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Uniform
Title:

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Edition: Imprint: Portales, NM : Dept. of Languages and Literature, Eastern New Mexico Univer

Article: Spiegel, "The Construction of the Romance in Jane Eyre"

Vol: 9 No.: 1-2 Pages: 133-146 Date: 20010301

Dissertation:

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Title: Readerly/writerly texts : essays on literature, lit

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ROMANCE IN *JANE EYRE*

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Charlotte Bronte depicts in *Jane Eyre* a particularly unusual portrait of romantic love given the cultural forces prevalent during the Victorian era. She portrays a love fueled by intellectual and spiritual affinity, and the novel is structured through characterization and narration to make an unlikely, subversive heroine the romantic center of the novel. For Jane, unlike the standard Victorian heroine, is not beautiful and demure; instead, she is plain and intellectual. In fact, one critic has suggested that "Jane Eyre is the first defiantly intellectual heroine in all of British literature" (Meyer 168). Jane's unusual characteristics as a romantic heroine present a challenge for Bronte; in order for Jane to be believable as a romantic heroine and for her love story to appeal to what might be called the collective imagination of the audience, Bronte has had to construct a romantic hero who would be believable as Jane's lover.

While Bronte was subversive in her choice of a plain heroine, she is not subversive enough to have Jane involved with a young, handsome hero. Jane, in fact, falls in love with Rochester, a man who is both older than she is and the guardian of a young child. He is additionally burdened by a complex and painful romantic history. Much has been written about Rochester as the Byronic hero: worldly, peripatetic, sexually experienced, and difficult to tame. This view of him certainly gives him a certain sense of mystery. This characterization is also particularly likely to appeal to the readers' sense of the romantic. The lonely sparrow-like Jane is the beloved of the passionate, enigmatic hero; who can resist? But, in reading Rochester, we must also note that his history has been fictionally constructed to bring him to Jane, and he has his own vulnerabilities. His vulnerabilities can even be seen as sexually generated. In one of his earliest conversations with Jane, as he discusses Adele's origins, he explains in great detail his romantic relationship with Celine Varens. Far from describing himself as the

handsome gadabout sampling various women, he describes the painful jealousy, torment, and finally, indifference he experienced as a result of his passion for Celine. This description of his passion and jealousy is metaphorically imagined by him as "a craggy pass of the channel" and is compared to the "calmer current" he is borne on now (92). This allusion to a calm current suggests his reluctance to enter into the pain and torment of feverish passion, and he further comments to Jane during this conversation that "she may refresh him" (93). This burgeoning feeling that Jane may help to rescue him spiritually would not be an uncommon way for a Victorian male to view romantic love. Peter Gay suggests that the nineteenth century was heir to several ways of viewing love; one of them was the desire to attach love to a higher sphere (45). The nineteenth century lover, according to Gay, was in the midst of two currents of feeling in romantic love: the sensual and the tender. The Victorians, reluctant to acknowledge the primacy of the sensual, struggled with the balance between the two—and it may be these two currents that Rochester is attempting to reconcile. The combination of Rochester's unique sexual background and the historical forces molding the views of romantic love converge in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester's feelings for Jane reflect his desire for renewal, and they mirror some of the larger concerns of Victorian life.

Critics have commented on the confidences he exchanges with Jane—not only regarding Celine Varens, but also regarding Blanche Ingram and his wife, Bertha. There has been a sense among the critics that these conversations bestow a certain equality upon Jane in terms of both class and intellect. Sandra Gilbert suggests that, "his account of Celine, which struck many Victorians as improper, emphasizes not his superiority but his equality with her" (166). She also states that Rochester is solacing himself with her "uneducible independence" (166). However, these conversations, though they provide Jane a fascinating glimpse into a larger world, also contain an undercurrent for they desexualize her by placing her in the position of hearing of his passion for Celine. Certainly, in a more typical love story, it is difficult to imagine the romantic hero discussing with a woman he might find appealing the jealousy he experienced with a former lover.

