

## In Defense of Jane Eyre

*“Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to read my story and struggles. I can’t be a Charlotte Bronte, but I may do a little something yet.”*

*-Louisa May Alcott*

The last major role I played was Jo March in the musical adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. This show, this character, had been a dream project of mine since I knew the musical existed, and even before then I had always identified with Jo. She’s a tomboy, she’s fearless, she’s brash, she directs her sisters in plays that she writes, produces, and also stars in, she’s kind of socially awkward, she’s high-energy, she’s a New Englander to her very core. This role challenged me technically– the vocal range of the character lives in a super-focused high belt, requiring the actor to be in very particular vocal shape. As far as the landscape of the action, Jo runs through a wealth of emotion, especially in the second act of the show, which is pretty much a straight shot from her first major publishing, to the news of Beth’s scarlet fever, to Beth’s death, to Amy’s return from Europe engaged to Laurie, to Jo’s ultimate climactic decision to transcribe her life into *Little Women*, to her engagement to Professor Bhaer, all in the span of a 70-minute second act. It’s quite the journey. But even though it was challenging, after one performance my brother came up to me and said, “That was amazing, but it was *you*.” One of my best friends since middle school expressed the same sentiment, “You weren’t acting at all!” I mean, I was, but it was definitely from a place of genuine, unfiltered truth. Some roles you just really connect to; between personality similarities with Jo and an almost identical ferocious love for my siblings, it was not hard for me to access that character in a really authentic way.

One of the things I loved so much about doing *Little Women* was the opportunity for extensive literary research on both the novel itself as well as on Louisa May Alcott, letting my English-major brain get some exercise. I vividly remember reading that Louisa May Alcott had read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and that the novel had profound influence on her. Louisa was a generation of writers behind Charlotte, about 20 years her junior; Louisa referred to *Jane Eyre* as an early influence on her writing, and later would say that she really identified with Charlotte Brontë herself. Upon reading Charlotte's life, Louisa journals, "A very interesting, but sad one. So full of talent; and after working long, just as success, love, and happiness come, she dies. Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to read my story and struggles. I can't be a C.B., but I may do a little something yet." For me, what a coincidence that the next role I book after Jo March is Jane Eyre in the musical adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. Naturally, since I identify so much with Jo and Jo is a not-so-loose autobiographical version of Louisa, I identify with Louisa; since Louisa identified with Charlotte, I transitively assumed that in my pre-rehearsal research for *Jane Eyre* I would find I identify with Charlotte too.

Louisa's relationship with Jo is almost exclusively autobiographical, save for the fact that Louisa never married; she was a self-proclaimed literary spinster. Truly everything in that novel, from the events described, to the home in which it is set, to the actual names of the March sisters (Amy's real life counterpart was named May— not the most subtle anagram) are transcribed from the Alcott family's lives. Charlotte's development of Jane Eyre is a little more complex, but there is a dynamic connectivity between the character and the author. Once the Brontës were all writing consistently, Charlotte criticized her sisters for only depicting heroines that were beautiful, going so far as to say they were "morally wrong" in doing so. In response, Emily and

Anne defended what they perceived to be a necessary trope, insisting that beauty was the only way for a female character to maintain the interest of then-modern readers. Charlotte resented this; she promised to write a novel in which the leading lady was immensely interesting and “as plain” as she herself was. *Jane Eyre*, of course, is that heroine.

Perhaps one of the key similarities between Charlotte and Louisa, for starters, is their incredible closeness with and protectiveness of their siblings. For much of her life Charlotte was the eldest of four: her older sister Emily, younger brother Branwell, and Anne, the baby. Charlotte had lost two siblings by the time she was a teenager and ultimately outlived the surviving three. Louisa, of course, was greatly affected in her mid-twenties by the loss of her younger sister Elizabeth, upon whom *Beth March* is based; for Charlotte, it seems that watching sisters die was tragically normalized much earlier on. As such, it seems significant that *Jane Eyre* is an orphan. Her parents are dead before the novel even begins, but Jane does experience the loss of her closest friend at Lowood School, Helen Burns, when she’s about ten; many scholars believe this plot point to be based on the death of Charlotte’s older sister Maria. Charlotte maintained a strained relationship with Patrick Bronte, her father, for most of her life, and her mother died when she was very young. If Jane is in any way an autobiographical figment of Charlotte Bronte, the most significant relationship of her life is not a familial one.

