

“Clearing the Sill of the World”: Jane Eyre and the Power of Education in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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Abstract

The idea of education in nineteenth-century women’s writing revolves around social class, social mores, and the subtleties of the writer’s imagination. Nowhere can this be seen more vividly and thoroughly than in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre*.

The book’s opening scene, striking in its symbolic detail, highlights and foreshadows the aforementioned criteria for women’s education of the era. Although doors to education were opening wider both in the United States and England due to the Suffragist Movement and other influences, specifically, America’s Civil War and the West’s Industrial Revolution, the majority of women were as constricted in their educational goals as the claustrophobic space in which the young Jane sequesters herself inside the breakfast-room of the Reed home at the opening chapter of Brontë’s novel.

Four images made clearly apparent in this first chapter become critical motifs in the book, notably the window out of which Jane gazes; the books surrounding her in the library; birds, as highlighted in *Bewick’s History of British Birds*, which she is studying; and the red curtains behind which she takes sanctuary from the Reed family.

Jane’s own imagination is far more advanced and exercised than the Brocklehursts of Lowood or even Mr. Rochester himself as he is first introduced at Thorndale. And so, it is Jane’s *subtleties of the imagination* that instantaneously endear her to Rochester, subtleties learned from Helen Burns and Miss Temple, Jane’s female mentors. It is these same subtleties that imbue her with moral fortitude when Bertha’s existence is revealed; protect her on the moor when, destitute, she is found--unbeknownst to either party—by her long lost cousins; and, finally, fill her with the courage to reject the narrow path of St. John and listen to her own “educated” and by now experienced heart.

Given the cultural, social, and economic upheavals of the late nineteenth century, given women’s compelling desire to pull down the walls of denial in educational traditions, and given the strength of woman’s keen intellect and imagination, it was only a matter of time before the Jane Eyres of the middle to late-nineteenth century opened their windows, grabbed their books, and took off in flight draped in the crimson folds of passion, indeed eventually “clearing the sill of the world.”¹

Introduction

The idea of education in nineteenth-century women’s writing revolves around social class, social mores, and the subtleties of the writer’s imagination. Nowhere can this be seen more vividly than in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre*.

The opening scene in the book, striking in its symbolic detail, highlights and foreshadows the aforementioned criteria for women’s education of the era. Although doors to education were opening wider both in the United States and England due to the Suffragist Movement, America’s

¹ Richard Wilbur, “The Writer,” in *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1988).

Civil War, and the Industrial Revolution, the majority of women were as constricted in their educational goals as the claustrophobic space in which the young Jane sequesters herself inside the breakfast-room of the Reed home at the outset of Bronte's novel.

Four images made clearly apparent in this first chapter become critical motifs in the book, notably the window out of which Jane gazes; the books surrounding her in the Reed's breakfast-room; birds, as first referenced in the text that Jane is reading, *Bewick's History of British Birds*; and the red curtains behind which she takes sanctuary from the Reed family.

But Master John Reed will not allow Jane sanctuary for long; to do so would mean risking usurpation of power, and in his own household:

“What were you doing behind the curtain?” he asked.

“I was reading.”

“Show the book.”

I returned to the window and fetched it thence.

“You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg...Now, I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me...Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the window.”²

John hurls the book at Jane, striking and injuring her—a symbolic and violent action that sums up her lonely station in the world as a powerless and faceless female without opportunity. But Jane experiences a revelation, and rather than cower before the “Master,” she sees the tyrant in him and asserts herself in the face of it. For Jane already has read a good deal of history. “I had read Goldsmith's History of Rome, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, etc.”³ She also understands that something significant has changed about her response to such assaults when she asserts, “I resisted all the way: a new thing for me...The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself, as the French would say” and continues by referring to herself as a “rebel slave.”⁴ Knowledge of French culture and language, the Roman Empire? At an early age, we see that Jane is quite well self-educated.

Of course, Jane is punished, sent to the red-room. Complicit in this banishment are all the women in the household, gentry and servants alike—a common phenomenon of these times. “Four hands were imminently laid upon me,” she states.⁵ Not coincidentally, the red-room is

² Charlotte Bronte, Chapter 1, in *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:13.

where John Reed's father died—the only Reed family member to have nurtured and loved his niece. Jane experiences an unwelcome rite of passage in this room, eventually leading to the decision to send her away to school. The school, of course, is the infamous Lowood, and it reflects perfectly the education orphans and those of lower socioeconomic means receive: dubiously relevant scraps of information coupled with physical and spiritual starvation of its inmates.

