

A Review of Jane Eyre: the Novel and the Films

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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PURPOSE

One purpose of this thesis is to discover and explain the importance of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. I will also discuss how the character of Jane is developed in three different versions --the novel itself, the 1983 CBS/Fox video directed by Julian Anyes, produced by Barry Letts and starring Timothy Dalton and Zelah Clarke, and the 1944 Twentieth Century Fox video directed by Robert Stevenson, produced by William Goetz and starring Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine. I have reported the various results and conclusions concerning the accuracy of the films in relation to the novel.

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A Review of Jane Eyre: the Novel and the Films

The nineteenth-century Victorian novel Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë has become a very important piece of literature. It represents the strength and courage of one woman who overcomes great adversity. Although Jane suffers great hardships, she withstands these adversities.

Not only has Brontë's original book had a great impact on society; it has also inspired filmmakers to reach audiences with this moving story. The 1983 CBS/Fox video directed by Julian Anyes, produced by Barry Letts and starring Timothy Dalton and Zelah Clarke and the 1944 Twentieth Century Fox video directed by Robert Stevenson, produced by William Goetz and starring Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine created two versions of Jane Eyre. Although neither follows Brontë's novel exactly, both capture important aspects of the characters and plot in a way which helps the audience understand the novel better.

Jane Eyre contains many key scenes, but I shall discuss only the major ones following the development of Jane's spirit and passion for life. Since Anyes's video is more extensive, providing 239 minutes of film as compared to Stevenson's 96-minute film, it captures most of these important sections of the novel, whereas Stevenson's version of Jane Eyre does not show the complete story. According to Kahn, Stevenson's version omits "certain elemental features . . . that tended to give the original story some of its colorful passages" (76).

Neither film is always an adequate representation of the novel, however, because each lacks essential lines and actions that create a specific picture or feeling for the reader. I shall discuss the portrayal of some of these key scenes in the two movies as compared to the novel itself. The differences demonstrate that, in the end, the original novel is superior.

In the beginning of Jane's life, she is treated cruelly by her supposed benefactress, her Aunt Reed. One important symbolic event occurring in this stage of her young life is her confinement in the red room (the room in which her Uncle Reed died). She has been wrongfully accused of acting wickedly toward her cousin John Reed and sent to this room alone as punishment. She is very frightened and suffers greatly. Brontë creates a vivid image and personality for the red room with her words, "This room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchens; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered" (6). All of Jane's emotions are revealed--her fear, anger, and frustration. Similarly, in Anyes's movie, this scene is presented in detail, covering the same plot line as the novel. Jane is locked up, and her imagination wanders until she is overcome with fear. On the other hand, in Stevenson's version, Jane's imprisonment is not even mentioned. The first two works consider this scene important because it represents Jane's childhood where she was confined

to a life of suffering and fear. She could not escape her trials no matter how "good" she was. It also foreshadows the future confinement of an evil source in Bertha. Both of these items play a part in the tragic times of Jane's life. Because Stevenson's movie does not contain this event, viewers of this version are denied seeing the full extent of Jane's suffering.

Jane manages to survive her life with the Reeds until she is sent to Lowood Institution, where she hopes to find happiness. However, her dreams are shattered by the coldness and injustice so typical of Lowood. Once again Jane is alone and unhappy until she meets a friend. Helen Burns brings steadfast love and hope to Jane. Helen's approaching death has taught her to accept life with its pleasures and hardships. In her review, Elizabeth Atkins states that "Helen's goodness becomes a spiritual guide for Jane" (56). Even when Helen is treated unfairly, she knows it is wrong to be unkind in return. Helen quotes to Jane Christ's injunction, "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you" (40). From Helen, Jane also learns that she is loved and not worthless. She loves Helen and finally finds hope for the future.

In both film versions, Lowood is cold and dreary just as it is in the novel. However, Anyes's film goes into more detail about Jane's relationship with Helen. For example, Jane meets Helen and then sees her unfairly criticized and

punished regularly. In Stevenson's version, many of the cruel scenes are omitted or changed. For instance, Stevenson shows Helen and Jane forced by Mr. Brocklehurst to walk outside in the rain with irons and signs labeling them as rebellious and vain. Nowhere in the novel is this scene found. On the other hand, both movies and the book examine Jane's experience with Mr. Brocklehurst in which she is condemned as a liar and forced to spend the day standing on a stool shunned by her classmates. Jane has spent much time trying to prove her worth, yet it takes only a moment to crush her spirit. Although Jane feels completely ruined, she finds that she has true friends who believe in her and give her support.