Even later when he speaks so disparagingly of Bertha and contemptuously labels her as "intemperate and unchaste," he sets up a definite contrast between Jane the chaste and Bertha the rapacious. It is no accident that Rochester, who has been sexually betrayed by Celine, also describes his marriage to Bertha in scathingly sexual terms. Little reason exists for Rochester to emphasize to Jane Bertha's prodigious sexual appetites, and this certainly seems to link the women, Celine and Bertha, whose sexuality has threatened him. His sexual fears are not oblique for he continues his narrative by saying, "How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me" (203). The association between the two women and Rochester's comments about them strongly suggest that he has been shaken by his previous sexual relationships. His descriptions of both Celine and Bertha become even more

suggestive when juxtaposed with his references to Jane; Jane is "elfin," "angelic," and "otherworldly." The cerebral, elusive qualities Jane possesses achieve ascendancy here. These references, like his confidences to her, set her up in opposition to the more full-blooded, passionate women he has known. The fact that he chooses to confide in Jane these private and troubling aspects of his romantic and marital history also suggest that Rochester sees Jane in a spiritual rather than a sexual light. The description of Celine and Bertha's sexuality also has the effect of giving Jane's sexual passion a certain purity, a not unnecessary consideration for an easily shocked Victorian audience. Because Jane's sexuality is unambiguously joined to romantic love and to the higher sphere of spiritual affinity, her feelings are differentiated from the women whose appetites are both excessive and unrelated to love. This contrast also allows Jane's erotic connection to Rochester to be depicted in almost spiritual and religious terms. Rochester even claims after he and Jane declare themselves that they will revisit Europe and he will be "healed and cleansed with a very angel as my comforter" (171).

Rochester's less than satisfying relationships with women are not confined solely to his past for it is also evident that Rochester's relationship to Blanche Ingram is hardly what dreams are made of. While he is clearly not in love with her, it is also obvious that Blanche rejects him when she discovers he does not have the wealth she has assumed he has. Jane is concerned about Blanche's feelings when she discovers that Rochester will not marry her, but Rochester, himself, comments to Jane, "she deserted me" (174). So Rochester, who is typically seen as this romantic, virile character, has in fact suffered rejection and betrayal, and one could argue that these betrayals make him a more believable lover for Jane. Rochester's characterization of women as betrayers permeates the novel as a whole. This idea becomes particularly explicit at the end of the novel as he links the women in his life together. When Jane finally, amidst a flurry of the most intense romantic feeling, returns to him, he again refers to the women who have left him and says to Jane: ". . . now you will fly too, as your sisters have all fled before you" (289). These fears serve a function in the story. Had Rochester been truly the rake, truly the successful Byronic lover who attracts women like moths to a flame, it would be less than credible that he falls passionately in love with his lonely governess.

Rochester's history exerts a powerful grip on Jane, but more importantly, Rochester, himself has not escaped the potent and conflicting forces that have so driven his romantic past. It is significant that he has not, for example, totally divested himself of the idea of having a beautiful woman on his arm. On the one hand he claims, "To the women who please me only by their faces, I am the very devil when I find out they have neither souls nor hearts. . . but to the clear eye and eloquent tongue. . . I am ever tender and true" (172). This revelation of Rochester's behavior and psyche would seem to indicate he values intellect over beauty. However, he has, in the same conversation with Jane, said that he wishes for the

world to acknowledge Jane as a beauty too. He wants to take her to Europe and show her off dressed, not in her usual gray dresses, but in vivid satin, lace and roses. This wish for her sartorial splendor is clearly not for Jane's benefit, for she feels he is deluding both himself and her, and she is not hesitant about telling him so.

These dueling desires lend depth to his character and thus to the love story. His words extolling the virtues of intellectual communion are also important, because they emphasize that the desire for intellectual companionship is not simply the feverish longing of a woman who has been denied much of what the world has to offer. Rochester, who has enjoyed both cerebral and corporeal pleasures, values intellectual companionship as much as Jane does. Although Rochester values the intellectual communion he finds with Jane, there are delicate layers to his desires that convey the impression that Rochester is at war with himself. The clash between his vision of Jane beautiful in silk, and the Jane who is his loyal confidante is subtle, but it exists as does the clash between his stated desires for intellectual affinity and the reality of his romantic past. His reports of his search for intellectual companionship seem a little forced at times. He has certainly, his stated desires notwithstanding, searched in some pretty strange places to find the affinity he says he has been seeking. He describes his quest as a committed exercise in finding that elusive woman who would understand him: "My fixed desire was to seek and find a good, intelligent woman I could love: a contrast to the fury I left at Thornfield" (206). Yet he ends up coupled with mistresses who are corrupt but "singularly handsome," a fact that does not go unmentioned to Jane.

