

**READING FREELY INTO JANE EYRE:
A SUBJECTIVE APPRECIATION**
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Part I: *Jane Eyre* and the Symbolic Landscape

All of Jane Eyre's abodes are stifling, suppressive, stagnating. As an outcast at Gateshead, she's imprisoned in the nightmarish red-room. Lowood School is a Procrustes' bed of conformity: any self-expression of body, mind and spirit are racked and lopped. Even spacious Thornfield Hall seems stultifying when Rochester is away. Moore House is a haven, but more house than home, with chilly St. John as its master. "I never had a home," she tells him; she must leave at once when he pressures her into accepting a life with him, sans love, an anathema to her nature.

Jane does better outdoors. She jumps at the chance to walk two miles in midwinter to post a letter; re-entering Thornfield, she is "loathe to quell...the faint excitement" her walk wakened, doubtless aroused by her chance first meeting with Rochester, which could have occurred only out-of-doors. Her initial impression of him is man-cum-animal. The dog-horse-man appears as a starting, rearing, heaving, stamping, clattering, barking, baying and cursing unit—the portrait of a satyr too large for any Hall wall.

Running away from Rochester when she learns he has a wife, she barely survives a three-day ordeal on the moors, and is as mythically unaccommodated as Lear. But survive she does, demonstrating that her human nature is a match for larger Nature. Home is only with Rochester: she says: "I am strangely glad to get back again to you: and wherever you are is my home—my only home." At novel's end their home is Ferndean, and the penultimate chapter ends: "We entered the wood, and wended homeward"—homeward and Edward being one and the same.

Landscapes of the imagination symbolize inner states. Ten-year-old Jane looks at a book whose pictures she will never forget. Years later she unconsciously renders them in paintings of her own, as prescient images representing her inner autobiography. *Jane Eyre*, page one. Hidden in a window-seat (the source of a lifelong habit, where she is not separated, visually at least, from plein air), Jane reads Bewick's *History of British Birds*, illustrated with little wood engravings of Arctic landscapes. The introductory pages of Bewick serve as introductory pages to *Jane Eyre*. The inner visions of her inner life are born here, nature images later reinvented as cathartic self-expression: "The solitary rocks and promontories...; 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...glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surrounded the pole, and centre the multiplied rigours of extreme cold." Her commentary: "Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own...The words...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."

Eight years later, three watercolors painted at Lowood attract Rochester's admiration. One is Jane's depiction of the "half-submerged mast" of a wrecked ship upon which lurks a "cormorant, dark and large," holding in its beak a bracelet snatched from the "frail frame" of a drowned corpse. The cormorant is a Bertha-image: "...up in the locked attic: the voice of...a carrion-seeking bird of prey." As Rochester says, "When I think of the thing which flew at me this morning, hanging its black and scarlet visage over the nest of my dove..." Bertha snatches Thornfield and Rochester's intended gifts from Jane. The "wreck just sinking" foreshadows Jane's wandering self-exile. The wrecked ship hints of the incinerated Thornfield; the cormorant on the mast is Bertha on the rooftop. Moreover, Bewick's "object of terror" to young Jane is "a black, horned thing seated on a rock, surrounding a gallows"—which augurs Bertha on the roof, her execution by breakneck fall; the madwoman as nemesis on her husband's back.

Another watercolor, depicting a "pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar white sky" is a subject plucked right from Jane's Bewicked imagination, "a head—a colossal head" resting against an iceberg—the very image of Rochester "cushioning his massive head against the swelling back of his chair," with light thrown on his granite-hewn, prominent brow, like one of Bewick's "solitary rocks and promontories," a "rock standing up alone." The eye in Jane's picture is "hollow and fixed, blank of meaning, but for the glassiness of despair," and above the temples "gleamed a ring of white flame" which is prescient of blinded Rochester, whose hollow eye expressed only despair, whose "cicatrized visage" bore his white badge of courage, a fire-scar. And the thin, supportive hands in Jane's drawing work out to be her own, as she supports Rochester from beginning to end.

