

Into the Fae: Jane Eyre's Dissociation from Reality

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“Into the Fae: Jane Eyre's Dissociation from Reality” explores Charlotte Brontë's recurring images of daydreaming. These daydreams center around fantasies of the fae. As Jane accumulates trauma, she escapes into an internal Avalon. These daydreams temporarily alleviate Jane's pain while simultaneously granting her autonomy or power. However, these revelries become maladaptive as reality is purposefully ignored. Looking towards Brontë's tendencies of “making out,” daydreaming functions as a catalyst of escape for both author and creation. This piece is an intersectional close reading that encompasses the lenses of feminist rhetoric, trauma studies, and psychoanalysis.

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the titular character is subjugated to various forms of trauma beginning in her adolescence. Jane's trauma is recursive and accumulative, only subsiding when she flees for nature. Directly following each point of trauma, Brontë uses dissociative language. This language is directly aligned with fairy tales or the world of the fae. As escapist episodes amass, Jane's habitual dissociation from trauma leads to a blurring of what is subjective reality and internal fantasy. This convergence of her internal mind and narrative truth leaves the reader, and Jane herself, with an uncertain sense of what is real. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë alleviates Jane's trauma through dissociation, which leads her to the imaginary world of the fae, where she is welcomed, effectively escapes reality, and is endowed with a temporary sense of power.

Adolescent Jane is first imprisoned in the crypt-like red room, which leaves her in a state of impassioned psychosis. Only in name does the Reed family adopt Jane. In true experience, she is treated

as a demi-human who is isolated from the family unit. Already in her short life, two families have relinquished Jane. She lost both the departed biological family and the family she hoped to find nestled within the Reeds. Yet, the Reeds do not stop at simple isolation. They erupt into physical violence and emotional abuse. Shortly after a spat with John Reed, Jane is imprisoned in the red room. As the setting sun dances across the tapestry of the red room, she is attacked by thoughts of Mr. Reed and “dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes” (Brontë 31). This horrendous circumstance can certainly be labeled as traumatic. Our heroine is smothered by the trauma of a loved one lost, the betrayal of an almost family, and overwhelming isolation from the confinement of the red room. As muddled thoughts swirl, Jane imagines a frightening “swift-darting beam [that] was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me” (Brontë 31). The red room is the genesis of Jane’s patterns of dissociation. A study conducted by McLamb et al. centered around adult adoptees defines dissociation:

In the trauma model, dissociation is viewed as a psychobiological response to threat or danger to enhance survival during and after the event.... it can take the

form of Automatic behaviour, analgesia (feeling numb to pain), depersonalisation (feeling that you are seeing yourself from outside your body and/or that things around you are not real) and the compartmentalisation of memories (forgetting or repressing painful thoughts and memories) ... [it is] the natural psychobiological response to threat or danger experienced. (McLamb et al. 152-153)

Rather than face the shrine of John Reed within the red room, Jane manufactures winged visitors from another world. These artificial light fairies frighten her to the point of “anguish[ed] and wild sobs” (Brontë 32). Yet, it is not the physical red room that petrifies Jane beyond consolation, but the power of her imagination. She escapes the paralyzing red room and John Reed’s remembrance by dissociating from reality. Jane’s genuine “vision from another world” references the supernatural world of the fae (Brontë 31). Although overwhelmed by the unrefined capacity of her imagination, she is briefly strengthened by her ability to flee the red room into her internal sanctuary. Jane’s reaction to the visitors within the red room frames her dissociative behavior for the remaining text.