The beauty of the women in *Jane Eyre* is always separated from intelligence and goodness specifically when the women are set up in relationship to Rochester. I would argue that they *must* be separated. Brontë sets up this dichotomy deliberately to present Jane's plainness in a more positive light. Hunt claims that, in seeking to avoid the stereotypes and conventions which dominate the era, Charlotte Brontë turns to "counter-ideals." These are idealized characters who modify or change traditional ideas of femininity (96). Clearly, Brontë, in setting Jane up as so idealized a character in relation to the other female characters, is working within the framework that Hunt suggests. In creating this "counter-ideal" Brontë must also take into consideration the expectations of her audience; for this reason the counter-ideal can never be compared directly against the ideal. Although Brontë never compares Jane to the model of Victorian womanhood, she questions this vision of femininity. Because the beauty of the Victorian heroine has been such a dominant part of her appeal, Brontë through the way in which she contrasts the female characters, challenges the idea that beauty alone should generate romantic attraction. This challenge may account for Jane's not very lady-like attack on Blanche Ingram. Some of the censure is provoked by Blanche's unkind characterization of Adele "as a tiresome monkey" (124). But some of Jane's ire is produced simply by Jane's assessment of Blanche's romantic appeal. Jane, in

evaluating Blanche, comments that "she cannot charm" Rochester. She further describes her as infatuated with herself. She even reflects that Blanche would further ingratiate herself with Rochester "by simply sitting quietly by his side saying little" (122). This passage reflects Jane's frustration with her situation as the plain woman observing the action in the romantic arena, and it allows us a fuller portrait of Jane in relation to one of the female characters.

If Rochester has been constructed as a believable romantic partner for Jane, and if Jane's plainness and intellectualism become appealing to Rochester precisely because of his experiences, it may also be instructive to look at the other elements of the novel which make the love story work. As I've argued, Bronte deliberately does not choose to set Jane off against a beautiful and modest Victorian heroine and explore how this might all play out on the vast and often far from level playing fields of romance. Instead Jane is contrasted with the beautiful but amoral Celine Varens, the crazy, lustful Bertha, and money-hungry Blanche Ingram. This certainly also allows the Victorian audience—fed on a diet of sweet but hardly nourishing, demure, beautiful, female fictional characters—to see Jane in a more sympathetic light.

Any portrayal of romantic love is driven by the personal sensibilities of the writer as well as by the prevailing winds which happen to be blowing through a particular time in a particular culture. If some literary works suggest that love is an inexplicable force, a mystery based on beauty and illusion, *Jane Eyre* challenges this notion of love. Bronte, in her rendering of romantic love, proposes an explanation for why the two characters fall in love; it is this explanation which allows Jane her status as romantic heroine. This is not a literary work in which romantic love is a given needing no elucidation; it is also crucially not a novel in which the hero projects all of his feelings onto a rather blank and beautiful heroine. A love sparked by beauty and stoked by illusion requires a beautiful heroine, and her loveliness is usually enough explanation for why the hero is smitten. A love such as Jane and Rochester's based on spiritual affinity renders a beautiful heroine unnecessary. More significantly, the lack of a traditional heroine requires a certain vision of romantic love.

