Spatial Symbolism of Proper Names in «Jane Eyre» by Ch. Bronte

Cognitive linguistics recognizes that the study of language is the study of language use and that when we engage in any language activity, we draw unconsciously on vast cognitive and cultural resources, call up models and frames, set up multiple connections, coordinate large arrays of information, and engage in creative mappings, transfers, and elaborations. Language does not «represent» meaning; it prompts for the construction of meaning in particular contexts with particular cultural models and cognitive resources.

Spatiality is a category showing the relationship between human language, the mind and socio-physical experience in terms of space perception and expression [1]. So, the aim of this article is to analyze the potential of proper names in spatiality expression (based on the material of the novel «Jane Eyre»).

In the novel there are several spaces with its boundaries each (places that served Jane as temporal home):

1. Gateshead-Hall

Gateshead is a place where Jane Eyre spends her parentless childhood with Reed’s family. If we separate Gates-head, it becomes Gates and Head. From the first name of the place, we know the meaning of ‘gate’ means ‘gateway’. It is as a doorway for Jane Eyre in entering her next life place: «...Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty.» [2, p. 20].

‘Gate’ also refers to a barrier or some kind of a ‘fence’ used to border an area. Metaphorically, gates as a border of an area, in «Jane Eyre», are to restrict Jane, to prevent her from being free and happy. She is bounded with the restrictions and the cruelty of her aunt’s family. «...as if an invisible bond had burst» suggests that her patience came to an end and everything she had kept secret for a long time came to the surface.

‘Head’ connotes to be the front or top of something. It is a place where the story begins as she spends her childhood without her parents. Further, it is the beginning of the complications which come to her life.

Thus, we can say that ‘Gateshead’ is the first obstacle in her life where the whole story starts with Jane’s unpredicted rebellion followed by Mrs. Reed’s decision to get rid of her.

2. Red Room

Red room was a room inside Gateshead Hall where Jane was locked in for the fault she did not do. It was also a room where her uncle had died a long time ago. «The Red-room was a square chamber, very seldom slept in, I might say never, indeed, unless when a chance influx of visitors at Gateshead Hall rendered it necessary to turn to account all the accommodation it contained: yet it was one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion. A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre; the two large windows, with their blinds always drawn down, were half shaded in festoons and falls of similar drapery; the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth; the walls were a soft fawn colour with a bluish of pink in it; the wardrobe, the toilet-table, the chairs were of darkly polished old mahogany. Out of these deep surrounding shades rose red, and glared white, the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed, spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane. Scarcely less prominent was an ample cushioned easy-chair near the head of the bed, also white, with a footstool before it; and, looking, as I thought, like a pale throne.» [2, p. 6].

In this passage, we can see that the exploitation of color is dominating in the description. We believe, the author has done it on purpose, in order to achieve the effect of mystery making the reader himself feeling that terrible anxiety that overlapped Jane – a ten-year girl with her childish fears and beliefs.

The Red room is obsessed with things in red. We see the curtains of ‘deep-red damask’, the ‘red carpet’. All the furniture is of ‘old mahogany’ which is known to be a ‘reddish brown colour’. Red could stand for many things, from love, strong emotion like anger, passion and danger even to wickedness and evil. Red is the colour of blood and it is obvious that if the light fades away, red gets even darker and quite quickly. So, the red room is completely dark, frightening dark for a little child.

The other color is white which the author applies in less intensity: only in the ‘shades’ and ‘cushioned easy-chair’. Out of total darkness these spots of white are especially scaring even for adults. We should also take into consideration the visual effects produced by white in darkness: it is impossible to estimate real parameters of the object and, if to keep staring at it, the visual effect of its moving is produced. This explains that the main heroine might really have seen something – not particularly the ghost of her late uncle, but just some fake vision.

3. Lowood School

It is another restricted space where Jane is captivated for a particular period of her life. Lowood is a charity school for orphan children. Similar to Gateshead, ‘Lowood’ means ‘Low’ and ‘Wood’. As what Bronte describes in the novel, it is located under the hill. ‘Low’ means that something is in under the average level. The usage of this word in the name of a charity boarding school may be a direct hint on the quality of this school: quality of the conditions in which poor children exist and fight for their survival. ‘Wood’ is smaller than forest. ‘Wood’ can be a place where the atmosphere of darkness dominates because of the thickness of the trees. It also implies a wild life. Wood typically becomes a habitation for wild and fierceful creatures.

