In Defense of Jane Eyre

ARNOLD SHAPIRO

Critics have accused Jane Eyre (the character) of cowardice and Jane Eyre (the novel) of inconsistency, even duplicity: Jane is a coward when she runs away from Rochester, unable to meet his love's challenge; the supernatural voice which calls her back to Rochester is unbelievable; at the end, only her vision prevails and Rochester is helpless in her hands. Charlotte Brontë, however, throughout the novel is consistent in her call for openness and freedom between individuals. In the Gateshead and Lowood sections we see society attempting to crush the individual. With Rochester, Jane has a chance at openness but Rochester is closed and peremptory, offering her an untenable relationship. She leaves, torn apart and guilty at not being able to fulfill his needs or their love. With St. John Rivers, however, Jane finally rejects all attempts to suppress human-heartedness. When she hears the voice, it is "within" her because she is ready to return to Rochester. Significantly, she returns before she knows anything of the change in his condition. The vision at the end then is not of Jane triumphant but of humanity, the feeling heart, triumphant over the social forces which have tried to suppress them.

The late Richard Chase's charges against Jane Eyre (the character) and Jane Eyre (the novel) have never been fully answered, I think. Rather, they have been picked up by other critics and made sticks with which to beat Charlotte Brontë's second novel. First of all, Chase accuses Jane Eyre herself of cowardice, when she refuses to remain with Rochester, despite his pleadings, after their abortive wedding and the revelation of Bertha Mason's existence. Jane, Chase says, "cannot permit the proffered intimacies of this man who keeps a mad wife locked up in his attic. And if her moral scruples would allow his embrace, still she could not endure the intensity of his passion. The noble, free companionship of man and woman does not present itself to her as a possibility. She sees only two possible modes of behavior; meek submission or a flirtatious, gently sadistic skirmishing designed to keep her lover at bay."1 This is a

1"The Brontës: Or Myth Domesticated," in Forms of Modern Fiction, ed. William Van O'Connor (Minneapolis, 1948), p. 107. Professor G. Armour Craig, in a different sort of criticism of Jane's behavior at this point, says that Jane is asserting her moral superiority over Rochester: "... after Rochester's explanations and protestations of love, she confirms her superiority by refusing to fly with him to the south of France as his mistress." "The Unpoetic Compromise: On the
serious charge to level at someone who, all along—at Gateshead and Lowood and in the earlier weeks at Thornfield—has complained of her own isolation and claimed to want companionship, a meaningful relationship with another human being, above all else.

Second, Chase accuses Charlotte Brontë of duplicity at the end of the novel when she suddenly has Jane Eyre hear the voice of Rochester (at the moment of greatest intensity in her struggle with St. John Rivers): "The universe, not previously amenable to supernatural communication between the parted lovers, now allows them to hear each other though they are leagues apart." Finally, and perhaps this is the most serious charge of all, Chase accuses Charlotte Brontë of cowardice. At the end, Chase implies, the novelist cannot be true to her own call for love and passion made earlier in the book (for example in the orchard scene, when Jane cries out that her spirit is speaking to Rochester's, that caste and custom must not be allowed to separate them). The injuries that Rochester incurs during the destruction of Thornfield are, according to Chase and other critics, "a symbolic castration. The faculty of vision ... is often identified in the unconscious with the energy of sex. When Rochester had tried to make love to Jane, she felt a 'fiery hand grasp at her vitals'; the hand, then, must be cut off. ... It is as if the masterless universe had been subdued by being lopped, blinded, and burned." Chase does admit that Rochester and Jane have a child—presumably not through the intervention of the supernatural—but still the conclusion represents the triumph of Jane, "a patient, practical woman"; and the universe, as well as Rochester, has been "quelled."
This criticism of the novel seems to me to show either a lack of understanding of what *Jane Eyre* is all about or a lack of sympathy with the themes of the book. The attack on Jane for leaving Rochester in the first place pays no attention to the terrible torment Jane undergoes during this period, her fantastic struggle within herself as to what she should do, and the guilt and anguish she feels when she does leave. The attack on the conclusion of the novel ignores what happens to Jane during her struggles with St. John Rivers—her complete denial of Rivers's philosophy and view of existence, her affirmation of her own individuality and right to self-expression, and, most important, her very refusal to turn away from humanity, from the real needs of real people, to an otherworldly life-denying selfish existence nominally carried out in the name of God.