What, then, do windows, doors, birds, and red curtains have to do with Jane's educational experiences at Lowood and elsewhere in the novel? As often is the case in women's literature, *windows* are important symbols of wider horizons, as yet unimagined opportunities, escape routes. *Books* speak volumes: women who were taught to read often became avid readers, plying pages of novels and nonfiction texts for intellectual and creative sustenance—a refuge of sorts, like the Reed's book collection was for Jane. Indeed, as Elaine Showalter has argued, reading “offered them [women] ‘vicarious participation, emotional expression, and the feeling of community that arises from a recognition of shared dreams.’”⁶ *Birds*, of course, denote flight, and Jane takes off any number of times in her quest for freedom and independence, love and self-actualization. And the *red curtains* provide protection and elegance—literally, the fabric of something substantive. Finally the color *red* symbolizes rebellion, passion, ardent devotion to principles, and love.

Although Jane will become gainfully employed, becoming unemployed for a member of her socioeconomic class can spell immediate destitution. When she begins employment with Rochester at Thorndale, Jane can at least make the claim that she has secured a better than prototypical education for a nineteenth-century lower middle-class female, though such learning has come at great expense: humility for the crumbs of education distributed; the knowledge that a person of her gender and social station is entirely disposable and replaceable; the basics of arithmetic, Latin, grammar, history, the reading of select classics, French, piano, and drawing, “. . . those dissociated snippets of information to be found in the despairing refuge of the under-prepared governess and schoolmistress...”⁷ And so, the continuum of women's education in the nineteenth-century is routinely assured.

⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

However, as we will see, not only has Jane been better educated than the average governess of her time, Jane's imagination is far more advanced and exercised than, certainly, the Brocklehursts of Lowood or even Mr. Rochester himself as he is first introduced at Thorndale. For we know that Edward Rochester has much to learn, learning that later will be attributed to his young governess. And so, it is Jane's *subtleties of the imagination*—indeed, reflective of Bronte's own—that mystify and intrigue Rochester, subtleties learned from Helen Burns and Miss Temple, Jane's female mentors. It is these same subtleties that imbue her with moral fortitude when Rochester's first wife's existence is revealed; protect her on the moor when, destitute, she is found by her long lost and materially self-sufficient cousins; and, finally, fill her with the courage to reject the narrow moral path of St. John Rivers and listen to her own “educated” and by then experienced heart.

Given the cultural, social, and economic upheavals of the nineteenth century, given women's compelling desire to pull down the walls of denial in educational traditions, and given the strength of woman's keen intellect and imagination, it was only a matter of time before the Jane Eyres of the middle to late-nineteenth century opened their windows, grabbed their books, and took off in flight draped in the crimson folds of passion, indeed, eventually “clearing the sill of the world.”

Gateshead: Reading as a Subversive Activity

A miserable day marks the opening of *Jane Eyre*, where, “the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was not out of the question.”⁸ Jane, ever “humbled by the consciousness of [her] physical inferiority”⁹ has at least three strikes against her: she is female, she is an orphan with no independent economic means, and she is trapped inside the Reed household. Further, she is silenced. Silencing is another common motif in the study of women's literature and education. “Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent,”¹⁰ Mrs. Reed reprimands her. Without a father to protect her and a mother to guide her, the young Jane is left to fend for herself where soon she will “fly at Master John”¹¹ like a bird battering against a window pane in the struggle to escape.

⁸ Charlotte Bronte, Chapter 1, in *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:13.

Girls with a low social station in life were expected to be “pleasant,” forbidden to exhibit either passion or fury, as underscored by Bessie and her maid, Abbot’s, admonitions: “Dear! Dear! What a fury to fly at master John!” and “Did ever anybody see such a picture of passion!”¹² Hence, Jane’s exit to Lowood—but not before she is exiled to the red-room: “Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there.”¹³ With this ascension, however, will come a release, as, phoenix-like, Jane is “borne upstairs”¹⁴ In displaying both *passionately* and *furiously* her will to escape, the red-room experience provides the ashes from which she will rise and the perch off which she will fly from Gateshead, her prison, to Lowood, a place where Jane’s imagination will be both chastened and expanded.

