Florence Nightingale, well-born, beautiful, courted, living out
the rituals of society and the oppressions of the Victorian family
which held its daughters in a clutch of duty and hysteria; becoming
neurasthenic; battling her relations and her class to enter a profession
considered demeaning and immoral; preparing herself with heroic
patience and in secret for the great occasion which Victorian imperial-
ism was eventually to provide her—Eleanor Taylor has compressed
what might be the materials for a play or a film into eight intense
pages of verse. The materials are ideally suited to her style, a style
born of tension, in which whispered undertones are in dialogue with
the given of social existence, with the sudden explosive burst of
rebellion or recognition:

A girl, desperately fortified in my castle,
The starchy pure linen,
Sealed plates, the sanitary air,
The facile word killed soul-ferment.
Six courses starved the spirit.
And I said of laughter, mad,
And of mirth, what is it doing?
I dreamed of all things at man's mercy.

Nightingale was, of course, no Victorian angel in the house but a
brilliant administrator and researcher, a fighter, with terrifying end-
durance and a keen sense of politics. She was also a driven woman;
the split-second urgencies of her will come through in the jagged
lines and verse paragraphs of the poem.

What I find compelling in the poems of Eleanor Taylor, besides
the authority and originality of her language, is the underlying sense
of how the conflicts of imaginative and intelligent women have
driven them on, lashed them into genius or madness, how the
home-nursing, the household administration, the patience and skill
in relationships acquired at such expense in a family-centered life,
became an essential part of the strength of a woman like Nightingale,
but at tremendous price. Welcome Ευμενίδης is a writing-large, in
terms of a celebrated and powerful woman, of unanswered questions
that hover throughout Eleanor Taylor's poems, and throughout the
history and psychology of women.

Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman (1973)

Like Thackeray's daughters, I read Jane Eyre in childhood, carried
away "as by a whirlwind." Returning to Charlotte Brontë's most
famous novel, as I did over and over in adolescence, in my twenties,
thirties, now in my forties, I have never lost the sense that it con-
tains, through and beyond the force of its creator's imagination,
some nourishment I needed then and still need today. Other novels
often ranked greater, such as Persuasion, Middlemarch, Jude the
Obscure, Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, The Portrait of a
Lady—all offered their contradictory and compelling versions of
what it meant to be born a woman. But Jane Eyre has for us now a
special force and survival value.

Comparing Jane Eyre to Wuthering Heights, as people tend to do,
Virginia Woolf had this to say:

The drawbacks of being Jane Eyre are not far to seek. Always to be a
governess and always to be in love is a serious limitation in a world
which is full, after all, of people who are neither one nor the other... .
[Charlotte Brontë] does not attempt to solve the problems of human life;
she is even unaware that such problems exist. All her force, which is the
more tremendous for being concentrated, goes into the assertion, "I
love," "I hate," "I suffer"... .

An earlier version of this essay was given as a lecture at Brandeis University, 1972; the
essay was first published in Ms., October 1973.

221-22. A. R., 1978. Her Common Reader essays, so many of which were on women
In her new position as the Executive Director of Action Against Violence, Dr. Sarah Johnson has been working tirelessly to combat the issue of domestic violence. She has established a comprehensive program that includes legal advocacy, educational outreach, and support services for victims and their families. 

The program has been successful in several areas, including increased awareness among the public, greater support from healthcare providers, and a decrease in the number of reported cases. Dr. Johnson's leadership has been instrumental in achieving these results, and she continues to push for further progress in the fight against domestic violence.
window-embasure, trying to conceal herself from her aunt, her two
girl cousins, and her boorish boy cousin John. With the icy coldness
of the winter landscape outside on one hand, this chilly family circle
on the other, she looks at a book of engravings of Arctic wastes and
legendary regions of winter.

III

Moments after the novel begins, John Reed provokes Jane’s child-

ish rage by striking her in the face and taunting her with her poverty

and dependency. Thus, immediately, the political/social circum-

stances of Jane’s life are established: as a female she is exposed to

male physical brutality and whim; as an economically helpless per-

son she is vulnerable in a highly class-conscious society. Her re-

sponse to John’s gratuitous cruelty is to “fly at him” and thereat to be
dragged off and locked into the “Red Room,” where her uncle had
died and which is rumored to be a haunted chamber.

