

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*
and Nineteenth-Century Christianity

by

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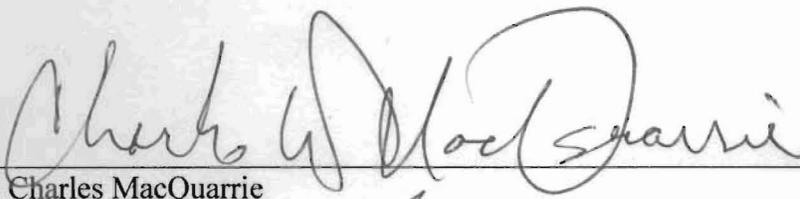
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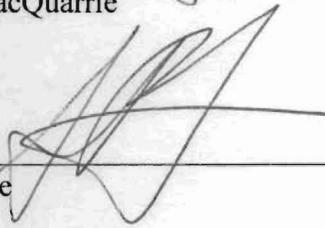
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Charles W. MacQuarrie".

Prof. Charles MacQuarrie

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Steven Frye".

Prof. Steven Frye

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Introduction

The textual, biographical and historical inquiry into Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* will center on the explicit and implicit Christianity of the novel and how it was possibly influenced by Charlotte Bronte's own unconventional religious perspective. The questions that I will explore deal with the brand of Christianity and social idealism with which Bronte was brought up, and how this is reflected in the text. Biography here is used to evaluate Bronte's attitudes concerning a multitude of Christianities, both prevalent and fledgling during the mid-eighteen hundreds. I will contextualize her faith, in hopes of broadening and enhancing our understanding of the text, and thus challenge aspects of the readings by critics who see her apparent feminism as a direct challenge to Christianity, (which they construe as a singular and monolithic social phenomenon). In chapter one I will contextualize Charlotte Bronte through the religious and social climate of her time and her own beliefs as they are revealed in her biography and letters. I will focus on the varying religious motifs of the novel as they are exemplified in the main characters. Chapter two will center on the character of St. John Rivers. Chapter three with Edward Rochester. Chapter four concerning Jane Eyre. At this point in my research, I have come to believe that Bronte studies in the recent past and present (1970's on) focus mainly on the feminist aspect of *Jane Eyre* while the Christian component is often marginalized or misunderstood. My reading of the criticism suggests that there is some oversimplification of 19th Century feminism and Christianity especially considering the subjects complexity. In my

study, I will examine this potential flaw in previous criticism and reveal some of the dynamics of Bronte's social concerns as they relate to her religious upbringing and perspective.

Charlotte Bronte's biography has been of great interest to critics. There is something of a consensus when it comes to a definitive biography and that would be Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, written one year after Bronte's death in 1855. This work is important because it is written by a woman who actually knew and befriended Bronte. Gaskell is able to give the reader a direct and personal sense of who Charlotte Bronte was and what she believed on various matters, social and religious. That said, it is not a completely reliable source because Gaskell wrote the biography purely to suffice Patrick Bronte (Charlotte's father) in hopes that the work might vindicate his daughter of charges from a portion of the public who considered *Jane Eyre* "a coarse, unfeminine, and ungodly book" (Elizabeth Rigby of the *Quarterly Review* Dec. 1848). Gaskell figures Bronte as a devoutly religious woman who is tormented by loneliness and physical suffering. There is a great deal of emphasis placed on Bronte's shyness in social situations as well as tremendous grief inflicted by the death of her sisters, mother, and brother. Because of all that Bronte suffered Gaskell argues that this is the reason her novel might be considered "coarse." Gaskell wishes the public to reconsider the pronouncement of coarseness in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* as merely the manifestation of grief from a sensitive soul. The sentimentality of this argument is not lost on the modern reader but it remains an important piece of the Bronte legacy.

Lyndall Gordon, a more modern and objective biographer who wrote, *Charlotte Bronte: A Passionate Life* in 1994, provides an alternative if somewhat overtly romanticized view of

Bronte's life. This perspective includes an in depth view of Bronte's infatuation with her professor, Constantine Heger, and attributes Bronte's later successes to her desire to please him and win approval (Gordon, 98). Gordon focuses on Bronte's attraction to the aesthetic of the Catholic church even as she scorned its doctrines (Gordon,226). In the period of her life when she and Emily were in Brussels at Heger's school, they were the only Protestants in the whole school and this alienated the sisters in many ways (Gordon,104). Gordon uses mainly correspondence from Bronte to her friend Ellen Nussey to express her own feelings of friendlessness, and her dislike for her Catholic school mates. Interestingly, Bronte once went to confession and was highly attracted and simultaneously repelled by the grandeur of the cathedrals and traditional ceremony (Gordon,108).

Considered the most important work of scholarship involving Bronte in the past thirty years is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *A Madwoman in the Attic*. This wide sweeping feminist critique delves into the systemic illness of women as manifest in the literature they produce. Most famously they contend that Bertha Mason, the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*, is Jane's double. Because of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist perspective, Christianity, in their study, is characterized in terms of patriarchy. They contend that Jane rejects the teachings of Helen Burns and Miss Temple as weak and ineffective (344-7). St. John Rivers is described as possessive and patriarchal, void of any redeeming qualities (365). These characters are minimized by the authors and are seen as mere foils: pious, godly, imprisoned and imprisoning tools to whom Jane is meant to contrast. Maria Lamonaca presents a far more inclusive reading

of *Jane Eyre* in her article, “Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*.”

The focus in this article is the end of the novel which is devoted to the character of St. John Rivers. Lamonaca argues that because St. John is figured as a devoted follower of Christ—and it is known that Bronte was a “loyal member of the church of England”(4)--his appearance at the end of the novel is quite important to some of the novel's themes. St. John is then a double for Jane because he lives a life of self-denial (renunciation of Rosamund Oliver whom he loves) and chooses to “take up his cross” as a missionary. Similarly, Jane gives up Rochester who she dearly loves in order to venerate herself (4). I find the assertion Lamonaca makes that St. John is Jane's double to be a fascinating feminist reading, as they are of the opposite sex. She sees two lives driven by faith and, in aspects, torn apart by the self-imposed conclusions of that Christianity. In this article the marriage of Christian and Feminist critique is rare and inspiring.

Maria Lamonaca is persuaded that *Jane Eyre* is a story of a woman's insistence that personal religion, and consequently, obedience to God rather than what men teach, is the central theme of the book, as she explains in her article, “Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*.” Jane feels no responsibility to any particular sect but to God alone for her choices and actions. This idea may not seem radical to a modern reader, but to one living in the mid 1800's, this theme is a rejection of portions of traditional Evangelical teaching. Lamonaca cautions those who would make *Jane Eyre* a document of prototypic feminism, such that could have been written after the women's movement. *Jane Eyre*, Lamonaca believes, employs social and gender themes, but not in a modern sense or for a modern purpose as she affirms, “*Jane Eyre* proclaims what could be considered a message of radical spiritual autonomy

for women. Yet feminist scholars must exercise caution” (245), Lamonaca, thus, sets up her argument for an interpretation of the end of the novel. Ultimately, she concludes that the ending of the book is problematic as a feminist or anti-evangelical text because Jane and Rochester marry, (after repentance and submission in the “fires of redemption”). This suggests that the novel as a whole must be read bearing in mind Christian elements as well as feminist. Many would like for the book to end when she leaves Rochester, as this is the perfect conclusion for a truly feminist reading, this is not the case—Jane marries the man. Secondly, the ending is problematic from a feminist perspective because the very last passage in the book is about St. John Rivers, a character that feminist critics typically vilify. St. John is seen as patriarchal and one-dimensional even though Bronte chose to end her book with these words, “No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope be sure; his faith steadfast” (466). Even though Jane has rejected his proposal of marriage and his world-view, does she then reject his religion along with him? Many feminists would respond affirmatively to this question. Lomanaca also verifies that the “mysterious summons” Jane has, before returning to Rochester, is a calling from God, as she says, “Discerning God's will through seemingly direct contact with the supernatural, Jane demonstrates that women—true to one facet of Evangelical doctrine—must experience God directly” (245). Lomanaca undauntedly argues that *Jane Eyre* is a Christian work, though her article is hardly original. She makes very similar observations as to the nature of feminism in the text that other critics have made, yet she succeeds in strengthening an already strong case for *Jane Eyre*, as a work intended to be read as unfalteringly Christian.