"Each picture told a story," Jane says of Bewick's *History*. Indeed. She remembers: "With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy; happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption." Eight years hence, Rochester asks Jane, "Were you happy when you painted these pictures?" Jane replies, "I was absorbed [read "uninterrupted"], sir: yes, and I was happy."

Part II: Reed-Rivers-Rochester: Jane Eyre's Three R's

Throughout *Jane Eyre*, character foils display correlative psychological types. They operate like a system of repeated musical motifs in a story of Romantic wildness--passion, rage and madness—which are set like gems in a narrative as solid as a crown.

Two pastors bracket the book. The Reverend Robert Brocklehurst, of the Lowood Orphan Asylum, is as brimstony and sadistic as the Reverend St. John Rivers is glacial and prohibitive. Ten-year-old Jane first sees Brocklehurst as a "black pillar": "the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital." St. John, by contrast, is likened to a Greek statue: "Had he been a statue instead of a man ..." with a Grecian face "as colorless as ivory ..." St. John Rivers is a foil to Rochester, as well. Just as St. John is moral, religious and forbidding, slim and blond -- Rochester is amoral, exhibitionistic, undisciplined, broad and dark. St. John, in fact,

is the callous, icy, Apollonian opposite of Vulcan-like Rochester who, along with his epithetical animals, is the quintessential Dionysian, pre-spiritual man.

Bertha Mason and Blanche Ingram are foils who may be read as latent aspects of Jane Eyre herself; symbolically, they are one character projected as two stages of regression—Bertha is a vampire, who sucks her brother's blood; while Blanche is a gold-digging vamp, sans ire. The roof from which Bertha jumps at Thornfield is foreshadowed by Jane's description of returning to Gateshead, where her aunt is dying:

On a dark, misty, raw morning in January, I had left a hostile roof [Gateshead] with a desperate and embittered heart--a sense of outlawry and almost of reprobation--to seek the chilly harbourage of Lowood: that bourne so far away and unexplored. The same hostile roof now again rose before me: my prospects were doubtful yet; and I had yet an aching heart. I still felt as a wanderer on the face of the earth; but I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression. The gaping wound of my wrongs, too, was now quite healed; and the flame of resentment extinguished.

The wicked siblings at the start of the novel -- John, Eliza and Georgiana Reed -- are Jane's cousins, and the odious counterparts of a second set of benevolent cousins, again two sisters and a brother: St. John, Mary and Diana Rivers. As a child, Jane is utterly disowned by the Reeds. As an adult, she claims the Rivers as family and divides her inheritance with them.

Rochester's ward, Adele, shares Jane's innocence. Governess and charge were both unloved children, but Adele is materially spoiled where Jane was deprived. The story elaborates the contrasting minds and educations of the two. While Adele is irritating, solipsistic and demanding, it is she who brings Jane to Rochester in the first place. She symbolically manifests Jane's burgeoning, if tacit, regard for the illusive master, for Adele's adoration is as clamorous as Jane's is checked. Scorned or ignored by her guardian, the little coquette occasionally deflects her thwarted affection onto Rochester's surrogate, the dog Pilot, as she persists in vying for the attention of her evasive father-figure. Her flagrant physical flirtatiousness is antipodal to Jane's witty ripostes. The child's premenstrual-pink dress, which she "disembowels" from its gift box, contrasts with Jane's severe black governess togs. But the two merge, as when Adele unknowingly promotes Jane's inchoate interests regarding Rochester. It is she who brings Jane's watercolors to his attention, unwittingly inviting him to explore Jane's soul.