Here begins the ordeal which represents Jane’s first temptation.
For a powerless little girl in a hostile household, where both psychic
and physical violence are used against her, used indeed to punish her
very spiritedness and individuality, the temptation of victimization is
never far away. To see herself as the sacrificial lamb or scapegoat of
this household, and act out that role, or conversely to explode into
violent and self-destructive hysterics which can only bring on more
punishment and victimization, are alternatives all too ready at hand.

In the Red Room, Jane experiences the bitter isolation of the out-

sider, the powerlessness of the scapegoat to please, the abjectness of
the victim. But above all, she experiences her situation as unnatural:

Unjust—unjust said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into
precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up,
instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from inexpressible
oppression—as running away, or if that could not be effected, never
eating or drinking more, and letting myself die.

I want to recall to you that the person who is going through this il-

lumination—for “dark” and “turbid” as her feelings are, they are il-

luminating—is a girl of ten, without material means or any known

Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman

 recourse in the outer world, dependent on the household she lives in
for physical support and whatever strands of human warmth she can
cling to. She is, even so, conscious that it could be otherwise; she
imagines alternatives, though desperate ones. It is at this moment
that the germ of the person we are finally to know as Jane Eyre is
born: a person determined to live, and to choose her life with digni-
ity, integrity, and pride.

Jane’s passion in the Red Room comes to its climax; she halluci-
ingenates, screams, is thrust back into the dreaded death-chamber, and
blackens out. Her ensuing illness, like much female illness, is an act-
ing-out of her powerlessness and need for affection, and a psychic

 crisis induced by these conditions. During her convalescence from
this “fit,” she experiences for the first time the decency of the family
apothecary and the gentle and caring side of the sharp-tongued
young servant Bessie. Bessie is the first woman to show Jane affec-
tion; and it is partly the alliance with her that makes it possible for
the child Jane to maintain her hope for the future, her will to sur-
vive; which prevents her from running away—a self-destructive act
under the circumstances—or from relapsing into mere hysteria or
depression. It is this, too, which helps her retain the self-respect and
the spirit of rebellion in which she finally confronts her aunt:

Shaking from head to foot, thrilled with ungovernable excitement, I
continued—

“I am glad you are no relation of mine. I will never call you aunt again
as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and
if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say
the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with
miserable cruelty.”

... Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult,
with the strongest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as
if an invisible bond had burst and that I had struggled out into
unhoped-for liberty.

This outburst, like much anger of the powerless, leaves Jane only
briefly elated. The depressive, self-punishing reaction sets in; she is
only pulled out of it by Bessie’s appearance and a confirmed sense of
Bessie’s affection and respect for her. Bessie tells her that she must
The transition of Loomwood and the moral and intellectual force of Helen brings into focus a larger, more complex moral dilemma.

Jane Eyre: The Redemption of a Madwoman

In the realm of moral motivation and character formation, the question of whether Helen's redemption is possible or if she is doomed to a life of perpetual guilt and pain becomes central. Helen's journey is not just one of personal growth but also of broader implications for morality and society.

On Love, Secret, and Silence
My world had for some years been in Lowood: my experience had been of its rules and systems; now I remembered that the real world was wide...

I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication. For change, stimulus. That petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space. "Then," I cried, half desperate, "grant me at least a new servitude!"

One of the impressive qualities of Charlotte Brontë's heroines, the quality which makes them more valuable to the woman reader than Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, and Catherine Earnshaw combined, is their determined refusal of the romantic. They are not immune to it; in fact, they are far more tempted by it than are the cooler-headed heroines of Jane Austen; there is far more in their circumstances of orphaned wandering and intellectual eroticism to heat their imaginations—they have, in fact, more imagination. Jane Eyre is a passionate girl and woman; but she displays early an inner clarity which helps her to distinguish between intense feelings which can lead to greater fulfillment, and those which can only lead to self-destructiveness. The thrill of masochism is not for her, though it is one of her temptations as we have seen; having tasted a drop of it, she rejects it. In the central episode of the novel, her meeting with Mr. Rochester at Thornfield, Jane, inexperienced, and hungry for experience, has to confront the central temptation of the female condition—the temptation of romantic love and surrender.