Richard Benvenuto derives the title of his article, “The Child of Nature, the Child of Grace, and the unresolved conflict of *Jane Eyre*” from the diverging perspectives of the children (Adele, Helen and Jane) in *Jane Eyre*. He argues that Jane as a child does not conform to Mrs. Reed's standards of behavior and is rejected because of this. Adele, Jane's charge, does conform to these same standards Mrs. Reed sets for Jane and for this reason Jane calls her, as Benvenuto quotes Bronte, “a pleasing and obliging companion; docile, good-tempered, and well-principled” (Bronte, 427). Benvenuto sees that there is a conflict in Jane as he says, “Jane is divided between roles that identify her as both a rebel against the cultural establishment and its apologist” (623). This division that he identifies carries over into her spiritual life as well. He says that Jane realizes she is both a child of grace, accountable to a structured morality, and a child of nature with an independent will. To become Rochester's mistress would align her with nature, but to marry St. John Rivers would bind her to grace. By leaving both men she straddles the concepts of grace and nature. Benvenuto believes that this conflict in Jane is brought to resolution when she returns to Rochester (631). Her return signifies the fulfillment of both nature as represented in her love for Rochester and grace through the death of Bertha (638).

John G. Peters begins his article, “We Stood at God's Feet, Equal”: Equality, Subversion, and Religion in *Jane Eyre*” by reviewing the first main pieces of criticism after the publication of *Jane Eyre*. He says that those who found the work anti-Christian and subversive (most notably Elizabeth Rigby of the *Quarterly Review* Dec. 1848) are correct in their assertions, because *Jane Eyre* does not advocate their brand of Christianity, therefore it is subversive (55). Peters then examines the opposite spectrum of more modern critics and their preoccupation with

Jane Eyre as a feminist manifesto. He concludes, “the novel deals with a more universal human equality, and these critics fail to see the broader equality Charlotte Bronte advocates because they fail to see the novel's significant religious concerns” (56). Peters clarifies the different enactments of Christianity in the characters of Brocklehurst, Hellen Burns, Miss Temple, St. John Rivers and Jane Eyre. He finds that there are slight differences between Helen Burns and Miss Temple that are closer to Jane's conception of religious ideology, while Brocklehurst and St. John are extreme and opposing examples (61).

Essaka Joshua has a similar focus in his article, “Idolatry and Messianic Symbolism in *Jane Eyre*,” as he traces the different ways in which characters are messianic or apostolic symbols and the pitfalls these characters encounter in their idolatrous attachments. He believes that the renunciation of idolatry is the main theme of *Jane Eyre* and that the work is “a deeply religious novel”(83). Joshua contends that throughout the book the characters place others in the realm of Christ. Jane and Rochester are savior figures to one another; St. John Rivers with his “Greek face,” tempts Jane as he is tempted by Rosamond Oliver. An exceptional character is Helen Burns because she is Christ-like without becoming a false Messiah or object of adoration. Bronte achieves this affect through implicit and explicit Biblical reference. He believes that the end of the novel places the focus directly on Christ, through the character of St. John Rivers. Because St. John is the subject of the last sentence in the book, Joshua believes Bronte shifts the focus of idols, or unaligned human relationships, to the success of one human being as he pursues the “incorruptible crown” by his service to the true Messiah. Certainly Joshua is correct in his conclusion that the theme of idols in *Jane Eyre* is an important one.

Marianne Thormahlen's book *Bronte's and Religion* is a thorough explication of the Bronte family's express as well as implied views on Christianity contextualized by the profoundly complex positions of the Church of England and the many offshoots of the Church. Thormahlen stresses that the religion of Patrick Bronte is not the religion of his family (16). They are related but progressive forms of the later. Even as the sister's Christianity diverges from their father's they also constitute their own private interpretations within the title "Evangelical" that each member of the family might call their own (18). This isn't to suggest that any of these conflicting interpretations disagree on anything fundamental in their collective faith, but each member of the Bronte family enacted their own spiritual development. It is important to point out that this is where many critics fail in their analysis of Charlotte Bronte's Christianity; because spiritual development implies change, Bronte's personal approach to her religion allowed and accepted complexity as her fiction would bear out. Thormahlen doesn't make the mistake many have when they attribute something Patrick Bronte believes to the rest of the family. She marks the important movements of their time and tries to piece together the individual attitudes held by each member of the Bronte family to the extent that the evidence reasonably allows.

A good amount of historical research, including the political and religious climate of 19th century Europe, is necessary to fully comprehend the environment in which *Jane Eyre* was written. Since I am concerned with the nuance of Charlotte Bronte's religion as it is seen in the novel *Jane Eyre*, I am hoping to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between Bronte's complex religious perspective and her social concerns as they are seen in the characters

St. John Rivers, Helen Burns and Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre*. There has been so much interest in feminist readings in the past but it seems the current direction in Bronte scholarship has shifted to the question of religion, as indeed the question exists. This is an opportune time to reconsider and problematize conventional scholarly consensus that feminism and Christianity are incompatible.

Chapter 1

Biographical and Historical Background

It is essential to frame the development of the person Charlotte Bronte: her religious and social ideology as well as attitudes formed through the atmosphere(s) in which she grew up. Her family and the little town of Haworth, as well as the broader religious and social environment of Europe during the early to mid-19th Century helped shape Charlotte Bronte's singular brand of Christianity. Biographies, histories and letters present a dynamic representation of Bronte, which reveal that Christianity is an extremely important aspect of her life and work. Letters written by Charlotte Bronte¹ play an important role in distinguishing fact and fantasy; when at all possible it is a powerful affirmation to have the author's own words and it is crucial to note that there are many different views of Bronte's upbringing and religious/social preoccupations² and unless other letters or sound evidence is produced, the mysteries surrounding her life should be acknowledged and left alone. The fact that Charlotte was a devoted Christian should not be in dispute, because she attests this fact in the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* and often elsewhere in her correspondence. The evidence for Charlotte's brand of Anglican Christianity as well as the nuance of her own private interpretations concerning her faith are important and even more so for the modern reader who perhaps, would tend to label Charlotte Bronte into a mass entitled "Anglican" without the benefit of understanding what it meant for Bronte or the broader population at that time.

From the beginning to mid-nineteenth century in Europe there was a shifting of political,

social and religious ideology that took place. Because of the impending industrial revolution the labor industry had resorted to exploitation of women and children in the work houses, mines, and factories performing physically exhausting jobs, working long hours for little pay. Poverty became a daily reality to many and the choices were few, especially for women. Authors during this time elaborated on the evils of such a society including Charles Dickens and William M. Thackeray³. Dickens managed to sympathetically portray Nancy the prostitute in *Oliver Twist* just as Thackeray created Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*⁴ in order to make the public aware of the evils of poverty and the need for action. These are just two examples of the widespread concern the literary world mirrored. The idea of benevolence and giving during this time was gaining momentum. Social groups, Churches and individuals, were becoming aware of the heightened need and responsibility to provide for one another. F. David Roberts claims that in the early 1800's individuals looked to property, church and government to provide for others but shifts to a more Laizer-fair attitude toward the middle of the 1800s, as individuals took more of a personal role in benevolence and wanted less from organizations (1) thus the self-reliant mind was developing.

During the early nineteenth hundreds some argue that Evangelicalism and not feminism was responsible for enlarging the sphere for women (Bebbington,129). There seems to have been a diverse group that made up Anglican circles during this time: radical traditionalists, formalists, and free thinkers; but progress made by some of these women lasted as the popularity of Evangelicalism declined in the mid nineteenth hundreds (Griesinger,1). Some of these different attitudes surely would have been present in Reverend Bronte's congregation; even in a small

town there would be some diversity of thought. Even though Patrick Bronte was not what one might consider forefront of feminist progression, and he did not see that men and women are equal. As an example: Mr. Bronte wrote to Mrs. Gaskell in 1855 describing how he once asked his children a series of question. He asked Branwell this, “What was the best way of knowing the difference between the intellects, of men and women—he answer'd by considering the difference between them as to their bodies--” (Barker, 4). It is obvious, from this excerpt of a letter he penned himself, that he held a strong prejudice in his beliefs about men and women. This would become even clearer as he put more personal attention and financial support toward Branwell's continually failed attempts at a career. His daughters were sent to an undistinguished school and then left to their own devices to secure governess positions. Even when they went to the Heger School in Brussels, their Aunt Branwell paid the tuition. Not to be too hard on Mr. Bronte, he had very little money and many children.

