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Trials and Temptations: Freedom Through Conviction in *Jane Eyre*

Bryana Fern

Jane Eyre is the most popular novel written by Charlotte Brontë, the oldest sibling to her brother, Branwell, and two sisters, Emily and Anne. Emily Brontë is most known for *Wuthering Heights*, while Anne's best work is *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. All three sisters published under male pseudonyms: Currer Bell, Ellis Bell, and Acton Bell. Charlotte's heroine, Jane, is one of the most popular literary figures, right up with Josephine March from *Little Women* or Elizabeth Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane suffers far more trials as a child than Jo or Lizzie did, but her hardships refine her already fiery spirit into an unbreakable character of resolve. Jane's convictions about virtue and independence will guide her in difficult decisions where, even though she suffers, she keeps hold of her beliefs in what is just and right.

Lowood School: "this girl is—a liar!"

Jane's childhood is unhappy and lonely to say the least. Orphaned, she is raised by her aunt, who does not want her. Mrs. Reed and her children, Eliza, John, and Georgiana, are all abusive to Jane. Jane spends much of her time in the library reading, and when John calls her a "rat" and hits her, she fights back and is taken to the "red-room" to be punished. Mrs. Reed sends her away to Lowood School, where Mr. Brocklehurst isolates her further by telling the other girls that Jane is a liar and that they should refuse her any friendship. He makes Jane stand on a stool all day, but a girl named Helen Burns slips Jane some food. Along with Helen, who quickly

becomes Jane's only friend, there is Miss Temple, the only teacher who shows the girls kindness and warmth. Together, they encourage Jane to release her anger toward all the unjustness she has faced in her life by turning toward God and an eternal life, rather than this cruel and temporary one. Helen tells her in a statement Jane would later echo to Mr. Rochester that "If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends." Helen soon dies of sickness, as many of the girls did from the school's poor provisions, and Jane takes her friend's words to heart.

Jane begins to care less of what others think of her and focuses instead on her own spirit and what she knows to be true about herself. Years later, she returns to Gateshead to see her dying Aunt Reed, and though Aunt Reed still refuses to acknowledge Jane kindly, Jane's temper has since tamed to wisdom: "Love me, then, or hate me, as you will," she tells Aunt Reed. "You have my full and free forgiveness: ask now for God's and be at peace." Her convictions for her self-respect remain strong, but they have now been tempered with passionate mercy instead of resentment. Her own conscience is clear of malice and wrongdoing, and that is enough.

Thornfield Hall: "I love it, because I have lived in it a full and delightful life"

Jane's new employer, Mr. Rochester, is someone she grows close to over her time at Thornfield. They have deep conversations and relate to each other in their social unpopularity; Jane is small and plain and not classically beautiful the way other society women are, and Mr. Rochester is gruff and short-tempered, hiding pain and sadness Jane cannot discern. When Jane believes Mr. Rochester is going to marry Miss Ingram, she tells him she must leave and gives one of her most popular quotes: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will." When it turns out that Mr. Rochester wants to marry Jane instead, she agrees to stay and marry him. But another barrier presents itself in the form of Mr. Rochester's current wife, a secret named Bertha Antoinette Mason, long kept in the attic. Mentally ill and violent, she is hidden away

and safely cared for, but is still his wife by law, which does not allow for divorce. Jane will not stay at Thornfield to be with Mr. Rochester as long as he is married, even though she pities him for his circumstance: "Reader, I forgave him at the moment and on the spot." He begs her to remain with him, telling her that she would be his true wife, the one he wants to be faithful to. She replies, "If I lived with you as you desire—I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical—is false." Jane continues to stand her ground when he presses her, and it is here that her convictions become most clear in what she is willing to sacrifice. Truth is most important to her: "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. . . . Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour. . . . If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth?" That night, Jane cannot sleep, and while watching the night sky, she senses a voice telling her, "My daughter, flee temptation." So she packs her things and escapes Thornfield Hall while it is still dark, making her way across the moors and empty land.

Even though Jane does eventually marry Mr. Rochester with the famous "Reader, I married him" line, once Bertha tragically perishes after setting Thornfield on fire, her convictions to follow what she knew was right are what set her apart as a character of virtue. She is able to search herself and, while treating others with kindness and empathy, still hold to her self-respect. She flees the situations tempting her to compromise her integrity. Helen's biblical advice from her childhood remains with her: "It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you." Even though Jane tempered her passionate need to avenge herself in the face of unjust wrongdoings, she channeled her strong convictions into an unwavering sense of quiet self-respect that allowed her to stand firm against temptations that would risk it. Her convictions gave her strength to refuse and to find freedom in those firm denials, even if they brought internal sorrow. She stayed true to her beliefs, and so kept her self-respect.

What Jane Eyre Can Teach Us: “I have an inward treasure born with me”

There are many passages throughout Scripture that speak on withstanding moments of temptations. Peter writes to say, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9). Jesus himself preached to turn and offer the other cheek if we are slapped on the right (Matthew 5:39). Jane learns to turn her passion inward and focus on her own spiritual growth rather than her previous needs to avenge herself. She chooses forgiveness and clears her conscience in doing so. Her childhood trials give her strength to avoid larger temptations, and twice, she is determined to leave Thornfield rather than stay with the temptation of being with Mr. Rochester outside the bonds of marriage. Paul reminds Christians of their ability to fight against tempting situations: “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). Jane literally flees from her temptation.

Even if fleeing the temptations we face isolates us, we are not alone. The Psalmist cries out to God, saying, “You have taken account of my wanderings/ Put my tears in Your bottle/ Are they not in Your book?” (Psalm 56:8). Though Jane wanders, lost for weeks in her grief and despair, she never turned back to Thornfield Hall because she believed what she was doing was right. Leaving temptation is hardly ever easy; we all have things that tempt us individually—some more than others. But if we retain our character and virtue by doing so, it is always better, therefore, to stand firm. Paul tells believers to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Jane demonstrates that even when circumstances are dire, it is possible to stand up to temptation and cling to convictions that grant us freedom and a clear conscience.