Before she leaves, however, she has a second important revelation, which is that just as she sees John for who he is—a violent and narcissistic tyrant—so she understands clearly, perhaps for the first time, that she cannot live the lie of the Reeds. Thus she breaks her silence in the following interchange:

Speak, I must... gathered my energies and launched them in this blunt sentence: --
“I am not deceitful: if I were, I should say I loved *you*, but I declare I do not love you...”
“How dare you affirm that, Jane Eyre”
“How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I? Because it is the *truth*.”
...
Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt.¹⁵

At this moment, Jane Eyre presages American author Kate Chopin’s famous protagonist, Louise Mallard, in “The Story of an Hour,” when Louise exclaims, in a moment of epiphany, “Free! Body and soul free!”¹⁶ at the thought of spending the rest of her life living only for *herself*, not husband Brently. Like Louise, the young Jane experiences the emancipating power of free will, and early the next morning, she leaves the misery of Gateshead for good.

¹² Ibid., 1:13.

¹³ Ibid., 1:13.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1: 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4: 39.

¹⁶ Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour,” in *The Awakening and Selected Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 213-15.

Lowood: Deprivation and Hypocrisy as Pedagogy of the Oppressed

At Lowood, Jane, along with the other girls, is supplied a diet of patriarchal Christian piety. These girls are presumed deeply grateful for every morsel of nutrition and education parceled out to them. And because it is assumed they will be neither materially nor socially significant members of society in their own lifetime, they are fed the spiritual tenets of humility that ostensibly will bring them everlasting serenity and spiritual wealth in the afterlife. Hence the cutting of their hair, the drab pinafores, the excessive punishment and public humiliation, and the dire physical conditions that exacerbate the typhoid epidemic plaguing the school one raw and wet May, leaving dozens of students to perish. All of this amidst the grotesque display of the Brocklehurst family's obscene material wealth seen in sumptuous furs, feathers, and fabrics as Mrs. Brocklehurst and daughters preen and primp before the school's beleaguered population on periodic visits to the campus.

But all is not lost in Lowood's poverty-induced conditions. As Jane herself admits, "I would not now have changed Lowood with all its privations, for Gateshead and its daily luxuries"¹⁷ For like any hero on a quest, Jane, our heroine, must overcome the obstacles thrown in her path in order to grow stronger, a young woman who, described by critic Arthur Zeiger, "possesses singular integrity."¹⁸ Still, it is one thing to defy, as a budding adolescent at her wits' end, the Reeds' maltreatment of her; it is quite another to learn how to navigate the tumultuous terrain of a deeply entrenched patriarchal institution that can and will break its subjects when transgressions and insubordination are perceived. Such is the single most important lesson Jane takes from Lowood, and this from her first true friend, Helen Burns. While it can be argued that Helen's consumption exhausts her spirit so that she no longer has the fight within to resist routinely received scorn and abuse, nonetheless, her temperance teaches Jane that passion released too forcefully and at inappropriate times can do more harm than good; indeed, Jane becomes ever "mindful of Helen's warnings against the indulgence of resentment."¹⁹ In short, Jane learns to pick her battles, saving much needed energy for those future critical moments when rational thought and decisive action will more than once save her physical, spiritual, and moral life. Nonetheless, Helen *burns* of a fever that dissipates and eventually consumes her.

¹⁷ Charlotte Bronte, Chapter 8, in *Jane Eyre*, (New York: Penguin, 1982), 77.

¹⁸ Arthur Zeiger, afterword to *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Bronte (New York: Penguin, 1982; New American Library, 1960,457-61.

¹⁹ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 8: 73.

When Jane curls up with Helen the night she dies, the two embody the yin and yang of devotion: Helen to her religious and otherworldly principles, Jane to her very earthly ones.