When Charlotte Bronte was born April 21st 1816 to Patrick and Maria Bronte. Maria Branwell was raised in Penzance and brought up in the Methodist religion and by all accounts she was a gentle, devoted and intelligent woman. She had a “mind of a truly fine, pure, and elevated order” (Gaskell 335), Charlotte wrote later in life after reading old letters written by her mother to her father and adding, “the records of a mind whence my own sprang; and most strange”(335). She felt an obvious connection to her mother even though she had no memories of her own; Maria died when she was 39 years old (in 1821) of cancer—coincidentally Charlotte would die at the same age as her mother on March 31st 1855. Elizabeth Gaskell remarks, after perusing the nine letters written by Maria Bronte, that they are, “pervaded by the deep piety to

which I have alluded as a family characteristic”(37). Those who knew the Brontes gained a sense of their religious values and the importance those values impacted their lives.⁵

Rev. Patrick Bronte was a native of Ireland and from a poor but distinguished family. He was educated at St. John's college, Cambridge and then relocated to Heartshead in Yorkshire. He preached and lived at Haworth until the age of 85, outliving his wife and six children. He was, what might be considered, closest linked religiously with Wesleyan Methodism and Evangelicalism in the Church of England. He refuted the more Calvinistic leanings of some Wesleyan teachings but his own sermons focused greater attention on damnation as opposed to comfort in salvation. Marianne Thormahlen believes that the Bronte family was a microcosm of Protestantism in 18th and 19th century England (14), and that it would be difficult to divulge variations of doctrine simply with a denominational title. Patrick and his children tended to have a view that preferred a focus on similarities in belief rather than argue dissonant tenets, allowing them freedom from indoctrination and encouraged spiritual exploration, within the Anglican tradition.

Many did not like Patrick Bronte, in fact Elizabeth Gaskell gives insight into this peculiar man, “He [Patrick] was very polite and agreeable to me; paying rather elaborate old-fashioned compliments, but I was sadly afraid of him in my inmost soul; for I caught a glare of his stern eyes over his spectacles at Miss Bronte [Charlotte] once or twice which made me know my man; and he talked at her sometimes” (Letters, 374). He seems a difficult man to understand—from the varying letters he wrote as well as the few things written about him; we know that he was a man who believed in a life of simplicity. He ate simple foods and imposed simplicity of dress

on his children—of which they eventually continued themselves—even the house was simply decorated (partly owing to Mr. Bronte's fear of curtains and rugs catching fire).⁶ Aside from these peculiarities, Patrick Bronte was a man of limited resources who, despite this constraint, loved and worked for his children's future, in particular, Branwell's unrealized artistic pursuits. Their relationship may not have been close, as one would define closeness in the modern sense, (in fact he was often alone in his rooms, preferring solitude to childish prattle) but it would be unfair to conflate his seclusion with disinterest.

After Maria's death, her sister Elizabeth Branwell moved from Penzance to Hawarth in order to care for the young Brontes. Aunt Brandwell's role in the religious life of the Bronte children is another important element to mention because she was an outspoken and religious person with whom the children spent much of their time. Aunt Branwell was unlike Mr. Bronte and seems to have believed that children should be indoctrinated from an early age but there is scant evidence to support the claim that Anne, in particular, suffered from “religious melancholy” (Gerrin, 35), as some claim, because Aunt Branwell thought it her duty to constantly “teach” the children. If this is true it would be in stark contrast to Mr. Bronte's philosophy of raising children.

The small town of Haworth, where the Bronte children were raised and lived (off and on) until each of their deaths, was amidst a unique and harsh landscape where an equally unique and harsh people resided. Charlotte once informed Elizabeth Gaskell of a local adage, “keep a stone in thy pocket seven year; turn it, and keep it seven year longer, that may be ever ready to thine hand when thine enemy draws near”(Gaskell,16) which perfectly illustrates how much the

people who lived there harbored hostility. They were a people who loved fiercely and hated to the end. This same outspoken inclination translated to their religion. One preacher that was notoriously loved or hated in Haworth before Patrick Bronte was one Mr. Grimshaw (appropriately named) as Elizabeth Gaskell relates, "He used to preach twenty or thirty times a week in private houses. If he perceived that any were inattentive to his prayers, he would stop and rebuke the offender and not go on until he saw everyone on their knees. . .and taking a horsewhip went into the public-houses, and flogged the loiterers into church. . .Even now the memory of this good man is held in reverence, and his faithful ministrations and real virtues are one of the boasts of the parish" (25). This is a portrait and only one example of the people with whom the Bronte's were accustomed and a clue to understanding who Charlotte was: is it any wonder that she wrote such forceful and alive characters in *Jane Eyre* or that when faced with criticism she withstood unfounded remarks with the fierceness of, say, a Mr. Grimshaw?

Charlotte had two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth as well as three younger siblings: Branwell, Emily, and Anne. Maria and Elizabeth died very young: Maria (age 13) died May 6, 1825 and Elizabeth (age 12) died June 15, 1825 after becoming ill at Cowan Bridge school. Charlotte famously incorporates the short life and death of her beloved sister Maria in *Jane Eyre* as the long suffering Helen Burns. It is obvious that her sisters' deaths had a great impact upon her, not only because she had lost her mother at such a young age but because she believed their deaths were indirectly caused by the misunderstandings of the Calvinistic doctrines enacted by Carus Wilson, the school's overseer. The circumstances surrounding their deaths seem to have affected Charlotte to life-long bitterness and she created the characters of Mr. Brocklehurst and

Miss Scatterd to represent the real life Carus Wilson and Miss Andrews. Carus Wilson was not only the director at the Cowan Bridge school, where Maria, Elizabeth and Charlotte (and Emily briefly), but was a minister at the local church. He was a man who had a devoted belief in the election of the saints and seemed to direct all of his energies to preach, write and lecture concerning repentance of sin and self-deprivation. He would scare the children with stories of young children's deaths in order to motivate their devotion to live a sinless life. He wrote and compiled a weekly magazine entitled *The Children's Friend*, accounting deaths of naughty children as well as lives of children they should emulate. Biographer Winifred Gerrin says,

A Calvinist, Mr. Wilson left his young readers in no doubt about the eternity of damnation for the wicked, among whom must be classed the naughty child...Mr. Wilson's stories were not mere cautionary tales, they reflect his own profound beliefs. Writing in *The Children's Friend* for December 1826 of the real death of one of his girls at Cowan Bridge, his thankfulness for her early removal from a world of temptation is a genuine sentiment that cannot be in doubt" (12-13).

Charlotte's own father believed and preached damnation; so what was so different about the hell-fire and brimstone of Carus Wilson? Mr. Bronte rejected the tenets of Calvinism involving predestination and election of the saints which places great importance on the actions of the individual to denote salvation or damnation. Wilson made it his duty to look for faults early in children in order to differentiate the unsaved from their peers, or the lambs from the goats. This practice and belief of election was detestable to the Brontes, but it is helpful to remember that

when these memories were made at Cowan Bridge school (Carus Wilson and the deaths of her sisters) Charlotte was only nine years old. Because she was so young it is possible that her emotions rather than the analysis of the events prompted her memories. Regardless, there are theological differences between Bronte and Wilson that the elapse of time did not and could not change. Though the controversy surrounding the person of Carus Wilson⁷ exists, one thing remains certain and that is the dramatic impact he had on Charlotte Bronte and *Jane Eyre*.

As teeming multiplicity is the peculiar stamp of the Dickens universe, so the hallmark of Charlotte Bronte's fictional world is its constriction of focus, its radical minimizing of narrative event, scene, and cast. One feels that there are more characters, more settings, more twists of plot in *Our Mutual Friend* alone than in the whole Bronte corpus. Yet this narrowing of scope is well adapted to Charlotte Bronte's purposes, for it allows maximum concentration on her abiding interest: the experience of a single consciousness (Philip Momberger, 20).

That single consciousness is Charlotte Bronte's through the character of Jane Eyre. *Jane Eyre* is rendered in a sensitive yet forceful style that poignantly conveys Charlotte Bronte's stubborn intelligence combined with naivety. Her isolated upbringing allowed her the freedom to have her own thoughts yet she was educated both formally and through private reading. All six of the Brontes displayed intellectual gifts (including the young Maria and Elizabeth who died so early). They all produced unusual works of poetry and prose; Emily, Charlotte and Branwell were also interested in art, and Emily played the piano (she taught piano at the Heger school). There was

little to distract or separate them from their literary ambitions until they became governesses in different households—this produced similarly adverse effects on the three sisters and helped Charlotte to shape the character Jane Eyre.

