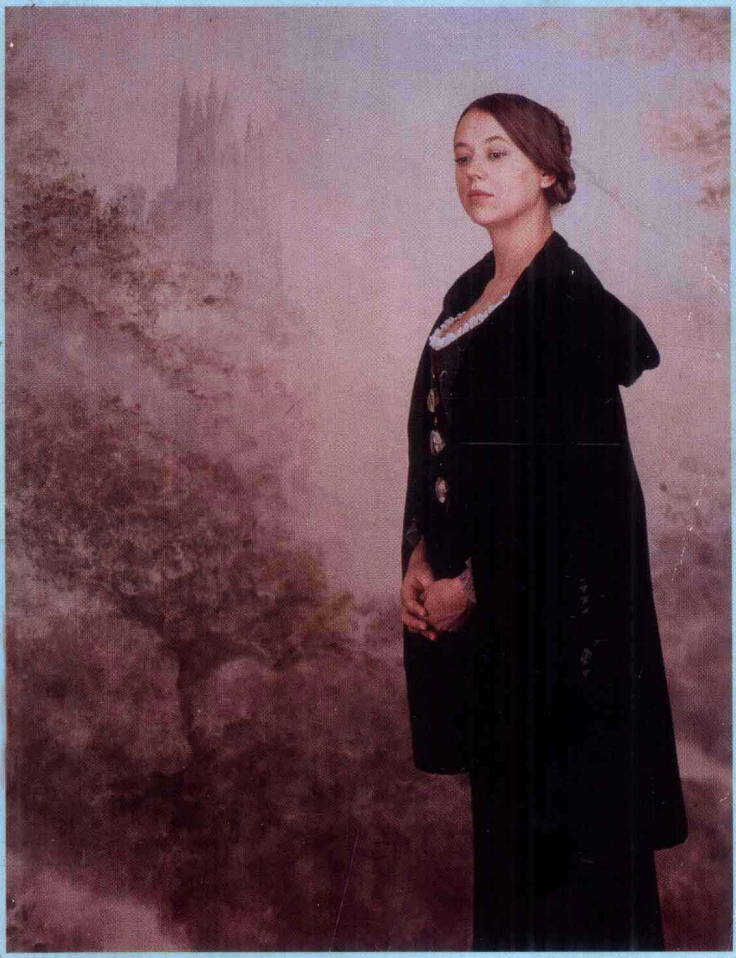
CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Jane Eyre



ENRICHED CLASSIC

Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre

INTRODUCED BY

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INTRODUCTION

Like No One There

Why do we still read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre?* Why does it still spark real excitement and deep enjoyment a hundred and fifty years after its initial publication? Why also does it deserve our continued reading and rereading long after we have first been handed it in our childhoods? And what makes this a book that can keep our imaginations throughout our lives?

In its own time, proper people did *not* consider *Jane Eyre* a book fit for children: it was most definitely not a girl's book.[1] Rochester not only has affairs, he tells Jane about them. Jane not only feels passion, but, unlike most heroines of that time, she is unashamed about it. She falls in love with her employer, and he with her. And to further complicate the matter, he is married. Brontë recognized that these improprieties might offend some readers and so addressed them in the novel. She has St. John accuse Jane of indecency for wishing to accompany him unmarried to India, and when Jane returns to Rochester, she worries for a moment that he might think it improper that she is so forward in her love. In showing both concerns to be artificial and overscrupulous, Brontë hopes to defuse them for her audience. But still she remains worried enough to feel she must use her preface to the novel to justify herself: "Conventionality is not morality," she writes. Her concerns, however, were justified: conventional Victorians considered the novel indecent.