While in school, Charlotte was the ideal pupil and became sort of a teacher’s pet of Professor Constantin Heger, a married man about twenty years her senior. After leaving school, he invited her to work as a kind of domestic servant, living with him and his wife for a few years and giving English lessons to the Professor and his colleagues. During her residency with the Hegers, Charlotte fell in and out of depression, writing manically, reading hidden meanings into

Mr. Heger's behaviors towards her. She became obsessed, perhaps even publishing *Jane Eyre* as a means of regaining his attention once she'd left the servitude, and while certainly she had a special place in his affections, the extent to which he reciprocated any feelings of the same magnitude is unconfirmed. Heger is widely accepted to be the inspiration for Edward Fairfax Rochester, the byronic hero and love interest of *Jane Eyre*; Charlotte based the backstory of his clinically insane wife Bertha Mason on lore she learned from a tour guide named Mary Eyre at North Lees Hall, from the padded room to the ultimate death by fire (subtlety seems to be of no interest in this age). However, unlike Jane and Rochester, Charlotte and Constantine were never married; in her novel, Charlotte could write off the wife of the man she loved so as not to impede on the epic love story.

And it absolutely is an epic love story, a major contrast with Jo March's narrative. While the originally published full title is *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, the bulk of the novel revolves around Jane and Rochester's initial courtship and failed engagements; *Little Women*, on the other hand, reads as a collection of vignettes, with a handful centering on romantic episodes, but many having nothing to do with men at all. In fact, Louisa only wrote Jo and Professor Bhaer's engagement because her publishers insisted that Jo end up married, and she adamantly refused for her to ultimately be with Laurie. While Louisa May Alcott recorded her life only thinly fictionalized, Charlotte Bronte wrote a novel that reflected her deepest and most passionate desires, what she wished her life had been. This makes some sense; Louisa was overall very happy in her life, close to her family, content with her work and her ability to improve her already pleasant station. She was, after all, family friends with Emerson and Thoreau, born smack dab in the center of the transcendentalist intellectual elite. Charlotte, however, while also

born into an artistically inclined family, struggled with opium addiction, depression, consumption, and all-consuming self-loathing. She was devastatingly vain, obsessed with her undesirable looks; her peers had no doubt that should she have been given the opportunity to exchange her genius and success for beauty, she would have taken the trade. Louisa was content with her lot, Charlotte was often terribly unhappy.

In my research I found these two distinct autobiographical relationships to their respective works fascinating and salient, reflected even in the overall mood and tone of the novels. *Little Women* is upbeat, colorful, youthful, charming, four young girls singing around the piano in a well-to-do parlor in Concord. *Jane Eyre* is decidedly gothic, dark, a novel driven largely by anger; any adaptation is emblemized by an austere young woman with a middle part in a black dress. This contrast is also echoed in the reputations of the leading ladies. The March Sisters are arguably four of the most well-loved female characters in the English canon, Jo March maybe the most relatable and best-loved; Jane Eyre, however, was criticized even at the time of initial publication as unlikable, cold, and unfeeling, an unsympathetic protagonist at best, a cold-hearted bitch at worst. Even Rochester repeatedly refers to her as a “witch.”

This really got to me, especially as an actor getting ready to play Jane for the duration of a contract. Likability isn't something you work on as an actor; you can't play likable because it isn't an emotion or intrinsic trait. Likability is a reaction, it's what the audience perceives of what they see. Nevertheless, a good actor is cognizant of the fact that an audience will have opinions about characters, and maintains some degree of awareness of that reception. My Jo March was received with wide open arms as feisty, forthright, someone whose happiness the audience became entirely invested in. With Jane Eyre, I could, in theory, develop a version of

this character who the audience sees as cold, unfeeling, even mean, and that portrayal would be dramaturgically viable and justified. My question though becomes why? Why is it that this woman has been so disliked by readers, so unworthy of affection, so, and I hate that I'm about to use this word, misunderstood? What is it of Jane's personality, which I would argue is impossible to entirely extricate from Charlotte's, that is so much less palatable to audiences than Jo and Louisa's?

