

In Defense of Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre is a perennial novel for me. Yes, I teach it every year, but more importantly, I reread it every time. Not just a skim. A full read. And this is why.

1. Jane is a character of such growth. I know, I know. Brontë includes much of her own life and experiences in the novel, so maybe Jane isn't so original after all. It doesn't matter to me. At age 8, Charlotte Brontë was sent to a horrible school for poor clergymen's daughters, and her two older sisters died of tuberculosis within six months. That was reality, and it also happens to make great drama. How do you survive and continue after that? Well, that's Jane's plight and saga to tell, and it absorbs me entirely each time.

2. *Jane Eyre* is a story of spiritual metamorphosis. From a loveless, relationless childhood where God is wielded as a threat to time spent at a Christian charity orphanage where the gospel of privation and public humiliation are standardized, Jane changes. Her heart may be hardened to Aunt Reed for a time, but through the influence of Helen Burns and Miss Temple, her view of the present and the eternal begins to change. What's more is that through her budding relationship with Mr. Rochester, Jane's morality deepens as it is tested. She is tempted to remain at Thornfield as Rochester's mistress but chooses to flee instead without knowing her future. It's as if she is reinstated as an orphan. Yet beseeching God first and foremost, Jane sets off, and through time and choice, she is returned to her love, her person, a more righteous character than at her beginning.

3. Gothic drama and mystery are a perfect setting. How I enjoy the mysterious with Gothic flair! From Brontë's first chapter where Jane is sent to the Red Room in fear of ghosts to the eerie Grace Poole and an insane woman in the attic, Brontë creates a place of doubt where her readers wonder about

reality and the supernatural. That dramatic contrast is full-on Gothic – places and persons of fear contradicting places of light and peace. The practical Jane gets to discover it all and see the truth.

4. Brontë wrote a bestseller. It was a success for her, her publisher, and female authors of her time (and ours!). Book critics raved, writing about her “noble purpose,” the story’s freshness, originality, and power. *The Liverpool Standard* declared, “the writer has evidently studied well the human heart.” Yes, the key characters are dynamic, but then the miraculous happens, so frequently in fact that I wonder who in the Victorian era could think this story was relatable. Yet it is that improbability that makes the novel likeable. I think of how God rescues us, and I can see why Brontë created a long-lost benevolent uncle with money to spare. Never mind if it isn’t realistic. Our hope surges as we read, and I cheer for Jane because I want the best for her. I want her to love and be loved, and most of all, because Brontë has made her real.

5. A deepening love is one of the hardest to describe because it is active and changing as you read, yet the first infatuation is also real. We are with Rochester in the library as he shares bluntly with Jane. We are with them as they walk the gardens and pause under the great chestnut. The first sign of fascination and love might be light, but it is necessary if that love will ever deepen. More so, as the audience, we are entranced because we know the truth before Jane does. We play the “what if” game with Rochester. Could the wedding actually happen? When it doesn’t, we are crushed for them even though we’re glad the truth is known. Soon after, as Jane prays and hears from God, she must choose a life without love for a time. It’s a desert and a trial. But as she heals physically and emotionally, Jane grows and recognizes her life is empty without the friend who is part of her soul. Yes, St. John offers “love” and companionship of a sort, but her heart knows

it would be incomplete. When she hears Rochester's voice on the moors calling for her, she responds from within, a cry from spirit to spirit. It is then that Jane knows her heart and her readiness to return, to be complete: "Wherever you are is my home" (283).

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