

analysing texts

Charlotte Brontë

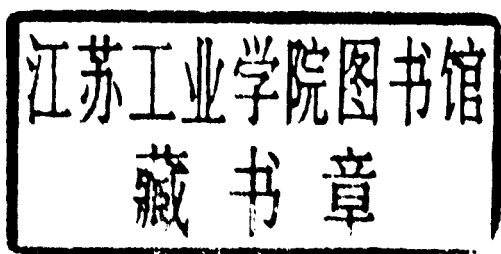
The Novels

Mike Edwards



Charlotte Brontë: The Novels

MIKE EDWARDS



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General Editor's Preface

This series is dedicated to one clear belief: that we can all enjoy, understand and analyse literature for ourselves, provided we know how to do it. How can we build on close understanding of a short passage, and develop our insight into the whole work? What features do we expect to find in a text? Why do we study style in so much detail? In demystifying the study of literature, these are only some of the questions the *Analysing Texts* series addresses and answers.

The books in this series will not do all the work for you, but will provide you with the tools, and show you how to use them. Here, you will find samples of close, detailed analysis, with an explanation of the analytical techniques utilised. At the end of each chapter there are useful suggestions for further work you can do to practise, develop and hone the skills demonstrated and build confidence in your own analytical ability.

An author's individuality shows in the way they write: every work they produce bears the hallmark of that writer's personal 'style'. In the main part of each book we concentrate therefore on analysing the particular flavour and concerns of one author's work, and explain the features of their writing in connection with major themes. In Part 2 there are chapters about the author's life and work, assessing their contribution to developments in literature; and a sample of critics' views are summarised and discussed in comparison with each other. Some suggestions for further reading provide a bridge towards further critical research.

Analysing Texts is designed to stimulate and encourage your critical and analytic faculty, to develop your personal insight into the author's work and individual style, and to provide you with the skills and techniques to enjoy at first hand the excitement of discovering the richness of the text.

NICHOLAS MARSH

Textual Note

As far as convenient, extracts from the novels are identified by chapter so as to enable them to be found easily in any edition. Page numbers of Charlotte Brontë's novels refer to the latest editions in the Penguin Classics series.

Jane Eyre: first published in 1847; Penguin Classics, 1996

Shirley: first published in 1849; Penguin Classics, 1985

Villette: first published in 1852; Penguin Classics, 1985

The Professor: first published in 1857; Penguin Classics, 1989

Extracts quoted are generally as they appear in the Penguin editions, but I have amended two minor misprints.

Where it is clear which novel, or, in the chapter on critical approaches, which essay, is under discussion, reference is usually by page number alone. Other books are fully identified at the time of reference, and reappear in the recommendations for further reading.

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PART 1

ANALYSIS

1

Narrators

We begin our exploration of Charlotte Brontë's writing with the narrators whose voices speak in her novels. The narrators make a good starting point for our analysis because they are crucial to the impact of the novels. We can think about the way they present themselves and tell the story, and the mood they establish. At the same time we will see how they introduce us to other characters and to themes which we will develop later on. In this chapter, we will study three extracts in detail, one from the early pages of each novel, and try to see how they prepare us for what follows. We will be concentrating on what is being expressed, and how. Even at this stage, however, we can begin to think more broadly about what the author is trying to do, and how well she is achieving it.

We will deal with the novels in order of publication, and therefore look first at *Jane Eyre*.

I: *Jane Eyre*

This is the beginning of the brief opening chapter:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.

The said Eliza, John, and Georgiana were now clustered round their mama in the drawing-room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarrelling nor crying) looked perfectly happy. Me, she had dispensed from joining the group; saying, 'She 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.'

'What does Bessie say I have done?' I asked.

'Jane, I don't like cavillers or questioners: 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.'

A small breakfast-room adjoined the drawing-room, I slipped in there. It contained a book-case: I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.

I returned to my book – Bewick's *History of British Birds*: the letter-press thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of 'the solitary rocks and promontories' by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindenness, or Naze, to the North Cape.

Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls
Boils round the naked, melancholy isles
Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge
Pours in among the stormy Hebrides.

Nor could I pass unnoticed the suggestion of the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, Iceland, Greenland, with 'the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space, – that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold.' Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive. The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking.

I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly risen crescent, attesting the hour of even-tide.

The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.

The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him, I passed over quickly: it was an object of terror.

So was the black, horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows.

Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour; and when, having brought her ironing-table to the nursery-hearth, she allowed us to sit about it, and while she got up Mrs Reed's lace frills, and crimped her night-cap borders, fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and other ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of *Pamela*, and *Henry, Earl of Moreland*.

With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my

way. I feared nothing but interruption, and that came too soon. The breakfast-room door opened.