Part III: Domination & Independence

Though Edward Rochester is master over his "paid subordinate," Jane Eyre is an authentic independent, transcending social convention, and she cannot be captured. Rochester is attracted and bemused by her singularity. The two constantly exchange ripostes and silences, watch and vex each other, and impose absence on

each other. Rochester is apt to gallop off (his horse is "Mesroure," which means "pleasure" in Arabic) at any moment, triggering in Jane great anxiety. "Will he leave again soon?" she frets. Later: "Journey!—Is Mr. Rochester gone anywhere? I did not know he was out," followed by a resolve to keep her "raptures" and "agonies" to herself.

But once she makes an abrupt departure herself, returning to Gateshead and to the odious Aunt Reed, who is dying. Here she learns of her uncle John Eyre's will and of her inheritance, the source of financial independence. Rochester, who comes and goes as he pleases, does not want her to leave him. He resists and prolongs the good-bye, and exacts a pledge: "Promise me only to stay a week" (as the Beast begged Beauty, called home to her father's deathbed, to stay away no longer than one week). For her journey he gives her more money than her salary. She protests that she has no change; he says he wants no change, but then reconsiders and tries to turn her stipend into collateral. "Better not to give you all now; you would, perhaps, stay away three months if you had fifty pounds. There is ten, is that not plenty?" Yes, Jane says, but now he owes her five. "Come back for it, then," he enjoins. Now he regrets giving her the monetary means of independence: "I wish I had only offered you a sovereign...Give me back nine pounds, Jane; I've a use for it." But Jane throws the ball back handily:

"And so have I, sir," I returned, putting my hands and my purse behind me...

"Little niggard!" said he, "refusing me a pecuniary request! Give me five pounds, Jane."

"Not five shillings, sir, nor five pence."

"Just let me look at the cash."

"No, sir; you are not to be trusted!"

"Jane!"

"Sir?"

"Promise me one thing." [This makes two things.]

"I'll promise you anything, sir, that I think I am likely to perform."

"Not to advertise; and to trust his quest of a situation to me. I'll find you one in time."

But he cannot lord it over her entirely. She will not be dominated, though his style of courtship verges on the sadistic. When they become engaged, Rochester wants to dress her up, possess her, chain her with jewels; but Jane stands fast, will accept neither jewelery nor domination, and insists on her identity—she is still Jane Eyre, and not Mrs. Rochester. Still, she manipulates him: "I knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns; it was one I chiefly delighted in, and a sure instinct always prevented me from going too far; beyond the verge of provocation I never ventured; on the extreme brink I liked to try my skill."

One flirtatious device is that of looking: the askance glance; the penetrating gaze; secret observation back and forth. From the start she scrutinizes his face, which arouses his curiosity about her; as, "with a single hasty glance [he] seemed to dive into my eyes"; or, "He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance." Jane is

often behind some curtain, secretly watching—or stealing away from a potential encounter. From her window-seat she thinks: “I am not looking...yet I see him enter....No sooner did I see that his attention was riveted on them, and that I might gaze without being observed...” She thinks he hasn’t noticed, which stimulates her: “He made me love him without looking at me.” The day after she rescues him (from fire this time), she thinks: “I both wished and feared to see Mr. Rochester on the day which followed this sleepless night: I wanted to hear his voice again, yet feared to meet his eye.” His deliberate evasiveness contrasts with his cold scrutiny of the beautiful, conniving, conventional Blanche, with whom he is constantly on guard--with Jane examining the whole show.

Back and forth Rochester and Jane describe and analyze each other. From her point of view it is she who is doing the observing while Rochester remains aloof. But he has, of course, noticed her from the start: “I observed you—myself unseen—I could both listen and watch.” ... “I was...stimulated with what I saw: I liked what I had seen, and wished to see more.” He follows her when she slips from the room (she thinks unseen); he observes that she is “getting paler...as I saw at first sight.” He has been aware of her all along, and even maneuvers her responses by caprice. But perhaps Jane cannily knows that he knows, and is playing along all the while.