Charlotte describes Emily's experience as a low-level teacher in a letter to her friend Ellen, October 1838, "I have had one letter from her since her departure it gives an appalling account of her duties—Hard labour from six in the morning until near eleven at night. With only one half hour of exercise between- this is slavery I fear she will never stand it-" (Barker, 59). In another excerpt from a letter of Charlotte's to Emily written June 8, 1839, she clearly describes feelings of depression when she (Charlotte) is employed for the first time as a governess, forced to submit to a life of menial tasks and viewed as inferior by her employer Mrs. Sedgwick, "I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil"(Barker, 65). It is easy to see that her experience and those of her sisters continues to develop the plot for the yet -to -be written *Jane Eyre*. It is evident to her that, as a governess, she was not valued as a human being let alone one with a great intellect. Even as a teacher at Miss Wooler's school she felt she was still underutilized and pestered by the inconsequential needs of her pupils as they are seen here in a journal entry on August 11, 1836, "The thought came over me am I spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage, forcibly suppressing my rage at the idleness the apathy and the hyperbolic & most asinine stupidity of these fat headed oafs and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness, patience & assiduity?" (Barker, 39). Charlotte Bronte was then deeply affected by these teaching

experiences and how they encroached on her time. She expresses herself forcefully, using the word “rage” to describe her feelings. During this time, when she was teaching at Miss. Wooler's school, she wrote a (now) famous letter in 1837. Charlotte Bronte (age nineteen) wrote to Poet Laureate Robert Southey asking him to review her work and offer his advice about the direction of her career, if he believed she might be capable. He did write back and affirm that her writing showed promise but he felt a writing career for a woman, however gifted, might cause unhappiness, “The daydreams in wh[ich] you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind, & in proportion as all the 'ordinary uses of the world' seem to you 'flat & unprofitable', you will be unfitted for them, without becoming fitted for anything else. Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be....But do not suppose that I disparage the gift wh[ich] you possess, nor that I w[oul]d discourage you from exercising it, I only exhort you so to think of it & so to use it, as to render it conducive to your own permanent good”(Barker,47-8). Charlotte never admitted to feeling anger or resentment toward Southey for these words of caution but she does tell Elizabeth Gaskell the following, “Mr. Southey's letter was kind and admirable; a little stringent, but it did me good” (Gaskell, 124). It seems that his reply helped her to focus more on her task as a teacher and less on her “Angrian” pursuits. This was an unpleasant reality for her and she became unhappy, yet determined to make her way, since she had no other means of financial support at this time.

Charlotte, Emily, and Anne tried very hard to open their own school at home. Emily and Charlotte traveled to Brussels in 1842 in order to receive further education in language and music to qualify themselves as teachers for their own school. Throughout this time, even though

she was not writing with the purpose to publish, she was gaining experience that helped to shape *Jane Eyre*. There is evidence that Charlotte and Emily did not try very hard to make friends in Brussels; they found that they had little in common with their school mates and teachers: they were the only Protestants, they were English, and they dressed oddly. They were also poor, as opposed to their fellow students who were of a higher social class (Gordon, 104). It was here that she fell in love with her exacting, dark-browed professor Monsieur Constantin Heger. In Lyndall Gordon's biography *Charlotte Bronte: A Passionate Life*, Gordon argues that the married Heger becomes an obsession for Bronte because he helped her perfect her literary gifts, "M Heger transformed Charlotte's ideas of manhood. Unlike Papa, Southey, or Hartley Coleridge, here was a man who wished her to write—wished truly and urgently to perfect her gift"(Gordon, 98). Although there are no existing letters of Heger's to Charlotte, there is a letter that Charlotte wrote to Heger after she returned to Haworth. Her return was marked as an unhappy reunion because plans for a school were deserted and her brother Branwell, a ruined alcoholic and addict, unnerved the entire family. Bronte clung to the deteriorated friendship of her former professor as she tries unsuccessfully to maintain communication:

Day and night I find neither rest nor peace—If I sleep I have tortured dreams in which I see you always severe, always gloomy and annoyed with me—Forgive me then Monsieur if I take the course of writing to you again—How can I endure life if I make no effort to alleviate my sufferings? . . . I would rather undergo the greatest physical sufferings than always have my heart torn apart by bitter regrets. If my master withdraws his friendship entirely from me I will be completely without hope—if he gives me a little—very little—

I will be content—happy, I will have a reason for living—for working--” (Barker124-5).

Her plea would go unanswered. The letter was ripped up by Heger and found by his wife who then sewed the pieces together and kept it. Juliet Barker maintains that, “Monsieur Heger attempted to destroy the letters but his wife, who had had her suspicions about Charlotte for some time, found them. . .and stored them away for future reference “(124). This was the end of her relationship with her beloved Monsieur but the beginning of her literary career.

To work her way through this difficult time, she first discovered some of Emily's poetry and felt that it showed uniqueness and power. Anne also shared her poetry with Charlotte and her efforts were also deemed to possess, “a sweet sincere pathos of their own” (Barker, 140) so Charlotte went about the business of publishing their combined works in a single volume of poetry. Charlotte was the force behind this first step in the Bronte' literary legacy. Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre* amid unlikely circumstances—her father underwent cataract surgery in Manchester where Charlotte cared for him. She suffered from a tooth ache and the return of her first novel *The Professor* which remained unpublished. In this dark environment she made her own light through *Jane Eyre*.

Chapter Two

St. John Rivers

“Man is indeed an amazing piece of mechanism when you see—so to speak—the full weakness—of what he calls—his strength”

(Charlotte Bronte to Ellen; May 27, 1854).

St. John is a remarkable representative of what the Christian world in Bronte's time, in particular the evangelical atmosphere, elevated as the standard by which all might measure themselves; the apostolic perfection of self-denial and spiritual warfare. Charlotte Bronte needed a character in her book that would represent a “perfect” Christian with whom she might contrast Jane's defects. This isn't to say that St. John is without flaw, on the contrary, Jane has insight into his humanity but acknowledges his greatness. Charlotte Bronte struggled with the tenants of her religious upbringing and the character of St. John is a manifestation of that struggle. St. John Rivers is introduced late in the novel *Jane Eyre*; none the less he represents an extremely important aspect of 19th Century Christianity from Charlotte Bronte's prospective. He is the idealized Christian of her time; the un-hypocritical Brocklehurst, an industrious Eliza Reede, a practical Helen Burns; he is an ambitious, self-less, persuasive Christ follower. He is, however, cold and statue-like in appearance and manner (Bronte,354). He seems to care little for humanity except that it pleases God to pursue missionary work. Anglican Victorians would care more for a person's actions than they would desire warmth or sensitivity in their Christian martyrs, so St. John is the ideal representative. Unlike Charlotte Bronte who anticipates a certain modern social Christianity in her attitude toward this type of Christian, she never

condemns him. She even respects his devotion, yet she is not like him and does not love him.

The one she loves is as human and carnal as St. John is statue-like and restrained. Jane considers a life in the mission field with St. John but rejects his proposal of marriage. For Jane, marriage to a man who does not love her and whom she cannot love is as much a degradation as Rochester's attempt to dress her up as the beauty she knows she is not (Bronte, 264). Her rejection of his proposal has little to do with his religious perspective as John G. Peters believes, "Robert Brocklehurst, Eliza Reed, St. John Rivers, and Helen Burns present examples of religious sensibility in order to show the reader various interpretations of Christianity...each represents some aspect of practiced Christianity that Jane rejects"(59). Jane never shows distaste for St. John's religious views, she has difficulty with his personality, not his form of "practiced Christianity." There is little doctrinal discord but she says, "he lived only to aspire-after what was good and great, certainly: but still he would never rest; nor approve of others resting round him. As I looked at his lofty forehead, still and pale as a white stone-. . . I comprehended all at once that he would hardly make a good husband: that it would be a trying thing to be his wife" (Bronte, 403). Many critics are mystified by the final lines in *Jane Eyre* that praise St. John,

St John is unmarried: he never will marry now. Himself has hitherto sufficed to the toil; and the toil draws near its close: his glorious sun hastens to its setting.