V

It is interesting that the Thornfield episode is often recalled or referred to as if it were the novel Jane Eyre. So truncated and abridged, that novel would become the following: A young woman arrives as governess at a large country house inhabited by a small French girl and an older housekeeper. She is told that the child is the ward of the master of the house, who is traveling abroad. Presently the master comes home and the governess falls in love with him, and he with her. Several mysterious and violent incidents occur in the house which seem to center around one of the servants, and which the master tells the governess will all be explained once they are married. On the wedding day, it is revealed that he has a wife still alive, a madwoman who is kept under guard in the upper part of the house and who is the source of the sinister incidents. The governess decides that her only course of action is to leave her love forever. She steals away from the house and settles in another part of the country. After some time she returns to the manor house to find it has burned to the ground, the madwoman is dead, and her lover, though blinded and maimed by the fire, is free to marry her.

Thus described, the novel becomes a blend of Gothic horror and Victorian morality. That novel might have been written by many a contributor to ladies' magazines, but it is not the novel written by Charlotte Brontë. If the Thornfield episode is central, it is because in it Jane comes to womanhood and to certain definitive choices about what it means to her to be a woman. There are three aspects of this episode: the house, Thornfield itself; Mr. Rochester, the Man; and the madwoman, Jane's alter ego.

Charlotte Brontë gives us an extremely detailed and poetically convincing vision of Thornfield. Jane reaches its door by darkness, after a long journey; she scarcely knows what the house is like till the next day when Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, takes her through it on a tour which ends in the upper regions, on the rooftop. The reader's sense of its luxury, its isolation, and its mysteries is precisely Jane's, seen with the eyes of a young woman just come from the dormitory of a charity school—a young woman of strong sensuality. But it is the upper regions of the house which are of crucial importance—the part of the house Jane lives in least, yet which most affects her life. Here she first hears that laugh—"distinct, formal, mirthless"—which is ascribed to the servant Grace Poole and which she will later hear outside her own bedroom door. Here, too, standing on the roof, or walking up and down in the corridor, close to the very door behind which the madwoman is kept hidden, she gives silent vent to those feelings which are introduced by the telling phrase: "Anybody may blame me who likes..."

The phrase introduces a passage which is Charlotte Brontë's feminist manifesto. Written one hundred and twenty-six years ago, it is still having to be written over and over today, in different language but with essentially the same sense that sentiments of this kind are
Jane Replies: The Companions of a Motherless Woman

VI

We see little of Belinda; Belcher; she is heard and seen neither.

Jane Replies: The Companions of a Motherless Woman

...on the occasion of his becoming possessed by the English of the place...
On Lies, Secrets, and Silence

did not and must not; Rochester's loathing of Bertha is described repeatedly in terms of her physical strength and her violent will—both unacceptable qualities in the nineteenth-century female, raised to the nth degree and embodied in a monster.

VII

Mr. Rochester is often seen as the romantic Man of Fate, Byronic, brooding, sexual. But his role in the book is more interesting: he is certainly that which culture sees as Jane's fate, but he is not the fate she has been seeking. When she leaves Lowood for Thornfield, when she stands on the roof of Thornfield or walks across its fields longing for a wider, more expansive life, she is not longing for a man. We do not know what she longs for, she herself does not know; she uses terms like liberty, a new servitude, action. Yet the man appears, romantically and mysteriously, in the dusk, riding his horse—and slips and falls on the ice, so that Jane's first contact with him is with someone in need of help; he has to lean on her to regain his seat on horseback. Again at the novel's end it is she who must lead him, blinded by fire. There is something more working here than the introduction of a stock romantic hero.

Mr. Rochester offers Jane wider horizons than any she has known; travel, riches, brilliant society. Throughout the courtship there is a tension between her growing passion for him and her dislike of and uneasiness with the style of his love-making. It is not Rochester's sensuality that brings her up short, but his tendency to make her his object, his creature, to want to dress her up, lavish jewels on her, remake her in another image. She strenuously resists being romanticized as a beauty or a horror; she will, she tells him, be no part of his harem.

In his determination to possess Jane, Rochester is arrogant enough to lie to her three times. During the house party at which Jane, as governess, has to suffer the condescension and contempt of the ladies of the neighborhood, Rochester, disguised as an old Gypsy woman, comes to the door to read fortunes, and he attempts to trick Jane into revealing her feelings for him. It is clear, in this scene, that Rochester is well aware of the strength of Jane's character and is uneasy as to the outcome of his courtship and the kind of marriage he is going to propose to her. In making as if to read Jane's fate in her features, he tells her:

"...that brow professes to say—I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me to do so. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all the extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give."

