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Author(s): Eric Solomon
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Round Table

JANE EYRE: FIRE AND WATER

ERIC SOLOMON

As Mark Schorer has eloquently said, criticism of fiction "must begin with the base of language, with the word, with figurative structures, with rhetoric as skeleton and style as body of meaning."1 A proper understanding of Charlotte Brontë's achievement in Jane Eyre should be based on the symbolic form of the novel. While any perceptive reading of the book must grant the author's artistic excesses—the improbabilities, the stilts dialogue, the lack of restraint, the flat secondary characters—still, the argument for Jane Eyre's continuing fascination must go beyond the usual commonplaces about Charlotte Brontë's forcefulness, her powerful imagination, the vitality of her passionate heroine. I would argue that Jane Eyre is not formless "romantic" art. The novel makes up for a certain flabbiness of plot by a hard coherence of thematic and symbolic pattern.

Basically, the novel is divided into four acts and a brief conclusion. In each act the same scenes are played out: Jane comes into conflict with authority, defeats it by her inner strength, and departs into exile. The first act takes place at Gateshead: Aunt Reed is the harsh oppressor; Jane resists unjust punishment and is exiled to Lowood Institution. In this first section Jane's powerful passion defeats the outside force of Aunt Reed's brutality. Next, at Lowood, Jane learns from her saintly spiritual ad-

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An assistant professor in English at Ohio State University, Mr. Solomon is the editor of an anthology of 19th-century Civil War fiction and the author of articles on Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, Emily Brontë, Rudyard Kipling, and other novelists. He is presently completing a study of the fiction of Stephen Crane.

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These two lessons are emphasized by the break in Jane's Thornfield experience that takes place when she goes to her aunt's deathbed. Here Jane displays the strength to deal with the Reeds as well as the charity to forgive Aunt Reed. Both these qualities are called for to resist and forgive Rochester.
and becoming a teacher; she finally saves herself by combatting his domineering spirit that would crush her. Again she escapes, but this time back to Rochester at Fern- dean, a chastened, symbolically emasculated Rochester, to whom she pretends to submit (in the guise of a servant) but whom she actually has conquered.

Charlotte Brontë uses other structural methods to make her supposedly rambling novel cohere. There are parallel scenes—Jane's isolation in the red room and, later, in the room with the wounded Mason, for example; or the attempted seductions by Rochester and Rivers. The novel also sets contrasts of character—Rochester and Rivers are opposites, as are Blanche and Rosamund, the Reed sisters and the Rivers sisters. There is considerable foreshadowing: Rochester must lean on Jane when he first meets her and when they come together at the end. The book has a general thematic unity; as the hymn at the start of the novel indicates and as Helen's death makes clear, a motif is the orphan Jane's search for a home (a motif basic to Victorian fiction). By stressing the tensions in each section of the novel between spirit and flesh, order and emotion, submission and revolt, restraint and excitement, conscience and passion, and, finally, love and sin, Charlotte Brontë brings her heroine through a series of temptations, each one starting in isolation and ending in a triumph of integrity.

Much of the imagery of Jane Eyre is obvious—the chestnut tree, the grim landscapes, the red room that is like Hell. But two images are so pervasive that they serve as a substructure for the entire novel: fire and water—and their extremes, the flames of lust and the ice of indifference. The fire is in Jane's spirit and in Rochester's eyes. Jane desires "life, fire, feeling" (p. 103); Rochester has "strange fire in his look" (p. 145). If these two are fire, St. John Rivers (note the last name) contains the icy waters that would put out fire, destroy passion. His nature is frozen over with an "ice of reserve" (p. 334); when he tells Jane, "I am cold: no fervour infects me," her reply is, "Whereas I am hot, and fire dissolves ice" (p. 364).

From the start of the novel, Charlotte Brontë's fire and water imagery indicates the essential idea. The fiery passion of Jane, and, later, Rochester, must be quenched by the cold waters of self-control—but not destroyed by the ice of repression. If their bodies burn, their minds must dam the fires. Jane warns herself that secret love might "kindle" within her life an "ignis fatuus" (p. 153). Yet it is Rochester who is all-fire: when, disguised as a gypsy, he has his interview with Jane, she feels his powerful attraction and says, "Don't keep me long; the fire scorches me." Rochester, for his part, realizes Jane's double quality; she has the fire of bodily love, "The flame flickers in the eye," but also the cool control of the soul, "the eye shines like dew" (p. 190). Earlier, Rochester insists that Jane is cold because she is alone: "no contact strikes the fire from you that is within you" (p. 187).

