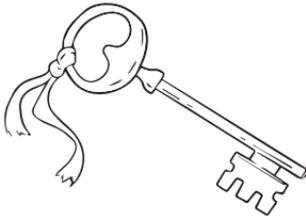
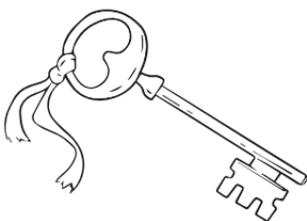


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

JANE EYRE

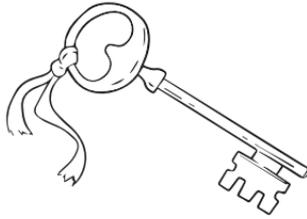


Amanda Ryan



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INTRODUCTION

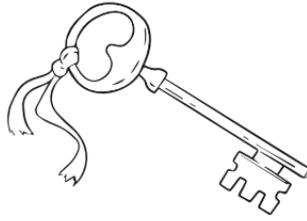
In a letter to her literary advisor, Charlotte Brontë once described her new creation of *Jane Eyre* as a “mere domestic novel,” one which “discusses no subject of public interest” and would most likely “seem trivial to men of large views and solid attainments.”¹ In Victorian England, the domestic domain was too small and insignificant a world to catch the interest of the public and people of importance.

It is true that *Jane Eyre* is not overtly concerned with the public interests of her day. The novel focuses on the life of the mind and heart of a woman on the fringe of society. By doing this, Brontë introduced the literary world to a sphere it had yet to see and, ironically, one larger than it

1. All quotations from Charlotte Brontë and Richard J. Dunn, *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1971), 419.

could contain.² In Jane's struggle, the novel presents an argument, persuasive mainly through its pathos, against the 19th century norms of classism, gender roles, marriage, passion versus restraint, and convention versus truth.

2. Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë, a Passionate Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 163.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Probably the most popular issue surrounding *Jane Eyre* is the “feminist question.” Does the novel skew gender roles and contradict a biblical understanding of femininity, or is something else going on? This question has hounded the book since its publication, and, unsurprisingly, *Jane Eyre* has been commandeered by many a feminist scholar. However, feminists have also claimed the works of Jane Austen, Anne Bradstreet, Shakespeare, and the Good Lord Himself for their agenda. Just because the feminists plant their flag on an author does not make that author a feminist. For a Christian reader, it is instead more helpful to ask whether or not the virtues being normalized and applauded in *Jane Eyre* are actually biblical virtues. Are her ideas about of romance, marriage, and gender roles faithful to a biblical vision? Or are they foolish?

A key to approaching these questions is to consider the novel’s form. In the world of literary criticism, *Jane Eyre* is

considered a *bildungsroman*, a fancy German word which basically means a “coming of age” tale. In this kind of story the protagonist overcomes spiritual hardship and grows up despite the hard soil of a restrictive society. The story is about who or what the main character becomes at the end, and this determines the novel’s outlook.

It is also important to note what Charlotte wanted to accomplish by creating the character Jane Eyre. She wanted to introduce a new kind of heroine. According to Elizabeth Gaskell, Brontë’s friend and biographer,

[Charlotte] once told her sisters that they were wrong—even morally wrong—in making their heroine beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.”¹²

And she did. Instead of using the what was then stereotypical heroine, the beauty, the one who needs a Prince to come after her, who does the right thing not knowing exactly why, Brontë creates a heroine who lacks physical beauty, but whose actions are principled; one who doesn’t need a prince but gets one anyways.¹³

12. Elizabeth Gaskell and Elisabeth Jay, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 215–216.

13. It’s since become the main staple of heroine—although in some movies they’ll still get a pretty actor but give her glasses and *say* she’s