Chase's criticisms, moreover, seem paradoxical in the light of Charlotte Brontë's own professed intentions for her book. For Charlotte Brontë seems to be against the very things that Richard Chase is against. In the largest sense, *Jane Eyre* is a protest novel. It is a protest against all that would stifle or repress the individual—against the inhuman treatment of human beings. The famous review of the book, in the *Quarterly Review*, was correct (for the wrong reasons) when it complained that the novel was pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment—there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence....

We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*.4

---

4. Freud, whereby she so manipulates the plot of her novel that, while the governess retains her psychic health through the most fearsome tribulations, the master, Edward Fairfax Rochester, must be nearly demanaged—blinded and deprived of a hand in a holocaust that is as symbolic as it is real—before the governess can submit to what at least was his passion, and what remains, at least, his affection.” Introduction to *Jane Eyre*, Riverside Editions (Boston, 1959), p. v.

4. “*Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair,*” *Quarterly Review*, LXXXIV (1848), 173-174. Kathleen Tillotson in her *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Ox-
Charlotte Brontë herself corroborates this view of the book, when in the preface to the second edition, she lashes out at her critics: “I mean the timorous or carping few who doubt the tendency of such books as Jane Eyre: in whose eyes whatever is unusual is wrong; whose ears detect in each protest against bigotry—that parent of crime—an insult to piety, that regent of God on earth.” She continues by making a plea for originality, for the right of the individual to express himself: “Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.”

Jane Eyre, then, is a considerable extension of what Charlotte Brontë began in The Professor. Where, in the latter novel, she showed the inhumanity of the businessman, the person who would use others for profit, here she enlarges the protest. The world may be content “to make external show pass for sterling worth—to let white-washed walls vouch for clean shrines.” But she is going to penetrate beneath the surface, to “expose—to rase the gilding, and show the base metal under it—to penetrate the sepulchre, and reveal charnel relics....” This is strong language—no wonder the Quarterly Review critic was frightened at the possible results of such an assault on the established citadels of respectability. And it is interesting that Charlotte Brontë uses the language of religion to combat those critics who attacked the novel on religious grounds. For one of the things she is going to show in her book is that religion is not simply the religious establishment, that it is not properly represented by conventionality or the maintenance of the status quo. The spiritual values the novel evidences are closely bound up with moral and human values. True religion, true spirituality, must be the very obverse of the creeds espoused by Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers. It must have as a basis that same “proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man” that the Quarterly Review was so terrified of.

We can see this clearly at the start of Jane Eyre when...
Charlotte Brontë makes evident the close bond between Mrs. Reed and Brocklehurst, the upholders of the social order, of things as they are, and the enemies of freedom and openness. In the first few pages of the book we learn that the Reeds do not like Jane because she is different from them, because she does not try to keep up appearances and lets her feelings be made known. Mrs. Reed, Jane tells us, “... regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she heard from Bessie, and could discover by her own observation that I was endeavouring 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—she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children.” There is real irony here, in that Jane is expected to put on a better surface, like a coat of paint, and thus become more natural. Her problem is that she is a child, but does not act like a child, or the way that everyone thinks a child should act. Society has standards for even its youngest members, and one must comply or be cast out. When Jane asks what she has done wrong, Mrs. Reed replies: “‘Jane, I don’t like cavillers or questioners [here she sounds remarkably like the Quarterly Review!]: besides, there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent’” (Chapter 1, I, 1-2).

One of the things Charlotte Brontë is protesting against most in this opening section of the novel is prejudging, imposing an identity on someone, so that his individuality is lost. Thus, when Jane cries out in her desperation, after she has been left alone in the red-room, Mrs. Reed does not see a terrified child, but a “precocious actress”: “She sincerely looked on me as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity” (Chapter 2, I, 16). Jane feels relieved when Mr. Lloyd, the apothecary, comes to attend to her because he is a “stranger,” “an individual not belonging to Gateshead, and related to Mrs. Reed,” thus someone who has not already made up his mind about her (Chapter 3, I, 17). For even to the servants she is “a tiresome, ill-conditioned child,” “a sort of infantile Guy Fawkes.” Abbot could have pity on her if she were a “nice, pretty child” but she is “a little toad” (Chapter 3, I, 26-27). In a house full of people, therefore, Jane is totally alone. Her only companion is her...
doll: "... human beings must love something, and in the
dearth of worthier objects of affection, I contrived to find a
pleasure in loving and cherishing a faded graven image,
shabby as a miniature scarecrow" (Chapter 4, I, 30-31).