Miss Temple bridges the two. Portrayed as a kind of demi-goddess, Maria Temple “is tall, fair, and shapely...her dress...of purple cloth, relieved by a sort of Spanish trimming of black velvet.”²⁰ Relief and comfort she brings, like the softness of velvet she wears, the richness and regality of purple. While Helen’s burning consumption and religious fervor can be interpreted as the red passion of piety, Miss Temple demonstrates for Jane that an earthly life *is* worth living and can be negotiated through a carefully chosen path of morality, education and self-knowledge. Miss Temple’s ideas of morality diametrically oppose the hypocritical gender and class system imposed by Brocklehurst. We see this directly when Miss Temple brings a full slice of bread and a “scrape” of butter each Sabbath to raise the students’ spirits and caloric level. Of course, shortly after the typhoid catastrophe, when Brocklehurst is demoted to Treasurer, Miss Temple administers, along with the Board, major changes at the school—so much so that in Jane’s own words, the school transforms into a “truly useful and noble institution.”²¹ Clearly, Miss Temple, a woman, knows what is best for her female pupils. After six years as a pupil and two as a teacher, Jane is satisfied that she has “had the means of an excellent education.”²² We take her at her word.

When Miss Temple—“mother, governess, and latterly, companion” to Jane—marries and moves away from Lowood, Jane, restless, states, “I went to my window, opened it, and looked out. There were the two wings of the building...I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon; I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped...”²³

And, placing an advertisement in a local newspaper, Jane takes flight from Lowood, finding employment as governess at Thorndale.

Thorndale: Truth Be Told

The lessons at Thorndale begin with self-reliance and end with self-respect. In this section of the novel, not only does the plot intrigue take hold, Jane herself exhibits behavior befitting a self-assured and independently minded young adult. She not only is a match intellectually with

²⁰ Ibid., 5:49.

²¹ Ibid., 10:86.

²² Ibid., 10:86.

²³ Ibid., 10: 8.

Edward Rochester—her book learning and life experiences clearly an advantage here—her sensibility and manner arrest him from the moment the two meet. She says to Rochester after he has injured himself, “I cannot think of leaving you, sir, at so late an hour, in this solitary lane, till I see you are fit to mount your horse.”²⁴ He claims that she “bewitched” his horse.

As we see, Jane, a mere employee and a female one at that, helps Rochester, the master of the house, in unexpected ways. If at first he patronizes her education, mocking her piano playing skills—“You play a *little*, I see; like any other English school-girl”—upon seeing her abstract and symbolic paintings, he is keenly impressed, exclaiming, “I daresay you did exist in a kind of artist’s dreamland while you blent and arranged these strange tints.”²⁵ It is at Thorndale, then, that Jane’s own *subtleties of the imagination* strengthen and evolve in such a way that they are gradually and fully appreciated by Edward Rochester. Likewise, he grows impressed with her singular ability to dismiss superficiality in the form of Miss Ingram, or the falseness of appearances, as when Mr. Rochester veils himself in gipsy fortuneteller garb, or still later when he showers Jane with material gifts and sumptuous clothing, dressing her up like a doll. For Jane’s sincerity is absolute; she lives and breathes it. Importantly, this is the sincerity born of hard earned self-knowledge, education, and life experience modeled by Miss Temple at Lowood.

In her capacity as governess, Jane recalls the humanity of Helen and Miss Temple, and dispenses it with equanimity to Adele, her undisciplined but charming young pupil: “...she was quite a child, perhaps seven or eight years old, slightly built, with a pale, small-featured face.”²⁶ Adele eventually flourishes under Jane’s tutelage, responding positively to Jane’s warmth and measured approach. “...she [Adele] had not been used to regular occupation of any kind; I felt it would be injudicious to confine her too much at first...”²⁷

Earlier, en route to Thorndale, Jane reaps the pleasure of reuniting with Bessie, who clearly can see the growth and maturity in her former ward. “Oh, you are quite a lady, miss. I knew you would be...”²⁸ Married and no longer working for the Reeds, Bessie can express herself freely, without the angry censorship of that family, and thus assuring Jane of her love and affection for her. Of course, it is also during Jane’s tenure at Thorndale that she learns of the Reed’s ill fate: Mrs. Reed’s grave illness and her son John’s premature death from illicit self-

²⁴ Ibid., 12: 117.

²⁵ Ibid., 13: 127, 129.

²⁶ Ibid., 11: 103.

²⁷ Ibid., 11: 106.