Surviving the red room leaves Jane anxious for release from the Reed family. Bessie’s newly affectionate manner and elaborate fairy tale stories temporarily

console her. Bessie's fantasies and fables provide a conceivable answer to Jane's reliance on the comforting fae. Following the spirited red room scene, Bessie concerningly remarks that "she should have that fit: I wonder if she saw anything" (Brontë 33). This diction insinuates that Bessie believes she witnessed an otherworldly visitor. Jane's knowledge of the fae is delivered, transcribed, and affirmed through Bessie. Searching for a temporary diversion, "Bessie asked if [she] would have a book: the word book acted as a transient stimulus... I turned over its leaves, and sought in its marvellous pictures the charm I had, till now, never failed to find - all was eerie and dreary; the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps" (Brontë 35). Before the red room, books submerged Jane in a pleasant diversion from reality. Following the imaginative awakening of the red room, she transforms even books into dissociative fairy tales. Fairy tales act as the catalyst for dissociation because Jane associates fairy tales with Bessie, escapism, and the more favorable portions of her adolescence. Bessie is the one individual at Gateshead who treats her with behavior reminiscent of kindness. With her departure for Lowood on the horizon, she is overjoyed by Bessie, who "told me some of her most enchanting stories, and sang me some of her sweetest songs" (Brontë 52). Jane chooses to escape reality through fairy tales because these fairy tales ground

her in comforting positivity. These positive dissociations allow Jane to trudge through the trauma that follows her.

Despite hopeful desperation, departing the Reed family provides little relief for Jane from the fledgling powers of her mind. At Lowood, she encounters both physical and emotional abuse, malnutrition, tuberculosis, and death. These instances of trauma accumulate and overburden her already fragile identity, self-worth, and spirit. The untimely passing of Helen Burns supplies Jane with her most acute trauma thus far. In a fleeting moment of innocent adolescent love, she mourns: "Helen; she seemed dearer to me than ever; I felt as if I could not let her go... I learned that Miss Temple, on returning to her own room at dawn, had found me laid in a little crib; my face against Helen Burn's shoulder, my arms round her neck. I was asleep, and Helen was - dead" (Brontë 91-92). Regardless of her youth, death has already claimed four souls close to Jane's heart. She lost her parents, her uncle, and now her dearest friend, Helen. Strikingly, Jane does not grieve or even comment on Helen's departure. Almost robotically, she spends "a space of eight years almost in silence... During these eight years my life was uniform: but not unhappy, because it was not inactive" (Brontë 92-93). To all appearances, Jane's choice to focus on her educational career is not inherently damaging to her

psyche. However, she does not confront, digest, or even acknowledge her trauma. She focuses on her education alone, thus placing Jane in the darkest recesses of her mind. During this brief interval, Brontë does not mention the world of the fae; yet Jane still exhibits qualities of dissociation. By living in sustained silence for nearly a decade, she essentially abandons reality. Jane's only comfort during this time is her mentor, Miss Temple.

Jane's phantom-like existence does not carry on forever. The loss of her one coping mechanism, Miss Temple, forces Jane to reflect on her place in the world. Just as the wedding bells cease to chime, she feels the hole left by Miss Temple's matrimonial exit:

From that day she left I was no longer the same: with her was gone every settled feeling, every association that had made Lowood in some degree a home to me. I had imbibed from her something of her nature and much of her habits: more harmonious thoughts: what seemed better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind. I had given in allegiance to duty and order.

(Brontë 93)

Jane used Miss Temple as a guide for her emotional regulation, manner, and mindset. With Miss Temple gone, she can no longer rely on her example to self-manage. She must once again rely on her ability to escape within. Jane loses herself in "reflections...I looked

up and found that the afternoon was gone...She had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity - and now that I was left in my natural element; and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions" (Brontë 93-94). Jane's power of the mind is renewed with Miss Temple's exodus. She did not need to escape reality when the reality she lived was not her own. Jane lived through Miss Temple. No longer able to depend on her puppeteer, she must once again self-soothe. No matter the type of dissociation, she repeatedly retreats internally. Once at Thornfield, Jane gains the codependent servitude she lost and now longs for again.