Even though Jane loses her friend Helen, she achieves great success in her succeeding years at Lowood. She gains skills in music, art, and French and, by the age of eighteen, is ready to move out into the world. She advertises and secures a job as a governess at Thornfield Hall. Her pupil is Adela, the ward of a Mr. Rochester, master of Thornfield. Upon her arrival, Jane meets the housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax, but she does not meet Rochester until a while later. This new position represents a fresh start in Jane's life. She has a chance to make an impact on the lives of others. Little does she know how much of an impact the situation will have on her own life.

In this section of the novel, it is important to note the appearance of Thornfield Hall. Brontë's Thornfield Hall on

the inside is very appealing to Jane. She sees a "very pretty drawing room, and within it a boudoir, both spread with white carpets, on which seemed laid brilliant garlands of flowers; both ceiled with snowy mouldings of white grapes and vine-leaves, beneath which glowed in rich contrast crimson couches and ottomans" (76). Although the residence is large, Jane finds comfort in its beauty and warmth. The Thornfield Hall in Anyes's film is similar with lovely, colorful rooms and decorations. However, in Stevenson's black and white movie, Thornfield is dark and gloomy. According to James Ursini, the scenes are "photographed in fogs and shadows" a technique which increases "its aura of mystery and doom" (861). This approach creates a very different image than that of Thornfield as a haven in Brontë's novel.

The next key scene in Jane Eyre occurs when Jane meets Mr. Rochester. At first she does not know that it is he whose horse has slipped on the ice as they pass on the road, resulting in an injury to Rochester. He is very abrupt and rough, yet Jane is not afraid. According to the novel, Jane finds "he had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted just now; he was past youth, but had not reached middle age; perhaps he might be thirty-five" (83). She is able to remain calm and assist the stranger. This scene symbolizes a future time when Jane is the cause of great pain and anguish to Rochester when she leaves him after discovering

he is still married. However, later Jane relieves Rochester's distress by returning to his side as she becomes, in a way, his savior.

Both film versions find this first meeting scene very important and take great care in ensuring that it coincides with the novel. Timothy Dalton and Orson Welles both portray the rugged, stern Rochester well and the meeting corresponds with the scene in the novel. Rochester is cross yet grateful, and Jane is able to help lessen his pain.

Jane discovers that the man she met on the road was Mr. Rochester. Her opinion of him changes and she is sure that " . . . most people would have thought him an ugly man; yet there was so much unconscious pride in his port; so much ease in his demeanour; such a look of complete indifference to his own external appearance; so haughty a reliance on the power of other qualities, intrinsic or adventitious, to atone for the lack of mere personal attractiveness, that, in looking at him, one inevitably shared the indifference and, even in a blind, imperfect sense, put faith in the confidence" (98). She gets to know him gradually when he occasionally calls her in to speak with him and keep him company. On the second evening of this talk, Jane appears uncomfortable in his presence, yet quite able to speak her mind. Her words are bold and honest, a novel approach which is very appealing to Rochester. At one point he asks her "you examine me, Miss Eyre, do you think me handsome?" (96) She replies "no, sir" after short and honest

consideration. Rochester is impressed with Jane's general attitude and remarks later in the same conversation that "not three in three thousand raw school-girl governesses would have answered me as you have just done" (96). Jane has been through so much in her life already that she has learned to be truthful and thoughtful, yet firm, in order to succeed in life and be happy.

The films follow this sequence of events closely because it is very significant. However, Anyes's version is more detailed than Stevenson's film. The dialogue is almost exactly the same as in the novel whereas in Stevenson's version, many words are left out. In both cases, however, the message is clearly presented. Jane has begun to see a warm side of Rochester and feels comfortable being honest with him. Rochester is intrigued by Jane's words and finds himself pleased with her presence. Their spirits are beginning to intertwine.