Abruptly, at the end of this scene, he reveals himself. But he continues to carry on a flirtation with the heiress Miss Ingram, in order to arouse Jane's jealousy; he pretends to the last possible moment that he intends to marry Miss Ingram, till Jane, in turmoil at the prospect, confesses her grief at having to leave him. Her grief—but also, her anger at the position in which she has been placed:

"I tell you I must go!" I retorted, raised to something like passion. "Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? ... Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong—I have as much soul as you—and full as much heart! ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!"

(Always a governess and always in love? Had Virginia Woolf really read this novel?)

VIII

Jane's parting interview with Mr. Rochester is agonizing; he plays on every chord of her love, her pity and sympathy, her vulnerability. On going to bed, she has a dream. Carried back to the Red Room, the scene of her first temptation, her first ordeal, in the dream, Jane is reminded of the "syncope," or swoon, she underwent there, which became a turning point for her; she is then visited by the moon, sym-
Jane Bower. The Composition of a Modern Woman

...
for service, her feminine urge toward self-abnegation: in short—as
Jane becomes soon aware—he will use her.

But St. John is offering Jane this "meaning" under the rubric of
marriage—and from this "use" of herself she draws back in healthy
rejection.

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? Can I bear the consciousness that every endear-
ment he bestows is a sacrifice made on principle? No: such martyrdom
would be monstrous . . .

As his curate, his comrade, all would be right: I would cross oceans
with him in that capacity; toil under Eastern suns, in Asian deserts with
him . . . admire and emulate his courage and devotion . . . smile un-
disturbed at his ineradicable ambition; discriminate the Christian from
the man; profoundly esteem the one, and freely forgive the other.
But as his wife—at his side always, and always restrained, and always
checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low . . . this
would be unendurable . . .

"If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now"
[she tells him].

His lips and cheeks turned white—quite white.

"I should kill you—I am killing you? Your words are such as ought not
to be used—they are violent, unfeeling [sic] and untrue . . ."

So she refuses his cause; and so he meets her refusal. In the mean-
time she has inherited an income; she has become independent; and
at this point an extrasensory experience calls her back to Thornfield.

IX

"Reader, I married him." These words open the final chapter of
Jane Eyre. The question is, how and why is this a happy ending?
Jane returns to Thornfield to find it "a blackened ruin"; she discovers
Rochester, his left hand amputated and his eyes blinded by the fire in
which he vainly attempted to save the life of his mad wife. Rochester
has paid his dues; a Freudian critic would say he has been symboli-

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cally castrated. Discarding this phallic-patriarchal notion of his or-
deal, we can then ask, what kind of marriage is possible for a woman
like Jane Eyre?

Certainly not marriage with a castrate, psychic or physical. (St.
John repels Jane in part because he is emotionally castrated.) The
wind that blows through this novel is the wind of sexual equality—
spiritual and practical. The passion that Jane feels as a girl of twenty
or as a wife of thirty is the same passion—that of a strong spirit
demanding its counterpart in another. Mr. Rochester needs Jane
now—

"... to bear with my infirmities . . . to overlook my deficiencies."

"Which are none, sir, to me."

She feels, after ten years of marriage, that "I am my husband's life
as fully as he is mine." This feeling is not that of romantic love or
romantic marriage.

To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in
company. We talk—I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a
more animated and an audible thinking.

Coming to her husband in economic independence and by her
free choice, Jane can become a wife without sacrificing a grain of her
Jane Eyre-ity. Charlotte Brontë sets up the possibility of this rela-
tionship in the early passages of the Thornfield episode, the verbal
sparring of this couple who so robustly refuse to act out the para-
digms of romantic, Gothic fiction. We believe in the erotic and in-
tellectual sympathy of this marriage because it has been prepared by
the woman's refusal to accept it under circumstances which were
mythic, romantic, or sexually oppressive. The last paragraphs of
the novel concern St. John Rivers; whose ambition is that of "the high
master-spirit, which aims to a place in the first rank of those who are
redeemed from the earth—who stand without fault before the throne
of God, who share the last victories of the Lamb, who are called, and
chosen, and faithful." We can translate St. John's purism into any of
a number of kinds of patriarchal arrogance of our own day, whether
political, intellectual, aesthetic, or religious. It is clear that Charlotte
The content of the image is not legible due to the quality of the scan. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a natural text representation.