

## What If *Jane Eyre* Never Really Happened?

Jane Freeman



*“The eagerness of a listener quickens the tongue of a narrator.” I said this rather to myself than to the gipsy, whose strange talk, voice, manner, had by this time wrapped me in a kind of dream. One unexpected sentence came from her lips after another, till I got involved in a web of mystification; and wondered what unseen spirit had been sitting for weeks by my heart watching its workings and taking record of every pulse. – Ch. 19*

I woke up this morning from dreaming that the entire narrative of *Jane Eyre* too was a dream, that Jane created a fictitious life of her own. Are Jane and her Autobiography real? The Reader believes so, lapping experiences vicariously through the act of reading. But I woke up wondering if Charlotte created (or is taking dictation for) an unreliable narrator who is making it all up. What if the last “real” moment in Jane’s existence occurs on that stile, where, Alice- or Dorothy-like, she drifts into sleep or reverie, and dreams or imagines the otherworldly arrival of Rochester, and all that ensues? What if *Jane Eyre* has confided her imaginings to Charlotte Brontë, who entrusts them to Currer Bell, who imparts them to us, as members of that fortunate category of all future “Readers of *Jane Eyre*”?

Restless, pacing the leads at Thornfield, Jane’s eyes take in the distant horizon that she cannot breach in the restrictive, patriarchal world of 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. Feeling stifled, she wants to leave the house; as grand as it is, it represents her material dependence and the limited scope of her experience and possibilities, as the first sentence of the novel adumbrates with “no possibility.” To get out of the house, she commences on an ordinary errand, taking Mrs. Fairfax’s (incidental but crucial) letter, whose contents she and we never learn of, to post in Hay. In offering to mail the letter, she launches a narrative in microcosm to an unknown recipient, who may be the progenitor of Charlotte’s countless future Readers. This *errand* (one of many words akin to her surname) initiates the unexpected first meeting between Jane and Rochester. Smack between Thornfield Hall and the village of Hay (a kind of fulcrum, “in medias res”), in the middle of nowhere (until no-where transforms, in its significance, to now-here), she interrupts her walk to sit on a stile by an icy *causeway* – the cause of and the way to possibility, and the mirror image of “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.” Perhaps she never gets up from that stile, but unwinds a dream-life that manifests as *Jane Eyre*.

Dreamlike imagery appears “*ignis fatuus*-like” throughout the novel, as in Ch. 25, where an uneasy Jane tells Rochester:

*“I cannot see my prospects clearly to-night, sir; and I hardly know what thoughts I have in my head. Everything in life seems unreal.” / “Except me: I am substantial enough—touch me.” / “You, sir, are the most phantom-like of all: you are a mere dream.” / He held out his hand, laughing. “Is that a*

*dream?” said he, placing it close to my eyes. He had a rounded, muscular, and vigorous hand, as well as a long, strong arm. / “Yes; though I touch it, it is a dream,” said I, as I put it down from before my face.*

“Though I touch it, it is a dream” renders a flesh-and-blood hand as putative as a phantom limb; Rochester’s hand will in fact be amputated. (“Amputate” and “putative” share the same Latin root “to prune”). So, coming to the point, considering the elusive, allusive, and illusory nature of the novel:

What if, out of Christian duty (big theme), Jane actually does marry icy St. John Rivers, and goes with him to India, where, as Diana Rivers warns (predicts?), Jane is ‘grilled alive’ by the sun or on the twin racks of loveless marriage and lifeless Calvinism? What if, in a sunstroke delirium, Jane conceives an alternative life with St. John’s opposite, a hot-blooded, Byronic bad-boy?

Or what if *Jane Eyre* spins out of Bertha’s mind, as she crawls back and forth in her third-story prison (“story” with a double meaning here), as Jane simultaneously paces the leads, unknowingly very close to Bertha—close in physical proximity and psychic temperament? What if this entire story is Bertha’s (never mind *Wide Sargasso Sea*), the narrative of a life reduced to rage and madness, a mind that fabricates a wish-fulfilling alter ego, a splinter of herself (a “mocking changeling—fairy-born and human-bred”) whom her hating husband can adore?