Why Jane has to "worship" a graven image soon becomes
apparent. Organized religion, in the form of Mr. Brocklehurst,
offers no help for the lonely, terrified individual; in fact, it
is in league with the rest of the world against her. Thus
not only does Mrs. Reed interpose, cast a shadow on Jane's
future, by telling Mr. Brocklehurst that Jane is a liar and
deceitful, but he himself is impervious to human feelings,
closed to human appeal. In Jane's eyes he is a "black pillar" —
a "stony stranger"; his "grim face at the top was like a
carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital" (Chap-
ter 4, I, 34). His religion is completely hypocritical. When
Jane tells him that the psalms are not interesting to her, he
accuses her of having a "heart of stone" and holds up as an
example of proper piety his young son who wishes "to be a
little angel here below" and gets gingerbread nuts for saying
so (Chapter 4, I, 36-37). He and Mrs. Reed agree that the
central doctrine of Christianity should be "humility" (of
others) and "consistency" rather than love or charity: "'con-
sistency, madam, is the first of Christian duties; and it has
been observed in every arrangement connected with the es-
tablishment of Lowood [Brocklehurst's school]: plain fare,
simple attire, unsophisticated accommodations, hardy and ac-
tive habits; such is the order of the day in the house and its
inhabitants'" (Chapter 4, I, 38-39). Against such a regimen,
what chance has the merely human?

Certainly it has no chance at Lowood, the institutionalized
extension of Gateshead Hall, which is dealt with in the second
section of Jane Eyre. Here the individual is reduced to the

*While it is possible that Charlotte Brontë's attack here is exaggerated,
many commentators have justified what she says. Mrs. Gaskell, for
instance, thinks that Charlotte was pretty accurate in capturing the
qualities of William Carus Wilson, presumably the original of Brockle-
hurst—"his disagreeable qualities, his spiritual pride, his love of power,
his ignorance of human nature and consequent want of tenderness." The
Life of Charlotte Brontë, ed. Temple Scott and B. W. Willett
(Edinburgh, 1924), p. 61. A recent writer goes along with this view.
Ford K. Brown notes that "Miss Brontë was probably accurate about
Carus Wilson's Evangelical contempt on behalf of his young pupils for
food, clothing and sanitation." Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of
most common denominator; the girls at the school are de-sexed by being called by their last names. Mr. Brocklehurst's hard-
ness predominates, and is, in fact, contagious: "Miss Temple [the usually pleasant supervisor] had looked down when he first began to speak to her; but she now gazed straight before her, and her face, naturally pale as marble, appeared to be assuming also the coldness and fixity of that material; especially her mouth, closed as if it would have required a sculptor's chisel to open it, and her brow settled gradually into petrified severity" (Chapter 7, I, 77). Brocklehurst's in-human religion prevails. When Miss Temple protests against his order that the girls' hair be cut, and says that it curls naturally, he replies: "'Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature: I wish these girls to be the children of Grace . . .'" (Chapter 7, I, 77). The girls are to forego their identities. Brocklehurst's mission is "‘to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel . . .’" (Chapter 7, I, 78). And Jane Eyre tries un unsuccessfully to elude the headmaster's gaze. When he finds her, he makes her the center of all eyes, as Mrs. Reed had done; he accuses her of being "an interloper and an alien" and tells all the school to shun her.