Part of this, I think, is that we are never left to question what Jo is thinking or feeling, whereas Jane doesn't necessarily give that information forthright, if at all. Both Jo and Jane's subversions are symbolically underscored by the use, and maybe even overuse, of fire imagery. The musical adaptations in particular, because distilled from such long novels, are able to blatantly highlight moments of burning. In *Little Women*, after selling her hair, Jo shouts "I've got a fire in me, Aunt March!" and proceeds to engage in a heated screaming match defending her independence. In her act one finale, "Astonishing," she insists that she is meant to lead a life beyond Concord and that "even now I feel its heat upon my skin," ultimately declaring that she "will blaze until I find my time and place." Fast forward to the penultimate number, the reprise of this melody after Beth's death, not-so-subtly entitled "The Fire Within Me," and Jo reflects that her love for her sisters ignited that fire of passion. Both renditions climax with Jo's declaration that she will "shine as brightly as the sun." Doesn't take much extreme literary analysis to get the point here: fire equals passion, and Jo has a lot of it. The scene with Aunt March is key; Jo is unashamed and unrestrained in loud self-expression. She is a constant orchestration of impassioned eruptions, instantaneous reactions that, while always genuine, are perhaps ultimately less significant than she perceives them to be. In *Jane Eyre*, fire also

symbolizes passion, but, unsurprisingly, a hyper-internalized one; no question as to why Claire Harman entitled her 2015 biography *Charlotte Bronte: A Fiery Heart*. As a child, Jane has bursts of temper, screaming at her Aunt, insisting to Helen Burns that they should “strike back” at the teachers who discipline them with physical violence. Adult Jane, however, has bottled her passions inside her, passions that begin to stir again when she meets Rochester. After extinguishing the first fire that Bertha Mason sets to Thornfield, Jane retires to her bedchamber, singing, “Deep in my secret soul, a fire burns. My heart flutters near the flame for which it yearns, but I can still recall... a little child in the attic that no one’s love would save.” She recalls her imprisonment, intrinsically tied to her constant anger, as reason to continue stifling her newly reawakened passions, this time of love rather than hatred: “my judgement warns my passion not to let this fever ravage me.” “Fever” here is another manifestation of rising temperature, this time more carnal, not unlike Rochester’s earlier insistence that love is a “virus” that then “infects” the two of them in this duet of soliloquies. In the repeated chorus of “Sirens,” sung first by Rochester at the end of the first act, then reprised by Jane once she learns he is already married, she insistently prays to a higher power, “curse the passion, dim the flame.” In case the textual fire motif wasn’t clear enough, it lives physically onstage throughout this adaptation, in the lanterns and candles, and of course growing from those candles to the fires that Bertha ignites. From a plot perspective, this play is bookended by house fires; the first marks Jane’s acknowledgment of her overwhelming attraction to Rochester and their subsequent courtship. The second marks Bertha’s death, the complete obliteration of Thornfield, and Jane’s subsequent return. It takes disaster, literal ignition of her surroundings, for Jane to reveal what is behind her

austere exterior. Unlike Jo, Jane has taken to heart that she must restrain her feelings and resist the immediate gratification of reactionary outbursts.

These two iconic contemporaries of literary feminism's decidedly opposite conducts when faced with overwhelming passion allude to two very different types of feminist empowerment. What is so charming about Jo March is her unwillingness to conform. She is loud and boisterous, excessively extroverted in her rejection of societal restrictions for women. She wears boy's clothes, she rejects Laurie's marriage proposal, she steps into the father role for her family, supporting them financially through working odd jobs and eventually from her more widespread success as a New York writer, all actions Louisa wrote from her own experiences. She wears her feminism brashly and clearly. Jane is more subtle in her subversion, largely due to her station; Jo, like Jane, has been taught to hold her tongue and restrain her feelings, but Jo chooses not to, largely because her station grants her that luxury. I'd posit that there's perhaps a classism inherent in any preference for Jo March over Jane Eyre as an ideal feminist. Jo can afford, and I mean monetarily as well as abstractly, to resist society's expectations of her in large part because she comes from money; her Aunt March reminds her time and again that she can always come to her for financial assistance. Even though the girls complain of being poor and ragged, they are still of the elite class, invited to all the social events in Concord; Meg complains that she's the only girl at parties in a dress that isn't new, but they all acknowledge that they are still, in fact, at the party. Jane Eyre is a poor orphan. She becomes a governess because that is the only conceivable occupation for a young, single, family-less girl of her standing, save for being a prostitute. Like Charlotte, Jane subverts society's expectations from within her expected place,



mostly through everyday acts of quiet defiance.<sup>1</sup> Charlotte absolutely hated housework, sewing in particular, but she reclaims the task in *Jane Eyre*: whenever Jane wants to watch the goings on around her, she hides behind her stitching so as to seem occupied. She doesn't have the support system that Jo does to take social and financial risks, so any criticism that *Jane Eyre* isn't assertive enough, isn't progressive enough, isn't feminist enough seems a gross oversimplification of what behavior was actually possible for her. If Jo March is a feminist of the modern-day liberal elite, *Jane Eyre* is certainly a more conservative, earlier-wave feminist, but a feminist nonetheless. In her 1916 essay "*Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*," Virginia Woolf described Charlotte's "untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things" and referred to her "desire to create instantly rather than to observe patiently." For Charlotte, writing in and of itself was the act of subversion, underscored by her use of the male pseudonym Currer Bell for the majority of her career.