Contrary to Thornfield's barbed exterior, Jane feels peace in the company of Mrs. Fairfax and her blossoming pupil, Adèle Varens. Regardless of the serenity of the manor, she remains unfilled and hollow within. Lacking external stimulation, Jane begins to embellish the outer world with fairy tale images. She recognizes her habitual daydreaming "of fancies bright and dark tenanted my mind: the memories of nursery stories were there amongst other rubbish; and when they recurred, maturing youth added to them a vigour and vividness beyond what childhood could give" (Brontë 120). Jane's tendency to fabricate reality is reminiscent of maladaptive dreaming. As defined by contemporary psychiatric medicine, maladaptive daydreaming falls under the umbrella of

dissociation:

Maladaptive daydreaming is characterized by extensive daydreaming that occupies many hours per day, causes significant subjective distress and interferes with function, and is accompanied by extensive comorbidity... Clinically it appears that maladaptive daydreaming often provides an escape from life circumstances that are depressing and anxiety-provoking, and the daydreaming is often described as being compulsive in nature. (Ross et al.)

These enchanted daydreams allow Jane to alter her perspective of reality, internal trauma, and even other human beings. She is welcomed into this manufactured world of the fae. Under Bessie's influence, these images echo the same fairy tale world that she composed in her childhood. Brontë uses fairy tales and other supernatural images as an indicator of her daydreaming. Within these sweet reveries, Jane can overlay reality with the fancies and fairy tales of her mind. Therefore, reality becomes more palatable for an understimulated Jane. However, these fairy tale allusions do not cease with inanimate objects. Jane's imagination blushes even the greyest of characters.

Jane's depiction of the fae orbits one character in particular, Edward Fairfax Rochester. Much like the red room incident, her reveries can extend

to the physical world. Jane's inaugural meeting with Rochester fractures her concentration on the fae. While rambling along the wooded path to Hay, she envisions a mythical dog-like creature:

It was exactly one mask of Bessie's Gytrash, - a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head: it passed me, however, quietly enough; not staying to look up, with strange pretercanine eyes, in my face, as I half expected it would. The horse followed, - a tall steed, and on its back a rider. The man, the human being, broke the spell at once.

Nothing ever rode the Gytrash.

(Brontë 120)

Jane embellishes her woodland walk with images of the supernatural. These images make the unfulfilling pilgrimage more appealing. However, Rochester shatters Jane's self-entrancement. The couple's earliest "incident establishes the pattern for Jane's relationship with Rochester: her connection to the fairy-archetype empowers her" (Sass 21). Diverging from Sass, any power Jane is granted is internal. This world of the fae is objectively non-existent. It is her belief in this world that allows her to dissociate from the disagreeable pieces of reality. It is her mind that endows her with power, not the actual world of the fae. Despite hopes for a better future, Jane continues to accumulate trauma at Thornfield. As her trauma cultivates and expands, Jane continuously escapes internally and

embellishes reality with her fantasies. Concurrently, as her relationship with Rochester strengthens, her grasp on reality weakens.

At Thornfield, Jane is deceived by Rochester disguised as a fortune teller, gaslit into believing Grace Poole is laughing mad, and nearly caught in the crossfire of Bertha's fiery homicidal rampage. Previously, her solitary source of comfort was her ability to escape within her avalon. As her relationship with Rochester solidifies, Jane's fairy tale allusions become less frequent. Jane seeks reassurance from reality, their relationship, and even herself in Rochester. Like Bessie and Miss Temple before him, she comes to codependently rely on Rochester's presence for comfort. After promising her hand to Rochester, Jane truly "could not be certain of the reality till I had seen Mr. Rochester again, and heard him renew his words of love and promise" (Brontë 255). Jane cannot trust her mind to confirm "reality" (Brontë 255). Instead, she looks to Rochester to affirm that what she believes to be true is so. Jane's internal fairy tales have become Rochester's external pledges of divine love. No longer must she pine after "life, fire, feeling, that [she] desired and had not in [her] actual existence" (Brontë 117). Now, Jane has the greater existence she longed for within Rochester. Her language surrounding Rochester is highly reminiscent of the previous language used regarding Miss

Temple. Rather than seek self-fulfillment, Jane relies on external validation from those around her. She blindly ignores the red flags Rochester waves directly in front of her eyes. She refuses to recognize Rochester's language as manipulative or coercive. In these blissful moments of blooming love, she does not wish to escape reality. To Jane, reality seems as sweet as her reveries. Yet, when her relationship with Rochester weakens and crumbles, Jane will once again seek internal refuge.