The wild life is shown with Jane’s affliction and suffering during her education time in Lowood. Many of her teachers treat her unkindly and unfairly. She always suffers from mental and physical harassment. So, here, just in this very proper name we may
observe the confrontation of two spaces – of strict school life versus Jane’s cherished desire to get her freedom: «My first quarter at Lowood seemed an age; and not the golden either: it comprised an irksome struggle with difficulties in habituating myself to new rules and unwonted tasks.» [2, p. 33].

4. Thornfield-Hall

Thornfield stands for Thorn Field, a field which is occupied and dominated by thorn. Thorn is a sharp point on a certain plant, and able to hurt. Thornfield is indeed built in a place having thorn trees. Thus, in the words of Mr. Rochester we get an idea of the house’s appearance: «I like this day; I like that sky of steel; I like the sternness and stillness of the world under this frost. I like Thornfield, its antiquity, its retirement, its old crow-trees and thorn-trees, its grey façade, and lines of dark windows reflecting that metal welkin: and yet how long have I abhorred the very thought of it, shunned it like a great plague-house? How do I still abhor …… – » [2, p. 80].

We can not help mentioning the usage of metaphors in the above set abstract: the specifics of the place itself and the master’s attitude towards it are expressed in domination of grey and metal colours as well as in the tranquility of everything around: ‘that sky of steel’, ‘the sternness and stillness of the world under this frost’, ‘its retirement’, ‘its grey façade’, ‘lines of dark windows reflecting that metal welkin’.

The simile ‘shunned it like a great plague-house’ is also very strong to show Mr. Rochester’s real attitude to the house, his deep almost uncouscious fear of it mixed with hatred and sorrow.

In terms of spatiality ‘Thornfield’ can also be understood as a restricted space ending where the edge of the ‘field’ is. It contains a hint on possible decision to make: the main heroine can either pass by this place or take the risk knowing about the existence of it.

One more peculiar thing about thorn-trees is that they never stay is blossom, they are not the trees producing green, producing life. They are always grey and dark, they are the trees symbolizing loneliness, isolation and despair. Actually, the house itself, as well as its owner are such thorn-trees, although we come to understanding it only in the process of observing Mr. Rochester and everyday, routine life of the place.

It is Jane’s next life pace after Lowood where she spends her life as governess. These are allegorical with the great ideas of the Bible. Jesus bore and endured with the crown of thorns. He had to suffer from the pain by the thorns. Just like thorn which is able to harm or threaten, Thornfield becomes a place where Jane finds mystery, peril, and temptation, where she has both minutes of happiness and deep sorrow, the place where her heart and soul become vulnerable; where she, like Jesus Christ, has to struggle and protect her principles and beliefs.

5. Moor House

It is another symbol contributing to the ‘space’ concept expression in the text. It means that Jane finally finds a ‘moor’ which is defined as a place where a boat, ship, etc. is fixed to an object or the land with a rope or an anchor. Bronte puts Moor House in one fourth of the end of the story because it is the part of the falling action of the story. It is a place for the main heroine to rest and to recover her health and manage her heart after she flees from Thornfield-Hall with a broken heart. Moreover, it is a place where St. John and his sisters live. Thus, it is also a place that is close to Christianity and full of peacefulness which Jane was seeking for.

One more peculiarity is the spatial contradiction represented in the opposition of these proper names: «Gateshead-Hall» ↔ «Thornfield-Hall» ↔ «Moor House»: the idea is that the main heroine can not find peace in great houses, huge and filled with luxury, she needs something more common, that is simple and plain – some house that could be as cozy as home, and ‘Moor House’ becomes this temporal harbour for her.