I would even go further as to assert that Jane's feminism, the earlier feminism, is decidedly more dangerous than Jo's. While not at all to downplay the weight of Jo's grief for Beth as a valid and devastating hardship, Jo never finds herself in any real position of danger. She lives a life of relative comfort, supported by family, encouraged to pursue her passion for writing. Very little is risked in the course of the novel, and any consequence for Jo's rebellion is either trivial or an indication of her privilege; the pivotal ramification is Aunt March rescinding the invitation to Europe, resulting in Jo's move to New York. Imagine, such tragedy! If Jane

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, her climactic act of defiance is marrying for love, outside of her class, which is the ultimate disobedience, but this is no shotgun wedding. Indeed, it takes a failed wedding ceremony, near-starvation, Bertha Mason's death, Thornfield's burning down, Rochester's crippling and blinding, a year with St. John Rivers and his unappealing proposal, and a supernatural episode of being called back by Rochester for Jane to ultimately become his wife, and even then, their marriage is societally understated, not calling attention to her rejection of conformity.

Eyre acted in such a way, it would be far-fetched to presume such lighthearted slaps on the wrist. Jane's life is defined by hardship. In the musical, the very first scene is buttoned by John Reed telling the ten-year-old Jane, "Why don't you just kill yourself?" which she takes to heart; she later tells Helen, "if others don't love me, I'd rather die than live." Eight years later, when Jane confides in Miss Scatcherd that she hopes to leave Lowood, she is met with an unflinching, "A girl with no talents, no money, no beauty and no class? Don't think of it." Since childhood, it seems Jane Eyre's diet consists more of force-fed self-loathing than actual food; when she returns to Gateshead as Mrs. Reed is dying, there is neither reconciliation nor change. The woman shouts from her deathbed, "There was Typhus at Lowood School... you didn't die, and I wish you had. You should have died." Jane fights for her very survival, avoiding typhus at Lowood seemingly from sheer luck, extinguishing the fires that Bertha attempts to murder Rochester with, living homeless and begging for food and shelter after she leaves Thornfield. Quite simply, the stakes in *Little Women* are never life and death; in *Jane Eyre*, they very much are. And what could possibly be more subversive, more threatening even, than Jane Eyre's very survival, the simple fact that she does not die, no matter how contrary it seems to her circumstance?

I find that these authors' two distinct autobiographical relationships to their work reflect the chronology of their respective feminist contributions to literature and the Western world at large; Charlotte, the earlier pioneer, helps pave the way for Louisa, and it is always more difficult to go first. While Louisa and Jo's externalized, exciting acts of defiance may be easier to celebrate and glorify, Charlotte and Jane's quieter subversions were both undeniably brave and

absolutely necessary for more progressive behaviors to be possible.<sup>2</sup> These women were each progressive for their respective time. Should progression continue? Absolutely. The root of progression is, after all, progress: forward movement that doesn't stop but rather is an ongoing, active constant. To some modern audiences Jane Eyre may not seem to be making much headway for women at all, but I think it's unfair to condemn that work, or those women, for not doing enough, because without it, or them, we wouldn't be having a conversation about doing *more*.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, critiques and judgement of any female protagonist are to be expected; all women, regardless of station, particularly exceptional women, get mobbed with undesirable superlatives. Too loud, not loud enough, too bitchy, too nice, too intimidating, too approachable, too sexy, not sexy enough. The one that irks me the most, and is perhaps the most applicable to Bronte and Jane, is the "c" word. Crazy. I won't say I haven't described Bronte as crazy. In my research that word absolutely flashed in and out of my mind with regards to her opium addiction, her borderline stalker-like obsession with Heger, the graphic characterization of his wife's literary counterpart as perhaps a severe Huntington's patient, her subsequent grotesque writing-off. Yet the insane Bertha Mason is in many respects a parallel character to Jane Eyre, a

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<sup>2</sup> This echoes an experience I had doing *The Vagina Monologues* in college. When I was a junior, a large group of students voiced resentment towards Eve Ensler's work as being too exclusive, too focused on the experiences of heterosexual white women and not including the voices of LGBTQ+ women, trans women, women of color. In response, they put together a performance they entitled *The Vagina Dialogues* as a means of providing a platform to expand on the original play. They were right: *The Vagina Monologues* includes only a sliver of the many voices that identify as having a vagina, but it's important to remember that it's a product of its time. These testimonials were curated in the 1980s; it was a big deal that any discussion of vaginas, any theater centered around women's sexuality at all, was even in existence.

<sup>3</sup> To me, this also parallels criticism of Hillary Clinton, particularly in the 2016 election cycle, for not being liberal enough, not being progressive enough, not being loud enough as, say, an Elizabeth Warren or Kamala Harris. Well, Hillary got her start quite some time ago, and if it weren't for her working within the established system, we wouldn't have the luxury of later women being able to move beyond it.

foil, a distorted mirror; Jane is literally in a wedding dress upon their face-to-face meeting, in Thornfield's attic, reminiscent of the attic or Red Room of Jane's childhood torment. When my director posits that perhaps Bertha is the personification of Jane's unbridled rage, the childhood "fits of temper" that so disturbed her Aunt Reed and that she has ultimately been trained to quell, I'm floored. This isn't a new interpretation, many scholars have suggested the same symbolism, but I hadn't fully processed this from within working on the piece. If this is so, said rage is ultimately thrust out a window while burned alive, all in an act of suicide. What does that then imply of female anger?

There is some parallel universe in which Jane never escaped the prison that was Gateshead, that as she matured she became mentally unstable from the constant torture she endured. The proverbial "attic" of the nineteenth century is frequently inhabited by crazy women; it's a place of significance particularly for female writers of this time.<sup>4</sup> For Alcott, it's where the March sisters act out their operatic tragedies. It's where Jo goes to write. In the musical, one such story is "Carlotta, the Madwoman the attic, a creature of gall;" Carlotta may as well be Bertha Mason. The stark contrast of these two writers' attics is not to be ignored here. For Alcott, the attic is a stage, a place of pretending, dramatic role play, a room fostering imagination, creativity, and adventure. Bronte's attic is where her protagonist experiences emotional and physical abuse, coming face to face with severe mental illness and suicide. For both, though, it's a space of confinement, of hiding, of memories and imagination, of dreams for

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<sup>4</sup> This "attic" notion is critically examined in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, published in 1979. This text posits Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the elder Brontes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson, among others, within the theoretical confinement that female characters must either embody an "angel" or "monster" archetype, stemming from male writers' tendencies to create female characters that were either pure and virginal or rebellious and unkempt.

Alcott's characters and nightmares for Brontë's. Are these women crazy, or do we mean stir-crazy, exhausted by the entrapments of expectation, rejection, criticism, disapproval? Perhaps "crazy" gets put on these women, certainly on Brontë more than Alcott, to delegitimize their potential and to downplay their ultimately prolific contributions to literature. Perhaps "crazy" is an essential part of the human experience that we try to just keep locked up in an attic, and Brontë was brave enough to delve into a work that approached it. Was she crazy or brave for writing something so dark? Are we crazy or brave as a culture for then fixating so much on this story that it has become one of the most iconic novels in the English canon? Maybe both. Who's to say? Does it matter?

In some ways, this whole essay, this collection of musings, which I've entitled "In Defense of Jane Eyre," seems arbitrary, unnecessary, absurd, even. Jane Eyre is not a woman who needs defending. In her own words, she is "no bird and no net ensnares her; she is a human being with an independent will." This declamation comes as an instantaneous rejection of Rochester's marriage proposal, a spontaneous, primal, organic, uninhibited, uninfluenced response; she has been walking the walk of this belief for her entire life, and it does not change just because this man wants to marry her. Her power lies not only in her ferocious independence, but in her complete awareness of and authority over it, all the while remaining quiet, not needing to flaunt or prove a thing. She needs no aid, no approval, no company. One could argue that she borders on transcending feminism, perhaps not so much a feminist icon as a humanist one. How lucky we would be to have a piece of Jane Eyre within each of us, a quiet storm, a passionate fire, complete self-awareness and sufficiency yielding such force and strength of character. Her spirit is that of a survivor, completely undominated by circumstance. But such power may only

be born out of constant resistance of what society expects and desires of you, an experience that, for Jane, is inextricably tied to the condemnation of being a woman.

-Tess Jonas, Fall 2017

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