What has not often been pointed out in discussions of these earlier sections of *Jane Eyre* is that Jane not only castigates Brocklehurst's false religion, but she also turns away from Helen Burns's other-worldliness, realizes that it is not for her. Helen Burns is chiefly used in the novel as a foil. Though she is saintly, though she befriends Jane, the latter quite specifically rejects her advice and her example. When she first sees Helen undergoing some punishment, for example, Jane perceives that her new acquaintance does not live in the same world that she inhabits: "I have heard of day-dreams—is she in a day-dream now? Her eyes are fixed on the floor, but I am sure they do not see it—her sight seems turned in, gone down into her heart: she is looking at what she can remember, I believe; not at what is really present" (Chapter 5, I, 62). Jane cannot accept Helen's doctrine of turning the other cheek. She says she must resist anyone who attacks her, would strike back: if a teacher "‘struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose’" (Chapter 6, I, 67). Helen, perhaps, embodies a saintly
ideal, but Jane has learned the lesson of the Reeds all too well. She is not a saint; she is human, trying to cope with a world that she sees as completely hostile. Her doctrine has little to do with the Sermon on the Mount, since she has seen little of the Sermon in her own life: “If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should—so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again” (Chapter 6, I, 69). Helen helps Jane when Brocklehurst makes an example of her and forces her to stand on a stool in the middle of the schoolroom. But Helen herself is the victim of the world. At the time, she is wearing the “untidy badge” and has been condemned to a supper of bread and water by her tormentor, Miss Scatcherd. Most important, she cannot stay with Jane, and once she leaves, Jane collapses: “Now I wept: Helen Burns was not here; nothing sustained me; left to myself I abandoned myself, and my tears watered the boards” (Chapter 8, I, 83).

Unlike Helen, Jane has no inner security; doctrine alone is not sufficient for her; belief in an afterlife is meaningless when one is suffering now. In one of the most terrible outbursts of the book, she tells Helen that she desperately needs others in order to survive: “I know I should think well of myself; but that is not enough: if others don’t love me, I would rather die than live—I cannot bear to be solitary and hated, Helen. Look here; to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest,—” (Chapter 8, I, 84-85).

One cannot simply ignore this outburst or any of the Gateshead or Lowood episodes of Jane Eyre in trying to understand

While Barbara Hardy notes that Jane and Helen have different views, she feels that eventually “Jane comes to accept Helen Burns’s faith” (The Appropriate Form, p. 66) and that this change in Jane’s beliefs is not dramatized in the novel. My point is that, though Jane often uses the language of religion and spirituality, her conflicts are always moral and human ones, and she resolves them in human terms. Certainly when she leaves Rochester, after he reveals his marriage to Bertha, she feels none of the security a person sure of his religious faith would feel, even though she claims she is following “God’s law.”
the early relationship between Jane and Rochester. Jane desperately needs love and affection, but Rochester at first can give them to her only in a limited way. His past—the secret he is hiding—keeps him from being a whole man. Suffering from remorse, he is, as he characterizes himself, “hard and tough as an India-rubber ball; pervious, though, through a chink or two still, and with one sentient point in the middle of the lump” (Chapter 14, I, 168-169). Since he feels that he cannot be open with Jane, their relationship can never be one of equality. At times, in his behavior toward her, he even takes on some of the coloring of Brocklehurst and Mrs. Reed.

This is made very evident in what happens immediately after Rochester’s proposal of marriage. In proposing to Jane, Rochester said that he would defy the world’s opinion, wash his hands of the world’s judgment, but one feels that he would only impose a new burden on her. He has a false view of what she is. For instance, though she protests that she is a “plain, Quakerish governess,” he insists that he is going to cover her with jewels: “‘I will make the world acknowledge you a beauty,’” he says, and she replies that then he will no longer know her; she will no longer be Jane Eyre (Chapter 24, II, 25-26). He tells Adèle that Jane is a “fairy,” that he is going to take her to the moon, and Jane continually has to interrupt to bring him back to reality. Rochester here is trying to use Jane to expiate his own sins. He tells her they will travel throughout Europe: “‘... all the ground I have wandered over shall be retrodden by you: wherever I stamped my hoof, your sylph’s foot shall step also. Ten years since, I flew through Europe half mad; with disgust, hate, and rage, as my companions: now I shall revisit it healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter.’” Jane refuses to be used this way; she tries to bring Rochester back to earth, to make him realize that he is marrying a real woman, and that he cannot solve his problems through her. “‘I am not an angel ... and I will not be one till the day I die: I will be myself Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me—for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate’” (Chapter 24, II, 26).

Miss Ratchford has pointed out that Rochester has in him some of the traits of Zamorna—the hero of Charlotte Brontë’s juvenilia—some of the “god-like Majesty of Angria under the
unheroic mould and less handsome features of an English squire."

And at this point in the relationship between Jane and Rochester, we can see the Zamorna resemblance. Rochester tells Jane that he means to claim her, her "thoughts, conversation, and company—for ever" (Chapter 24, II, 34). And even beyond—he sings a song to her about his "love" who has "sworn, with sealing kiss, with me to live,—to die" (Chapter 24, II, 43). In pure self-defense Jane has to assert loudly that she has no intention of dying with him—"he might depend on that."

