

# Review of *Jane Eyre*

By Elizabeth Rigby, from *The London Quarterly Review*, December 1848

Jane Eyre is throughout [the book] the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit, the more dangerous to exhibit from that prestige of principle and self-control which is liable to dazzle the eye too much for it to observe the inefficient and unsound foundation on which it rests. It is true Jane does right, and exerts great moral strength, but it is the strength of a mere heathen mind which is a law unto itself. No Christian grace is perceptible upon her. She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature--the sin of pride. Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless--yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him, for the food and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth--for the care and education vouchsafed to her till she was capable in mind as fitted in years to provide for herself. On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling far short of it. The doctrine of humility is not more foreign to her mind than it is repudiated by her heart. It is by her own talents, virtues, and courage, that she is made to attain the summit of human happiness, and, as far as Jane Eyre's own statement is concerned, no one would think that she owed anything either to God above or to man below. She flees from Mr. Rochester, and has not a being to turn to.... Of course it suited the author's end to represent the heroine as utterly destitute of the common means of assistance, in order to exhibit both her trials and her powers of self-support--the whole book rests on this assumption--but it is one which, under the circumstances, is very unnatural and very unjust.

Altogether the autobiography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment--there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence--there is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilized society in fact, has at the present day to contend with. We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*.

Still we say again this is a very remarkable book. We are painfully alive to the moral, religious, and literary deficiencies of the picture, and such passages of beauty and power as [are contained in *Jane Eyre*] cannot redeem it, but it is impossible not to be spellbound with the freedom of the touch. It would be mere hackneyed courtesy to call it 'fine writing.' It bears no impress of being written at all, but is poured out rather in the heat and hurry of an instinct, which flows ungovernably on to its object, indifferent by what means it reaches it, and unconscious too. As regards the author's chief object, however, it is a failure--that, namely, of making a plain, odd woman, destitute of all the conventional features of feminine attraction, interesting in our sight.

We deny that he has succeeded in this. Jane Eyre, in spite of some grand things about her, is a being totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end. We acknowledge her firmness--we respect her determination--we feel for her struggles; but, for all that, and setting aside higher considerations, the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman--one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess.

[Whoever Currer Bell may be], it is a person who, with great mental powers, combines a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion. And as these characteristics appear more or less in the writings of all three, Currer, Acton, and Ellis [Bell], alike, for their poems differ less in degree of power than in kind, we are ready to accept the fact of their identity or of their relationship with equal satisfaction.... [The question of authorship] can deserve a moment's curiosity only as far as `Jane Eyre' is concerned, and though we cannot pronounce that it appertains to a real Mr. Currer Bell and to no other, yet that it appertains to a man, and not, as many assert, to a woman, we are strongly inclined to affirm. Without entering into the question whether the power of the writing be above her, or the vulgarity below her, there are, we believe, minutiae of circumstantial evidence which at once acquit the feminine hand. No woman--a lady friend, whom we are always happy to consult, assures us--makes mistakes in her own metier--no woman trusses game and garnishes dessert-dishes with the same hands, or talks of so doing in the same breath. Above all, no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane's ladies assume--Miss Ingram coming down, irresistible, `in a morning robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!!' No lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on `a frock.' They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming too. This evidence seems incontrovertible. Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.

And if by no woman, it is certainly also by no artist.... There is not more disparity between the art of drawing Jane assumes and her evident total ignorance of its first principles, than between the report she gives of her own character and the conclusions we form for ourselves. Not but what, in another sense, the author may be classed as an artist of very high grade. Let him describe the simplest things in nature--a rainy landscape, a cloudy sky, or a bare moorside, and he shows the hand of a master; but the moment he talks of the art itself, it is obvious that he is a complete ignoramus.

We cannot help feeling that this work must be far from beneficial to that class of ladies whose cause it affects to advocate. Jane Eyre is not precisely the mouthpiece one would select to plead the cause of governesses, and it is therefore the greater pity that she has chosen it: for there is none we are convinced which, at the present time, more deserves and demands an earnest and judicious befriending.

Jane Eyre, like the works of Jane Austen, is one of those novels that you feel you know from cultural osmosis. For instance, I knew the basic plot of Jane Eyre well before I tucked into the novel for class as a literary critic-in-training, for Pete's sake! But I'd never read it or, if I did attempt it at an early age (y'all know how bad my memory prior to fourteen is), I didn't get very far. So I felt a little cocky as I began Jane Eyre; there couldn't be any surprises in store for me. And then I couldn't stop reading it! I had to know what happened next. The moral of the story is don't trust The classic "Jane Eyre" is the 1944 version with Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles. Fontaine was 27, Welles was 29. Mia Wasikowska is 21 and Michael Fassbender is 34. The novel is actually about forbidden sexual attraction on both sides, and its interest is in the tension of Jane and Rochester as they desire sex but deny themselves. Much of the power comes from repressed emotions, and perhaps Charlotte Bronte was writing in code about the feelings nice women of her time were not supposed to feel. The director here is Cary Fukunaga, whose "Sin Nombre" was one of the best films of 2009. Its story, based on fearsome Mexican gangs, scarcely resembles "Jane Eyre," but it showed an emotional intensity between characters who live mostly locked within themselves.