Rochester also aligns Jane with the supernatural. While Jane uses fairy images as an escape, Rochester uses mystical images as a mechanism for control. Rochester regards Jane as an angel in disguise. Rochester hauntingly admired her "as if he spoke to a vision, viewless to any eye but his own; then folding his arms, which he had half extended, on his chest, he seemed to enclose in their embrace the invisible being. 'Now,' he continued, again addressing me, 'I have received the pilgrim - a disguised deity, as I verily believe'" (Brontë 143). Jane and Rochester are connected in their shared daydreams. In Rochester's spoken visions, he places false expectations on Jane. Rochester aligns her with images of supernatural angels and deities. By labeling her as supernatural, Rochester grants her power. Yet this saintly power does not serve Jane. Like a guiding light, she is expected to make Rochester feel

completely “healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter” (Brontë 257). Rochester’s relief from his sinful past is Jane. Rather than face the reality of Bertha or his numerous affairs, Rochester chooses to escape reality through his angelic Jane. Like Miss Temple and Bessie before him, Rochester becomes Jane’s coping mechanism. In turn, she provides the same solace for Rochester. Jane and Rochester rely on each other to fulfill their emotional needs, lack boundaries, and struggle to establish independent identities. In parasitic codependency, the pair become nearly inseparable as their wedding approaches.

Impending marital bliss leaves Jane in nirvana; yet her reliance on Rochester for self-fulfillment means his betrayal is even more devastating for her psyche. Believing herself unworthy of satisfaction, Jane rejoices that “human beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world. I was not born for a different destiny to the rest of my species: to imagine such a lot befalling me is a fairy tale - a day-dream” (Brontë 256). Through this language, Jane directly addresses Rochester’s status as her newfound coping mechanism. She also acknowledges her belief that she is not entirely human. Like the pulling tides, her identity ebbs as her use of fairy tales flows. Rather than take control of her destiny, she chooses to place her fairy tale happiness in Rochester’s hands. Jane’s merriment wanes as

Rochester’s unfiltered reality is revealed. At the altar, she is confronted by the shadows and secrets of Bertha Mason. After learning of Rochester’s attempted bigamy, Jane’s “nerves vibrated to those low-spoken words as they had never vibrated to thunder - my blood felt their subtle violence as it had never felt frost or fire... I looked at Rochester: I made him look at me” (Brontë 285). After years of self-soothing dissociation, she had temporarily abandoned her abstract fairy tales for Rochester’s embrace. Jane has survived the Reed family’s isolation, Lowood’s unlivable conditions, and the deaths of numerous loved ones. These events cannot possibly match the trauma of Rochester’s betrayal. Despite her otherworldly love for Rochester, she stands by her decision to leave him. In the fallout of nuptials unsaid, Rochester threatens Jane with unlawful matrimony. Rochester gravely implores, “Jane! will you hear reason?” (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear) ‘because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence” (Brontë 297). Rochester’s crushing ultimatum “is startlingly at odds with popular views of the novel’s romantic discourse” (Cox 337). When his menaces fail, Rochester tries his hand at guilt. Appealing to Jane’s spiritual sense of duty, Rochester ruefully questions “You will not come? - You will not be my comforter, my rescuer?” (Brontë 312). Repeatedly, Rochester sets manipulative and unrealistic expectations for her.

Rather than seek out self-reformation, Rochester intends for Jane to be his sole salvation. Having lost Rochester and her external coping mechanism, this treachery thrust Jane back into the interior world of the fae. Jane's internal visions and tangible nature converge as the moon takes on a physical form.