Not even the urbane and large-minded novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray—whose own novels Charlotte Brontë idealized, to whom she dedicated the book, and who himself cried over it—let his daughters read it. They sneaked it anyway.[2] Thackeray had personal reasons for his decision. Unbeknownst to Brontë, his own wife, like Bertha Mason, had gone mad and been locked away. "The plot of the story is one with which I am familiar," he wryly wrote

Brontë's publisher. Brontë's dedication to him was a personal embarrassment, prompting all kinds of rumors: was *Jane Eyre,* as its subtitle claimed, really "An Autobiography"—written, perhaps, by a governess of the Thackerays? Brontë's most affronted critics used the unfortunate blunder of the book's dedication as confirmation of its impropriety. Yet the moral tone of *Jane Eyre* had its defenders as well. It is worth remembering that Queen Victoria herself—who, notwithstanding her modern reputation, appreciated passion—was in no way shocked by the novel. She enjoyed it heartily. Although she found *Jane Eyre* "very peculiar in parts," she also insisted on "such a fine tone in it, such fine religious feelings, and such beautiful writing."[3]

The continued attraction of this novel seems to lie in something more than just its treatment of passion. Certainly Jane herself must be at the root of it: in the novel's story, she is the one who, against all expectation, provokes continued excitement, discord, fascination. Although Jane sickens of the routine after eight years at Lowood, and gasps for liberty and change, although she climbs up to the rooftops of Thornfield and utters her famous cry of the heart against stagnation, and for experience, movement, and action, her life is actually amazingly varied and exciting. Quite a lot goes on around Jane. Her world is spun into agitation precisely because she doesn't fit in. No matter where she finds herself, she is, as she says of herself in relation to the Reeds, "like nobody there."[4] From her incendiary presence in that household at the beginning of the novel (they find her an "infantine Guy Fawkes") to her explosion of the tedium and monotony of the Rivers' lives at book's end, Jane shatters the mundane and expected.

It makes sense that younger readers are especially drawn to someone who doesn't fit in and who shakes things up. That is, after all, how we feel about ourselves at that age, what we long, perhaps in reprisal, to do. Older readers may secretly retain the same self-image and fantasy. Although we know that we ought to be mature, responsible, and to have conformed and adjusted to the world around us, *Jane Eyre* may still speak to our desires for rebellion and defiance. The book allows us to feel *comfortable* in indulg-

ing those desires on mature reflection, however, by where it locates them. Its discontents don't simply chart the psychological development of adolescence but identify the forces that make cultural adjustment an issue for anyone. As a "heterogeneous thing," Jane doesn't just seize us because the contradictions and struggles of her psyche, her dreams, and her emotions match our own in tumult and conflict. The discords *Jane Eyre* describes are also social ones. We reread *Jane Eyre* because it tells us not just about ourselves but about the history and the social forces that have created us.

The picture history preserves of Charlotte Brontë is of a spinster alone with her eerie sisters and raving brother, immured in a parsonage amidst the desolate moors of England. The family's house, set right in the graveyard of an isolated village, seems the best symbol of their lonely and macabre existence: the view out their windows gave onto a wilderness of tombstones, which increasingly marked the graves of the Brontës themselves. What seems most odd about their isolation was that the Brontës said they preferred it—fiercely, desperately—to all else. In her early scenes of Lowood in *Jane Eyre,* Brontë writes so passionately of its inhuman conditions because she blamed the school at Cowan Bridge on which Lowood is based for killing her older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth. Brontë's father brought the young girls home to die, of tuberculosis and typhus, and this would be a pattern repeated again and again in the Brontës' biography. What the Brontës blamed for actually killing them, however, may have simply been leaving home at all. Although Charlotte, Anne, even the reclusive and mysterious Emily, were driven by poverty to keep going out in the world, to school, to be governesses, to teach, they seemed immediately upon leaving Haworth to take ill, literally to sicken for home. They saw that home as a sanctuary, the world outside it as foreign and dangerous. They stood being away as long as they could: in Charlotte's case as a student and teacher, at Roe Head School and again in Brussels, her absence from home meant agonizing mental torture, even collapse. People blamed their unhappiness on an almost pathological shyness around strangers. It was said that when Brontë was forced to converse with people, she

would so twist herself around on her chair that she would ultimately face away from them entirely. Emily simply wouldn't talk to people at all. Although she was quieter and grimmer about her sufferings than her sister, she stood them for much less time, and finally stopped leaving home at all.

