

## Temporarily Blinded: Brontë's Ableist Descriptions of Disability in *Jane Eyre*

"I found her nature wholly alien to mine," Edward Rochester muses upon his mentally ill and estranged wife, Bertha Mason (Brontë 274). Little does he know, however, how much he will come to share with his "woman in the attic" when he himself is blinded and disabled at the end of the novel. When scholars are asked to highlight disability issues in classic literature, many will turn to iconic characters such as Tiny Tim (from *A Christmas Carol*), Quasimodo (from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), or Lenny (from *Of Mice and Men*). Though some people will highlight *Jane Eyre* for Bertha's character, very few will bring up Edward Rochester as an example of disability in classic literature, as I do with this essay. Edward Rochester is an important character in *Jane Eyre* and is often written about for his actions: he locks up his estranged wife in his attic, he seduces Jane and asks her to be his mistress, he fathers an illegitimate child and separates himself from her upbringing. Rochester is rarely viewed as a passive character upon whom things are done. However, Rochester's character in the final chapters of the novel is a victim to disability stereotypes, and Brontë's treatment of him as a character with a disability is insensitive and cruel. In this essay, I detail the various ways in which Brontë uses disability as a plot device and surrounds it with negative and stereotypically ableist images that value the abled body over the disabled body. While some may argue that a blind character counts as disability representation, the context of Mr. Rochester's blindness is nothing more than a shallow and ableist plot device used to create tension and develop character in the final volume of *Jane Eyre*. The impairment of Mr. Rochester falls into many classic disability tropes and is associated with negative descriptions and images that encourage a poor view of the true experience of disability.

To the modern-day reader, Rochester's disabling can be directly traced to contemporary critiques of disability in literature. In their chapter "Invisible No Longer: Images of Disability in the Media," in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, Paul Martin Lester and Susan Dente Ross detail the five stereotypes that haunt the stories of people with disabilities: the "supercrip" hero, the victim, the burden, the villain, and the misfit. Mr. Rochester's impairment can be categorized as belonging to all five of these disability tropes, but I would like to begin with detailing the definitions of two. The victim trope is cited as "perpetuat[ion of] the image of those with disabilities as objects of pity... childlike, incompetent, needing total care" (Lester & Ross 280). Acting as the "upswing" of this pity, the "supercrip" hero is defined as "the heartwarming story... common of someone who faces the trauma of a disability and... rises above it or succumbs heroically" (278). Marilyn Dahl calls it "time of the wounded hero" (par. 5). The context of Rochester's blindness fits snugly into these descriptions. Rochester chooses to try to save his estranged and mentally-ill wife Bertha from his burning home, which results in his blindness and a necessary amputation of a hand. The change in heart is read as a positive, for example, when Jane asks the innkeeper to tell her the story of the fire—the innkeeper describes Rochester's blindness as a result of "all his own courage, and a body may say, his kindness, in a way, ma'am: he wouldn't leave the house till every one else was out before him... He is now helpless, indeed—blind and a cripple" (Brontë 382). Rochester's attempted rescue is presented as courageous and noble, and the resulting impairment a tragedy. This heroism reflects the potential that "a lot of ordinary disabled people are made to feel like failures if they haven't done something extraordinary" (qtd. in Lester & Ross 278), and Rochester's impairment may have appeared as such a failure without the accompanying heroic rescue attempt. Tying Rochester's

selfless act to his impairment adds an unnecessary heroism to his actions, rather than creating the image of a man doing what is good and moral without consequence.

In addition to the trope of the “supercrip” hero, Rochester’s character is treated with pity following Lester and Ross’s stereotype of the disabled “victim.” The innkeeper describes Rochester, following his remarks about his courage, as “helpless indeed — blind and a cripple” (Brontë 382). The word “pity” is used four times in reference to Rochester’s impaired state. Jane remarks that ““It is a pity to see it [his amputated hand]; and a pity to see your eyes” (388). Margaret Rose Torrell agrees with the text that through this description, “the host can only read his change in body as a loss of status” (86). In order to emphasize Rochester’s change of status, along with the loss of his home to fire, the host feels it necessary to tell Jane about Rochester’s impairment, both of which serve to communicate the depth of tragedy of the events that occurred while Jane was away. Elizabeth J. Donaldson considers the host’s remarks in a better light. She writes that “Jane's narrative encourages readers not to stare but to gaze with pity upon Rochester's newly disabled body” (25). While it is better to see those with disabilities as humans rather than as outcasts, I agree with Lester and Ross that Brontë’s use of the word “pity” and treatment of Rochester as helpless helps to “perpetuate the image of those with disabilities as objects of pity” (280), which is counterproductive to the goals of modern-day disability activists. Jane also adds that “I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion — to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you” (Brontë 387). The last two statements push Jane’s statement of care to a statement of caring for, ending her statement of kindness with an implication of Rochester’s acute helplessness. She positions herself as a replacement for his “missing parts” (his loss of