Inspired by nature, Jane is called back to the fae and her internal power. In the night, Jane escapes Thornfield with the motherly moon as her attendant:

I was transported in thought to the scenes of childhood... The light that long ago had snuck me into syncope, recalled in this vision... broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure... it whispered in my heart - "My daughter, flee temptation"! (Brontë 313)

Jane remembers her first encounter in the red room with the manufactured lights of the fairy world. This call back to the red room reinforces the resurgence of her internal powers. Spawning from the clouds, a physical manifestation of the moon emerges. The moon acts as an extension of Jane's subconscious. In a dream, the moon commands her to leave Thornfield. Immediately vacating the manor, she takes the moon's warning as absolute. Therefore, her dream has power in the waking world of reality. By transcending the confines of Jane's mind,

these dreams become momentarily real. Guided by the dream, she finds asylum on the moors amongst the peat moss:

Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was... To-night, at least, I would be her guest - as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price... Everywhere sunshine. I wish I could live in it and on it... I might have found fitting nutriment, permanent shelter here. But I was a human being, and had a human being's wants. (Brontë 317-18)

Jane is penniless, homeless, and starving; yet she feels whole amongst nature. Jane's imagination is so powerful that it provides an "escape from the realities of life" (Gribble 280). This euphoria does not last. Jane reminds herself of her human identity. She is not a member of the fae, nor can she survive on the bounty of nature alone. Nonetheless, her internal dissociative imagination gives her adequate power to escape Thornfield and Rochester's damning influence.

At Marsh End, serendipity grants Jane an authentic family, secure wealth, and a fulfilling job at the village school. In theory, she should be satisfied with her new circumstances. Even with worldly comforts, Jane cannot escape the fae, daydreams, or the longing for something greater. In the wild marshes of Whitcross, she searches for charity and shelter. An otherworldly "light

sprang up. ‘That is an ignis fatuus,’ was my first thought... This light was my forlorn hope: I must gain it... Again a whitish object gleamed before me: it was a gate” (Brontë 323-24). A will-o’-the-wisp guides Jane to Moorhouse, where she is welcomed and healed. Much like the moon prior, Jane’s delusions directly affect her reality. Surely, a mere gate would not have the power to beckon her so desperately. Since she imagined the gate to be a supernatural entity, Jane is drawn toward the house of her unexpected family. The warm hearth of the Rivers family renews Jane’s body and spirit. In Mary and Diana, Jane finds kinsmanship, a fellowship of mind, and mutual affection. Jane rejoices that the Rivers sisters feel “the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles... the same attraction as for them - wound round my facilities the same spell that entranced theirs... Thought fitted thought; opinion met opinion: we coincided, in short, perfectly” (Brontë 341). The scales strike the perfect balance between Jane, Mary, and Diana. This balance signals that she has finally reached a state of peace with the external world. Yet, Jane still calls back to her fairy tale origins. Jane believes a bewitching charm has fallen over the three women. Although she is externally content, the fairy world still extends beyond her mind. Jane no longer needs to escape reality. Yet she still adorns the world with language

centered around the fae. Marsh End proves that even with a serene life, Jane will still crave the internal dissociation founded in the fairy world.

Life at Marsh End ceases to be perfect. St. John manipulates Jane’s time, threatens God’s punishment, and deploys coercive proposals to restrain and control Jane. On the verge of accepting St. John’s hand, Jane hears a hysterical calling from beyond. This supernatural voice saves her from the reality of a loveless marriage:

I had heard it - where, or whence, for ever impossible to know! And it was the voice of a human being - a known, loved, well-remembered voice - that of Edward Fairfax Rochester... “This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature” She was roused, and did - no miracle - but her best... It was my time to assume ascendancy. My powers were in play, and in force. (Brontë 406)

Forgetting St. John entirely, Jane is summoned by her internal voice back to Thornfield. She muses that “I recalled the voice I had heard; again I questioned whence it came, as vainly as before: it seemed in me - not in the external world” (Brontë 407). This calling is not a daydream. Jane’s innermost voice has burst forth into reality, thus altering her path. Jane connects the voice back to divine nature and her fae powers. Much like the moonlit escape from

Thornfield, her reveries have the power to forge reality. This repeated blurring of her internal mind with reality leaves the reader, and Jane herself, with an uncertain sense of what is true.