The last letter I received from him drew from my eyes human tears, and yet filled my heart with Divine joy: he anticipated his sure reward, his incorruptible crown. I know that a stranger's hand will write to me next, to say that the good

and faithful servant has been called at length into the joy of his Lord. And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this:- "My Master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly,--'Surely I come quickly!' and hourly I more eagerly respond,--'Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!' (Bronte, 466).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see this character as the figurative New Testament John the Baptist "Jane must symbolically, if not literally, behead the abstract principles of this man before she can finally achieve her independence"(365). The above quote is in complete opposition with this critical estimation. These final words from St. John bring joy and praise from Jane, not contempt. Jane never rejects St. John's principles, she rejects a union with a person she does not love. Even those critics who agree that St. John is a positive or partially -positive character have a difficult time reconciling these last words in the novel with St. John's character. John G. Peters says, "For St. John, religion is a duty, and he understands only the rigour, not the heart" (59). It is not true that St. John doesn't have a "heart" for religion, he is just more interested in human souls than earthly well-being. Jane knows he has tremendous love for Christ; it seems that she is moved to tears and feels "Divine joy" when she thinks of his future reward in heaven (466). A more accurate interpretation of St. John's character is that he is a dynamic representation of the idealized 19th century Christian. From Jane's early opinion of St. John we see that she has insight into his shortcomings because she is aware of her own, "I was sure St. John Rivers-pure-lived, conscientious, zealous as he was-had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all

understanding: he had no more found it, I thought, than had I” (361). This passage indicates Jane's conviction that St. John is tentative concerning his own salvation at this point in his life, compared with the final paragraph in the book describing St. John's impending death and sure reward. Such contrasting views are an indication that he changed and grew as a person just as Jane does. Peters, Gilbert and Gubar don't try to interpret the last passage in the book because it is problematic for their critical interpretations of St. John as a negative character.

Jane Eyre's Character might be compared with St. John's on a few levels: she exhibits a certain coldness to those around her just as St. John does, “I assured [Rochester] I was naturally hard—very flinty, and that he would often find me so; and that, moreover, I was determined to show him divers rugged points in my character before the ensuing four weeks elapsed: he should know fully what sort of a bargain he had made, while there was yet time to rescind it” (279). Jane is practical and sensible just as St. John; she elevates God's law above her own feelings which is evident when she leaves Rochester whom she loves (325), just as St. John gives up the idea of union with the beautiful Rosamond Oliver for whom he lusts because he comes to realize she is unsuited for missionary life (384). Even though it appears that Jane and St. John are similar enough to have a certain empathy together it becomes apparent that Jane has a deeper feeling for those around her than St. John. He knows and acknowledges this, “allow me to assure you that you partially misinterpret my emotions. You think them more profound and potent than they are. You give me a larger allowance of sympathy than I have a just claim to....Know me to be what I am—a cold hard man”(385). St. John is honest in his own self-appraisal but he is

referring to earthly affection and warmth, these are the qualities that he is lacking. He does possess love for the human soul, the eternal portion of humanity and this is why he has such a strong desire to be a missionary. Jane has a need to be loved and to love in return. This is her mission in life.

St John Rivers is often criticized for imposing his own ideas of salvation and damnation upon Jane. This, according to Maria Lamonaca, is because “Jane must once again deal with a domineering male character who is firmly convinced of God's will for them both. Because God is all-knowing, St. John seems to believe that he himself, as God's servant, is likewise omniscient” (4). Although St. John is inflexible in his view of life and what it means to be a servant of God he is sincerely knowledgeable of the Bible and its principles. He only ever repeats these principles to Jane in order to convince her to marry and join him in missionary life, and he nearly persuades Jane because she respects his work and devotion. Yet he is erring in wisdom, and he does not understand that although the choice of a missionary life is excellent, in and of itself, he chose for himself; pressing Jane when she feels it is wrong to marry him is unthinkable, “I did consider: and still my sense, such as it was, directed me only to the fact that we did not love each other as man and wife should; and therefore it inferred we ought not to marry” (417). It is Biblically inconsistent of St. John to try and convince Jane to marry him when she is averse; St. John would know the verse that condemns his actions, “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak (Romans 14,21). Instead of acknowledging Jane's logical argument against their marriage, he pursues her with greater determination in order to, “secure [his] great end” (420).

St. John is a minor character but he is one that has left an impression on readers and critics because of his forceful presence. Few will try to understand him because it is easier to become infuriated with his patriarchal and inhumane characteristics. Charlotte Bronte knows her subject better than her audience; even her contemporary Christian audience was appalled by Jane's, and ultimately Bronte's, complex feelings about St. John. She did not treat this apostolic figure with awe and reverence, but with a human consideration that weighed both good and evil. Not just good and evil in St. John, but herself. In a letter written to her devout friend Ellen, these concerns are manifest:

I often plan the pleasant life which we might lead together, strengthening each other in that power of self-denial, that hallowed and glowing devotion which the first Saints of God often attained to—My eyes fill with tears when I contrast the bliss of such a state brightened by hopes of the future with the melancholy state I now live in, uncertain that I have ever felt true contrition, Wandering in thought and deed, longing for holiness which I shall never, never obtain—smitten at times to the heart with the conviction that your Ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true—darkened in short by the very shadows of Spiritual Death! If Christian perfection be necessary to Salvation I shall never be saved, my heart is a real hot bed for sinful thoughts (Barker 41-2).

It is clear that Bronte had great concern for her own spiritual welfare—there is such honesty in her own self-appraisal. One might just read this letter as an overly humble disguise of her true piety, but it remains that Charlotte is the daughter of a clergyman and that by confessing her lack

of repentance she would not hope to elicit exhortation but scorn. Just as St. John scorns Jane Eyre, “Refuse to be my wife, and you limit yourself for ever to a track of selfish ease and barren obscurity. Tremble lest in that case you should be numbered with those who have denied the faith, and are worse than infidels!”(421). Bronte struggled to such an extent because her own nature was in conflict with her interpreted Biblical truths. St. John perfectly contrasts with Jane's nature and the more she tries to be what he wants, the more she realizes the impossibility of that end, “As for me, 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”(410).

St. John Rivers is the ultimate example of the ideal 19th Century Evangelical Christian in terms of his devotion and severity. The character of Jane speaks for Bronte's own insight into the flaws of this man and subsequent reality and practice of that Christianity. Even though Bronte praises St. John at the end of the book she also leaves the reader with a picture of Jane's own happy ending, even after she has resisted St. John's assertion that she would be lost if she returned to Rochester (421). The natural conclusion to this seeming contradiction is that they had separate callings yet equally important work.

Chapter Three

Edward Rochester

“He [Rochester] is taught the severe lessons of Experience and has sense to learn wisdom from them—years improve him—the effervescence of youth foamed away, what is really good in him remains—his nature is like wine of a good vintage, time cannot sour—but only mellows him.

Such at least was the character I meant to pourtray”

(Charlotte Bronte to her publisher William Smith Williams; August, 14, 1848).

Edward Fairfax Rochester, Charlotte Bronte's Byronic antagonist is as interesting and dynamic as her heroine. Though he is not mentioned often in recent criticism, when he is he appears as a mere caricature: a patriarchal villain or Jane's tempter (both sexual and spiritual). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued both of these points, founding a modern feminist critique that more often allows only the female in the novel an injurious plight. It is easy to read Rochester as an imposing, domineering figure and there is evidence of his physical mastery over others (Bronte, 225). Gilbert and Gubar have brilliantly settled, for many feminist readers and critics, the notion of Jane's double as Bertha Mason who acts as Jane secretly wishes to act (against Rochester), and in these actions battling the concepts of marriage bodily, “What Bertha now does, for instance, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the “vapoury veil” of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her. Fearing the inexorable “bridal day” Jane would like to put it off. Bertha does that for her too. Resenting the new mastery of Rochester, whom she sees as dread but adored, she wishes to be his equal in size and strength, so that she can battle him in the contest of their marriage” (359). Though they

make a compelling case, for Bertha as Jane's double, they fail to consider that there is no real evidence in the text to indicate Jane feels anything but love for Rochester. She states often that she is well loved by him, and is his mental equal: "I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence; with what I delight in,--with an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind. I have known you, Mr. Rochester; and it strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you forever" (257). Jane sees Rochester as her equal mentally, and she says herself that the only terror she feels is in the thought of leaving him. She doesn't dread marriage but the apparition of Bertha and the symbolic torn veil. Jane's battle is not with Rochester but within herself; a battle Bronte might see in a Biblical duel of flesh against spirit. But what of Rochester's "battle?" It seems that Rochester is a feminist character in many ways: he professes that Jane is his savior, "[his] comforter, [his] rescuer" (326). The traditional roles of male and female are switched in their case. The theme of idolatry that Bronte was so personally obsessed with is here clearly identifiable in Jane as messianic savior and Rochester the sinner in need of redemption. Essaka Joshua states a similar argument but Rochester is pictured as a false savior,

This picture of Edward atoning for sin through his love for Jane is clearly an attempt to recast the sin he is committing as a Messianic act of self-sacrifice. Edward believes his actions to be sanctioned by God, asserting that Jane's happiness will be adequate reparation for bigamy. He justifies the importance of his role in Jane's life by echoing John's gospel: "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you"(16). Here Jesus asks the disciples to believe in him, listing the benefits of doing so. Throughout this speech Edward presents himself as the saint who has his eyes firmly fixed on Heaven, rejecting

earthly reputation in favor of the salvation he can bring to Jane. This is, nevertheless, a disordered image of a Messianic mission: the committing of a sin in order to atone for a wrong. In justifying bigamy in this way, Edward displays spiritual pride. In washing his hands of the "world's judgement," he echoes Pilate's self-absolution and complicity in the crucifixion in Matt. 27:24 (Joshua, 15).

