindors apart (...) or yet in wise old Ravenclaw, If you’ve a ready mind, Where those of wit and learning, Will always find their kind” (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* 126). Thus, Hogwarts challenges Hermione and push her personal growth, which in combination with her active academic spirit, results in her mature and responsible character throughout the novels. This is particularly evident in the last novel; *The deathly Hallows*, where Hermione obliviates her parents to protect them and live up to her responsibility to aid Harry in the fight against Voldemort (Rowling 96).

Hermione also encounters discrimination in the wizarding world, which is one of the obstacles she needs to tackle to establish her place in the magical society. Hermione is seen as ‘different’ because of her ‘muggleborn’-status. As a result, she gets treated badly by

characters such as Draco Malfoy “No one asked your opinion, you filthy little mudblood” (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 117). Likewise, she finds herself being treated differently because she is recognized as a girl: “But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light. ‘Hermione, Neville’s right- you are a girl...’” (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire* 337). However, these obstacles work as motivators for Hermione’s agency against injustice, which is clear through her active use of voice, intellect, and other abilities (Foster 116). Hence, being a ‘muggleborn’ turns out to be an asset in the adventures of Hermione and Harry: “This isn’t magic – it’s logic – a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven’t got an ounce of logic, they’d be stuck in here forever.” (Rowling, *Philosophers Stone* 307). Thus, she changes her presumed ‘disadvantage’ to establish a strong persona which embodies her mix of the magical and the human. As a result, Hermione goes through a big personal journey in all the novels, where she develops her many abilities and characteristics and finds her place as an equal with her friends Harry and Ron.

The significance of education in the life of Jane and Hermione is evident. The two female characters are driven by education in various forms. School education is fundamental for the emotional and intellectual development of both characters; Lowood is key for Jane’s liberation into employment and establishing herself, meanwhile Hogwarts gives Hermione the opportunity to develop her intellectual abilities and establish herself as a powerful witch. Moreover, the library and books are safe spaces for both Hermione and Jane. They feel safe, and happy when interacting with literature, while it also satisfies their desire for knowledge. Because of their reading activities, they share certain characteristics with the female quixotic, particularly their amount of reading and some aspects of their literary-based reasoning. However, both Jane and Hermione separate themselves from the traditional quixotic through their preference for non-fiction and an experience-based logic and reasoning. Therefore, they distinguish themselves as non-traditional female characters who break boundaries and challenge social structures.

Nevertheless, there are clear differences between the two female characters. Firstly, Hermione lives in a fantasy world, thus there are naturally differences in terms of social structure. For instance, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter is characterized with considerable high degree of gender equality (Gercama 37). Meanwhile the context in *Jane Eyre* is set in the 19th century of Britain, with a clear patriarchal social structure and conservative views on gender roles. Thus, Jane’s story reflects realism based on historically accurate social/cultural issues such as gender inequality (Atherton), while Hermione faces struggles that are references to more current social and cultural issues. This key difference is

also a reflection of the different times these novels are written and their writers. Brontë wrote her novel in the 1870s, while Rowling's book-series is from the late 1990s and early 2000s, which explains the difference in degree of gender inequality, what issues that concern gender roles and the different degree of formal education. As a result, Jane faces more struggles to prove her intellectual abilities to those around her compared to Hermione, because Hermione lives in a far more equal society and can pursue a more academical education than Jane.

Even though these two characters live in very different worlds; their differences do in fact also illustrate their shared qualities as intellectual feminist heroines. Despite the contrasting realities in terms of gender equality, Hermione still faces discrimination and struggles for her gender, just like Jane. The difference of gender roles presents the historical development of gender equality and highlight the consistent issues of gender inequality that are still current. Hermione needs to use her broad education to fight discrimination and prove her worth and place, thus following in Jane's footsteps. In addition, Hermione and Jane share the experience of being categorized as 'different'; Jane for being an orphan and Hermione for being a 'muggleborn'. Thus, they do not only face obstacles because of their gender, but struggles because of their 'different' family-contexts. However, this does not stop any of them, and through their experiences they embody the female bildungsroman and learn to use their voice and demand their rightful place in society. Likewise, because they both are educated formally and socially, they establish equality in their relationships: Jane with Edward, and Hermione with Ron and Harry. Furthermore, Hermione and Jane are active users of their voices. From an early age they are active speakers of their mind and for justice, which only grows stronger and clearer as they develop and gain knowledge. Hence, formal schooling, reading and social education are important tools for Jane and Hermione in their journeys and are key to their agency as intellectual feminist heroines.

The influence of education in the story of Jane Eyre and Hermione Granger is evident. Jane is able to pursue a comfortable and happy life because of her education. Her schooling in Lowood opens the door for employment and ultimately economic liberty. Because of her reading activities, Jane gains more knowledge and a clearer voice when speaking up for herself and injustice she may encounter. Jane's life journey gives her the experience and social understanding to establish herself in society, where she is also an equal to her partner Edward. Hermione's relationship resembles that of Jane Eyre. Hermione can pursue her academical ambitions in the school of Hogwarts, thus giving Hermione the opportunity to pursue a career in the Wizarding World. Since Hermione is an active reader, she is quickly characterized as a clever student, and the knowledge gained from reading becomes

Hermione's most powerful weapon in the meeting with all types of situations. Since she is a 'muggleborn', Hermione must work to establish respect with her peers. As a result, she goes through a development, where her life experiences combined with intellectual abilities give her a strong voice in the meeting with injustice. Consequently, she establishes equality with her friends in the Wizarding World. Thus, it turns out that Jane Eyre and Hermione Granger are much alike. They share a love for reading and knowledge, and have similar experiences of growing up different, both in the roles of women and orphan and 'muggleborn'. Because of formal education they are both able to pursue a career and find their place in the societies they live in. In conclusion, this essay has established the important role of different types of education for the agency of the characters Jane Eyre and Hermine Granger. Thus, also suggesting the impact education has in the portrayal of the feminist heroine in popular fiction across literary periods and genres.

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