Previously, Jane's reveries only impacted her own reality. Her inverted pilgrimage back to Thornfield sees her visions become subjective truths. Stumbling upon ruinous Thornfield, Jane anxiously stresses that "the front was, as I had once seen it in a dream, but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile looking. Perforated with paneless window: no roof, no battlements, no chimney - all had crashed in" (Brontë 411). The nightmarish scene of Thornfield's destruction has befallen. The confirmation of Jane's vision of Thornfield suggests that "she actually does possess supernatural or extrasensory perceptions" (Gribble 286). She continues her frantic search for Rochester. After receiving directions from a long-winded innkeeper, Jane seeks the concealed manor of Ferndean. In thriving nature, she searches for Rochester and shrouded Ferndean:

I looked round in search of another road. There was none: all was interwoven stem, columnar trunk, dense, summer foliage- no opening anywhere... At last my way opened, the trees thinned a little; presently I beheld a railing, then the house - scarce, by this dim light, distinguishable from the trees; so

dank and green were its decaying walls. Entering a portal, fastened only by a latch, I stood amidst a space of enclosed ground, from which the wood swept away in a semi-circle.

(Brontë 416)

Jane is transported to Ferndean through a supernatural doorway. This fairy circle leads her to a worn and weary Rochester. The isolating nature of the fairy world and reality coincide at Ferndean. Here, both Jane and Rochester exist in a space based on her delusional vision. Once married, Jane makes the rapturous comment that "I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine... He saw nature - he saw books through me; and never did I weary from gazing for his behalf" (Brontë 435). Rochester serendipitously gains Jane's supernatural sight when blinded. Recollecting his spiritual calling, Rochester remembers, "Ferndean is buried, as you see, in a heavy wood, where sound falls dull, and dies unreverberating... I could have deemed that in some wild, lone scene, I and Jane were meeting" (Brontë 432). Rochester's vision mirrors Jane's powers of perception. Borrowing her sight, Rochester seemingly joins the ranks of the fae. With Ferndean as their lushly veiled sanctuary, both Jane and Rochester can transcend their shared trauma. Transported to Ferndean, Jane has finally escaped reality. Able to forge her fairy tale world alongside Rochester, Jane achieves the ultimate form of power

in both external and internal happiness. Concurrently, the improbably happy ending at Ferndean cannot be concretely defined as internal reality or narrative truth. It is Ferndean's ambiguity that leaves Jane and Rochester's fate inconclusive.

Charlotte Brontë concludes Jane Eyre with Jane and Rochester in marital bliss. Jane survives the trauma that began in her childhood. No longer must she relive the memories of the Reeds, Lowood, or even Thornfield. In wild Ferndean, Jane abandons the mortal world for the isolated nature of the fae. Yet, one must theorize why Charlotte Brontë uses dissociative imagination to empower Jane. Brontë's isolated upbringing amongst the rugged English countryside has reached an almost mythic status. The Brontë siblings had to rely on one another, their imaginations, and manufactured fantasy worlds like Gondal for entertainment, camaraderie, and fulfillment. Previous critics have noted Brontë's almost desperate need for daydreaming. Gettelman argues that Brontë's novel plainly addressed her excessive tendency to daydream:

Charlotte Brontë's potent "making out" provides an important context for understanding her depiction of what she once called "morbidly vivid realization" ... As a way of describing the Brontës' imaginative activity, "making out" signals less an experience of pure invention

than one which approximates hallucination: as if one were straining to see an image present before one's eyes, as indeed both Charlotte's and Emily's intensive imagining has been described.

(Gettelman 560)

Brontë's "morbidly vivid realization[s]" parallel the characteristics associated with maladaptive daydreaming. Without the modern vocabulary of dissociation or maladaptive daydreaming, Brontë created a term that fulfilled her, as well as her sibling's, desperate need to escape reality. Brontë could have centered Jane's reveries around numerous fantasies; yet Brontë chose fairy tales as her primary vehicle of escape. In the world of the fae, there "was the appeal of a poetic system which still believed in magic and which was still centered around the role of women" (Martin 94). Akin to Brontë, Jane's "making out" centers around the feminine-guarded fairy world, which grants her the necessary power to transcend an unfavorable reality, renounce years of accumulated trauma, and forge her own truth (Gettelman 560).

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