²⁸ Ibid., 10: 95.

indulgence. As if recalling Helen's wisdom about the dangers of harboring resentment, Jane does not hesitate to heed Mrs. Reed's request to visit her former guardian, a move that further illustrates Jane's "lucid morality"²⁹ and one that educates her about an important family connection, albeit a temporarily lost financial opportunity. Difficult as her journey has been thus far, Jane is settling in, finding her rightful place in the world. Yet, Jane is deeply restless. Just helping Rochester the night he falls from his horse is diversion enough to highlight the monotony of her life: "My help had been needed and claimed; I had given it: I was pleased to have done something; trivial, transitory though the deed was, it was yet an active thing, and I was weary of an existence all passive."³⁰

In a matter of months, Jane will find herself in the vortex of drama, and *act* she will, the veil of deceit lifted and torn asunder when she discovers on her wedding day that Mr. Rochester already is married. Jane takes flight from Thorndale of her own volition, penniless and with no plan; stripped of everything, she willingly enters the wilderness with only her wits, an "English school-girl's" education, and her self-respect.

Moor House: To Thine Own Self Be True

On a certain level, the structure of *Jane Eyre* operates as the inverse of the traditional fairy tale in that Jane functions as the "anti-princess." While she shares some features with the prototypical princess in that she is wooed by a "prince," has "wicked" relations, and has lost her mother, she also is said to be "plain" and she turns down not one, but two prospective "princes." Yet, like the princess and the pea, it can be said that Jane is looking for the "right" prince, the perfect fit, the one who will not quash the pea, though it is clear that Jane does not sit passively waiting for the arrival of such. Rochester and St. John certainly quash situations for Jane: Rochester turns out to be the "darkly" prince—keeping his marriage a secret to Jane; and no Prince Charming awaits Jane on the moor, for St. John all but hides his own dark side beneath the harsh bright light of Christian devotion. His motives, however pious, are self-serving: take Jane as wife merely to help administer "love" as a missionary. For Jane will never become the object of St. John's affection. Miss Rosamond is, but John Rivers rejects her in the name of the greater good.

²⁹ Zeiger, afterword, in *Jane Eyre*, 458.

³⁰ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 12: 119.

“It is hard work to control the workings of inclinations and turn the bent of nature,”³¹ he tells Jane. His own sister, Diana Rivers, calls him “inexorable as death.”³² Clearly, John Rivers is no match for our earth-bound Jane.

But Jane has achieved relative contentment in life, anchored as she is at Moor House with loving family, home, money, an intellectual life, work, even romantic experience. Thus, Jane has all the goods of a male *princely* protagonist.

What’s more, she has been helped, numerous times in the novel, by an otherworldly influence, first when experiencing a kind of vision in the red-room at Gateshead; next when brainstorming, as if by some sort of “fairy magic,” to leave Lowood for something better; again when “bewitching” Rochester’s horse; and finally on the moor when, destitute, she spiritually connects with the moon, whose luminosity protects, then shows her the path to physical salvation. At this point, Jane has “fought” her way, without sword in hand, through the thorny wilderness, touched “bottom” as she was forced to beg and eat porridge that “T’pig doesn’t want”³³ until finally she steps into the magic kingdom of lost relations who provide her with the financial security, love, and respect she deserves.

Has Jane Eyre finally found her true home? Is St. John’s offer the Holy Grail of Jane’s quest? Of course not. In gently but definitively rejecting his offer, Jane solidifies her place in the physical world as well as her unequivocal understanding of her own true self. St. John’s words could never successfully woo her: “I want a wife: the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death.” Jane shudders at these words and responds, “Seek one elsewhere than in me, St. John: seek one fitted to you.”³⁴ Having met her intellectual peers in John and his two sisters, Jane becomes ever more convinced of her place in the natural world. And so, when she hears the “voice” of Edward Rochester call out, “Jane! Jane! Jane!”,³⁵ she goes to him the next day, not out of romantic naiveté and inexperience—out of the blood-red passion of deep and viscerally connected love. But not before she asserts herself a final time with St. John, under whose marbled countenance she nearly relents: “It was *my* time to

³¹ Ibid., 31: 363.

³² Ibid., 31: 367.

³³ Ibid., 28: 332.

³⁴ Ibid., 34: 408.

³⁵ Ibid., 34: 422.

assume ascendancy. *My powers were in play and in force . . . I desired him to leave me: I must, and would be alone. He obeyed me.*”³⁶ Jane’s flight is now also metaphorical.