What is worse, he still has not told her everything about himself. His past is still a mystery to her. He tells her: "'You are welcome to all my confidence that is worth having Jane: but for God's sake, don't desire a useless burden! Don't long for poison—don't turn out a downright Eve on my hands!'" (Chapter 24, II, 29). For her part, Jane is caught in the dilemma of anyone who is in love. She wants to maintain her distance, her individuality. She will not be another Céline Varens, she tells Rochester—"'I only want an easy mind, sir; not crushed by crowded obligations'" (Chapter 24, II, 39). Yet she realizes that he is everything to her: "My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than my world: almost my hope of heaven" (Chapter 24, II, 45).

As if to symbolize Jane's predicament, on their wedding-day Rochester becomes completely peremptory again—he is the iron man who carries her along in his wake: "... I was hurried along by a stride I could hardly follow; and to look at Mr. Rochester's face was to feel that not a second of delay would be tolerated for any purpose." She is cut off both from the world around her, and from what is going on inside him: "I know not whether the day was fair or foul; in descending the drive, I gazed neither on sky nor earth: my heart was with my eyes; and both seemed migrated into Mr. Rochester's frame. I wanted to see the invisible thing on which, as we went along, he appeared to fasten a glance fierce and fell. I wanted to feel the thoughts whose force he seemed breasting and resisting" (Chapter 26, II, 63). When the wedding is interrupted, and the revelation that Rochester is already married is finally made, he is the completely petrified man, the counterpart of Mrs. Reed and Brocklehurst, those who have

*The Brontës' Web of Childhood (New York, 1941), p. 204.
cut themselves off from humanity: “I looked at Mr. Rochester: I made him look at me. His whole face was colourless rock: his eye was both spark and flint. He disavowed nothing, without smiling; without seeming to recognize in me a human being, he only twined my waist with his arm, and riveted me to his side” (Chapter 26, II, 66).

We must keep Rochester's behavior at this point in mind when we try to understand Jane's actions after the wedding has been interrupted and she finds that her husband-to-be is already married. Jane may be accused of not having enough faith or trust in Rochester (for example, when suddenly reversing her previous beliefs, she says that she “will keep the law given by God” and leaves Rochester) but in a sense he has caused this reaction himself. It was he who did not have enough faith in Jane in the first place to tell her his story openly. It was he who would have betrayed her into a false marriage.

But more is involved than this simple logical justification. How could Jane stay at Thornfield? How could she become Rochester’s mistress? It is not a question of the “free companionship of man and woman” (to go back to Chase's criticism). Jane has been longing for that sort of relationship all through the novel. As Chase himself points out Jane could never become another Bertha Mason, given over solely to passion. And she is not one of the Angrian heroines, like Mina Laury or Caroline Vernon, who can simply submit to her lover’s importunities. She has to live in the world, the world of men and women, where no one can be a completely free agent, however much he might desire it. When Rochester goes over his past with her, tells her how much he hates the memory of his string of mistresses, she heeds the warning. Jane fears becoming a mistress, an impossible role for her to play in the world as she knows it.

What is truly remarkable in this section is that Jane takes so long to make her decision, and undergoes so much agony in doing so. As R. B. Heilman notes: “The intensity of the pressure which he [Rochester] puts upon her is matched, not by the fear and revulsion of the popular heroine, but by a responsiveness which she barely masters. . . .” Charlotte Brontë, in fact, loads the dice against Jane. For she who has

10“Charlotte Brontë’s ‘New’ Gothic,” in From Jane Austen to Joseph
been so aware of the horrors committed in the name of society, certainly can realize that Rochester is not fully to blame for his terrible marriage. It was a marriage of convenience, arranged by his father and older brother to get him out of the way, and now he is still bound to his mad wife because of society's dictates. Leaving Rochester, Jane seems to be playing society's game, condoning the evils that have taken place.

Jane perceives this, and is almost torn apart by her conflicting feelings: her "reason," which tells her to leave; her pity and love for Rochester, which want her to stay. This crisis in her life returns her almost to where she was at the beginning. When she first feels the force of Rochester's revelation, she feels like the little girl at the start of the novel, looking at the bleak world from her window-seat. She "was a cold, solitary girl again: her life was pale, her prospects were desolate. A Christmas frost had come at mid-summer; a white December had whirled over June; ice glazed the ripe apples, drifts crushed the blowing roses . . ." (Chapter 26, I, 74). At the end, when she leaves, Jane certainly takes no comfort from her adherence to "principle," to the world's ways. She is not smug. Once more, as at the start of her story, she is alone, and feels guilty. But this time her guilt is justified; it is not just the "reproach of dependence" hurled at her by the Reeds and the servants at Gateshead. She has hurt someone else: "What was I? In the midst of my pain of heart, and frantic effort of principle, I abhorred myself. I had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self-respect. I had injured—wounded—left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes" (Chapter 27, II, 108). Paradoxically this is at least an advance over her former state. Her feelings here are not imposed on her from without as at Gateshead, and she has at least been involved with someone, someone who cares for her and loves her, and whom she loves in return.

In the last section of the novel describing Jane's life with the Rivers family, Jane is once again confronted with a challenge to human-heartedness. The challenge this time is embodied in her cousin, St. John Rivers, the man who subsumes within himself many of the traits that we have already seen

in other characters in the novel. Rejecting St. John, Jane finally rejects the enemies of all that she believes in, and shows herself ready to respond to Rochester when he calls to her.

St. John Rivers is a man who has stifled all humanity within himself. He is another Eliza Reed attempting to curb his own nature, as well as others’. Thus (in language reminiscent of Brocklehurst’s) he tells Jane: “It is hard work to control the workings of inclination, and turn the bent of nature: but it may be done, I know from experience” (Chapter 31, II, 161). He has specifically rejected the easy life offered him by marriage to Rosamond Oliver—there is of course obvious symbolism here; Rosamond equals “Rose of the world.” Whereas throughout the novel Jane has been the person who desires expansion of the self, who wants liberty, St. John has deliberately constricted his own bounds. He restrains himself until there is constant pressure, until he becomes almost like a machine. When he speaks to Rosamond Oliver, he is like an “automation” (Chapter 31, II, 167).

Moreover, though St. John’s religion is other-worldly, like Helen Burns’s, he is closer to Brocklehurst in that he makes no attempt to humanize it, to offer it as a comfort to suffering humanity. In a sermon of his, “there was a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness, stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines—election, predestination, reprobation—were frequent; and each reference to these points sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom” (Chapter 30, II, 149). In a sense, he is worse than Brocklehurst. As his sister, Diana, tells Jane, he “looks quiet . . . but he hides a fever in his vitals. You would think him gentle, yet in some things he is inexorable as death . . .” (Chapter 30, II, 155).

Like Brocklehurst again, St. John would extend his icy force to subdue others. He is the worst sort of teacher, since he would make his pupil his slave, instead of helping her achieve her own individuality. With him, Jane feels that she is losing all her freedom. In a grotesque parody of Rochester’s attempt to make her “Jane Rochester,” a creature bedecked with jewels and fine clothes, St. John attempts to transform her

11I am indebted here to Mrs. Tillotson who notes the pattern of recurrent character types in the novel. St. John especially “gathers into himself the cousinship of John Reed, the formidable religious sanctions of Mr. Brocklehurst, and the desire for possession of Mr. Rochester . . .” Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, p. 304.
completely: "... I daily wished more to please him: but to
do so, I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my
nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their
original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for
which I had no natural vocation" (Chapter 34, II, 211-212).

This man, who looks on his fellow men as "fellow worms"
(Chapter 34, II, 215), would subject Jane to an experience
she has felt before in the novel. He says that he recognizes
in her "the flame and excitement of sacrifice" (Chapter 34,
II, 218). But she feels that his love would be an "iron
shroud"; as his wife, her inward flame once again would
turn against her and destroy her. She could be his companion,
but not his wife: "... at his side always, and always restrain-
ed, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature
continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never
utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after
vital—this would be unendurable" (Chapter 34, II, 224).