Yet we see only this picture of strangeness and isolation when it comes to the Brontës' lives because that is the depiction Brontë deliberately painted. Anxious and outraged about the coarseness ascribed, not just to her novels, but even more to her sisters' (Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *Agnes Gray* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall),* Brontë attempted to explain that quality as the effect of her family's isolation, the rudeness of their wild surroundings—an explanation repeated for the same reasons by Brontë's friend and biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell.[5] It makes a good story: Brontë knew the power of an uncanny setting, even in crafting the tale of her own life. But Brontë also always quickly admitted that she had dwelt on "the wild wonderful and thrilling—the strange, startling and harrowing" in *Jane Eyre* to sell books.[6] It was meant as conscious redress of the failure of her first novel (she had finished *The Professor* a year before *Jane Eyre),* which is set amidst the lower-middle-class everydayness of a big city. *Jane Eyre* shifts the action to secluded estates and lonely landscapes. But part of the myth Brontë crafts is that Jane's supposed seclusion there, or Brontë's own in Haworth, in any way really cuts her off from the rest of the world.

Their remoteness and isolation seem to ensure that the people in these desolate scenes are different, special, like no one else, outside and above their circumscriptions. Yet, rather than being abnormal, Brontë's own life story can also be read as a condensation of our mortal condition—with more pain and suffering in it, but still inescapably, tragically human. Brontë, like Jane, grew up motherless. As her mother lay dying of cancer, she is said to have repeated over and over: "My poor children! Oh, God, what will become of my poor children?" All five of the rest of Mrs. Brontë's poor children ultimately died before Charlotte Brontë's eyes (only three were still living when she wrote her novel, and they all died soon after). But rather than making her somehow distinctive, that history seems to mark Brontë's

human connection: it charts the experience of loss and grief that binds us as social animals. Even more riveting for readers than that spectacle of pain, however, are the enticements of passion within Brontë's life. Her mental agonies away from home came not so much from a distaste for others' attention as from a longing for it. Brontë's letters and early writings make clear how much she needed people and how desperately lonely she felt. She was especially hungry for love. And love did find its way into that supposedly secluded life. We know that she turned down two matter-of-fact proposals to fall in love at last with a steadfast but overlooked suitor—a plain, unintellectual man, her father's curate—who nonetheless shook the gate to the parsonage with the force of his tears when she initially turned him down.

Even more dramatic, however, are the deeply romantic chapters in her life that took place before she wrote *Jane Eyre*. Rochester's affairs and his attraction to Jane make sense when we know that Brontë's brother, Branwell, was painfully, deeply, helplessly involved with the wife of his own employer. He and their sister Anne were tutor and governess in a house seething with passion. Although scholars quibble over whether Branwell's affair with the mistress of the family was ever fully consummated (as he repeatedly claimed that it was, and there seems no reason to doubt him), whatever happened between them was enough to result in his dismissal by her husband. Nevertheless, Branwell continued to receive messages and money from her for the rest of his short life. His mistress seemed much more interested in dallying with than marrying the penniless young man, however, and her betrayal drove him to drink and drugs. He was dead almost within the year. Brontë had no need to come by her knowledge of thwarted and unsanctioned passion secondhand, however. She herself had fallen deeply in love with the happily married master of the school she attended in Belgium. Like Jane, she chose to leave his presence on her own—for, unlike Branwell's, her passions went unreciprocated. Her agonies were thus confined to the few ardent, yearning letters she sent her schoolmaster after parting.[7]

Even when we come to recognize that Brontë, at least, is

much like us in grieving and loving, it is easier to read her books as the exploits of distinctive individuals than the records of common social facts. The spectacular emotional suffering in the Brontë biography imperceptibly guides us to read *Jane Eyre* as a psychodrama. This soap-opera quality, however, distracts us from the daily facts and ordinary details that also made up Brontë's reality: long-lost social history is much harder to recover and revive than enduring human emotion. As transitory as the newspapers she and her siblings keenly devoured a hundred and fifty years ago, the current events of Brontë's life, her social context, can seem as stale and without meaning to us as yesterday's news.