Names of characters as well as places are often chosen by the author to represent or symbolize something. Names of all the heroes are made by the author according to his/her own style and the ideas he/she wants to reflect in them. Below are the names choices of characters which contribute great deal to the story:

1) Jane Eyre

As the main character, the first name, Jane, suggests as simple. Jane is a plain name with no special attribute to make it sound fancy or elaborate. It is also easy to be pronounced. Derived from the name in the Bible, John, Jane is the feminine name of it. Jane is also heard so old fashioned and traditional. Besides, to describe the outdated look of hers, Bronte uses her words in drawing the simplicity of Jane: «I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with fancy or elaborate. It is also easy to be pronounced. Derived from the name in the Bible, John, Jane is the feminine name of it. Jane is also heard so old fashioned and traditional. Besides, to describe the outdated look of hers, Bronte uses her words in drawing the simplicity of Jane: «I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It was not my habit to be disregardful of appearance or careless of the impression I made: …… I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked.» [2, p. 55].

Similar to her first name which sounds old fashioned, her last name, Eyre, is an archaic spelling for air. Related to symbolism, Eyre (air) represents Holy Spirit.

Eyre sounds like ‘eyrie’ which means ‘nest of a bird crated in the high place among many rocks’. It is connected with her lover in the story, Mr. Rochester. She was symbolized as a nest that is placed in the surrounding of rocks. The main idea of this is that she is always close to Mr. Rochester.

2) Mr. Rochester

The first syllable of Rochester is audible as ‘rock’. ‘Rock’ stands to symbolize that he is a hard and cold person. It is also heard as ‘chesty’ which means ‘conceited’ or ‘arrogant’ in slang. The last syllable is echoing as ‘stem’ which is similar to what Bronte describes as ‘gloomy’ and ‘grim’.

«Mr. Rochester, as he sat in his damask-covered chair, looked different to what I had seen him look before, – not quite so stem; much less gloomy. There was a smile on his lips, and his eyes sparkled, whether with wine or not, I am not sure; but I think it very probable. He was, in short, in his after-dinner mood; more expanded and genial, and also more self indulgent than the frigid and rigid temper of the morning: still, he looked preciously grim, cushioning his massive head against the swelling back of his chair, and receiving the light of fire on his granite-hewn features, and in his great, dark eyes, for he had great, dark eyes, and very fine eyes, too – not without a certain change in their depths sometimes, which, if it was not softness, reminded you, at least of that feeling» [2, p. 73].

This practice of onomatopoeic toning of the name completes Bronte’s description of her judgment towards Mr. Rochester’s mental character based on the outward look. His character is depicted by Bronte as self indulgent person. It is previously symbolized by his chesty name.

3) St. John River

John is the masculine name for Jane. It is an old fashioned, traditional name, and simply articulated. His physical appearance meets his conventional name, as Bronte describes that his face «comes so near the antique model» meaning that every part of his face looked like that [2, p. 195].

His name is also a form of characterizing economy by capturing one of many names in the Bible. In connection to the Bible, he is close to Christianity. There is St. before his name, an abbreviation for Saint. This gives a hint on his qualities and good, noble deeds as well as his kindness and patience.
There is one more symbolic category related to space concept we would like to analyze. It’s the semantic field of ‘fire’ [3]. On the whole, the ‘fire’ in its denotative meaning correlates with the concepts of rudiments of the world and elements: earth, water, air, earquake, fire obtaining also a number of metaphoric meanings: ‘physical strength’, ‘life strength’ in the semantic group of synonyms ‘fire’, ‘energy’, ‘life’, ‘lustness’.

In the semantic group with ‘fire’ as its core (noun) we may come across the expressions used to reveal the emotional state of the heroes: lust, spirituality, liveliness, anger, etc.: «I have seen what a fire-spirit you can be when you are indignant».

Love, lust is expressed in such metaphors as «strange fire in his looks», «strange energy in his voice». In this novel there is very strong contradiction of two basic forms of ‘fire’ existance: as the one controlled by people and thus giving warmth and cosiness (like fire burning in the fireplace) and the power that can not be controlled by people (both as their passions and natural power).

Thus, in «Jane Eyre» there is a lot of spatial symbolism hidden even in proper names. On the whole, the word ‘space’ and its derivatives are met in the text for 14 times only, and most of the cases of their usage are the descriptions of halls and people.

References: