

Reader, what next? — The final chapter of 'Jane Eyre'

Charmian Knight

Abstract

Based on discussion at a Jane Eyre reading day at Haworth, Charmian Knight realized how many different opinions there are on the ending of the novel. Why is the ending so open-ended? Why does St John Rivers and Biblical language dominate the final paragraphs? Knight suggests that the lack of clarity reflects Charlotte's own unresolved theological thinking and her uncertainty about the future.

For many readers of *Jane Eyre* the famous words, 'Reader, I married him', are sufficient conclusion. Either they are content in the happy ending of a love story, or rejoice that this bride has taken an initiative: she is the subject, he the object of the verb. Others have doubts as to how happy such a marriage may prove. John Sutherland, who sees Rochester as a version of Bluebeard, suspects that after the partial restoration of his sight he may return to his 'wife-killing ways'.¹ In Sally Shuttleworth's view the 'harmony and stasis' of marriage 'suggest to an individual defined by conflict [*i.e.* Jane] a form of self-annihilation'.² And indeed the girl who paced the upper storey at Thornfield, appalled at the thought of lives spent making puddings and knitting stockings,³ might well have felt a little hemmed in at Ferndean.

These critics are not wholly convinced by a chapter,⁴ of which the famous sentence is the first and not the last, and in which Charlotte Brontë underlines the happiness of the marriage, briefly but firmly. There is the blunt realism of the servants (surely from Yorkshire):

'She'll happen do better for him nor ony o' t' grand ladies.'

Then a change to the present tense gives the air of a personal letter. In ten years of marriage

'No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.'

After describing the improvement in Rochester's eyesight, she has only to tie up the loose ends of narrative, by giving news of Adele, Diana,

Mary and St John. So far, so conventional, and even disappointingly so after the characteristic onward movement of the whole book. Except that in the case of St John Rivers, the loose end is not exactly tied.

The last three paragraphs ensure that the book ends not with stasis but with onward movement. They centre not on the heroine, nor her beloved husband, but on the man she did not marry. This 'disconcerting shift'⁵ as if from major to minor, some choose to ignore. But the last words of a novel, like the closing bars of a symphony, echo the themes of the whole. Charlotte Brontë had read a perfect example of an ending in that of *Wuthering Heights*. The final paragraphs of *Jane Eyre* are worthy of attention.

Why does Jane Eyre, happily married for ten years, finish her autobiography with a sidelong glance at the man she did not marry? Some commentators detect an inner unease. 'Jane is not in fact free from either doubt or desire,' according to Annette Tromly. She does not suggest anything so simple or subversive as second thoughts about rejecting St John, but that Jane compares her own 'pedestrian existence' with 'the epic scale' of Rivers' mission.⁶ The idea leads to an underlying question: what value judgment, either on Jane or St John or both, is implied in these paragraphs?

Since Thackeray, otherwise so glowing in his praise, described the missionary as 'a failure I think, but a good failure'⁷ Rivers has never had a good press. Adverse criticism has increased in proportion as imperialism, the patriarchy and the Christian ethic have lost support. St John Rivers has become in Robert Keefe's phrase 'a spiritual vampire'⁸ and to Lucy Hughes-Hallett has 'assumed in the reader's mind the character of a Robespierre, of an incorruptible killer'.⁹ Jane Eyre did not share this revulsion. Disastrous as the decision would have been, she came very close to marrying him. Much as she criticised him, she felt an initial affinity and an undiminished respect for him. This is her reaction on hearing he is about to die: 'The last letter I received from him drew from my eyes human tears and yet filled my heart with divine joy.'

It seems to me that the tears were for the death of an old friend, and the joy for the bravery of his acceptance of it. To some the passage is so tart with irony that the meaning is the opposite: the tears for his misguided convictions and the joy for his departure from this life. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Charlotte Brontë is parodying Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* here, and that it was 'to repudiate such a crucifying denial of the self' that the book was written.¹⁰ To them presumably the book ends on a note of unnecessary bitterness.

Certainly Biblical language dominates these paragraphs, and short as they are the Clarendon Edition lists for them six Biblical references and two from Bunyan. Three of the quotations are from Revelation, includ-

ing the penultimate verse of the book (and of the Bible). Jane could be parodying St John himself who, named for the supposed author of Revelation, chose its 21st chapter as the text for his final, almost successful attempt to persuade Jane that her vocation was to marry him and go to India.

If there is such a parody, it is a gentle one. The difference between Jane and St John was not of unfaith and faith, but of different interpretations of the same faith, and different vocations within it. Three people prayed on the fateful night. St John prayed for Jane's vocation, and got an unexpected answer. Jane heard a decisive call, and prayed 'in a different way to St John's, but effective in its own fashion'.¹¹ Rochester also prayed, 'de profundis', and was rewarded with Jane's return.¹²

The Book of Revelation is the book of last things; death and judgment, heaven and hell: things no child of Evangelical parents in the 1840s was allowed to forget. They plagued Jane Eyre, from her ordeal in the Red Room, Brocklehurst's browbeatings, Helen Burns's deathbed resignation and Mrs Reed's lack of it, to Bertha's fiery end and the escape of Rochester like a brand plucked from the burning. To achieve integrity she had to conquer her fear of death; but death remained the one thing that could separate her from Rochester and happiness.

Jane Eyre is rightly seen as a survivor, but even survivors cannot live for ever. The autobiographical form had given Charlotte Brontë freedom to explore the 'pilgrim's progress' of her heroine, but presented a final difficulty. No autobiographer can describe his own death, that ultimate mystery every pilgrim must face. In these last paragraphs the dark question is raised. The chord is struck that was sounded at Mrs Reed's deathbed, as Jane remembered Helen Burns:

'Whither will that spirit . . . flit when at length released?'¹³

Using the solemn prophetic language of Revelation, and focusing on the apotheosis Rivers expects, throws a light of enquiry onto the future of the woman who chose a different path. Jane too will die, but when and how and whether with such certainty of heaven, who knows? In its open-ended looking to the future, the last page of *Jane Eyre* can be compared to that of *Villette*. Both suggest an author peering forward, reluctant to come to a conclusion, or abandon the illusory world she has created.

Notes

¹ John Sutherland, *Can Jane Eyre be Happy?* (OUP 1997) (p. 80).

² Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (CUP 1996) (p. 182).

³ *Jane Eyre*, chapter 12.

⁴ *Jane Eyre*, chapter 38.

⁵ Lucy Hughes-Hallett: Introduction to Everyman edition, 1991 (p. viii).

⁶ Annette Tromly, *The Cover of the Mask — The Autobiography in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction* (ELS: University of Victoria, 1982) (p. 61).

⁷ Letter to W. S. Williams, 23 October 1847.

⁸ Robert Keefe, *Charlotte Brontë's World of Death* (University of Texas, 1979) (p. 111).

⁹ See note 5 above.

¹⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, 1979) (pp. 370–71).

¹¹ *Jane Eyre*, chapter 35.

¹² *Jane Eyre*, chapter 37.

¹³ *Jane Eyre*, chapter 21.

Biographical note

Charmian Knight is an Oxford graduate and part-time lecturer in the School of Continuing Education of Leeds University. She was previously a school teacher and was Education Officer at the National Trust's Beningbrough Hall near York.