But such social facts were always part of Brontë's writing. On the surface, Brontë's earliest writing seems completely removed from any interest in social context. She and her three closest siblings began writing books when they were still in the nursery. When their father brought a set of wooden soldiers home for Branwell, the children each seized one and designated it the hero of a series of wild and exaggerated sagas that they would write together into adulthood; Emily never gave up writing them. The children painstakingly lettered their stories in print that looked like type onto tiny squares of paper not much larger than postage stamps, and sewed them together into books. Charlotte and Branwell called their imaginary kingdom Angria—Emily and Anne's was Gondol—and they set them on the mythic shores of West Africa. The events of this world were sheer melodrama: wars, fratricide, adulterous passions, kidnappings, and mutinies were the everyday events there. The heroes were Byronic, with names like Zamorna; the heroines impossibly ravishing. These fantasies were totally consuming: they fill the young Brontës' daily jottings and letters. When Brontë, already a young woman, was a teacher at Roe Head School, she was still very much in their grip. She used to sit during her free time, daydreaming about them so intensely that the day would turn to night before she came back to reality, seized with terror at finding herself in the dark. Yet even these wild fits of fancy remain rife with the politics and history of England, picked up from the

young Brontës' reading of the newspapers and periodicals of the day.

Central to the Angrian legends were the real-life doings of the charismatic and dashing political figure, Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington. The children were fascinated by him, and eagerly followed any news of his exploits, making him the key figure in their saga. Brontë also interspersed these early chronicles with enthusiastic reports of Parliament's handling of Catholic Emancipation. Black characters lead revolts against Brontë's white colonists in Angria, just as they did in Britain's actual colonies. In fact, one of Brontë's rebels has the same name as the slave who led the Demerara uprising in British Guiana in 1823.[8] The news of the day was actually crucial in determining the shape of these artificial and idealized childhood romances. It was even more crucial as a part of the realist novel *Jane Eyre*. No matter how lonely and obscure her life, no matter how useful it was to think it such, no matter how exceptionally romantic it seemed, Charlotte Brontë was also very much a product of her own culture and time. Her books are social documents. The anomalies within her own self and her character, the heterogeneity she stresses, also express a discord in that culture itself.

The essays excerpted in the critical extracts at the end of this volume give an overview of scholarship on *Jane Eyre* from its publication until today. The focuses of these essays change over time. Often they are directly at odds with one another. In very little do these readers agree. They split essentially along the lines outlined above: for some, *Jane Eyre* sears with the force of its psychology. For others, it brings alive social and political debates. In charting the history of the book's reception through them, however, one connection becomes clear: all the essays admit to some extent the novel's own divisions between self and world. For most of them, these divisions are in fact what drives it: David Lodge (1966) suggests that "in preserving a precarious equilibrium between opposing forces, Jane Eyre finds the meaning of life." *Jane Eyre's* critical reception enacts the discord and division within the book; it helps to demonstrate how hard it is to separate the novel's emphasis

on a tempestuous inner life from the culture in which it was written.

The novel's earliest critics bluntly emphasize both its passion and its social grounding. For them, the two are clearly inseparable. Elizabeth Rigby, in an 1848 review that became notorious, suggests that a woman could *not* have written *Jane Eyre,* since only a fallen woman could have even conceived such a book. She then goes on to circulate the rumors about Thackeray's governess. Margaret Oliphant's review in 1855, written when Brontë died, is, as the occasion warranted, more appreciative. Yet she, too, observes what seems to her the novel's overheated treatment of love. At the same time, however, both reviewers also point to the social roots of Jane's singularity. To them, her unorthodoxy and personal discontent symbolize larger political problems.