If we look to the beginnings of their love story, it is easy to see striking dissimilarities between Jane and Rochester's meeting and the meetings of other fictional lovers in the Victorian era. In passage after passage in other Victorian novels, the romantic hero meets his potential lover, is struck by her physical graces, and is—if not smitten instantly—at least moved by the woman's beauty. The reader is left to understand that romantic interest will follow. For example, in *David Copperfield*, David instantly falls in love with Dora, a demure, childish beauty. He describes his feelings: "It was over in a moment . . . I was a captive and slave" (362). Similarly, in the *Woman in White*, in the first meeting between the narrator and Laura Fairlie, the impact of Laura's beauty on him is described vividly. The hero's

romantic interest develops based on his consideration of her lovely eyes and the delicate refinement of her features. Even in the central and much more complex love story in *Middlemarch* between Will Ladislaw and Dorothea, her appearance is foregrounded in one of their initial meetings. She is a beautiful figure seen in aesthetically pleasing surroundings and very much the subject of the male's admiring gaze as he takes in her lovely face and form. Will feels as a result of viewing Dorothea's beauty that "something had happened to him with regard to her" (182). The reader understands these stirrings of romantic interest although no explanation for the burgeoning feelings is proffered. Our understanding rests on our awareness—part instinctual, part culturally constructed—of the powerful force exerted by beauty. It is this expectation and understanding that Bronte must grapple with and explain away.

Because Bronte has created a heroine who is plain and unprepossessing, her love story must be written differently from the beginning. Certainly, Jane and Rochester's initial meeting differs dramatically from the above-mentioned encounters. As Rochester tries to persuade Jane to stay with him, he shares with her his initial impression of her: "On a frosty winter afternoon I rode in sight of Thornfield Hall. On a little stile in Hay Lane I saw a quiet little figure sitting by itself. I passed it as negligently as I did the pollard willow opposite to it;" (207). This passage is striking not because it shows lack of interest on his part; on the contrary, he goes on to say that he was interested enough to observe her the following morning unbeknownst to her. Notably absent from his account though is any mention of beauty. The focus of the passage as it continues comes to be on Jane's "strange perseverance and authority" (207). Much has been written about the elements of rescue in their meeting, and this element sets in motion some of the feelings that will dominate Rochester's romantic feelings toward Jane. Gilbert suggests that "Though in one sense Jane and Rochester begin their relationship as master and servant prince and Cinderella, Mr. B. and Pamela, in another way they begin as spiritual equals" (166). This is an entirely valid interpretation of their class differences. However, more striking is Jane's attention to their physical appearances; as she narrates their initial meeting, Jane comments on Rochester's appearance. In doing so, she obliquely comments on her own, because she claims that if Rochester had been handsome sympathy between them would be impossible (73). In remarking so early on the role of their respective appearances, Bronte is both subverting the more standard love story and beginning the explanation for her characters' love story.

I don't mean to suggest that the fact that the novel is constructed in terms to make Jane a believable heroine negates the power of the love story; there are certainly other elements to consider besides this construction. And, of course, love has not been described between them in strictly spiritual terms. I think we as readers believe in, what Adrienne Rich calls, "their erotic and intellectual

connection" (154). However, so much attention has been paid to their intellectual synergy and to whether Jane has somehow capitulated to Rochester—that is given up her independence for marriage—that less attention has been paid to the fact that their love story is so well explicated. This explanatory element of the story is striking in comparison to other novels written contemporaneously with *Jane Eyre*. In scene after scene, Rochester and Jane, in impassioned speeches to one another, declare their spiritual connection. Rochester, in one of the most lovely passages in the book, describes his connection to Jane: "it is if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in a corresponding quarter of your little frame" (166). This is beautifully described by Brontë, and I believe the general reader takes this in as a shared love story in which both understand the other.