Although Joshua argues that Rochester is a false Messiah, his claim parallels mine in that Rochester is the ultimate example of a sinner. A disordering of Biblical roles supports a Christian feminist reading in this way: Rochester attempts to figure himself as Jane's comforter even though he is conscious of her superiority, in a Messianic sense. His assertion is wrong because Jane dismisses that role and re-focuses the emphasis on Christ. The text rejects Gilbert and Gubar's argument that a feminist reading revolves around Jane's elevation through her double, Bertha; the text also rejects a reading that would suggest that Rochester is a traditionally masculine hero placed in order to rescue the maiden. The text is feminist and Christian because Christ is the only Savior, "Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven. Hope to meet again there" (324). It is feminist because Jane and Rochester are equals despite social, economic, and gender disparities. Bronte stresses this often, "We were both to strive and endure—you as well as I" (324), and in Jane's famous speech, "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if we had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet equal,--as we are!" (258).

It is extraordinary that Bronte's claims of equality echo truth, as she sees it, in terms of gender politics as well as religion. There is no need to preference Jane in order for it to be a feminist text.

Edward Rochester does make more mistakes than Jane but this makes him an even more redemptive figure. He leads a life of privilege that unfortunately leads him into temptation and spiritual pitfalls. We learn in chapter twenty-seven that Rochester was the second son, meaning that he would not inherit his father's fortune so he would have to marry well in order to secure his own living. He is then tricked into marrying Bertha Mason who beguiles him with her beauty and lavish attention (312). Even though he was deceived into the union it was his choice to be married to a stranger, intellectually inferior and emotionally unstable. This first decision leads him to live a dissipated life even though he is forever looking for something better, "This life,' said I at last, 'is hell! This is the air—those are the sounds of the bottomless pit! I have a right to deliver myself from it if I can" (315). In the end he himself tricks Jane into marrying him even as he was deceived into marriage with Bertha. Such a long list of crimes against him, yet Jane loves him all the more for his frailty, "I *do* love you," I said, "more than ever: but I must not show or indulge the feeling"(310). After Jane leaves, Rochester does despair but he begins to make the right choices for the first time in his life even though they are not to his immediate benefit. He tries to rescue Bertha in the literal and symbolic fire at Thornfield. Bertha dies (somewhat conveniently) and Rochester is left lame and blinded. The Biblical image of purification in a baptism by fire leaves Rochester humble yet reborn. He is much like Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus in the book of "Acts." Saul is blinded and in misery after

learning the truth and discovering the wrongs of his past; he wandered in blindness until he came to Damascus where—in a dream—the Lord had directed a man named Ananias to meet him and tell him what he must do. Jane is a figure of Ananias who hears God's calling. The mysterious summons that Jane has “ I heard a voice somewhere cry--”Jane, Jane, Jane!” “Oh God! What is it? I gasped (432), is a message from God for her to go to Rochester, just as Ananias receives a message in his dream to go to Saul. Saul's bloody past has been forgiven, just as Rochester's has and Ferndean is his Damascus, the place where he is healed and gains back some of his eyesight.

Charlotte Bronte had many sources from whom she drew impressions that lend breath to the creation of Edward Rochester. Her brother Branwell Bronte's sadly wasted life, as well as her professor Constantine Heger's brilliant and enlightened lessons both contribute to the evolution of this character. In a letter Charlotte Bronte wrote to her publisher and friend, William Smith Williams on October 6, 1848, she relates her feelings about her brother's death.

I had aspirations and ambitions for him once—long ago—they have perished mournfully—nothing remains of him but a memory of errors and sufferings—There is such a bitterness of pity for his life and death—such a yearning for the emptiness of his whole existence as I cannot describe....I seemed to receive an oppressive revelation of the feebleness of humanity; of the inadequacy of even genius to lead to true greatness if unaided by religion and principle. In the value, or even the reality of these two things he would never believe until within a few days of his end, and then all at once he seemed to open his heart to a conviction of their existence and worth. The remembrance of this strange change now comforts my poor Father greatly. I myself, with painful,

mournful joy, heard him praying softly in his dying moments, and to the last prayer which my father offered up at his bedside, he added 'amen.' I felt as I had never felt before that there was peace and forgiveness for him in Heaven. All his errors—to speak plainly—all his vices seemed nothing to me in that moment...If Man can thus experience total oblivion of his fellow's imperfections—how much more can the Eternal Being who made man, forgive his creature! (Barker 210).

This letter is evidence of Bronte's powerful feelings concerning redemption and God's love. It is remarkable to hear her insist that her brother, in the end, has acknowledged his sin and received salvation in the one word she has heard Branwell say, “Amen.” Whether or not it is true that he did “repent” his mistakes, it is obvious that it is necessary for Bronte and her father to believe that he did; just as it is important for Rochester to be forgiven in the end of the novel. Lyndall Gordon agrees, “Jane Eyre will not settle for anything beyond or less than a transformed Rochester”(152) and in this we see part of the inspiration for Rochester. But what of the qualities in Rochester that attract Jane to him in the first place?

Edward Rochester is no ordinary man. He is a larger than life version of Constantine Heger, Charlotte Bronte's married Professor of rhetoric at the Heger school in Brussels. He is the man who Lyndall Gordon says, “transformed Charlotte's ideas of manhood”(98). Bronte's first encounter with him echo the first impression Jane has of Rochester, as she calls him 'a little black ugly being' (Gordon 94). Jane recognizes Rochester as an 'ugly man' but as she begins to know him she says, “And was Mr. Rochester now ugly in my eyes? No, reader” (147). Jane discovers her attraction to Rochester, as Bronte finds Heger magnetic, 'a man of power as to

mind' (Gordon 94). M. Heger is said to be the only man who could really see Emily's genius and because of this he could be seen as an early feminist sympathizer,

Heger showed his mettle as a teacher unthreatened by manifestations of Emily's will. He must have been a man of unusual judgment, for he was the first outside the Parsonage and for decades to come, to recognize the genius of Emily. He thought she would have made a great navigator with the power to deduce difficulty. He could see beyond what Charlotte called her sister's 'singularities'--Emily's indifference to the maitre's opinion, or to that of anyone else—and her complete detachment from any concession to femininity. It is to Monsieur's credit that, susceptible as he was, he could see a woman's character and promise rather than her ornamental aspect (Gordon 98).

Bronte was fortunate to have Heger as a model of masculinity because he was not just a gifted teacher who pushed the Brontes to improve, he was intellectually honest, admitting his female students had special talents and abilities that should be cultivated. This influenced Bronte and she continued to advance as a writer under Heger's direction. Even though their relationship deteriorated, he was one of the most important men in Bronte's life, as Rochester the character is in *Jane Eyre*.

Charlotte Bronte's Rochester defies the Victorian model of masculinity as a male character who is the intellectual equal, not superior, to his heroine. Critics Gilbert and Gubar, while correct that *Jane Eyre* is a feminist work, disregard the textual evidence that supports a reading of Christian feminist equality. Rochester is dynamic and sprung from the real sources of Branwell Bronte and Constantine Heger, bearing both vice and virtue.

Chapter Four

Jane Eyre

“I wish to be as God made me”

(Laetitia Wheelwright, quoting friend and fellow pupil Charlotte Bronte, to Clement Shorter, biographer; January 1896).

Jane Eyre has long been a text which feminist critics perpetually exploit to criticize patriarchy and Christianity, of which many argue must coexist. Recent feminist critics such as Emily Greisinger have a different perspective on *Jane Eyre* as she lays out in her 2008 article, *Charlotte Bronte's Religion: Faith, Feminism, and Christianity*,

while much modern criticism has been dismissive if not hostile to women's religious experience, the history of women's participation in the evangelical movement in Victorian England suggests that this view is historically naive, causing us to misread an author like Charlotte Bronte, whose life and writings reflect a complex understanding of God, whose female characters may indeed critique the gender biases of the Church, but who nevertheless find in Christianity the courage to protest, not just accept suffering and evil, and the authority to speak and act courageously to change themselves and the world (Greisinger,1).