When Bertha, Rochester's old passionate flame, sets his bed on fire, Jane saves him by dousing the bed with water. Miss Brontë's imagery is precise and explains the relationship between the central characters. Bertha represents the flames of hellfire that have already scorched Rochester. Jane, fiery though she is, has sufficient control to water down these fires. Jane "brought my own water jug, baptized the couch afresh, and, by God's aid, succeeded in extinguishing the flames which were devouring it" (p. 142). She will save them both from hellfire by refusing the passionate advances of Rochester. After she learns of his previous marriage, she finally gains release from her burning agony and imagines herself laid down in the dried-up bed of a great river, and "I heard a flood loosened in remote mountains, and felt the torrent come..." (p. 281). Religion—true religion, not the frigid religion that will characterize Rivers—is described in terms of water: "the waters came into my soul... I came into deep waters; the floods overflowed me..." (p. 282). And this water in Jane's spirit enables her to withstand what Rochester calls the "pure, powerful flame" (p. 299) that fuses them. Despite the "hand of fiery iron [that] grasped my vitals" (p. 299), despite her "veins running fire," despite Rochester's "flaming glance" which is likened to the "glow of a furnace" (p. 301), Jane flees to the "wet turf" and sheds "stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears" (p. 305).
Although Jane is soaked with rain in her wanderings, her emotional fires still burn, ready to be re-awakened when the dangers of Rochester's appeals have passed. Rochester alone must be purged by the fires he long ago lit between himself and Bertha. This time there is no Jane to keep him from the searing, mutilating flames that destroy Bertha and Thornfield, and, ironically, put out the fiery gleam in his eyes. But Jane, meanwhile, is guarding her own flame from the freezing heartlessness of St. John Rivers. His "ice kisses" cannot reach her. She cannot forever "keep the fires of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital" (p. 417). She escapes from Rivers' chilling grasp and returns to the scorched ruin of Rochester where she can "kindle the lustre" of his "lamp" which has been "quenched" (p. 417). Soon she re-awakens the glow of their love, and their two natures join in a steady flame that burns neither as wildly as the lightning that destroyed the chestnut, nor as dimly as the setting sun of St. John Rivers' religious dream. The fire-water image underscores the basic idea of Jane Eyre: just as love must find a middle way between the flames of passion and the waters of pure reason, so Jane must find a golden mean between egocentric rage and Christlike submission, between Aunt Reed and Helen Burns, between the wild, Byronic Rochester and the tempered, controlled Rivers. Jane Eyre achieves this successful median in her own character and in her future life with the chastened Rochester. Image and idea join in a novel that not only shows the wildly passionate appeal of romantic art but also operates under the concept of formal control.

DICKENS AND LEITMOTIF: MUSIC-STAIRCASE IMAGERY IN DOMBEY AND SON

HARRY STONE

The fundamental changes which took place in Dickens' artistry between the completion of Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44) and the beginning of Dombev and Son (1846-48) divide his apprenticeship from his mature masterpieces. I have tried, elsewhere, to show the nature of these changes and their causes. In this article I should like to take one central change—the use of sustained symbolic leitmotifs—and show how this innovation helped integrate Dombev and Son, Dickens' first novel in his new mode.

Dickens had toyed with symbolic leitmotifs before 1843, but it was not until his five Christmas books, all conceived between 1843 and 1846, that he developed leitmotif into a major artistic device. In those Christmas novelettes—really enlarged fairy tales or, as Dickens put it, fairy tales raised to a "higher form"—he elaborated fairy-tale repetition and incantation into a sustained poetic symbolism which helped extend what he wished to say. For Dickens, then, the symbolic leitmotif was profoundly colored by a protean fairy-tale mode, an experimental mode which absorbed most of his creative energies during a crucial period in his artistic growth. This mode and its component techniques influenced all his subsequent writings. Dombev, for example, owes its fundamental fairy-tale structure, as well as many of its attendant fairy-tale techniques, to Dickens' experi-