As time passes, Jane and Rochester grow closer even though they are unaware of each other's feelings. Jane believes that Rochester is going to marry Miss Ingram because he is always with her at all the parties and special events. Also, all their circle of society friends match them as a perfect set. Jane feels she has no chance to win his love when, in fact, she already has. Likewise, Rochester does not know Jane's feelings right away, but after she returns from her trip to Gateshead, she reveals her inner desire and need

for his companionship. He is then able to draw her closer without letting her see his love. He pretends that he is marrying Miss Ingram and forces Jane to admit that she will miss him after she leaves Thornfield. After Rochester suggests sending her to Ireland, Jane says, "It is a long way off, sir . . . From England and from Thornfield and-- . . . From you, sir" (188). From Jane's words, "I have known you, Mr. Rochester and it strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you for ever. I see the necessity of departure and it is like looking on the necessity of death" (189), Rochester gains complete assurance that Jane loves him. He has been hurt and deceived in love before, and he does not wish to undergo those injuries again.

Finally, Rochester breaks the pretense and proposes to Jane. She doubts his word, but he convinces her that he loves her as his "equal" and his "likeness." He pleads, "Make my happiness--I will make yours" (191). Jane's search is over. Her life is finally filled with joy and love and happiness. She has found someone to love who loves her in return.

Although this proposal scene is supposed to show the lovers' equality, in Stevenson's film, Rochester is the more outstanding character. Elizabeth Atkins argues that in Stevenson's movie, "Jane is oppressed by Rochester, and not made to feel as an equal" (54). In another review, Bosley Crowther agrees that although Jane (Joan Fontaine) is the center of attention in the novel, Rochester (Orson Welles)

takes the spotlight in the movie and, consequently, much of Jane's personality is hidden and misunderstood. Crowther states that "Miss Fontaine's performance is so modest and subdued that one comprehends from it only anxiety and awe. No wonder there is no sense of love or passion between them" (7). Stevenson's version does not clearly display the relationship between Jane and Rochester.

On the other hand, the overall meaning in this scene in the two films is very similar to the novel. However, the proposal is very raw and rough in Stevenson's version. Rochester is quick and a bit harsh sounding. He must have Jane for his own before his past wrongs catch up with him. The background is dark and stormy, almost violent, as if something or someone is tearing at their happiness. A tree bough even breaks from the violent lightning. On the other hand, in Anyes's version, the scenery is dark, yet calm. The love between Rochester and Jane is strong and will not be conquered. They feel happiness together, yet the darkness and shadows of future barriers remain.

Following that stormy night, Jane discovers the split tree trunk which symbolically represents the future lives of Rochester and Jane. In the novel, Jane sees this image and says, "I think, scathed as you look, and charred and scorched, there must be a little sense of life in you yet: rising out of that adhesion at the faithful, honest roots: you will never have green leaves more --never more see birds making

— nests and singing idylls in your boughs; the time of pleasure and love is over with you: but you are not desolate: each of you has a comrade to sympathise with him in his decay" (207). Little does she know that this decaying of life and love will be a part of her relationship with Mr. Rochester. They will be torn apart, but enough love will hold them together to give them comfort in the end.

The days grow few before the wedding day. On one occasion when Mr. Rochester is gone, Jane experiences a terrifying event. One evening she is awakened by a "demon" who "removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them" (213). Jane is horrified and loses consciousness. As she tells her tale to Rochester upon his return, Jane is frightened and confused. Rochester tries to convince her that she was dreaming and should not worry. However, the evidence of the damaged veil remains. Rochester is very worried because he knows that the creature was his present wife Bertha, who is mentally deranged. The act of tearing up the veil shows how she destroyed Rochester's life when they were married and how her presence will destroy the happiness Jane and Rochester have found in each other.

— Bertha's fit of rage over Jane and Rochester's engagement is depicted very well in Anyes's film. The terror of the experience and Jane's anxiety are very apparent, and this important scene indicates the trouble ahead to the audience.

Unlike Anyes's version, however, Stevenson's version makes no reference to this event. An important piece of foreshadowing is omitted, and the audience has less indication of the danger ahead.