This explanation of romantic love may also have its roots in the polarities of experience and emotion that dominate the novel. These oppositions that Jane experiences may be described, first as the desire for vision and expansion over constriction, and secondly as the desire for warmth and satisfaction after her many bouts with deprivation and loneliness. The polarity between warmth and deprivation begins early in the novel and is consistently reflected throughout the story in both Jane's experiences and such metaphorical allusions as seasonal change. These contrasting states can be seen as the budding explanations for why Jane might be so powerfully drawn to Rochester. Jane, who has experienced so much deprivation and coldness, needs love. Early in the novel, she confides to Helen Burns, "to gain some real affection from you or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me . . ." (50). Because these contrary states are so fully developed and Jane's need for love is seen against the coldness of her experiences with at Lowood, they form a powerful foundation for one of her most passionate speeches to Rochester later in the novel: "Do you think I can stay and become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?— a machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup?" (167) Her words, in addition to being a powerful avowal of self, can be seen as subversive. The nakedness of the emotion is highly atypical for a female in Victorian society. Women have more typically in Victorian novels, patiently awaited a declaration of feeling rather than initiating it. However unusual this speech is, the pull between deprivation and warmth is very strong and explicit in this scene. It illuminates something very powerful about Jane's psyche and history which Rochester seems unaware of. Surprising as her words may have been, her speech is a logical follow-up to the dichotomy of emotions that has dominated the novel.

Her desire for expansion is described many times in the novel and may be seen as Jane's desire to travel both literally and metaphorically beyond the confines of her

life thus far. These oppositions, so powerful in the novel, are resolved in her relationship with Rochester. In him she finds the warmth she has been seeking, and it is her perception that she has also experienced intellectual growth through her relationship with him.

Feminists have criticized the novel and the central romantic relationship between Rochester and Jane, commenting that, in choosing love, Jane has given up on the vision and development that have been so important to her. But lovers have often described finding the world in the faces, bodies, and souls of the beloved, and romantic love is often seen as transgressing the finite boundaries of the self. Jane, in fact, speaks explicitly of her sense of widening possibilities as her relationship with Rochester takes flight: "I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright and energetic and high. I have talked face to face with what I reverence, with what I delight in—with an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind" (281). This scene in which Jane expresses her feelings about Rochester is crucial to the love story, and it resonates with the reader. The rich impression we have formed of Jane's life coalesces in this moment. In particular, the much written about, much examined scene at the window in which she muses on the vista before her seems to linger, so powerfully have the oppositions in the story been written. This evocative, emotional passage in which she narrates her desire for growth and experience is oddly present when we read of what Jane has found in Rochester.

Jane is not alone in experiencing powerfully opposing forces; Rochester struggles to reconcile the conflict between sexual dissipation and spiritually satisfying love. For example, Rochester's unequivocal statement that Bertha's sexual appetites were repulsive to him (even within the bounds of marriage) brings to the forefront his sexual conflicts. For Rochester also acknowledges—in spite of the guilty dread he came to feel in his sexual relations with his wife—how drawn he was to Bertha's beauty, "tall, dark, and majestic" (202). Her looks dazzled and stimulated him, and, in his inexperience, he mistakes his feelings for love. The confusion and pain which result from his sexual impulses are brought into high relief here. As he relates his marital history to Jane, he seems less the Byronic hero than the confused Victorian male. He is attempting to come to terms with his own erotic past and struggling to reconcile his conflicting desires—and doing so on the often unyielding ground of Victorian societal expectations. He relates to Jane that he never loved, never esteemed, never even knew Bertha, his wife. He found her totally alien to him, and he vigorously criticizes her morality and intellect. Federico, in her exploration of fictional male characters in Victorian novels, explains that "The Victorian's sense of masculinity is constructed from contradictions, most of which evolve from a social attitude toward sexuality that is manifestly confused and insecure" (21). She further suggests that the severity of sexual repression resulted in the polarized idea of women as either madonnas or magdalenes. These images

controlled the sexual psychologies of both males and females, and it is easy to see how this might be reflected in Rochester's psyche, for Rochester clearly feels sexual passion toward Jane, but significantly he focuses on the spiritual elements of their connection. This element of the novel has a Victorian consciousness deeply embedded in it. As Brontë creates a credible reason for Rochester's interest in Jane, she also, whether consciously or unconsciously, conforms aspects of the love story to Victorian cultural values and ideals.

While Rochester seeks spiritual rescue, Jane seeks to go beyond the boundaries of her own limited experience. Had both Jane's and Rochester's conflicts not been so well delineated, the explanation of their love would not seem so striking. As it is, it is hard to think of another fictional account of love in the Victorian era in which the characters' histories so clearly account for their feelings for one another. Certainly, it is difficult to bring to mind another story in which the characters are so articulate about how their histories have led them to love one another.