Griesinger correctly identifies Bronte's religious and social views as bound together in her characters; none more evidently portray this complexity than Jane Eyre. Even though there is still a certain mystery surrounding the nuance of Bronte's faith, there is no evidence to support a supposition that she ever lost or discounted her own brand of Anglicanism. In fact, there is

enough in the way of letters and accounts from friends, that it is safe to assume she never did. There should be no concern that Bronte's own Christianity debases feminism. The character Jane is written with great subtlety, yet she has strong feelings about her own life and station that are consistently feminist. She is plain in appearance yet she exudes beauty. She is flawed in that she makes an idol of Rochester, and dynamic as she continually moves forward as she feels she is being led, toward her own salvation. These are the attributes that give her an immortal and human quality. She follows her own path of salvation patterned from Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a novel that Bronte admires. Jane gives life to Charlotte Bronte's personal views that demonstrate an independent mind existing within a religion of Victorian traditionalists. This is plainly evidenced in her own defense in the preface of her novel's second edition,

I would suggest to such doubters certain obvious distinctions; I would remind them of certain simple truths. 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 (JE 557).

Jane is a unique portrait of a woman who, though plain and poor, chooses to tread a path through the unknown, from Gateshead to Fearnside, in order to find happiness on her own terms. She does not settle for compromise as Rochester's mistress or St. John's loveless wife. She moves forward for the love of herself. This is what makes her a singular heroine in Victorian England and what strikes many readers today.

Charlotte Bronte insisted, despite the protest from her sisters Emily and Anne, that she could write an interesting yet plain heroine, this was a feat that had not yet been accomplished,

as Lyndall Gordon points out, “*Jane Eyre* stands out from many predecessors in the Gothic or romance tradition for its unusual heroine: no swooning beauty, no fragile model of sensibility, Jane is a plain, intelligent governess who tells her story with compelling honesty” (143). This choice to make her character small and homely would foreshadow the creations of authors such as Virginia Woolf and her contemporary George Sand, validating Bronte as an author (at least slightly) ahead of her time. Charlotte had read Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* (1839) which was set in an industrial middle-class town with main characters who were ordinary, not the fine ladies and gentlemen of the popular novels of the day. In contrast to Jane Austen's novels which Charlotte did not care for. In a response to a letter from G.H. Lewes (who evidently admires Austen) she says, [Pride and Prejudice is] an accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers—but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy—no open country—no fresh air—no blue hill—no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses (Barker, 180). Charlotte never participated in the fascination for the upper classes, in fact she wrote these words out of this very frustration, “We must change, for the eye is tired of the picture so oft recurring” (Gordon 86). Bronte's only dealings with the upper class is when she was a governess and so it is easy to understand why she would have such a negative opinion. Beyond her unhappy years as a governess she knew little of high society and would write only what she knew.

In fact, Jane is a combination of her own personal characteristics, her sisters Anne and Emily (whose middle name is Jane), and friend Mary Taylor. Mary Taylor was a strong, vigorous

woman with outspoken political views. She and Charlotte often disagreed but always maintained a close friendship through their letters. Taylor criticized Bronte because she believed Bronte was far too subtle in her treatment of women's emancipation issues in her novels. She seemed to believe that it was Bronte's duty to use her art to this end as she says in this April 1850 letter,

I have seen some extracts...in which you talk of women working. And this first duty, this great necessity you seem to think that some women may indulge in—if they give up marriage & don't make themselves too disagreeable to the other sex. You are a coward & a traitor. A woman who works is by that alone better than one who does not & a woman who does not happen to be rich & who still earns no money & does not wish to do so is guilty of a great fault—almost a crime (Barker, 278).

Mary Taylor's letter is evidence that Bronte did not use her art as a means to implement social change, as she affirms in a letter to her publisher George Smith, “I cannot write books handling the topics of the day—it is of no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral—Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme though I honour Philanthropy” (Barker, 353). She personally agrees with Taylor's form of social idealism, as she argues a similar position almost word for word in a letter to her publisher William Smith Williams in regard to his daughter working as a governess, “Believe me—teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid and despised—but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst paid drudge of a school. Whenever I have seen, not merely in humble, but in affluent homes—families of daughters sitting waiting to be married, I have pitied them from my heart (Barker, 241). This was

obviously not the impression Mary Taylor got from reading *Jane Eyre*, perhaps because the theme was too subtle for her liking. Lyndal Gordon differentiates the two women she saying, “Where Mary concerned herself with rights for women to work in other than menial positions, Charlotte, concerned herself with states of mind—the images of womanhood which were, in their way, more deeply enslaving than absent rights”(48).

It seems that Charlotte was determined to legitimize her own plain exterior through Jane. She was always sensitive about her appearance though never tried to hide under fancy clothes or fashionable hairstyle, in hopes that the beauty of the soul and mind might radiate through her character's Quaker-like facade. In fact, Bronte despised women whom she had seen in Brussels who were beautiful and affectatious, including Constantin Heger's wife whom Bronte described as “coloured chalk” (Gordon, 108). This comes through in the characters Blanche Ingram, Georgiana Reed, and Bertha Mason Rochester. These women are described as beautiful yet the descriptions themselves reference Bronte's own words describing the Belgian girls she knew and despised as, 'heavy' and 'hard' (Gordon, 104). Bronte paints Georgiana Reed as “fair as waxwork” (232), alluding to beauty that is put on, disingenuous. Blanche Ingram's beauty is ruined by her “habitual expression of her arched and haughty lip” (Bronte, 147), while Bertha Rochester is indeed a study in contrasts, a paradigm of the grotesque. When Rochester meets her she is seen as, “a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram; Tall, dark, majestic” (312). From this picture she transforms into a vampire-like apparition, “It was a discoloured face—a savage face” (290). The only truly beautiful female characters in the book are Rosamond Oliver and Jane's student Adele. Rosamond is described as the picture of supernal beauty, she is also

very kind yet she has nothing of originality and Jane concludes, "I liked her almost as I liked my pupil Adele" (378) which is hardly a complement. Adele is very much the same character: pretty, charming yet vain and coquettish. The all-consuming responsibility for these women is to allure. Bronte obviously resented these traps and contrivances of women she had known, perhaps because she could not compete herself. Regardless, Bronte shows an independence from the contemporary thought that women were only objects to be desired and bought on the marriage market. In fact, nothing frightened her more than when a woman she knew (a fellow teacher at Miss Whooler's school) informed Bronte of her desperation to be married, these are the women with whom Bronte contrasts Jane.

Jane is often described as "Quaker-like." This in reference to her simple style of dress but there is a connection to her spirituality as well. Bronte was raised to shun fashion and don simple attire as a reflection of her attitude toward worldliness, as Elizabeth Gaskell remembers, "attire befitting the wife and daughters of a country clergyman" (77). She even found some pleasure in her peculiar and unfashionable appearance because of the reactions of those around her (Barker, 198). Perhaps she found that her acquaintances were either genuinely drawn to her countenance regardless of her low social position, or repelled by it for the same reason. This is the cornerstone in the romance between Rochester and Jane; he could see beyond her exterior and find beauty. Bronte was quite obsessed by this idea and it drove her characterization throughout the novel. One of the most important examples of this symbolism in *Jane Eyre* is when Rochester and Jane become engaged and he tries to dress her up in silk and jewels, "I will myself put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead,--which it will

become: for nature, at least, has stamped her patent of nobility on this brow, Jane; and I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists” (264). The language here suggests imprisonment, the circle around her neck and bracelets on her wrists. Her response justifies this reading as she panics, “No, no sir! Think of other subjects, and speak of other things, and in another strain. Don't address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain Quakerish governess” (264). Her insistent plea to be left plain could easily imply that she wants to retain her own identity and fears that she is being made an idol as Rochester's “pride” and not “bride.” Her feminist Christianity is strongly present here as she struggles to remain undecorated yet well-loved, “And then you won't know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket” (264). For Bronte, dress is highly symbolic; it is her self-respect, her earthly mantle and religious cloak. She pointedly refuses to be made Rochester's “angel in the house” as she insists, “I am not an angel, and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself, Mr. Rochester, and you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me” (265). She again struggles to retain her own self-image, her own independence, which is, after all, why Rochester falls in love with her in the first place.