Jane's chance for happiness is snatched from her as quickly as it appeared. As the wedding ceremony is taking place, a stranger arrives with reasons to stop the wedding. Briggs, a lawyer, states that Rochester has a living wife, and this second marriage would be illegal. Rochester is furious, but finally admits the truth of the allegation. He rushes to Thornfield with all parties in attendance and presents his mad wife Bertha. She is the lunatic sister of Briggs's client Mr. Mason. Rochester describes how he was married to her when he was young and hardly knew her. Furthermore, even though madness was a part of her family history, Rochester was kept ignorant of this information. Shortly after marriage, Bertha's madness grew and became unbearable. However, according to nineteenth-century English law, a divorce was not permissible if one marriage partner was insane. Rochester is trapped and his life ruined. In his state of frustration, Rochester cries, "that is my wife . . . and this is what I wished to have . . . this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell . . ." (221). At these words Jane is shocked and overcome with grief. Her dream of a happy life has disappeared. She has only sorrow ahead of her.

This turning point in the novel was well represented in both films. The frustrated and angry Mr. Rochester feels loss of love and life when he has to face the fact that he cannot have the woman he desires. The intensity is present because the characters bring Brontë's words to life. Jane's sadness is unmistakable as she finds out the truth and realizes that she must part from the only man she ever loved, one who has given her love in return.

Despite much thought and pleading from Rochester, Jane leaves Thornfield. She knows she dare not live near him innocently knowing they can never be together. Jane's soul is tortured as she dreams of childhood horrors. She "was transported in thought to the scenes of childhood: I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead" (240). Her life has circled back to its tragic beginning.

Even though she has little money and no direction, Jane leaves Thornfield determined to forget Mr. Rochester. But these words show that her heart is still feeling sorrow and anguish for hurting Rochester, "May you never appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless and so agonised as in that hour left my lips: for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love" (243).

Jane takes the coach as far as her money will go--Whitcross. Having left her parcel on the coach, she has no money or possessions. After walking, sleeping on the ground, and begging for food, Jane has reached the lowest point in her

life. However, she is finally taken in after collapsing on a doorstep. Her rescuer is St. John Rivers, who is away from his parsonage and now at home with his sisters Diana and Mary because their father has recently died. The Riverses are kind to Jane and help her fully recover. Jane spends time with Diana and Mary while St. John looks for a way for her to earn a living. He sets her up with a job teaching a school of country girls along with a small cottage in which she can reside. Jane grows very fond of the Riverses and they of her.

Jane is living comfortably and finally starting to put the pieces of her life back together. One day greatly aids in her recovery when she discovers she is an heiress to £20,000 and that the Riverses are her cousins. Through correspondence with Mr. Briggs, St. John has found out that Jane is related to them. Jane is happy that she is financially independent, but especially that she has found family. She says, "but I had nobody; and now three relations . . . are born into my world full grown. I say again, I am glad" (291). In her excited state, Jane evenly distributes her fortune among her new family members (£5,000 each) despite their objections.

With her new-found independence, Jane is able to make choices to suit her own life. For instance, St. John proposes to her and asks her to work at his side during his missionary journey. Jane is tempted to accept, but she knows the love between them is not the love of a man and wife. She offers to accompany him as a sister, but St. John does not agree and is

angry with her. However, after some time to reconsider, it appears that Jane is about to consent to the marriage when she hears a voice crying-- "Jane! Jane! Jane!" It is Mr. Rochester. She replies "I am coming! Wait for me! Oh, I will come" (318). Jane is able to listen to her heart, and, as an independent woman, make the choice to return to the man she truly loved Mr. Rochester for at least one last meeting.

Jane's encounter with the Riverses is a definite part of Anyes's movie. On the other hand, in Stevenson's version, Jane does not even meet the Riverses but returns to Gateshead. This change is markedly different from the events in the novel and is probably used to shorten the film. However, an important issue is avoided when these events are omitted-- Jane's independence. According to Elizabeth Atkins in her review of Stevenson's film, "the screenplay writers . . . edited out Brontë's entire purpose of demonstrating the ability of women to be psychologically independent" (56). In contrast, Anyes's video shows how Jane becomes wealthy and decides not to marry St. John, but live her life for herself. In this film version and in the novel itself, Atkins agrees that "Jane does win her independence, and in doing so also finds her identity, which allows her to make decisions guiltlessly and without coercion" (59). She remembers what is truly important to her when she hears Rochester's cries in the air. All of her emotions pour out, indicating how she is driven to search out her own happiness.