sight and his hand), painting him as a victim of his impairment that needs solving, and then only with her involvement.

Beyond using impairment and disability as a stereotype, Brontë's representation of Rochester is associated with depression, isolation, animalistic descriptions, and self-deprecation. Following his impairment, Rochester sentences himself to self-exile. The host of the inn tells Jane that Rochester's current residence is "quite a desolate spot" with "Old John and his wife: he would have none else" (Brontë 382), and John's wife, Mary, supports this claim, telling Jane "I don't think he will see you... he refuses everybody" (385). Following the loss of his home, his family, and his sight, Rochester plunges into a deep depression and deals with it by isolating himself away from the world.

Rochester's deep depression fits Donaldson's description of "melancholy madness." Donaldson draws comparisons between Rochester's disability and Caius Gabriel Cibber's sculpture over the gates of Bethlem "Bedlam" Hospital, which features two figures of "raving madness" and "melancholy madness," marking the two as Bertha and Rochester respectively. She argues that Rochester's physical state after the fire, being "blind and a cripple" (Brontë 382), "mark[s] him as an icon of melancholy madness" (Donaldson 23). Melancholy, or melancholia, was a common diagnosis by 19th century psychiatrists. James Cowles Prichard cites John Locke's description of it in 1835 as "madmen [who] do not appear to have lost the faculty of reasoning; but having joined together some ideas very wrongly, they mistake them for truth" (251), separating it from the "raving madness" of Bertha, which Prichard instead describes as "the mind is totally deranged, and the individual affected talks nonsense, or expresses himself wildly and absurdly on every subject" (252). Similarly to Cibber's sculpture, Rochester is missing a hand, marking him as an icon of grief and melancholy. Jane even implores him to

“Cease to look so melancholy” (Brontë 387), making it a point for the reader to recognize the depths of despair which Rochester is in. Donaldson also makes a strong point of comparison between Bertha’s death and Rochester’s impairment, that “Bertha's disabling mental illness is transferred to the body of her husband as physical impairment and blindness, which, in turn, are deployed by Brontë to depict melancholy madness” (23).

Brontë is insensitive in her association between disability, depression, and self-exile. According to John Barlow’s 1843 essay on “The Power of Self-Control,” madness can be linked to what he calls “entirely changing the structure of the organ” which destroys “all possibility of reasoning” and “can make a man mad” (244). Barlow expands on this statement by specifying that one who has “early command over the bodily organ... remains sane” (244), which sparks interest when regarding Rochester’s impairment. The loss of his sight, specifically, means that Rochester loses command over a part of his “bodily organ,” which means he is more susceptible to losing control of his ability to reason, thus rendering him mad. Further, Prichard also states that “In cases of this description [madness]... the power of self-government is lost or greatly impaired; and the individual is found to be incapable” (252). Brontë ties physical disability to depression and madness, like the studies of the time suggest, implying that those who have suffered from impairment will be unhappy and more likely to succumb to mental illness in their disabled state.

These accounts relating mental and physical illness create complexities in Rochester’s character arc related to Bertha; however, I do not think the two are equal in presentation. Instead, Rochester’s blindness appears to act as a form of punishment, following the idea that blindness can be “portrayed as a form of punishment that ultimately proves to be a means of illuminating the inward eye” (qtd. in Bolt 37). Brontë is trading Bertha’s mental illness for Rochester’s

physical illness (and resulting isolation) in order to punish Rochester for how poorly he treated his wife—an eye for an eye, if you will. If Brontë were writing Rochester's character arc with the intention to punish him, it reveals Rochester's impairment as nothing more than a plot device, even if the tie between physical disability and depression reflects the time in which the book was written.