Rochester says of Jane, “I might as well 'gild refined gold' (266). The *Bible* uses the metaphor of refined gold in Psalms 19:10 to refer back to the perfection of Christ's law, yet here Rochester uses the metaphor in an earthly sense. Jane has become Rochester's idol just as he has become her idol, “My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his

creature: of whom I had made an idol” (280). Jane's need for love in her earthly relationships has set her up for the sin of idolatry. Maria Lamonaca agrees in her article, *Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in Jane Eyre*, “From the first moments of her love for Rochester, Jane is aware of the perils of human idolatry” (3). This is also true of Charlotte Bronte. She was painfully aware of the effects of idolatry (as she perceived it) in her own life as it is seen in a poem she wrote and sent to Heger entitled “He saw my heart's woe.” Lyndall Gordon surmises from what is written in this poem, “She [Bronte] is forced to conclude that she had worshiped an idol. 'My Baal', as she calls him, would not have seen or understood if she had slashed her wrists” (120). These thoughts of self-destruction were perhaps curtailed for a few reasons: her faith and personal drive as well as her family. Her sisters and father needed her and counted on her for financial support as well as that of caregiver. Her father's eye sight was so poor that he was blind at this point and needed Charlotte's assistance in everything. Branwell too was in need of supervision as he had become a drunken invalid.

During this time her brother Branwell was struggling with his own “idols” in the forms of alcohol, opium and an illicit affair with his employer's wife Mrs. Robinson (Gordon, 134), this linked the two, even if Charlotte's affair was unrealized, “In this sense, Branwell remained her emotional counterpart—amoral, anarchic, bent on self-destruction through surrender to passions” (Gordon, 136). She distanced herself from her brother and never spoke of her feelings for Heger. She worked through these difficulties in her fiction which she began at this moment of crisis—first with the *Professor* and then *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Bronte was living a personal nightmare and she blamed it on sin in the form of idolatry.

The theme of idolatry is one of the most important in the novel. It begins with Jane's desire for love and acceptance as a child. An early picture of love starved Jane with her pitiful doll is evidence that her need to be loved as well as to love invariably leads to idolatry, "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"(23). As an orphan at Gateshead, and then a student at Lowood charity school, she is used to obscurity, and, at times scorn. Helen Burns and Miss Temple are her first examples of enlightenment and greatness and they have a tremendous impact on young Jane. As Jane grows she develops the principles and beliefs that shape her mind and tame her passionate spirit. When Jane encounters Rochester she finds her own likeness (as she did in Helen Burns and Miss Temple), though he exudes a wild and unchecked nature along with his great intellect. Rochester, then, is a double for Jane who might make similar mistakes—choosing passion over her understanding of truth as Rochester admits has been his downfall, "I might have been as good as you—wiser—almost as stainless" (135). The "might have been" alludes to the fact that he had a good start and that, "Nature meant me to be, on the whole, a good man" (136). He places the blame on his circumstances in life. Bronte believes that this is no excuse, because Jane later faces temptation that is arguably greater than Rochester's. Because she overcomes her temptation, Rochester, in the end, finds his own salvation apart from Jane, "I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray" (460).

Jane has a passionate nature, as her name (Eyre, or 'anger') suggests, and this becomes simultaneously her flaw as well as her gift. Though many critics disagree, the contrast of Helen

Burn's character with Jane's is intended to show the reader, as well as Jane, a picture of an ideal Christian—from Bronte's perspective. Many disagree, including Emily Griesinger, who argues that Helen's form of Christianity is not the author's, “The novel's portrayal of Christianity cannot be reduced to Helen's understanding of it, however, Jane questions Helen's stoicism, insisting that people can't be doormats either but must fight evil that good may prevail”(1). It is true that Jane is unlike Helen when she is a child because she feels she has a right to happiness, but it is almost more important to notice how Jane changes after her encounter with Helen Burns.

Through Helen, Jane learns about heaven and salvation: Jane asks, “You are sure then, Helen, that there is such a place as heaven; and that our souls can get to it when we die?” Helen responds, “I am sure there is a future state; I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to him” (79). This is the first time Jane hears of a loving God and the assurance of salvation in heaven. Helen Burn's ideas of salvation, of God's love and acceptance, mirror Charlotte Bronte's beliefs more than any other character in *Jane Eyre*. Helen seems to communicate Bronte's own perspective as Helen divulges to Jane, “I hold another creed; which I delight, and to which I cling: for it extends hope to all” (55). Charlotte Bronte wrote a letter in 1850 in which she admits to believe this same creed she attributes to Helen Burns, “I am sorry the Clergy do not like the doctrine of Universal Salvation; I think it a great pity for their sakes, but surely they are not so unreasonable as to expect me to deny or suppress what I believe the truth!” (Barker, 264). This is a very important connection because it distinguishes Bronte's dissenting views from that of the Anglican church.

Helen teaches her to love those who treat her badly. Helen resigns herself to punishment that is undeserved (Bronte, 64), proving a will to submit even when it is unfair. Jane has a difficult time with this concept because it is not her nature, but she does endeavor to live this way as she grows. This can be proven when Jane (as an adult) visits her Aunt Reed on her death bed. After being rejected nine years before, she returns when she hears that her Aunt wishes to see her. Jane finds that her Aunt still dislikes her, “‘You have a very bad disposition’. . . the feeble fingers shrank from my touch—the glazing eyes shunned my gaze” (244). Even though her aunt continues to reject her, Jane does not respond in the passionate, headlong way she did in her youth before the teaching of Helen Burns. She responds with forgiveness and love, “‘Love me, then, or hate me, as you will, you have my full and free forgiveness; ask now for God's and be at peace” (244). Jane has obviously retained and put into practice the doctrine that Helen shared with her, “‘Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you” (54).

Even though Jane does transform on her own “road to Damascus:” she softens, learns patience and strength to follow her own ideas of righteousness; but she retains aspects of her old nature. Jane's passion when it is misapplied (as in her youth) could lead her to destruction in the arms of a married man. Passion with the end purpose of self-satisfaction has given way to the spiritually mature Jane who now says, “‘The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God” (325). This passion for truth is the quality that Jane now possesses, and this is what allows her to distinguish right and wrong and keep Rochester's love. He identifies that passionate unreachable spirit and

it torments him, “I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I upstare, if I crushed her? Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me...Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature!” (325). Rochester's only thought is to possess Jane but she is able to resist through her passionate desire to live the truth she believes.

Jane only returns to Rochester after he has repented his sin and been purified by fire. This is both feminist and Christian. Feminist in that Jane has the strength to leave, choosing poverty and obscurity over a compromised yet loving partnership. It is Christian because Jane and Rochester can now have a marriage that is morally right as it is free from idolatrous love. This plain Quaker-like character is a direct reflection of Bronte's emphasis on her personal and unique brand of Anglicanism that encompassed individual liberty (male and female) through truth.

Notes

1. In the 1995 compilation of Bronte letters edited by Juliet Barker, including many newly discovered letters and those that are published for the first time. Barker attributes the latter to “notoriously inaccurate editions” which omit or mis-transcribe.
2. There are aspects of Charlotte's life that are somewhat mysterious, such as her relationships with her father, her Aunt Branwell, her teacher Constantin Heger, and sisters Emily and Anne as well as her brother Branwell. There is little evidence to support claims that some biographers have defended concerning these relationships.
3. Charlotte admired Thackeray's work and met him in London, May 1851.
4. Interestingly *Vanity Fair's* title refers to a place in the novel *The Pilgrim's Progress* where there is an ongoing street fair celebrating all things of vanity and worldliness. *Jane Eyre* was also organized after the fashion of *The Pilgrim's Progress* as Jane journeys through her life.
5. There might be legitimate question as to Branwell's spirituality; early on there was a genuine religious interest, and he was Charlotte's closest confidant among her siblings, but as biography bears out he was soon far from concerned with the preoccupations of his family due to his excessive drinking.
6. Perhaps Patrick Bronte's fear of fire inspired Charlotte's imagination for the scene in chapter 15 where Mr. Rochester's bed is set on fire and again at the end of the novel when Thornfield is burned to the ground.
7. *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* by Elizabeth Gaskell discusses the difficulty she had when she was trying to find evidence to support Bronte's claim that Wilson was the tyrant in *Jane Eyre*. Many former students wrote to her, some claiming that he was a wonderful, kind man and some accusing him in support of Bronte. Few had solid facts (61).

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