St. John, therefore, would put her back where she was when
she was a little girl, confronting Mrs. Reed. But she will not
be put back there. As she has proved with the Riverses, she is
an individual, someone who has a right to be heard. She has
felt the healing influence of the Rivers sisters. In the school
she has run for St. John, she has shown her capacity to act
independently of others. Her inheritance has increased her
ability to stand alone and, at long last, she has found a family;
she is no longer isolated. Most important of all, she has grown
in awareness. She knows that what St. John offers her is not
love: "Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the
forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously ob-
serve) and know that the spirit was quite absent? Can I bear
the consciousness that every endearment he bestows is a sacri-
fice made on principle? No: such a martyrdom would be
monstrous. I will never undergo it. As his sister I might ac-
company him—not as his wife . . ." (Chapter 34, II, 220).
She sees his weakness. Unlike the women in Charlotte Brontë's
juvenilia, Jane rejects a man who would place himself above
other men, who would make himself a hero on a level with
God. When St. John says that allegiance to him is the same
as allegiance to God, she scorns him. Perhaps most signifi-
cantly she realizes that there is a human claim on her that
she must answer: as she tells St. John: "'God did not give
me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me would
be almost equivalent to committing suicide. Moreover, before I definitely resolve on quitting England, I will know for certain, whether I cannot be of greater use by remaining in it than by leaving it” (Chapter 35, II, 232-233).

Thus Jane is ready when she hears the mysterious voice calling her back to Rochester. As she points out, the voice “seemed in me—not in the external world” (Chapter 36, II, 243). Charlotte Brontë is realistic here. She shows us Jane almost giving in to the pressure St. John brings to bear on her. But surely the intent is to indicate Jane’s rejection of the false love, the false god of St. John Rivers. She has her own way of praying; her God does not abjure humanity, but aids it,refreshes the human spirit, instead of stifling it. The important thing to note about Jane’s return to Thornfield is that she is now completely open, receptive to Rochester’s pleas for aid. As Charlotte Brontë emphasizes and underlines, Jane goes back without knowing what has happened to Rochester. She answers his appeal even though she thinks he may still be a desperate creature. To emphasize Jane’s lack of knowledge about what she is returning to, Charlotte Brontë uses a lengthy simile. Jane’s first sight of Thornfield was like that of a lover who

finds his mistress asleep on a mossy bank; he wishes to catch a glimpse of her fair face without waking her. He steals softly over the grass, careful to make no sound; he pauses—fancying she has stirred: he withdraws; not for worlds would he be seen. All is still: he again advances: he bends over her; a light veil rests on her features: he lifts it, bends lower; now his eyes anticipate the vision of beauty—warm, and blooming, and lovely, in rest. How hurried was their first glance! But how they fix! How he starts! How he suddenly and vehemently clasps in both arms the form he dared not, a moment since, touch with his finger! How he calls aloud a name, and drops his burden, and gazes on it wildly! He thus gasps and cries, and gazes, because he no longer fears to waken by any sound he can utter—by any movement he can make. He thought his

“This is a point that must be emphasized. While the voice that Jane hears certainly does represent “supernatural aid”—as Mrs. Tillotson notes (Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, p. 304)—Jane does not receive this aid until she is ready and willing to respond to it. She began seeking news of Rochester’s whereabouts long before she heard the voice. Her rejection of St. John comes from within, not from without.
love slept sweetly: he finds she is stone-dead. (Chapter 36, II, 246-247)

Jane has to go to an innkeeper to find out Rochester's fate, to find out why Thornfield is a ruin. In a sense, she learns that she has been the cause. When she left him, Rochester became a recluse; he sent Mrs. Fairfax and Adèle off, never left the premises, wandered the grounds "as if he had lost his senses" (Chapter 36, II, 251). Jane's return to Thornfield, therefore, represents her return to human responsibility. One does not know of course how completely she has escaped the ties of the world—what she would have done if Bertha Mason were still alive—but at least she has responded to the human appeal.

At the end, of course, Rochester is transformed. One may fault Charlotte Brontë here for not dramatizing this transformation, as one may criticize Jane Austen for not dramatizing the change in outlook in Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, but we can understand what it indicates. Rochester has now achieved a humanity that he never had before. His feelings about life are completely different from what they were: "'Hitherto I have hated to be helped—to be led: henceforth, I feel, I shall hate it no more. I did not like to put my hand into a hireling's, but it is pleasant to feel it circled by Jane's little fingers.'" He admits that he was wrong when he tried to change Jane: "'The third day from this must be our wedding-day Jane. Never mind fine clothes and jewels, now: all that is not worth a fillip.'" He was wrong when he asked Jane to stay with him after the revelation of his marriage: "'I would have sullied my innocent flower—breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me'" (Chapter 37, II, 275-276). He is certain he has expiated his sin. The day he called out to her, he accepted the justness of his punishment: "'I longed for thee, Jane! Oh, I longed for thee both with soul and flesh! I asked of God, at once in anguish and humility, if I had not been long enough desolate, afflicted, tormented; and might not soon taste bliss and peace once more. That I merited all I endured, I acknowledged—that I could scarcely endure more, I pleaded; and the alpha and omega of my heart's wishes broke involuntarily from my lips in the words—'Jane! Jane! Jane!'" (Chapter 37, II, 276). One may wonder at the religious language here, but one must also note that it is always connected with Roches-
ter's changed feelings toward Jane, his changed view of the needs of another human being. One should also note in connection with his possible "castration" at this point, that he tells Jane that he longed for her "both with soul and flesh!"