Rochester's condition is also associated with animalistic images, bringing a bestial quality to his impairment and creating a power dynamic of the able-bodied person over the disabled person. Medical texts from the Victorian era draw ties between disability and animalistic images that are common in print. In an introduction to a collection of articles on "Insanity and Nervous Disorders," Taylor & Shuttleworth write that asylum reformers were trying to change "images of the bestial confinement which had earlier reigned" (227) in regards to care for the mentally ill. While the introduction emphasizes that "treatment of the insane in the eighteenth century was not so universally horrific" (227), the comparison of treatment to "bestial confinement" is no coincidence. Specifically, this line is likely drawn from Andrew Wynter's 1857 article on lunatic asylums, in which he writes, "Supposed to be degraded to the level of beasts, as wild beasts they were treated. Like them, they were shut up in dens... and made to growl and roar for the diversion of the spectators" (232). In "The Blindman in the Classic," author David Bolt writes that "Brontë's notion of visual impairment is... animalistic" (36), which is not a far leap from the descriptions of the mentally ill as "beasts." Bolt references how Jane calls Rochester "some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe," followed by her description of Rochester as a "caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished" (Brontë 384). His physical appearance also suggests an animal quality to Jane, which Bolt says is "sublimated in a general appearance of unkemptness" (36). Jane parts

“his thick and long uncut locks,” suggesting that he is “being metamorphosed into a lion, or something of that sort” (Brontë 388). Jane also remarks that his “hair reminds me of eagles... whether your nails are grown like birds’ claws or not, I have not yet noticed” (388). Brontë’s use of animal descriptors for a character with a disability is cruel and insensitive. Bolt adds that “the blurring of the boundary between the human and the animal invokes the notion of a lower evolutionary status... defin[ing] the legitimate subject position in relation to the sense of sight” (36). Brontë’s use of animal descriptions of Rochester’s character lowers Rochester’s humanity below Jane’s because his sight is affected. Rochester is painted as “lesser” for this entire scene—in fact, Jane makes it a point to say “It is time some one undertook to rehumanise you” (388). Jane’s first encounter with Rochester is framed in her narrative as a sighted person rather than in his experience as a blind person, which places Jane in a higher position of power than Rochester due to her ability to see and therefore make judgement on his appearance and physical state.

Barring the pity of others, Rochester himself is very unhappy with his condition, painting it in a negative and self-destructive light instead of coming to terms with it and accepting his new physical state. He has preconceived notions of his own physical state following his accident, and he projects these expectations onto Jane, asking “It is a mere stump — a ghastly sight! Don’t you think so, Jane?” (Brontë 388). Rochester does not like himself as he is and makes no attempts to come to terms with his injury. Instead, he looks upon it as an outsider horrified by the destruction of his own body. Even after Jane reassures Rochester that she still loves him, he replies, “I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm and cicatrised visage” (388). Rochester’s new status as a man with a disability is not framed in acceptance of his new physical state; Rochester instead follows the expectation put on by people without disabilities that

impairment is an ugly and destructive thing. In addition, Rochester views Jane's marriage to himself as a sacrifice. When Rochester asks Jane to marry him, he follows it by asking if she is sure she wants to marry "a poor blind man... a crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on" (396). Jane affirms this is the choice she wants to make, and Rochester comments that she "delight[s] in sacrifice" (396). This depiction fits the stereotype described by Lester and Ross as the "disabled burden" (281). Rochester sees himself as a burden to all, even to the woman whom he loves and who loves him back. Even in the Victorian Era, it was seen as a public duty to assist the poor and infirm, as "the people of each parish were taxed... 'competent sums for relief of lame, blind, old, and impotent persons'" (Holmes 108), supporting the idea that Jane is somehow "sacrificing" herself to care for Rochester. This is a struggle for the modern reader because present-day disability activists are trying to move beyond such antiquated ideas and instead are emphasizing independence and freedom for the disabled person. In addition, Brontë's use of Jane as Rochester's caretaker and wife shows "the nobleness and generosity of those who furnish the care, which objectifies the disabled person" (Lester & Ross 282). Brontë is using Rochester's character to boost Jane's goodness and self-sacrifice by marrying him and taking care of him in his impaired state. When Rochester speaks to Jane he wonders that she should "Not suffer you to devote yourself to a blind lamenter like me?" (387) and calls himself a "sightless block" (388), two rather disparaging terms for someone with a disability. I am unable to find sympathy for his character in this state because he is so self-degenerative—Rochester can find no happiness in his impairment. His dialogue reads from the point of view of someone without an impairment looking at it from the outside, instead of revealing the true inner nature of living with a disability.