They indicate, first of all, the double standards of Victorian England. For Oliphant, *Jane Eyre* espouses "true revolution," greater than "taking the Crimea, or fighting a dozen battles," it is "a wild declaration of the 'Rights of Woman.'" Rigby (who was about to become Lady Eastlake) is afraid that Jane demands too many "of the rights of man." For her, *Jane Eyre* is "a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and the privations of the poor, which . . . is a murmuring against God's appointment." Both essays expose the problems of economic oppression that were expressing themselves in England at the time, most notably through the Chartist Movement. This was a working man's movement from around 1832–48 that called for universal male suffrage, among other reforms that were considered explosive then. The need for working people to organize arose in part from the conservative, unpopular, and inadequate Poor Law amendments of 1834. These amendments ignored some of the worst effects of the change to industrialism in creating want and dependence by seeming to regard the poor as at fault for their own condition. The Corn Laws of 1815 had also contributed to social unrest by keeping the price of grain high, which benefited agriculturalists but made it difficult for the poor to afford bread. This unrest brought with it riots and the fear of riots. *Jane Eyre* draws on this social background in Rosamond Oliver's reference

to the "young knife-grinders and scissors merchants" who are responsible for the outbreaks that have caused soldiers to be stationed in her neighborhood. The mobilization of workers into a political unit appeared especially threatening. What the British had viewed as similarly radical threats had culminated in recent European history in the very revolution that Oliphant highlights: the French Revolution (1789–91), and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars (1792–1802). Rigby sees in *Jane Eyre* the same godless impulse that had "overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, fostered Chartism and rebellion at home." Brontë and Gaskell meant to refute these charges against Brontë as a discontented woman and an unbelieving social radical with their picture of the Brontë home as an innocent enclave, remote from social events and disquiet.

As critics moved away from the events of the time, the intensity of Jane's psychology helped to eclipse cultural history. Especially as it became harder to see Jane's behavior as at odds with social convention, the role of social forces within the novel seemed to disappear. Fifty years after the book's publication, George Saintsbury (1899) could praise it for introducing into the realism of Brontë's milieu "the passionate thoughts and feelings of the individual." Critics from Virginia Woolf (1929) to Richard Chase (1947) to Robert Heilman (1958) find the novel marked chiefly by passion—whether they characterize it as Brontë's anger at sexual injustice or her terror of and repression of masculine potency or entirely new kinds of passionate engagement previously unrealized by any form of writing.

Even these essays acknowledge, however, that the novel's passions come in response to social stimuli. For Saintsbury, as for Heilman, Brontë's achievement is the *intersection* of psychological romance with social realism. David Cecil (1935) insists that Brontë's fiery passion is united to a rigid Puritanism; Brontë is both Romantic and Victorian at one and the same time. Kathleen Tillotson (1954) suggests that the novel's very emphasis on the hitherto " 'unlit gulf of the self' " bespeaks one of the many ways it is a product of its time. One understanding of Romanticism sees it as an effect of a cultural shift that makes not only emotions, but the

very individual itself, central and important in a way they had never really been before. Our modern sensibility still so unquestioningly takes individuality as valuable, an end in itself, that it is difficult to detach ourselves from that view and understand it as only one way of ordering the world. (Another view might accord more importance to some kind of collective community to which it would subordinate personal expression and achievement.) At the crescendo in the book that perhaps most seizes the reader's imagination, and causes Rochester to propose to her, Jane asserts that no matter how much the world ignores or misunderstands her she is still "a free human being, with an independent will." To assume without questioning that our unique minds and hearts and souls are somehow outside of and at odds with, rather than functions of, society is a particular historical phenomenon; critics see its causes as largely economic, and locate its expression a full generation before Brontë, in the Romantic period.[9] Brontë's emphasis on her characters' inner lives in *Jane Eyre* reflects the influence of the Romantic poets, in whose works she was steeped. In fact, she had written to one of them, Robert Southey, to ask him if she had any future as a writer. His reply to her was that a woman's business in life could not be writing, nor should it be.