The fact that each of them answers for the other a very primary and profound need does not negate the role of illusion in their story. Jane, of course, is operating under a very significant deception—a comment on the power of romantic love to blind us—if ever there was one. But Rochester too, his observations about his knowledge of Jane's psyche and spirit notwithstanding, sees Jane somewhat less than clearly. It could even be argued that Rochester's history is not only constructed to lead him to Jane but that his complex romantic history causes him to see her through the haze of his own needs and feelings. Seen in this light, his attempt to desexualize Jane, however benevolent and unintentional, seems a result of his sexual history. His steady stream of comments relegating her to the territory of the angel, elf, and otherworldly sprite seem calculated to preserve Jane in the light in which he wishes to see her, and these labels also illuminate for the reader some blindness in Rochester's reading of her. Maynard, in his analysis of their sexual courtship, suggests that these comments return Jane to her "pre-sexual state" (122). Jane, after all, has shown herself to be a powerful character deeply conscious of her needs—sexual and otherwise. She tries to disabuse him of some of his notions of her as angelic, and one can sense more than a little frustration in her retort to him, "I had rather be a thing than an angel" (172). He, however, persists in his vision of her. Her descriptions of her own passion seems anything but elfin. They are the passionate outpourings of a woman in love, and this tension between the way in which Jane narrates to the reader her own passionate impulses and her narration of Rochester's view of her illustrates something about the way in which he is creating her in his head and heart. We can also see in their interactions the eternal, interminable contest between the illusory nature of romance and the largely sincere desire that romantic love can kindle: the desire to be truly known.

If Rochester has illusions about Jane, it is not because she fans them. Jane has a very powerful sense of self and wants to be seen and loved for who she is.

However, if we can read into Brontë's construction of Rochester and the women who surround Jane some ambivalence on Brontë's part, some special circumstances she constructs for Jane's romance, it also seems that Jane herself has ambivalent feelings about her role as romantic heroine. On the one hand, as the narrator of her story, she describes Rochester's passion for her; she even goes so far as to suggest that he is so driven by passion that he is about to rape her. Maynard suggests that Jane forgives him this transgression because "of the naturalness of his need" (112). There is no real textual evidence that suggests he is about to behave in this manner, and it is one of the less believable scenes in the novel; it seems an example of Charlotte Brontë wanting to have it both ways: the story as bodice ripper and a serious depiction of love. This incident also can be read as Jane's desire to be seen as capable of igniting such passion. Considering Jane's quiet and perhaps partly conscious ambivalence regarding Rochester's confidences about his previous escapades, it is not surprising that Jane should desire to characterize his behavior in this way. He has not been shy about divulging the sexual passion and jealousy he has felt toward other women, nor has he shrunk from mentioning the beauty of his former lovers. This interpretation of his passion for her has a certain emotional appeal while it also suggests the contradictions in Jane's view of herself. For Jane has commented on her fear that Rochester won't love her after marriage, and she reacts negatively in the brief passage in which Rochester tries to remake her with fine dresses and jewels. This ambivalence toward her role as romantic heroine comes very sharply into focus in her relationship with St. John. For St. John also has to be believable as a suitor for Jane. And it is, of course, his sexual repression, his sense of religious duty, and his rejection of the passion he feels for Rosamond that brings him to Jane. He comes to her not as a romantic lover, but as a potential marriage partner. This relationship is crucial to the story and not only in the way that many critics have suggested. Critics have tended to speak of Rochester as the sexual hero and of St. John as the repressed, dutiful, religiously devoted Victorian. Federico sees this division as a reflection of the opposing roles Victorian society engendered: "the virile man and the chaste man, or the seducer and the saint" (16). Maynard suggests that St. John has been created as a foil for Rochester, and that he prepares Jane to "make a choice between St. John's conventionally acceptable but entirely distorted sexual character and Rochester's sometimes anarchic but always direct and responsive sexual nature" (107).