At the end of Chapter 2, ten-year-old Jane is punished by imprisonment in the red room where, terrified, enraged by the injustice, she supposes she “had a species of fit: unconsciousness closed the scene” (“scene” in both senses). Later she says, “A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see....” —emphasis on “fancy”—the imperative to join her in imagining). In that state in the red room, panicked, enraged, and wounded, what if she dreams out (or bleeds out) her future, as her paintings from Lowood appropriate the tropes and archetypes she has unconsciously absorbed from a childhood spent reading? How can the child anticipate the woman? Kathleen Tillotson answers this non-problem by noting, “The savagery and reserve, sensitiveness and sharp-wittedness that we are to know in Jane at eighteen are hers at ten” (*Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Oxford, 1954, p. 303). I would add that the governess’s uber-innocence is balanced by an uncanny psychic acumen, inexperience balanced by wisdom, one of many qualities in her that attracts Rochester who does not possess them.

This passage, from Ch. 2, like a symphonic overture, introduces a strategy of themes that unfold in the magnum opus:

*My seat, to which Bessie and the bitter Miss Abbot had left me riveted, was a low ottoman near the marble chimney-piece; the bed rose before me; to my right hand there was the high, dark wardrobe, with subdued, broken reflections varying the gloss of its panels; to my left were the muffled windows; a great looking-glass between them repeated the vacant majesty of the bed and room. I was not quite sure whether they had locked the door; and when I dared move, I got up and went to see. Alas! yes: no jail was ever more secure. Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie’s evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers. I returned to my stool.*

There’s a lot of furniture in *Jane Eyre* (including the metaphoric “furniture” which Rochester calls Jane’s pictorial ideas; and symbolic furniture, like the superannuated beds and such, in the attic, discarded, like Bertha). The passage begins with “seat” and ends with “stool.” The ottoman

is a reference to the previous chapter when she sits cross-legged like a Turk, in double retirement, in the window seat, which is another recurring theme--from a window seat she looks both outside to the dreary day, and inside, into Bewick's vignettes; later, from a window seat she will observe Rochester entertaining his house guests, herself unseen (or so she thinks). Seat, stool, window seat, ottoman; and now in Ch. 12 the stile, which functions as a fulcrum in the novel, where she sits between Thornfield Hall and Hay. In the gloaming, she thinks of fairy tale creatures like the Gytrash. What if her imagining produces Pilot? The "imp" and "fairy" she sees reflected in the red-room mirror anticipate Rochester's soubriquets for her. And encapsulated in "ferny dells in moors" are adumbrations of her wanderings on the moors, her sojourn at Moor House, and the isolated house-in-the-woods, Ferndean, where Rochester, sans Jane, lives away from the world like the wild and wounded fairy-tale Beast. (The parallels between *Jane Eyre* and this fable are legion, down to the smallest details, not least of which is the happy-ever-after ending of *La Belle et la Bête* and the rather abrupt and sobering, down-to-earth settlement of the happily married Rochesters at Ferndean. Then again, St. John's blissful death and presumed union with Christ forms another happy ending at the literal end of the novel.

But before we wake up, let's return to Jane's encounter, both supernatural and preternatural, with the as-yet unknown traveler. The words beat like heart palpitations -- spur, start, rear, bound, rush -- before the vision dissolves:

*A touch of a spurred heel made his horse first start and rear, and then bound away; the dog rushed in his traces; all three vanished, / "Like heath that, in the wilderness, / The wild wind whirls away." / I took up my muff and walked on.*

The matter-of-factness of "I took up my muff and walked on" halts, full stop, an account that sounds like a fairy-tale or dream. "I returned to my stool" halts her fairy-tale-like nightmare in the red-room (the mirror image of "moorder" which sounds like "moor murder"). Is she looking at herself the looking glass? Is the image in the looking glass looking back at her? As in *The Wizard of Oz* and in *Alice in Wonderland*, might there be a rip in the fabric of this fictive reality, where the narrator (Jane? Charlotte? Curren? The Reader?) dreams her world into being?

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