But as Cecil suggests, Brontë is a Victorian, too. One thing the Victorian period made clearer—as it borrowed Romantic individualism, while also changing it—is the social origin of that individualism. The essay by Mary Poovey (1988) argues that the Victorian stress on individual psychology reveals that emphasis as a social tactic designed to mask certain social ills: by emphasizing individual freedom and choice, we tend to downplay large-scale social determinations, like poverty, that may actually have much more force in shaping people's lives, and which individuals really have very little power to change. *Jane Eyre* is not just about an individual character named Jane, it is also one of a group of novels of the time about the social plight of governesses in general. The condition of governesses was just one of a number of historical crises that showed some of the problems of always preferring the individual to the mass. Governesses' overall lack of autonomy and volition,

the obvious economic basis of their relations to their charges, cast an unsettling light on the lives of the middle-class wives and mothers upon whom the profession of governessing claimed to be modeled. If governesses were forced to take on what was actually often difficult and unappealing drudgery because of need, could economics also influence women who were supposedly freely choosing to be wives and mothers—one of the only choices women had? Was what their culture insisted on seeing only as a mother's instinctive loving care of her children actually to some degree also a form of under-rewarded labor? And if women weren't completely fulfilled by being mothers, did that suggest they might also want to become lawyers, doctors, merchants, or artists, too?

Recent critics such as Poovey mark a return to locating Brontë's novel explicitly in social terms. Like Brontë's earliest reviewers, they concentrate on the discords of gender and class. They add to these another, however: race, which they discuss primarily in terms of the expansion of the British Empire, which was fully under way when Brontë wrote her book. If we read *Jane Eyre* in this way, her disappointments and desires are not peculiarly her own. They reflect her restrictions as a woman. They grow out of her uncertain status in the social hierarchy as an orphan who eventually finds connections and station. They are ultimately grounded in assumptions of privilege that Jane doesn't even recognize. Those privileges are invisible because they rest upon the exploitation of whole groups of people—especially the colonized people of color in the West Indies and Indian Continent—that the Victorians didn't recognize fully *as* people. Slavery is the most obvious example of a society profiting from the enforced contributions of a group of people it treats as nonhuman, buying and selling them as animals. Slavery is an insistent topic in the margins of *Jane Eyre,* too. To read the book in these ways means paying attention to characters in it we readers often ourselves ignore: Grace Poole, Bertha Mason, St. John Rivers.

Jane Eyre's and Charlotte Brontë's struggles as women have figured most saliently to Brontë's recent critics, as they did to her earliest reviewers. The condition of women seems

such an important topic to them that they argue it determines the very shape of *Jane Eyre.* In vowing to create a heroine "as plain and small as myself," Brontë was pushing to their limits the plots that were available to her. Brontë insists on a heroine who is by convention most unheroine-like, which is exactly what Jane attempts to teach herself when she paints her own "Portrait of a Governess,"—"a *real* head in chalk" (emphasis added)—in contrast to the "fancy miniature"—that of Blanche Ingram, "an accomplished lady of rank" (and Brontë goes on to make even Blanche far from ideal). In taking someone "poor, obscure, plain, and little" as her heroine, Brontë was asking her readers: What stories can we tell about women? What seems to us important about them? What lives and futures can we imagine for them? She was also asking what stories it seemed possible for a *woman* to tell.

When Jane climbs out upon the parapets of Thornfield to dream of a more active life, she recognizes she will be criticized and dismisses it ahead of time: "Anybody may blame me who likes," she says. Similarly, Brontë recognized that her depiction of Jane would be seen as daring, and not for any trivial indecency, but because it attempts to imagine something more, different, better, for women. Brontë also suggests that such a story might not yet be imaginable. With Jane's narrative, she can only gesture to a tale that remains in her own novel noted, but still untold—the one Jane finds "best of all" as she tells it to herself (but not to her readers) up among the rooftops: "a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all the incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence."