Thornfield symbolizes Rochester’s mystery (to Jane he seems an unexplored room; and he holds keys to forbidden chambers, “mystic cells”). In the middle of one night (their encounters often occur at dusk or midnight) she barges into his chamber to save him from fire. An intimate call is sanctified by a symbolic baptism as she drenches him, along with the flames. (The fire-and-water trope appears often in myth; cf. Tamino’s initiation by fire and water in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*.) The night Bertha mauls her brother, Rochester appears at Jane’s door to marshal her aid. He sends her twice to his own room, to rummage in the drawers of his wardrobe for a phial containing some illicit crimson tincture.

Jane’s innocence cloaks real insight, unrealized by Rochester, who takes pleasure in toying with her. The novel reads like an elaborate courtship ballet in which the two alternately present and revoke themselves in an ever-building cat-and-mouse parley. Nor is it always apparent who is predator. In their first encounter, she arbitrates their roles as master and dependent, roles that are ultimately reversed. Having helped him limp to his horse after the icy skid, Rochester asks who she is. “Ah, the governess!” he says, without revealing his own identity. He uses the occasion to fish for information, or to tease:

“Whose house is it?”

“Mr. Rochester’s.”

“Do you know Mr. Rochester?”

“No, I have never seen him.”

“He is not resident, then?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me where he is?”

“I cannot.”

Later, disguised as a gypsy, Rochester uses the same ploy to discover Jane’s feelings:

“Is there not one face you study? You don’t know the gentlemen here? You have not exchanged a syllable with one of them? Will you say that of the master of the house?”

“He is not at home.”

“...A most ingenious quibble!...Does that...blot him, as it were, out of existence?”

Jane’s dawning awareness is triggered not by the intellect, but by sensibility. Rags and soot do not prevent the usually vigilant Jane from falling into a kind of trance, a hypnotic swoon. “Where was I? Did I wake or sleep? Had I been dreaming?” she wonders, realizing that the gypsy had “wrapped me in a kind of dream,” involving her in a “web of mystification.” Jane Eyre hits the “nail straight on the head” in guessing that Rochester is slyly drawing her out—or in; and leading her on. She protests, too much: “I do not like to walk at this hour alone with Mr. Rochester in the shadowy orchards.” Jane may not like it, but out she goes. “No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like....Here one could wander unseen...” Her panic at his appearance seems almost disingenuous. “I must flee...I see Mr. Rochester entering...if I sit still he will never see me...I can slip away unnoticed.” But Rochester, his back to her, begins a conversation; as she is “sheepishly retreating,” he entices her to stay “while sunset is thus at meeting with moonrise,” a redolent innuendo worthy of Coleridge.

The moon appears again shortly after Rochester alters Jane’s fate (temporarily) by his proposal. The blood-red disk passes between the fissure of the rent chestnut tree. The stricken tree is Rochester’s namesake and pagan twin. It is “a ruin, but an entire ruin,” just as Rochester becomes a ruined man, yet somehow intact. When Jane says, “I faced the wreck of the chestnut-tree; it stood up, black and riven,” she foretells of Rochester at the end: “His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour...his port was still erect, his hair was still raven-black...” The wounded tree (its circular bench symbolic of a wedding-band) portends Rochester’s suffering. Only when blind does he become inwardly sighted, like an Oedipus, Tiresius, or Gloucester. And in this state of humility and insight Rochester is finally worthy of wedding his counterpart.

Part IV: Jane, Cordelia, Belle, Cinderella

From once-upon-a-time to happily-ever-after, Jane Eyre is an elaborate bildungsroman fairy tale involving wicked stepsisters and –mothers, lost fortunes, found relatives, superhuman journeys, a happy ending—even a castle surrounded by thorns.