'Boh! Madam Mope!' cried the voice of John Reed; then he paused: he found the room apparently empty.

(pp. 13–15)

This is a powerful beginning. We are thrust immediately into a half-understood family situation fraught with conflict and controversy, and at the same time we are invited to share the observations and feelings of a narrator of whom, as yet, we know almost nothing. Already, however, we feel the desire to understand more.

Let us begin the analysis by looking at the structure of the extract. We can see at once that the earlier part of the extract contains action and dialogue, while the second is reflective. This is obvious, yet it already points to a basic feature of *Jane Eyre*: the split between an external world of contention and an inner world of peace emerges naturally from the use of the first-person narrator, relating experiences and meditating upon them. This interplay between experience and meditation is a central and essential element in the structure of the whole novel.

Now let us look more closely at each part of the extract. We will begin with the simple – looking at what happens – and move gradually towards more complex considerations.

The earlier part of the extract is vividly dramatised: it is full of emotional violence and menace. The narrator tells us that she is aware of her 'physical inferiority' to the other three children – we already guess that they are children because of the reference to the nurse, Bessie, in paragraph two. Bessie is at once introduced as an enemy of the narrator, who is made unhappy by the nurse's 'chidings'. Then we find that Mrs Reed – and we note that the narrator refers to her by that title, in contrast with the Reed children who think of her as their 'mama' – has excluded the narrator in cold and formal language: 'She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance'. The formality arises partly from diction, and partly from syntax: 'regretted' is much more formal than, say, 'was sorry'; 'to be under the necessity of' is periphrastic. Mrs Reed speaks quite

unlike a 'mama', in fact: the distant language reflects a distant relationship; clearly the narrator is not one of 'her darlings'. The narrator presents herself here, then, as a child in conflict with her small world.

The form of the narrator's response to Mrs Reed's reproaches – 'What does Bessie say I have done?' – is bound to anger Mrs Reed, who sees it as insolence. We, in contrast, are inclined to take a different view of the implication that Bessie is mistaken or lying: it looks like sturdy defence; it suggests a tough spirit underlying the narrator's unhappiness. It is no surprise when these qualities emerge much more forcefully in the next few pages of the novel. At this point we have already come to see the narrator – even though unnamed as yet – as a victim, at the mercy of the Reeds. We notice, too, if we are sensitive to the descriptive element in these opening paragraphs, that her vulnerability is stressed by the setting as well as by the dialogue and narrative. In the second paragraph a physical and an emotional winter are linked: 'nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened'. Everything supports the narrator's point, stressed by the inverted syntax, that 'dreadful to me was' returning home, that she feels 'humbled', physically and spiritually, beside the Reed children.

Let us now look more closely at how the use of the first-person narrator affects our view of Mrs Reed. Mrs Reed's attitude to Jane – we know from the fourth paragraph that the narrator is the heroine of the title – is sharply delineated. She expects the child to be 'more sociable and childlike . . . more attractive and sprightly . . . lighter, franker, more natural as it were'. Since we identify, almost inevitably at this stage, with the narrator, and we know her already as a victim, we are primed to see the flaws in Mrs Reed's demands. The terms used by Mrs Reed show that she is demanding of Jane something impossible, or at least unreasonable. The flood of parallel words she uses (sociable, childlike, attractive, sprightly, light, frank, natural) hints that she does not know quite what she wants – a suspicion supported by her vague 'as it were'. We are in a better position to judge what she means: when she expects Jane to be 'more childlike', she actually means that Jane should be less wilful; by 'lighter' she means less serious; by 'franker' she means that Jane should be less

able to defend herself; 'more sociable' implies that it is Jane's own fault that she fails to get on with Mrs Reed and the other children. In short, Mrs Reed is placing all the blame on Jane. It is only to be expected, therefore, that she dislikes 'cavillers and questioners' and objects to being 'taken up' by a mere child; she describes Jane's behaviour, with laughable exaggeration, as 'truly forbidding'. To us as readers, however, it is clear that Jane is being treated harshly and unreasonably, and by the end of the first page, Jane, surrounded as it seems by her enemies, has won in her readers an army of supporters in her lonely battle against oppression.

These first paragraphs are characteristic of the way Charlotte Brontë presents the novel. Jane narrates the whole story, with her focus chiefly on what she sees going on around her. Later on, as Jane matures, there is more opportunity for self-analysis. However, at this childhood stage, the incidents she narrates are carefully selected to illuminate the personality and attitudes of the narrator herself. Much is left unsaid: we do not have to be told that Jane is a victim, for we see the situation enacted; the details of the characters emerge naturally from the action, without the need for lengthy explanations; we are already beginning to understand the character of Mrs Reed – or at least her unfair distinction between favourites (her own children) and the outcast (Jane); we are projected into a family situation which has clearly existed for some time, and Brontë sees no need to develop its history. This is a highly effective style of writing, economical, vivid and rich. It is not objective, though it is not apparent at this point to what extent the narration is biased. Although we know that our perceptions are determined by the narrator, we have as yet no reason to doubt the narrator's point of view.