The core of Rochester's blindness is that it is used as a conduit for character development and plot advancement and dismisses the experience of disability. Brontë introduces Rochester's character to the reader as someone whose whole life is based around seeing and visibility. Chih-Ping Chen's article "Am I a monster?": Jane Eyre among the shadows of freaks" details how crucial the acts of seeing and viewing are to Rochester, notably in terms of his objectification of women. Chen writes:

Jane follows Rochester's lead to discover "new regions" in which women become objects of conquests and discriminatory gaze — Celine Varens, Giacinta, Clara, Blanche, and Bertha Mason... Rochester seduces Jane with the visual pleasure of seeing and the desire to be the seeing subject, but he is also, without Jane's awareness, inscribing himself sexually into her. Jane is made his listener and opens her inexperienced self to his glimpses and disclosure. He guides her through the presentations of these women to "educate" Jane into submitting to his pleasure and gaze, to become his object of desire. (376-77)

Chen describes Rochester's actions with phrases such as "discriminatory gaze" and "visual pleasure," putting heavy emphasis on how much Rochester's character depends on his ability to see. Rochester is also teaching Jane herself how to submit to his will of "seeing"—to become his object of desire based on how she looks and appears to him. It is not until his sight is taken away that Rochester is forced to "see" women, notably Jane herself, as people instead of objectively viewing them for their beauty. Brontë puts heavy emphasis on the seeing experiences of Rochester's character, making his impairment that much more shocking to the reader—again, a clear insistence of disability as a plot device. Rochester is unable to experience this character development without having been blinded and physically losing his sight, creating a less

engaging moment of character development because it hinges on a physical change in stature. Rochester's characterization hinges on that moment of selfless heroism and dealing with the physical consequences. When Jane returns to him, Rochester is suffering through a character change—he is depressed and remorseful. It is because his character must change based on a physical impairment that his characterization is flawed—Rochester's having a life realization should not depend on his physical stature. Brontë paints disability as, yet again, another trope—one of villainization. Brontë is punishing a character who has done bad things by mutilating him, following the modern stereotype described by Marilyn Dahl as the “evil crip.” Dahl cites Susan Sontag's idea that “It has been a convention of all literature and art that physical deformity, chronic illness, or any visible defect symbolizes an evil and malevolent nature and monstrous behaviour” (qtd. par. 2). Similar to Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* or to Richard III's hunchback, or even the classic example of Mr. Hyde from R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Rochester's blindness is used to reveal his true, inhuman faults for what they really are. It is only after Jane discovers that Rochester is hiding his first wife in the attic and after Rochester confronts his evil doings by trying to save Bertha that he is hurt and subsequently impaired. Brontë's use of Rochester's disability is for characterization which diminishes his role as a person with a disability, rendering his final moments of characterization as weak.

Rochester is further objectified by Jane, following her return, which leads us into yet another one of Lester and Ross's disability tropes—that of the “misfit,” or outsider, unable to cope with their disability and needing outside guidance. Lester and Ross further detail the trope of the misfit as “the person with a disability who is maladjusted, unable to handle the trauma of his or her problem,” which perpetuates the myth that “those with disabilities need guidance

because they are unable to make sound judgments themselves” (280-81). The application of this trope is yet another example of his characterization hinging on his disability. Jane’s first view of Rochester following the fire is one of a spectator, and, beyond her assumptions of his demeanor, she merely watches him as if for sport:

He descended the one step, and advanced slowly and gropingly towards the grass-plot. Where was his daring stride now? Then he paused, as if he knew not which way to turn. He lifted his hand and opened his eyelids; gazed blank, and with a straining effort, on the sky, and toward the amphitheatre of trees: one saw that all to him was void darkness. He stretched his right hand (the left arm, the mutilated one, he kept hidden in his bosom); he seemed to wish by touch to gain an idea of what lay around him: he met but vacancy still; for the trees were some yards off where he stood. He relinquished the endeavour, folded his arms, and stood quiet and mute in the rain, now falling fast on his uncovered head. (Brontë 384)