The novel is particularly close to the Cinderella story. The two heroines are deserving and pure, but degraded and humiliated by cruel relatives. In the fairy tale, the Prince searches for the elusive owner of a glass slipper. All the eligible girls are urged to try the slipper, but none can squeeze her foot into the glass shoe. The Prince learns of and locates a poor, obscure girl; the shoe fits; the match is set. In Jane Eyre, Rochester, disguised as a gypsy, sends his footman into the drawing room to invite the eligible young ladies to have their fortunes told. Blanche and Mary Ingram and the Eshton sisters, haughty and silly, emerge rattled from their gypsy

interviews. The footman [the footman in Cinderella is a crucial messenger as well] says: "The gypsy declares that there is another young single lady in the room who had not been to her yet..." So Jane takes her turn. Rochester finally reveals his identity, and only to her, establishing between them an exclusive intimacy: she alone is fit to confide in. According to Bruno Bettelheim, the Prince's act of slipping the shoe onto Cinderella's foot is a betrothal symbol, as a groom slips a ring on his bride's finger. Perhaps Rochester's revelation is a kind of betrothal symbol, as is the circular bench around the chestnut tree under which he proposes.

Jane Eyre is essentially sublime in character, as is Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia. Eliza and Georgiana Reed are versions of Goneril and Regan. Jane calls them "selfish" and "heartless." Cordelia (whose name means "heart"), like Jane, is at the heart of the plot. Both heroines are called "spirit" and are the heart's desire of a flawed, larger-than-life tragic hero. Each girl shows integrity in the temptation of excess. Cordelia won't eulogize her father or bow to his arrogance; Jane won't succumb to Rochester's illicit desires. Both remain silent rather than condescend to showy conversation. When Jane is pressured, she says nothing. This pregnant "nothing" dwells in both *Jane Eyre* and *King Lear* as a significant metronomic pulse. Truth needs no description, fanfare, or apology: it is "the shape which shape has none," as Jane says. Rochester tries to talk her into talking:

"...It would please me now to draw you out...therefore speak."

Instead of speaking, I smiled; and not a very complacent or submissive smile either.

"Speak," he urged...

Accordingly I sat and said nothing: "If he expects me to talk for the mere sake of talking and showing off, he will find he has addressed himself to the wrong person," I thought.

"You are dumb, Miss Eyre."

I was dumb still. He bent his head a little toward me, and with a single hasty glance seemed to dive into my eyes.

Lear and Cordelia have a similar interview:

Lear. ...what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sister? Speak.

Cordelia. Nothing, my lord.

Lear. Nothing?

Cordelia. Nothing.

Lear. Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

Cordelia. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. I love your majesty according to my bond; no more nor less.

When Jane discovers Bertha Mason's existence, she goes to her room and endures a lone and mighty moral struggle, to which Rochester laments, "You shut yourself up and grieve alone!" When Cordelia learns of her sisters' treachery and

father's madness: "...away she started/To deal with grief alone." Jane faints in Rochester's arms; Cordelia dies in Lear's arms. Though the one embrace ends with departure and the other with death, the dramatic effect is the same.

Gloucester, an echo of Lear, achieves insight only when blinded, as does Rochester. Gloucester's lament: "I stumbled when I saw" relates to Rochester's: "Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see." Gloucester must "see feelingly" as Rochester does, and their exclamations are virtually identical: "Oh! I *cannot* see, but I must feel, or my heart will stop and my brain burst" (and Edgar says, Viii: "O, that my heart would burst!"). Rochester cries, "Whatever, whoever you are, be perceptible to the touch, or I cannot live!" Gloucester, yearning for his son, says, "Oh, dear son Edgar.../Might I but live to see thee in my touch,/I'd say I had eyes again!"

Rochester's life of superficiality and indulgence reflects his hellish state: "To live, for me...is to stand on a crater-crust which may crack and spue fire any day." How like Lear's mad inner world, reflected by the storm on the heath: "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!/You cataracts and hurricanes, spout.../You sulphurous and thought-executing fires.../Crack nature's moulds..." [III:ii:1]. Though Cordelia does not survive the world's madness and man's duplicated errors, Jane prevails, retains faith and self, and emerges to lead Rochester, re-formed through remorse and repentance, who can ultimately meet her all the way.