These dichotomies, while they both have elements of truth, are incomplete. Yes, Jane feels the conflict between duty and love, although I would say these have not been so sharply delineated in the novel as have the other oppositions she feels. But more importantly, it is in this section of the novel that Jane's role as romantic heroine is threatened. She cannot act out the role of the romantic heroine in St. John's narrative. Rich has written that Brontë's heroines are valuable to us in "their determined refusal of the romantic" and postulates that Jane "strenuously resists

being romanticized as 'a beauty and a houri' when Rochester attempts to dress her in fine dresses and jewels" (149). But this is not because Jane resists the romantic (nor does she reject beauty). She does though object to being seen in illusory terms. Her narrative may reflect a resistance of the illusory nature of romantic love, if not love itself. There has been an ideology prevalent in the novel that there is a difference between what Jane describes she shares with Rochester and simply "a love of the senses" (261). She has used this phrase "love of the senses" to describe what she comes to realize characterizes St. John's feelings for Rosamond. This love dominated by sensual attraction would seem to have its roots in the beauty of its object. Love based primarily on physical passion is explicitly set apart from what Jane experiences with Rochester. Jane, far from rejecting the romantic, sees it in a radically different light; romantic love is a fusion of soul and body— not simply a response generated by the twin sisters: beauty and illusion.

St. John is, of course, in love with Rosamond Oliver. And, for the first time in the novel, Jane is viewed against a woman who comes close to the Victorian ideal. Rosamond is described as completely beautiful and, although Jane is not always wholehearted in her enthusiasm for her, she is effusive in her description of Rosamond's appearance. Jane describes her as a vision of perfect beauty. She is portrayed as dressed in pure white, veiled, a youthful and graceful form, "an earthly angel" (241). But again, as Jane has done with Blanche, she criticizes aspects of her personality to destabilize her as the ideal heroine. She is much more cautious in her criticism here, because Rosamond obviously has much more to recommend her than Blanche does. But nonetheless, Jane describes her as "coquettish, but not heartless, exacting, but not worthlessly selfish . . ." but finally as "not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive" (245). It would be easy to read this evaluation as simply Bronte's critique of the beautiful, self-effacing but ultimately not very interesting Victorian heroine. I would argue though that equally important to what Jane says about Blanche or Rosamond is that she says anything at all. Her judgements, exacting and less than kind, reveal that she sees both women in relationship to herself. As the romantic heroine she definitely doesn't want any competition. She may concede their beauty, but in no way can they compete with her in charm, intelligence, morality, or presence.

Regardless of Jane's critique, we instinctively understand the power Rosamond exerts over St. John. Because of this, there is a certain sympathy for him in his renunciation of her. The fact that his passionate (albeit repressed) feelings for Rosamond are juxtaposed against his rather dry, cerebral admiration for Jane allows the reader to see the two women in relationship to one another. This relationship between the two woman is significant for it preserves—albeit indirectly—Jane's romance with Rochester. Jane can never be to St. John what Rosamond is to him. Jane can be idealized as a lover by Rochester but never by St. John. This is not only because of his innate coldness, but also because the figure of the more perfect

Victorian heroine lingers in the background of the reader's consciousness. Even Jane seems to subtly compare herself to Rosamond if only because she recognizes that St John will never see her in that romantic light. This renunciation of herself as a figure capable of inspiring romantic feelings is difficult. She does not want to see herself as "made for labour, not for love"—St. John's deflating, painfully candid analysis of her romantic charms.

It seems to me significant that Jane focuses initially and to a greater degree on how St. John might feel about her than on her own emotions toward him: "He prizes me as a soldier would a good weapon . . . Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit was quite absent?" (269). This passage is interesting for several reasons: it demonstrates that she is more concerned with his failure to see her in a romantic light than with her own lack of romantic feeling for him, and it suggests a complexity in Jane's feelings for him. Jane confirms these feelings later and suggests that, at least in part, her plainness and his beauty render them unsuited for each other. She even comments that she might develop "a strange torturing kind of love for him." (277). There is a certain poignance to these thoughts because Jane has also said: "I shall never more know the sweet homage given to beauty, youth and grace" (239). And one could almost say that Jane is grieving not only for Rochester, but also for the romantic vision of herself reflected in his eyes.