Most noticeably, Jane asks “Where was his daring stride now?,” highlighting an evident change in his gait, drawing attention to how Rochester was and his transformation to her current view. Perhaps, if we return to the myth of the “misfit,” Brontë has elected Jane fit to relate Rochester’s transformation to us because he, as a recently disabled person, is unable to do it himself. Bolt’s research provides an expanse of this idea and views Jane’s narration negatively, seeing it as a use of the “blindman as a source of pleasure for an unseen spectator” (42). Jane is merely observant of Rochester, but her descriptions of his slow advancement and “not knowing which way to turn” reveal her view of him as helpless or needing assistance. However, Jane continues to watch, refusing to assist him. She assumes “spectatorial authority,” as it is “her assertion that Rochester

knew not which way to turn” (42). It is the first of Brontë’s attempts to sway the power dynamic in Jane’s favor, but Brontë is playing on the idea that, as an outsider due to his disability, Rochester is unable to act on his own character. Following her first glimpse of Rochester, Jane enters the house to interact with him but continues to play tricks on him. She refuses to announce who she is and does not outrightly reveal her identity, actively withholding information from the blind Rochester. Jane tells Mary, “do not give my name” when revealing that she has returned to see Rochester (Brontë 385). When Jane speaks to Rochester for the first time since she has left Thornfield, Rochester does not recognize her. In fact, Rochester asks Jane no less than six times to reveal who she is and, following the first few inquiries, Jane notices his “trying, as it seemed, to see with those sightless eyes” (385). Jane is purposely playing to Rochester’s blindness in order to delay the reveal of herself, which is just a cruel trick on a depressed blind man. It is not until Rochester reaches out to touch her and recognizes the feel of her hands and waist that Jane finally reveals herself, and even so Rochester doubts his own touch. Jane insists on delivering her own form of punishment to Rochester in their meeting by hiding her identity from him.

In the final lines of the novel, Jane hints at withholding information from Rochester through her writing of the narrative. Though Rochester regains some sight in one eye, “He cannot now see very distinctly: he cannot read or write much” (Brontë 402). Jane makes recurrent remarks in both the beginning and the end about her narrative and her “tale draw[ing] to its close” (401), centering this story squarely in Jane’s experience. If this narrative featuring a man with a disability is written from Jane’s experience, we cannot solidify the descriptions of his experience as genuine, as they are told from the point of view of an outsider. In addition to withholding information from Rochester, his character is not only viewed as but treated as helpless following his impairment. She tells Rochester that she is willing to wait on him and

follows up on that promise, reflecting that “He saw nature — he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf” (Brontë 401). Similarly to Jane’s unreliable narration of Rochester as an outsider, Rochester relies on her description and guidance. Her experience of life may be completely different from Rochester’s had he retained his sight, and Jane is able to push (however gently) her worldview onto him due to his impairment. Jane’s assistance of Rochester is problematic in terms of his independence as a person with a disability. Jane also writes “Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go: of doing for him what he wished to be done” (401). It does not read that Jane is encouraging Rochester to be able to walk on his own or live life independently of her; rather, she is encouraging his reliance on her as an assistant. Though Jane does these services with pleasure and claims that Rochester “claimed these services without painful shame or damping humiliation,” Rochester’s lack of independence following his impairment is troubling to a modern audience (401). Brontë pushes Rochester back into the stereotype of the disabled burden, regardless of how willing the participants are. It is only through Jane’s voice that we hear that Rochester “knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance” (401). During a time when self-help and self control were highly emphasized, it is disquieting that Jane insists so much on Rochester’s dependence on herself. The Victorian era undermines itself, however, in regards to disabled people. Remembering that people paid tax to support the poor and infirm (Holmes 108), proves, at least economically, that the public was considered responsible for the care of the disabled. Though Rochester and Jane are instead portrayed as members of the private sector, the expectation still stands. Therefore, it is by Jane’s insistence (due to social standards) that Rochester be dependent on her that she is empowered over him. Ordinarily, if Rochester was a nondisabled man, he would retain the social and economic power gifted to him in that position,

and Jane would not be able to encourage such reliance on herself, resulting in a change in that power dynamic. Instead, Jane is using Rochester's disability to her advantage to claim power over him, though it may be read as a kind and helping hand.

