

The Sheets are on Fire: An Exploration of Sexuality in *Jane Eyre*

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The Victorian era was a time of sexual repression. Men weren't even allowed to sit where a woman had been seated until a suitable amount of time had passed, because that warm cushion might give them *ideas*. Multiple petticoats and collars to the chin hid every inch of flesh, but *Jane Eyre* has more than enough heaving bodices to keep the reader interested. Why then is *Jane Eyre* so erotic? Charlotte Brontë hadn't been married, was raised by a strict clergyman, and I assume wasn't truly knowledgeable about men and women's romantic relationships. Yet she could not have filled *Jane Eyre* with more thickly layered sexual tension. Why is this Victorian novel so steamy? The answer is language, mystery, and sensuous details.

Jane and Mr. Rochester are like flames and firecrackers. They test each other with little jabs and snubs that leave the reader breathless. Their banter is so intelligent, so witty, and so spontaneous that it produces sheer delight. "Do you think me handsome?" Rochester asks in only their second real conversation. Jane's quick reply, "No, sir," leaves him baffled, but also engaged (181). He admires the fact that his money and status don't make him handsome in her eyes. He often observes Jane out loud. "You have the air of a little *nonnette*; quaint, quiet, grave, and simple, as you sit with your hands before you, and your eyes generally bent at the carpet (except, by the by, when they are directed piercingly at my face)"(181). Even though his speech is abrupt and rather rude, he is hilariously funny. His muttering reveals his fascination with Jane and with what she thinks of him. He describes Jane's comments as "if not blunt...at least brusque"(181). They are very similar in their upfront, no-holds-barred conversation. It brings them together, for they've finally found someone of the same ilk. They are actually put at ease by each other's bluntness and dark humor. When Adele receives

This paper was written for Lynn Anderson's Advanced Placement British Literature class in the spring of 2010.

her presents from Europe, she inquires as to whether Rochester has brought any gifts for Miss Eyre. “Do you expect a present Miss Eyre? Are you fond of presents?” he asks, “and he searched her face with eyes that she saw were dark, irate, and piercing” (166). Rochester seems to test her, and her answers, always short and always honest, thrill and intrigue him. She “knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns,” and “could...meet him in argument without fear of uneasy restraint; this suited both him and Jane”(218).

There is a great sense of repression in Rochester’s words. After Jane saves his life in a fire, she stands awkwardly in his dark bedroom, clad in only a thin nightgown. When she tries to leave, he exclaims, “What, are you quitting me already, and in that way?” and then “He paused; gazed at Jane: words almost visible trembled on his lips—but his voice was checked” (210). There is tremendous fervor in his words. As a reader I’m practically falling off my seat, wishing Rochester would kiss her, or tell her he loves her, or just do something rather than hold back his words. When she tries to leave, he grabs her hand tightly and exclaims, “What, you *will* go?” (210). Rochester appears to be asking Jane to stay with him, alone at night in his bedroom, in their bedclothes no less. This hardly fits Victorian stereotypes of “propriety.”

The impropriety is what makes Rochester so attractive. He *is* sexual. He spent his youth tromping through Europe bedding every courtesan and opera singer he could find. He again censors himself when he says, “Goodnight, my —,” when he stopped and bit his lip (252). So much feeling is expressed without being explicitly said. Their dialogue is particularly exciting considering that their relationship is somewhat taboo. He is an extraordinarily wealthy man in his prime while she is an impoverished eighteen-year-old governess in his employ. By not directly calling Jane his “love,” or some other incriminating term of affection, he keeps his psychological game running smoothly. He is intent on keeping Jane unsure of his feelings, which adds another layer of excitement and sexuality. This power dynamic reverses once they are engaged. It is now her turn to play the fickle one. Jane takes it upon herself to be as nasty to him as possible. “My prize is not certain,” Rochester observes. She was “as slippery as an eel” and “as thorny as a brier-rose” (391).

All this flirtatious banter and steamy undercurrents are intensified by sensuous details that set a scene of romance. “He would sometimes pass me haughtily and coldly, just acknowledging my presence by a distant nod or cool glance, and sometimes bow and smile with gentleman-like affability” (177). The mixture of Rochester’s cold masculinity and warm gallantry make him the ideal Byronic hero. He is dark and brooding, yet capable of kindness and tenderness. Rochester is a vessel of vitality. Brontë intimates that Rochester transformed his home by simply entering. “Thornfield Hall was a changed place. No longer silent as a church, it echoed every hour or two to a knock at the door or a clang of the bell...a rill from the outer world was flowing through it. It had a master; for my part, I liked it better” (163).