What is that tale? Can we imagine it now? Certainly Jane's story winds up having a great deal of incident, life, fire, and feeling—more than readers like Rigby found comfortable. But to give her heroine sufficient scope, drive, and passion remains a story Brontë cannot directly tell, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest (1979). Like Virginia Woolf, they find that Brontë's book is very much marked by woman's discontent with the social constraints that keep her from realizing her true potential: Brontë's book is marked by anger. Like Woolf, they see that anger

breaking out again and again in the novel—but not in Jane's direct expression. Jane's task throughout her story, after all, is to subdue herself, to become more moderate and correct, so that "restrained and simplified, [her tale will] soun[d] . . . more credible," as it does when she tells it to Miss Temple. Woolf's uneasiness about Brontë's anger shows that discontented women, full of "gall and wormwood," are little more valued in this century than they were in Brontë's time. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in order to keep her unconventional heroine to some degree sympathetic, Brontë must express her dissatisfaction indirectly. The *first* Mrs. Rochester becomes the channel for all these disturbing sentiments instead. Bertha Mason functions as Jane's alter ego, hard to see but always there, quite literally infusing the narrative with the kind of fire that Brontë and her character can't explicitly express. Her rages seem to call up the very flames of hell, as she ignites Rochester in his bed and then burns down Thornfield.

In *Jane Eyre,* Brontë tests the limits of the conventional tales about women that Jane herself finds monotonous as they unfold before her eyes among the guests at Thornfield: "They generally run on the same theme—courtship; and promise to end in the same catastrophe—marriage." Bertha Mason's story suggests that *Jane Eyre*'s daring lies not just in expressing women's sexual passion, but also in trying to move beyond love. Certainly marriage has not been fulfilling and sufficient for Bertha. *Jane Eyre* implies that women have other interests and connections: Adrienne Rich (1973) finds in its story a longing for women's relations with each other equally important—if not more so—as their relations with men. Brontë's novel seems on first reading to be all about love. It remains a central source for Harlequin romances today, with their standard plot: an inexperienced woman meets a mysterious and mocking man who provokes her with an attraction she can't quite pin down and a violence she can't understand. Tania Modleski (1982) argues, however, that Brontë sets up this scenario in order to criticize it. Jane's turn from Rochester midway in the book is crucial to its story. She needs to do so in order symbolically to gain her "independence," which comes to her in the form of her uncle's inheritance—the very uncle

who foils Rochester's plan to trick Jane into a bogus marriage. Jane's agonized but resolute *"I* care for myself" effects her parting from Rochester. She realizes that her own self-respect must be more important than his love. Modleski argues that Brontë is at least attempting to sketch the outlines of what still remains an unconventional plot: what would a woman's life be that was not based solely on man's love?

Brontë may not be able to tell this story fully herself (no matter how much Jane does on her own while apart from Rochester, she's obviously just marking time until they can get together again), but she suggests nonetheless that this is a story worth telling. Just as she indicates the importance of women's friendships without being able to realize them, her own novel remains caught within the traditional forms of her culture as it tries to question and modify them. It is still a romance—but one that asks whether romance alone is enough for women. It is also a fairy tale. Rochester thinks unaccountably of fairy tales the first time he sees Jane; she knows that marriage to him would make her life one. By complicating that marriage, Brontë in part tries to refuse the form. She tries to make hers a fairy tale with a difference, tries to imagine how a heroine with "neither fortune, beauty, nor connections" can live happily ever after. The attempt is impossible; the form reasserts itself. Jane does pick up wealth, relations, even beauty, it seems, over the course of her story ("I looked at my face in the glass," she tells us after Rochester woos her, "and felt it was no longer plain."). But though *Jane Eyre* may have to fit itself to the fairy tale form, it rests there uneasily. In bringing Jane and Rochester together after pain and suffering that isn't fully dispelled by their reunion, she makes her fairy tale a muted, almost dark, one.

Jane Eyre charts the complications of living happily ever after for women who wish for something more than just a prince. The resolve and independence that take Jane from Rochester cast a shadow on their reunion. Perhaps nothing in the book is more controversial than Brontë's choice to blind and cripple Rochester at its end. The essays by Chase, Eagleton (1975), and Modleski join the range of critics who try to account for its meaning. They read it in various ways: