



Novel Illustration: An Educational Approach to *Jane Eyre*

“Where did you get your copies?”
 “Out of my head.”
 “That head I see now on your shoulders?”
 “Yes, sir.”
 “Has it other furniture of the same kind within?”
 “I should think it may have: I should hope—better.”
 He spread the pictures before him, and again surveyed them alternately.
 — *Jane Eyre*¹

In this memorable early scene, Mr. Edward Rochester examines the artistic portfolio of his governess, the eponymous heroine of Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*. Rochester categorizes the contents of the portfolio as “for a school-girl, peculiar”—an evaluation with which readers concur.² The paintings are so peculiar, in fact, that many readers, including my students, consider the ekphrastic lapse a cue to skim rather than read deeply for a few paragraphs.

This would be a mistake. In fact, this is a critical passage for close-reading, providing insights into the character of the heroine and the central tensions of the novel. It also provides an opportunity for readers to consider the place and pedagogical virtue of visual art in depicting a fictional world.

Illustration, like book covers good, bad, and indifferent, can enhance the study of a novel, and inspire conversation about themes, context, critical emphases, and artistic form. Illustrations can demonstrate understanding of the text—or the lack thereof. For instance, an edition of *Jane Eyre* with a lounging female in 1960s attire on its cover would reveal an anachronistic agenda or monumental misreading—an excellent opportunity for student criticism.

Three different covers of Dickens’ *Bleak House* might display a Gothic house, a starving urchin on the streets, and a solitary Victorian woman—each a signal of the thematic focus of the edition editor.³

Beyond the cover, readers can ask why an illustrator chooses to depict one scene rather than another, and take that decision as a clue into what the illustrator deems of greatest importance. Illustrators can play a vital part in the formation of a character in the reader’s mind; we need only think

of the deerstalker cap of Sherlock Holmes, which was given to him by the illustrator Sidney Paget, not by the author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In all of my classes, illustration sometimes becomes so inspiring to the students that they present me with their own works of art. Several from *Jane Eyre* students appear here.⁴

In reading the Brontës, visual art goes beyond general utility to provide a particularly powerful lens for study. The Brontë siblings, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne, were adept in many artistic forms of expression, including fiction, poetry, line drawings, and paintings. We can see this throughout the high-fantastical *Juvenilia* which the children crafted together primarily between 1827 and 1831. With Branwell at the center, the four children developed the complicated paracosm of Glass Town, Gondol, and Angria, complete with histories, geography, tempestuous personal narratives, and myriad artistic depictions. This mode of imagination, deeply influenced by the siblings’ reading of the Romantic Poets, continues into the poetry and the novels of the three sisters. They understand art and use it with deliberation. When, therefore, the heroine of a Brontë novel shows herself to be an artist, this is not a cast-off detail. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Graham, the unhappy wife of an alcoholic libertine, paints in a realistic mode—a fact which speaks volumes about her character and the way in which the author, Anne Brontë, has chosen to write about the redeemability of a vicious man.

Jane Eyre, in contrast, shows the author’s deep emotional attachment to the lost worlds of childhood creation. In 1839, Charlotte Brontë wrote *A Farewell to Angria* as an act of ruthless self-detachment



Figure 1: *Jane’s first painting*, by Kate Bartel



Figure 2: *Jane’s first painting*, by Celine Esposito

from fantasy: “the mind would cease from excitement and turn now to a cooler region where the dawn breaks grey and sober, and the coming day for a time at least is subdued by clouds. . . .”⁵ Readers of *Jane Eyre* will readily recognize the protagonist’s struggle between the excitement of emotion and calm, cool reason. She seeks a means of expressing what is within her, and to understand the world which is outside her. When she first learns to draw, it is not merely an advantageous accomplishment for her as a prospective teacher; it is a form of escape from the privations of her life: “That night, on going to bed, I forgot to prepare in imagination the Barmecide supper of hot roast potatoes, or white bread and new milk, with which I was wont to

amuse my inward cravings: I feasted instead on the spectacle of ideal drawings, which I saw in the dark; all the work of my own hands.”⁶ Given the proportion of privation and suffering experienced by the heroine in the first third of the novel, we should not be surprised that her paintings more than once stray into the realm of fantasy.

Let us return to Jane Eyre’s portfolio, and examine the first of the three water-colours selected by Rochester:

The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows, for there was no land. One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam; its beak held a gold bracelet set with gems, that I had touched with as brilliant tints as my palette could yield, and as glittering distinctness as my pencil could impart. Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn⁷ (Figure 1; Figure 2).

The cormorant recalls the first pages of the novel. On “that day,”⁸ the day on which the personality and narratorial voice of the novel first emerges, young Jane retreats into a window seat to lose herself in Thomas Bewick’s *A History of British Birds*, a two-volume work first published in 1797.



Figure 3: *Blanche vs. self-portrait*, by Liz Grumbine



Figure 4: *Jane's second painting* by Kate Bartel



Figure 5: *Jane's second painting*, by Celine Esposito

At that moment, “I was then happy: happy at least in my way”—a qualified happiness which renders all the more painful

the reality of Jane’s abused and neglected childhood.⁹

The connection with Bewick leads to deeper consideration of that scene. It is worthwhile noting that she is “shrined in double retirement” between the red of the heavy window curtain, and the icy glass of the window, existing in a space that we might read as located between the red of emotional intensity and the cold chill of reason. Jane gazes closely at the intricate wood engravings of the volume, and finds the articulation of her own emotions. A few moments later, when her hateful cousin John Reed bursts upon her, it is this book with which he strikes her, rousing her to open, furious rebellion against injustice.

The gloom and moroseness, as well as the lack of emotional discipline, derived from her childhood resonate again in this first painting in the clouds and threat of storm over that “swollen sea”.

At the same time, the painting exudes Old Testament relevance. The Brontë siblings were the well-catechized children of an Anglican clergyman, and *Jane Eyre* seethes with Biblical references. Cormorants are carrion birds, representative of desolation, despair, and gluttony, mentioned in Leviticus 11:17 and 14:17, Isaiah 34:11, and Zephaniah 2:14. John Milton takes this further in *Paradise Lost*: Satan perches on the Tree of Life in the guise of a cormorant, “devising death” for Adam and Eve.¹⁰

The gold and gems glittering in its beak, as well as the fair arm of the drowned woman, express the lure of riches and vanity. They can, young Jane seems to warn, only end in despair. Alerted by the painting, that bracelet becomes an important point for student attention later in the novel. When, for instance, Jane tries ruthlessly to root out her romantic feeling for Mr. Rochester, she sets herself the task of painting another picture—that of her beautiful rival—she bids herself “omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet; portray faithfully the attire, aërial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose; call it “Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank”.¹¹ (At the same time she produces a severe self-portrait, under the guise of realism, a self-depiction so harsh that the Reader tends to mistrust it.) (Figure 3). Later, when she rejoices to find herself Rochester’s chosen bride, she resists his desire to “clasp the bracelets on

these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings".¹² Whether a source of envy or temptation, Jane, and the Reader, will be wary of bracelets.

The second of the two paintings seems more accessible:

The second picture contained for foreground only the dim peak of a hill, with grass and some leaves slanting as if by a breeze. Beyond and above spread an expanse of sky, dark blue as at twilight: rising into the sky was a woman's shape to the bust, portrayed in tints as dusk and soft as I could combine. The dim forehead was crowned with a star; the lineaments below were seen as through the suffusion of vapour; the eyes shone dark and wild; the hair streamed shadowy, like a beamless cloud torn by storm or by electric travail. On the neck lay a pale reflection like moonlight; the same faint lustre touched the train of thin clouds from which rose and bowed this vision of the Evening Star¹³ (Figure 4; Figure 5).

Rochester goes on to identify the mountain as Mount Latmos, where Selene (the Titan goddess of the moon) visited her mortal lover, Endymion, in his sleep. Once again, this recalls the enduring struggle of the novel—between Jane's Feelings and Jane's Reason. The painting presents serenity and peace. All of the tempestuous passions have been soothed by reason. Jane is no longer a stormy, swollen sea. It is as if we have realized here that for which Charlotte Brontë yearned when she bade that sad "Farewell to Angria".

Students not infrequently relate this painting to Jane's dear school friend, Helen Burns. Helen indeed first shows Jane that God is the source of serenity in the face of persecution, suffering, sickness, and even death. With this example, Jane endeavors to gain a degree of serenity through self-disciplined reason. She is no longer prone to dark and oppressive imaginings—like the vision of her dead uncle's ghost in the Red Room, which was vivid enough to make the child Jane faint. Jane has become reasonable and even pragmatic. We might apply to this painting the character reading Rochester (disguised as a gypsy fortune-teller) produces for Jane herself:

Reason sits firm and holds the reins, and she will not let the feelings burst



Figure 6: *Jane's third painting (with Death omitted)*, by Kate Bartel

away and hurry her to wild chasms. The passions may rage furiously, like true heathens, as they are; and the desires may imagine all sorts of vain things: but judgment shall still have the last word in every argument, and the casting vote in every decision.



Figure 7: *Jane's third painting (with Death omitted)*, by Celine Esposito

Strong wind, earthquake-shock, and fire may pass by: but I shall follow the guiding of that still small voice which interprets the dictates of conscience.¹⁴

The serenity of the woman in the painting, however, will be sorely tested. Rochester is baffled by the coldness of Jane. So

frustrated is he that he descends to manipulation to provoke her into passion. Readers see that he is successful in his aim. Roused by jealousy and the pain of unrequited affection, Jane confesses her love for Rochester. All serenity is upset: "The vehemence of emotion, stirred by grief and love within me, was claiming mastery, and struggling for full sway, and asserting a right to predominate, to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last; yes,—and to speak."¹⁵ It is a strange moment in the novel, when seeming romantic satisfaction should persuade the Reader simply to rejoice on Jane's behalf. There remains, however, a hint of disquiet. We who have studied Jane Eyre's paintings must know that the extreme of tempestuous passion is dangerous.

There is another extreme, of course, and students find it in the third of the paintings, always voted the strangest of the collection:

The third showed the pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar winter sky: a muster of northern lights reared their dim lances, close serried, along the horizon. Throwing these into distance, rose, in the foreground, a head,—a colossal head, inclined towards the iceberg, and resting against it. Two thin hands, joined under the forehead, and supporting it, drew up before the lower features a sable veil; a brow quite bloodless, white as bone, and an eye hollow and fixed, blank of meaning but for the glassiness of despair, alone were visible. Above the temples, amidst wreathed turban folds of black

drapery, vague in its character and consistency as cloud, gleamed a ring of white flame, gemmed with sparkles of a more lurid tinge. This pale crescent was “the likeness of a kingly crown;” what it diademed was “the shape which shape had none”¹⁶ (Figure 6; Figure 7).

Readings fix once again on the tension between Reason and Passion. The colossal head is taken for Jane’s own. Reason, that iceberg, left without Passion or Feeling, breeds “despair”. The rich personality of the protagonist will be almost devoid of life. On the other hand, the turbaned, flame-ringed, diademed shape is usually set aside by young readers as too difficult to untangle. Jane herself provides the clue to understanding it: the final quotation in the description. It comes from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

If shape it might be call’d that shape
had none
Distinguishable. . . . What seem’d his
head
The likeness of Kingly Crown had
on.¹⁷

That which hovers above the massive, despairing face is the personification of Death. Jane has fled the drama and peril of wild emotions provoked by Rochester, but now looks at the opposing danger: the deathly extreme of icy Reason devoid of emotion.

At this time in the novel, Jane has worked hard to become reasonable. During her time at as Rochester’s governess, there have been many high-fantastical experiences, which might well have provoked even the most disciplined of imaginations. Jane, calling on her knowledge of preternatural tales and folklore can recognize that the house is essentially haunted. She saves Rochester from an arsonist attack in his bed. She hears “goblin-laughter”, and sees mysterious acts of violence with overt vampiric connotations.¹⁸ She even wakes to see a “fearful and ghastly” specter in her bedroom. These are, of course, Gothic manifestations that can be and are explained away. Rochester’s first appearance is like the hideous creature, the Gyrtrash, but he is shown to be merely a man on a horse. There is no explanation, however, for the repeated dreams of a small child which give Jane a presentiment of the death of her discarded aunt, or the ominous dreams which warn Jane that there is secret

evil in that desired marriage to Rochester.

Jane flees Rochester and, in a way, flees the fantasy and imagination of her life. In her flight, she is left desolate and penniless. This culminates in a night spent out on an open heath, when Jane gazes up into the night sky and regains her serenity: “We know that God is everywhere; but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us; and it is in the unclouded night-sky, where His worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence.”¹⁹ Through

ins, the Rivers, new occupation in a village school, and even financial independence in an unsought inheritance. At this time, she continues her artwork, sketching small portraits and “sundry views from nature”.²⁰ Farewell, Angria, indeed (Figure 8).

Yet Jane is not satisfied, and must face that danger foreshadowed in her third painting, represented in the second of Jane’s suitors, her cousin St. John Rivers. St. John is a passionate preacher, but, as Jane notes, “he yet did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every



Figure 8: *Jane on Moor Marsh*, by Emily Klein



Figure 9: *Jane Returns to Rochester*,
by Emily Klein

this recognition of the Divine in the natural world, Jane is restored. Jane goes on through privation to a new life, finding a long-lost family connection in her cousin

sincere Christian and practical philanthropist”.²¹ St. John proposes marriage to Jane, a marriage which would take possession of her mind and her body, but dismiss her heart. She envisions him in arctic terms:

Reader, do you know, as I do, what terror those cold people can put into the ice of their questions? How much of the fall of the avalanche is in their anger? of the breaking up of the frozen sea in their displeasure?

“No. St. John, I will not marry you. I adhere to my resolution.”

The avalanche had shaken and slid a little forward, but it did not yet crash down.

“Once more, why this refusal?” he asked.

“Formerly,” I answered, “because you did not love me; now, I reply, because you almost hate me. If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now.”²²

Jane has fled the moral death which would result from an illicit life with Rochester; she now resists another death in the sacrifice to a god of heartless reason. It well may be that St. John is the greater of the two temptations—not because she has romantic feeling for him as she did for Rochester, but because he is an extreme form of what she has so long sought.

At first, Jane scorns his “counterfeit sentiment”, and to see it for what it is.²³ St. John castigates her resistance as resistance to God: “I cannot accept on His behalf a divided allegiance: it must be entire.” Jane’s reply is as pithy and discerning as any reader might wish: “Oh! I will give my heart to God,” I said. “*You do not want it.*”²⁴ Soon, after, however, she is nearly persuaded by the eloquence of St. John’s preaching. Has she not striven to serve God? Has she not matured beyond fantasy and intense emotion? Does she not desire to follow Helen’s example: “I live in calm, looking to the end.”²⁵ It is at this moment that the fantastic intervenes (in a strange hybrid of imagination and Providence): Jane hears Rochester calling to her, and returns to him (Figure 9).

Resolution and peace are found, in the end, in equilibrium between the fire of passion and the ice of reason. The High Romantic excess that permeates the *Juvenilia* has found proper balance. Jane neither sacrifices her soul in the pursuit of passionate Feeling nor sacrifices her heart and her life to an idol of Reason. Jane is able to marry the man she loves (after Rochester’s mad wife’s convenient demise and he himself receives a hearty dose of Old-Testament purification). Their loving reunion, though still sufficiently passionate (Jane does bear Rochester children, after all),²⁶ is more moderate. Their life, as described in the final chapter of the novel, is idyllic but bears none of the marks of the Gothic or of fantasy.

There is no mention of visual art either in this stage of life, but we should not follow the example of reductivist critics and see in this a revelation of marriage as stifling Jane’s self-expression. She has gone beyond the need to project her emotion onto a canvas; now she has become Rochester’s eyes. She describes to him the world, showing him anew how to see, leading to the partial restoration of his sight. Her imagination and her artistic vision now work toward that something “better” she desired, a “something” which takes the form of fruitful domestic life and artistic creation in the form of literary narrative.



Figure 10: *Jane Eyre* self-portrait by Lily Ortega

High fantasy isn’t entirely gone forever; this may be the reason the final words of the novel, which consider the fate of St. John Rivers, come from the Book of *Revelation*, signifying the elevation of fantasy to mysticism. In that clear-sighted balance between fantasy and realism, between Reason and Emotion, Jane might well be capable of a new self-portrait. Such an imagined image, conjured in my own mind, prompts me to conclude with yet another illustration provided by one of my students: Jane Eyre, the artist’s self-portrait (Figure 10).

Eleanor Bourg Nicholson, an award-winning novelist and scholar, is the assistant editor for the St. Austin Review, the resident Victorian literature instructor at Homeschool Connections, and a homeschooling mother of five. Read more at eleanorbourgnicholson.com.

About the artists:

Kate Bartel, from Washington State, grew up immersed in the beautiful world of literature. She is now in her first year of university as an English major.

Liz is a former student of Homeschool Connections, now working as a full-time nanny. In her free time, you can catch her exploring the city of Charleston, where she now lives.

Emily Merriman (22) is now a wife and mother, building a mini homestead on the family farm with cats, chickens, and a pig, while she and her husband dream of building their own house and having an irresponsibly large garden.

Lily Ortega is a tenth-grade homeschooler who enjoys reading classic literature, sewing historical clothing, and drawing while listening to classical piano.

Celine Esposito is a junior in high school who enjoys reading and drawing in her free time.

References

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Jill Kriegel, Ignatius Critical Editions (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), p. 160.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
3. Evaluation of book covers becomes an animated discussion point in all of my classes; we are particularly fond of the Wordsworth Classics, which are notoriously dreadful.
4. In *Jane Eyre*, our study is aided by an impressive, wide-ranging online collection: janeeyreillustrated.com.
5. The Brontës, *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Writings*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 314.
6. *Jane Eyre*, p. 97.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
10. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.195.
11. *Jane Eyre*, p. 207.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–62.
17. *Paradise Lost*, 2.667–73.
18. *Jane Eyre*, p. 189; we recall the cry of Mr. Mason, attacked by his long-lost sister, Rochester’s secret mad wife in the attic: “She sucked the blood: she said she’d drain my heart” (p. 271).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 463.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 441.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 516.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 511.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 508.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
26. The number of the Rochester children is never given, but the fact that the narrator speaks of their “firstborn” in the final chapter seems to suggest at least the possibility of more than one child.