Jane’s life has previously been as dull as cold gruel. Suddenly, this man of money, intensity, and glamour invades her world. For the first time, she experiences feelings of attraction, jealousy, and desire. The entrance of Rochester marks her sexual awakening. Even small details, like Rochester ordering her to “Come to the fire,” represent much more (167). He truly is asking her to come to the “fire,” or rather *him*. Fire is warm and lovely, yet also burns if you get too close. Bertha Mason Rochester, Rochester’s mysterious demented wife, is a pyromaniac. But she doesn’t just set Rochester’s room on fire. No. She sets his BED curtains on fire. “The very sheets were kindling” (206). There is something very erotic about Jane finding Rochester’s bed on fire, alone, at night, and being the only one who can save him.

Before she is aware of Bertha, Jane is wandering around the grounds and smells Rochester’s cigar. Knowing he could see her from his study window, she darts into the shadowy orchard “laden with ripening fruit.” She can’t escape his scent, however, and smells “the perfume increasing” (348). She tries to hide in some hanging ivy, but to no avail. Jane describes the garden as “Eden-like,” linking them symbolically to original sin. Rochester asks her to marry him, which has striking parallels to Eve eating the forbidden fruit. Eve does, and she is exiled from Heaven, just as Jane does, and exiles herself to the moors.

After Bertha's existence is revealed and Jane decides to leave, Rochester goes crazy with frustration. At one point he states he would "try violence" if she didn't listen to him. Jane has just a moment to "control and restrain him...the crisis was perilous; but not without its charm" (426). She likens the feeling to an Indian slipping over a rapid in his canoe. Rochester is threatening to rape her, yet somehow Jane isn't repulsed, but rather looks at the situation like an adventure. The eroticism in this scene stems from the tension of danger and restraint. Rochester is about to lose control, yet Jane is able to restrain him. Sexuality in the Victorian era was bubbling under the surface, yet the lid was tightly sealed.

The setting of Thornfield Hall and the demented woman in the attic also create an air of mystery and danger. Battlements, sprawling lands, and sinister sounds all make Thornfield Hall a character of its own. Jane quickly realizes that the servants within the ominous hall are hiding something from her. They chatter in low voices amongst themselves, yet abruptly stop when she enters a room. Rochester brushes off the fire and mysterious cackles as the work of Grace Poole, yet Jane can sense there is something more. Why does Mr. Rochester keep Grace if she wishes him dead? Why does she get paid more than any other servant? There is also the question of who tried to suck Mr. Mason's blood, and why Rochester ordered him to not say a word to Jane? The book is full of questions, but it is also laden with foreshadowing, such as Rochester's frequent rants about innocence, and the chestnut tree splitting in half. Danger lurks around every dimly lit corner. One evening, as Jane prepared for bed, "...it seemed her chamber door was touched; as if fingers had swept the panels in groping a way along the dark gallery outside" (205). There is something rather sensuous about something "groping" the walls outside Jane's chamber. I must again emphasize that Jane's life had been one of complete grayish misery, and suddenly she is thrust into a world of danger, mystery, and desire. Bertha, the hyena-like woman prowling the halls at night, her purple face and jet-black mane of hair as menacing as any horror movie today, represents the dark side of Rochester—and I believe I speak for most women when I say that the dark side is just as desirable as the bright side. Bertha is a symbol of Rochester's raging sexuality, setting the bed sheets on fire. She only comes out at night, is extremely cunning, and

often visits Jane's room. Charlotte Brontë couldn't have made this book sexier if she'd written it in 2010!

Jane Eyre has made the character of Mr. Rochester a sex symbol for generations of women. Maybe it's his raging libido, his wicked tongue, dry sense of humor, or even his flaws that make him so enticing. I believe that it's his sheer love for Jane that makes him such an iconic hero. He loves her with an unwavering intensity that women spend their whole lives searching for. "Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own: in pain and sickness it would still be dear," he declares to Jane (424). He is trying to assure her that if she went mad, he would still love her. Who wouldn't swoon at that? Rochester, although powerful and at times deceitful, has deep respect for Jane. Most importantly, he loves her for who she is, and could care less that she is "poor, obscure, plain, and little" (356). Could a woman possibly want more from a man? In essence, Rochester is an irresistible man, dangerous with a heart of gold. ●

Works Cited

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