Paralleling all previous flights, Jane “looks through the window”³⁷ of her lodging, realizing that she has one last leg of her journey to make. And, like the princes of fairy tales, Jane, the “anti-princess,” sets out to “save” her blinded, injured love, Edward. Kate Flint summarizes Elaine Showalter’s insights on blinded, wounded male mates of the nineteenth-century female-authored novels: “...whilst they [female authors] had little difficulty imagining female heroines who were extensions of themselves, they had genuine problems in figuring suitable men to be companions for them: hence the proliferation of blinded, wounded, lame, sick, even temporarily transvestite men who are produced as possible mates.”³⁸ She continues, “Men, these novels are saying, must learn how it feels to be helpless and forced unwillingly into dependency. Only then can they understand that women need love but hate to be weak. If he is to be redeemed, the woman’s man must find out how it feels to be a woman.”³⁹

Ferndean: Marrying Eden

“Reader,” Jane states famously, “I married him.”⁴⁰ The beauty of this line, of course, is its simplicity: written in active, not passive voice, Jane makes the decision and takes the action. She also makes her case very clear: she is an independent woman now, “as well as rich”; she cares not for fine jewels and clothing; she is her “own mistress”; she doesn’t “care about being married.”⁴¹ There is no coercion this time, no deceit. Jane learns of the sorry fate of Bertha, and perhaps that is the only blind spot she has: Jane accepts Rochester’s explanation of his first wife’s fate, never, apparently, wondering what *her* story might be. We forgive her this breach of the imagination, allowing author Jean Rhys to take up the matter nearly a century later in her novel, *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. Notably, at this story’s conclusion, the motifs of windows and flight and the crimson robes of flames and passion eerily parallel its precursor.

Still, given the narrow scope of Jane’s life canvas, she stretches it to the outer edges, transcending social class and social mores with the vitality of her imaginative intellect. Jane

³⁶ Ibid., 35: 423.

³⁷ Ibid., 36: 424.

³⁸ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 34.

³⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁰ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 38: 452.

⁴¹ Ibid., 37: 437-9.

does not merely *arrive* at Ferndean, her Eden, her *masterpiece*; she has created it, in a true sense has created Rochester, with all the rich and subtle hues her young life's experiences have taught her.

Conclusion: Into the Twentieth Century and Beyond

The idea of education in nineteenth-century women's writing evolves well beyond conformity to the patriarchal need for oppression and restriction, and becomes an intuitive quest for a life rich in meaning, self-discovery, self-determination, and truth. Kate Flint has asserted that throughout the nineteenth century, women "are to be observed constructing and maintaining discursive systems which emphasize their comprehension of social practice...Sometimes these systems operated according to the dominant definitions of what should constitute women's roles, but with increasing frequency, they functioned as a powerful, and shared critique on these definitions."⁴²

Similarly, we have seen Bronte's heroine, Jane Eyre, break the boundaries of educational as well as social expectations of women during that time and do so in unconventional ways. We see this further manifested in the now classic feminist works of late nineteenth-century authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin, early twentieth-century authors like Virginia Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston, or poets Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath—powerful and pained voices of the mid- to latter twentieth century. Gilman's narrator "got out at last, in spite of you and Jane"⁴³ Louise Mallard transcends, "a feverish triumph in her eyes," into a "goddess of Victory"⁴⁴; Mrs. Ramsay has her epiphany at the dinner party, despite earlier wondering, "What have I done with my life?"⁴⁵; and Lily Briscoe, by novel's end, "[has] had [her] vision."⁴⁶

So many decades earlier, Charlotte Bronte dreamed a dream where the heroine does not have to die or go mad to achieve her victory. As Jane herself states, "I was no Helen Burns."⁴⁷ We are thankful for that, as much as we may like and respect Helen or pity Bertha. By giving wings to her heroine, Bronte allows Jane to fly in the face of nineteenth-century obstacles of gender bias and expectations, limited education, restrictions in social class and constrictive social

⁴² Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 40.

⁴³ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper," in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 7th ed., ed. Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1998), 642.

⁴⁴ Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour," in *The Awakening and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 215.

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (New York: Harcourt, 1954), XVII: 92.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, XIII: 236.

⁴⁷ Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, 7:68.

mores. Jane soars, her compass moved by life's passions, a fine intellect, her keen imagination, and independent spirit.

This is the power of education in nineteenth-century women's writing.

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