Sandra Gilbert suggests that as Rochester has tried to make Jane "a slave to passion," implying that Jane, herself does not feel this pull toward romantic passion, St. John wants to "imprison the resolute wild free thing" that is her soul in the ultimate cell, "the iron shroud of principle" (175). Not only does this comparison seem to negate the powerful need Jane feels for romantic recognition, it also suggests that Jane's longing for independence is what causes her to reject becoming "a slave to passion." It further implies that Jane's response to St. John's proposal has its roots in Jane's desire for autonomy. In equating the two men and their influence on Jane, Gilbert minimizes the desires which so strongly draw Jane to Rochester.

Perhaps Maurianne Adams sees the forces that influence Jane with deeper perception. She seems to have a view of how these dueling forces must be resolved in the novel and comments that Jane's struggles with autonomy are resolved in the mode of the romantic novel—one that allows events to conform to the shape of wish and desire. She says that "*Jane Eyre* is marked by the fantasy that "love is a fusion of souls" and that this conception of love may not survive the real world. In Adams's eyes "love and autonomy are at odds and only romance brings some modicum of equality" (197). This perception interests me for several reasons. It confirms the fact that romantic love is conceptualized artistically and does not

remain an eternal verity, singularly understood by all people in exactly the same light. She also seems to understand that the novel is romantic in its construction both of its narrative and its heroine. This reading may lead us to consider what some readers consider the rather complicated problem of its ending.

The romance at the center of the novel has inspired emotion in generations of readers, and many have written about the complex responses they have to Jane's marriage to Rochester. Shirley Foster asserts that the ending can be read as "a final capitulation to romantic orthodoxy either in conscious response to artistic convention or inspired by a genuine conviction that marriage constitutes the highest womanly fulfilment" (92). But she also poses the idea that Jane's power over Rochester can be read as Brontë's "final vindication of female assertiveness" (92). A more complicated view of the ending is advanced by Karen Chase who suggests that the intricate spatial arrangement of the novel between exposure and confinement mirrors a question which has been implicit in the novel: How can love be both a presence and an absence? She maintains that Jane, at the end of the novel, finds a balance in this antithesis and that Rochester's blindness allows him to be "both near and far, this most stringent requirement of romantic love in Brontë" (90). She has a virtuously sightless Rochester beside her; she sees without being seen, and Jane is protected but not separated from Rochester. Even Adrienne Rich, who has written a less than fully sympathetic critique of Rochester, has written of the marriage that closes the novel, "Jane can become a wife without sacrificing a grain of her Jane Eyre-ity (154). She further comments that the sympathy of the marriage remains in place because it has been "prepared for by the woman's refusal to accept it under circumstances which were mythic, romantic, or sexually oppressive" (154). But, of course, the circumstances of the ending are romantic. Jane receives a mystical call in the night, her name echoing eerily in the moonlit room. This "known, loved, well-remembered voice" (279) saves her from a soul-deadening union with St. John and calls her to return to her beloved. When she returns to him, all impediments to their marriage have disappeared, and he welcomes her with a loving, heartfelt speech. Romantic? Absolutely. The fact that Brontë has carefully set up a construction to explain the love story doesn't negate the romantic elements of the narrative. To say otherwise is to misread the story. Jane, as I've argued, cares deeply about her role as romantic heroine and struggles to preserve it throughout the novel.

Whatever the merits are of these readings, they are striking in one sense: they desire to preserve, however tentatively, at least some of the romantic ending of the Ferndean section of the novel. It would seem that the reader, like Jane herself, is reluctant to give up the image of the plain but ultimately romantically triumphant heroine. Jane and Rochester's love story, which lives so compellingly and memorably in the imagination of so many readers, has been carefully fostered and sustained by Brontë's conceptualization of a love based on spiritual and intellectual

communion. In addition, our belief in their story has also been subtly influenced by Bronte's choice of a hero—one who is not young, handsome, and ideal, but one whose history and circumstances have led him to seek renewal and rescue in the lonely, plain, spirited, defiantly intellectual Jane Eyre.

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