Jane departs and makes the journey back to Thornfield Hall where she discovers a pile of ruins. She is told that it had been burned down by Bertha. Jane is frightened for Rochester's life so she inquires about his well-being. In the accident, Rochester had tried to rescue Bertha, but she had jumped off the roof. Rochester was left blind and crippled. Nevertheless, Jane is relieved and overjoyed--her love is alive.

After they are reunited, Jane tells Rochester she is an independent woman with £5,000. He is reluctant to believe that she wants to stay with a "blind lameter" like him. Jane assures him of her feelings, "But if you wish me to love you, could you but see how much I do love you, you would be proud and content. All my heart is yours, sir: it belongs to you: and with you it would remain, were fate to exile the rest of me from your presence for ever" (336). Jane's struggles have ended. The dream she thought would never be realized has become a reality. Her heart is finally full of happiness and love.

Jane's return in Anyes's film is very similar to that in the novel. The barrier separating them has fallen, and they are free to be together. Rochester is happy, but afraid Jane may not still love him. However, she convinces Rochester that she wants no one but him. Stevenson's movie varies the characters and background, but the message is still the same--love has reunited them. They are married and the happiness

never dies. Even after ten years Jane's feelings remain constant, "I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest -- blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (241).

Overall, Anyes's video portrays Jane Eyre very well except for a few minor scenes which are left out. The actors represent Brontë's characters extremely accurately in words and motions. Timothy Dalton captures Rochester's dark, rough character. However, he is not as "ugly" as the novel's Rochester. Also, Zelah Clarke portrays an excellent Jane. She is small and plain, yet her spirit is fiery and she has a strong, independent will.

Anyes's film produces and enhances the reader's feelings and visions. The color film makes the scenes more appealing than those in Stevenson's black and white version. Also, since the film is not as limited in length, all of the important aspects of the book are included in the movie. Even certain minor characters such as John Reed and Miss Temple are included because they are part of major scenes in the novel. However, Stevenson's film disregards these scenes in order to shorten the film.

Although Stevenson's version includes the major events discussed earlier, it excludes many major scenes such as the entire visit with the Rivers family. The main messages are clear, but the full impact of the novel is not felt. For

instance, Stevenson's version leaves out Jane's bonding with Miss Temple. This tie is important because Miss Temple is Jane's friend and her source of encouragement and love. After Miss Temple leaves Lowood, Jane has no reason to stay. Elizabeth Atkins states in her review that Miss Temple is important because she represents a "realistic lifestyle that Jane can emulate" (57). Since this part of the novel is omitted, the audience misses this significant influence on Jane's character.

Another disappointing feature of Stevenson's film is the addition of the character Dr. Rivers who is not part of the original novel. According to James Ursini, he is guiding Jane through all of the stages of her life and "acting as the conscience of the film" (861). Although his part is well performed, the addition of Dr. Rivers misrepresents the novel.

Also, in Stevenson's version, the constant darkness, roughness, and overall feeling of suffering is very outstanding and almost an inaccurate picture of certain happenings in the novel. Even when joy prevails, the background is gloomy and desolate. However, Kahn feels that the background adds to the "eerie"ness" of the novel.

The acting in Stevenson's version is excellent, but the characters are not always portrayed in accordance with the novel. Orson Welles plays Rochester well because he is very somber and rugged, an overpowering performance. Yet sometimes it is hard to discern any of the gentleness or love in his

features to which Jane is attracted. On the other hand, Joan Fontaine, as Jane, is too quiet and submissive. She does not represent the truly independent Jane in the novel. She is also not very plain in appearance as the novel suggests.

No matter how well the actors portray the characters or how closely the movies follow Brontë's novel in plot, they can never take its place. The novel contains detailed thoughts and scenes that can never appear on film. Even though it is sometimes helpful to have a visual picture in order to follow the story, the reader has less chance to let his imagination operate--to create his own characters and scenery. No film will ever replace Jane Eyre the novel.

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