There is much in these opening paragraphs which points to the rest of the novel. One of the first ideas to emerge is the central theme of personal freedom. It strikes us forcefully on closer study that the novel begins with a series of negatives: there is no possibility of a walk; outdoor exercise is out of the question. After the personal reflection, 'I was glad of it', Jane tells us that she 'never liked' long walks, and that she feels inferior. Mrs Reed then tells her that she is to be excluded from the family gathering and, later, that she doesn't like children who question her authority. There is a strong contrast

between the formal, and to that extent unloving language of Mrs Reed, and the emotional responses of the narrator, whose heart was 'saddened'. The effect is to create an atmosphere of grudge and resentment: we know that Jane feels neglected and trapped; already we are waiting to see how she will manage to escape from her situation. This is a pattern which becomes familiar as the novel proceeds: again and again, Jane commands our sympathy as she struggles to overcome obstacle after obstacle to her happiness and development. Her struggle appears to us as a child's instinctive embrace of a positive principle – the desire for freedom, for self-determination – against a negative oppression and restriction masquerading objectively as authority, and subjectively as duty.

The opening paragraph also introduces, in the way the natural world is used, one of the most striking features of *Jane Eyre*. Throughout the novel, the narrator shows a strong sensitivity to the natural world, particularly at critical moments of the action. Always, there is a significant interplay with events and moods. However, the natural world is not used mechanically: the relationship between human events and nature is used in a creative and flexible manner. The opening is a good example. The wintry weather expresses Jane's feelings, as we have noticed, but also reflects the hostile family environment in which she lives. The words 'cold' and 'sombre', and the reference to 'penetrating' rain, cast their shadow over the scene that follows. The walk in the 'leafless shrubbery' tells us that the action takes place after leaf-fall; but it also encourages us to feel a sense of loss or deprivation or even desolation – a feeling which is appropriate to Jane's loveless situation.

The relationship between human life and setting has moral significance, too. Mrs Reed's demand that Jane behave in a 'more natural' way is evidently ironic, for she is at this moment trying to change Jane's behaviour from natural to something else, only vaguely specified beyond the choice offered in 'speak pleasantly, [or] remain silent'. 'Natural', of course, is something of a Humpty-Dumpty word: it means exactly what you want it to mean, and one of the objects of *Jane Eyre* is to explore its meanings, particularly in relation to human behaviour, and more specifically religious behaviour. These are topics which we will consider more fully in later chapters.

The relationship between Jane and the other characters in these opening paragraphs foreshadows much in her relationships later in the novel, especially her subjection to Mrs Reed: Jane is often being placed in the position of trying to behave in a way that will satisfy other people – Rochester and St John Rivers spring to mind, to name no others! – and being thus driven to discipline and repress her own nature. Her ostracism from the inner circle of the Reed children looks forward to Jane's situation at Lowood, where she is made to stand on a chair in disgrace, and to her feelings when the Ingrams visit Thornfield and she is made aware of her lowly status as governess. Jane's isolation is dramatised in the latter half of the extract. Whereas the first six paragraphs present Jane as a social being, the next few reveal her private nature. This duality, which colours the whole novel, becomes more intensely felt later on as Jane develops greater maturity, and a more sensitive appreciation of the interplay between her personality and the world she inhabits. At this stage, Jane's private world is unsophisticated: it is the older narrator who brings subtlety to her mind.

Let us move on to consider that private world which is revealed when, in flight from the accusations of Bessie and the punishments of Mrs Reed, Jane takes refuge in a favourite hiding-place, the window-seat behind the red curtain in the breakfast-room. Here, protected from a hostile social world on one side, and screened by the window on the other from the 'drear November day', she looks out on the wildness of nature. In this scene, as in many later on, Jane is the outcast, unable to participate, and indeed fearful of doing so. Shut out from life, she retreats within herself; her existence narrows to defending her integrity, which she fears to risk in the cut-and-thrust of everyday living. On this occasion, she has Bewick's *History of British Birds* to turn to, and she spends some time absorbed in the arctic scenes depicted therein.

There is a great deal in this passage which deserves discussion, and readers tend to respond in a very individual way to its content, seeing in it meanings which seem to be hinted at without being fully expressed. The effect is characteristic of Brontë's writing: it is part of her achievement to have written about the minds and hearts of her heroines in a suggestive manner which implies depths not suscep-