A recent critic of *Jane Eyre*, Professor G. Armour Craig, has charged that there is only one voice in the book, Jane's. Her story is a success story, showing how she triumphs over all the other characters, stands superior to them morally and literally. The novel represents "the triumph of one mind's version of society. When her story ends Jane has reduced not only the initially overpowering differences of rank; she has reduced to the shape of her own vision the power that, for Charlotte Brontë at least, supports all differences of rank." Craig goes on to say that everything in the book is sooner or later reduced to Jane's vision. Paradoxically, when this has been accomplished, when all differences between people have been demolished, when all see as if out of Jane's eyes, she is alone, as isolated as she was at the start of the book:

There can be no doubt . . . that the reduction of the world to the terms of a single vision, no matter how moral its content or how sanctified its motives, is attended by the most dreadful violence. The power of the "I" of this novel is secret, undisclosable, absolute. . . . The violence with which it simplifies the differences labeled "inferior," "poorer," "richer," "better," or "higher," the killing and maiming and blinding which are the consequences of its dialectic, tell us as clearly as fiction can that even fantasy must subdue a real world. Jane Eyre's vision masters her world, but the price of her mastery is absolute isolation. When she knows her world completely she is out of it by the most rigorous necessity. I know no other work that so effectively demonstrates the demon of the absolute.13

This surely is not to do justice to *Jane Eyre*. One may grant that, at the end, Jane is smug, as Charlotte Brontë falls into the conventions of the Victorian novel and gives us a tidy, and impossible, perfectly happy ending. We learn that Jane and Rochester had nothing but bliss for years on end, and suddenly in the last chapter Jane changes her view of St. John Rivers. Seemingly since she herself is happily married she can describe St. John without rancor. She now indulges

in sentimentality, presenting St. John's sacrifice of himself as noble—he is almost a saint, ready to sail off to Heaven—and forgetting that he is the man who would have destroyed her to serve his own ends. But the “voice” of the novel up to this point? Surely before condemning it we should note what it says and hear what it calls for. This “demon of the absolute,” as we have seen, affirms the dignity of the individual as opposed to social convention; it calls for self-expression, rather than suppression; it is opposed to hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness, and affirms true feeling and naturalness. It calls for individuals to understand each other, to be open, not closed; it decries prejudging, placing people in pigeon-holes and forgetting about them. To a limited extent to be sure, it denies the privileges of caste and class distinctions. It calls for relationships based on equality, rather than master-slave relationships. To say that Rochester at the end has been wiped out by his suffering or injuries is to say that anyone who learns to care for someone else, who learns to respect and respond to the rights and needs of others, has been wiped out. 

*Jane Eyre* may have elements of fantasy in it, may rely on a sort of “magic” as a plot device, but it is concerned with real problems of a real world, and the solutions it offers, one hopes, are also real.

**The Ohio State University**

---

It is interesting, in this connection, that Raymond Williams places *Jane Eyre* in a large group of novels that appeared in the 1840's, which were concerned with social protest: “The orphan, the exposed child, the lonely governess, the girl from a poor family: these are the figures which express the deepest response to the reality of the way of life. . . . They emerge carrying an irresistible authenticity, not merely as exemplars of the accidents of the social system, but as expressions of a general judgment of the human quality of the whole way of life. Here, in the 1840's, is the first body of fiction . . . expressing, even through the conventional forms, a radical human dissent. At the level of social character, the society might be confident of its assumptions and its future, but these lonely exposed figures seem to us, at least, the personal and social reality of the system which in part the social character rationalized. Man alone, afraid, a victim: this is the enduring experience. The magic solutions will be grasped at, in many cases, in the end, but the intensity of the central experience is on record and survives them.” *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961), p. 68.