Brönte's attempt to return power to Jane can also be observed through further examination of the economic records from the Victorian period. In their introduction to the section "Insanity and Nervous Disorders," Taylor and Shuttleworth end with the idea that "Humanitarian concern is here yoked to economics" (230) due to concerns about human potential during this time, and because economic status and disability are intrinsically linked, this is not a favorable light on disabled people. In her book *Fictions of Affliction*, Martha Stoddard Holmes highlights two Victorian stereotypes of disability—the poor disabled child, and the poor disabled adult beggar. She argues that these figures "anchored and stabilized the shifting economy of emotions that characterized discussions of physical disability" (100), and that this conceptualization "allowed nondisabled people to enjoy unalloyed pity toward the innocently dependent and unalloyed outrage toward the guiltily dependent, despite the fact that their feelings toward all disabled people (and all dependent people) were probably mixed" (101). While this does give Brönte the benefit of the doubt by referring to the mixed feelings of the general public toward disabled people, she is using Victorian stereotypes and just as quickly erasing them to garner pity and sympathy for Rochester. Rochester's disability is yet another attempt to help contribute to the restructuring of class and power that benefits Jane at the end of the novel. Following the death of her uncle, Jane comes into a large sum of money (Brönte 387), putting her above Rochester in terms of social class. Drawing from the available Victorian disability stereotypes would frame Rochester as the adult beggar, and such framing is aided by Jane's sudden affluence. However, Brönte is not so quick as to throw Rochester to the dogs,

because “dependents’ ... were perceived as both pitiable and detestable” (Holmes 102) and, as evidenced by his “happy ending,” she likely still wanted some amount of sympathy for him.

Rochester’s resignation to be cared for at home also emerges from economic values of the Victorian period. As welfare programs began to emerge during this time, social workers were hard-pressed to “classify the distressed... did they deserve to be helped?” (Holmes 108). I think Brönte brings this question into play when Jane returns to Rochester—her interactions provoke this same question in the audience—does Rochester deserve her help after everything he did to her? However, we must remember that humanitarian concern is linked to economics—adult beggars are “defined by their distance from the productive economy,” and “disabled people’s status in the emotional economy... was shaped in large part by their status in the monetary economy” (Holmes 101-02). Brönte uses this exclusion from the working world—and therefore, any sense of economic independence—to force Rochester’s hand into relying on Jane for support.

Jane is also now more physically attracted to Rochester following his impairment. Torrell details how their return is rife with sexual tension. Earlier in the novel, Jane is repulsed by Rochester, calling him “rather an ugly man, but quite a gentleman” (Brontë 204), but upon viewing Rochester wandering through the gardens she notes:

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his hair was still raven black; nor were his features altered or sunk: not in one year’s space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled or his vigorous prime blighted. (384)

Torrell points out that through these observations of his “athletic strength” and “vigorous prime” Jane sees Rochester as “muscular, manly, and sexy” (86). Jane also wishes “to drop a kiss on that

brow of rock, and on those lips so sternly sealed beneath it” (Brontë 384), both of which point to “her sexual attraction to him as a disabled man” (Torrell 86). Jane has a considerably newfound attraction to Rochester that is framed in these strong and positive descriptions. Suddenly and from afar, Jane is physically attracted to Rochester following his disability, which is unusual and almost positive. It paints Rochester in a place of strength and physical admiration, something many disabled characters are not provided with. Some may argue that Brontë’s provision of physical touch in their relationship is beneficial to Rochester’s character, and while touch is important in their renewed relationship, it is essential to examine the power dynamics between an able-bodied woman and a disabled man that allow this touch to occur. Torrell touches on this concept in her essay, framing its occurrence in *Jane Eyre* as a positive. Upon reading the following description, however, I found Jane’s sudden attraction to him to be reminiscent of fetishization. Torrell writes that:

Physical touch between them... would ordinarily be impermissible in Victorian society, but in Jane’s narrative it is sanctioned — made proper and presumably asexual — by the terms of the caregiver relationship. In the romance of Jane and Rochester, however, these moments are an outlet for the sexual desire Jane has for Rochester, allowing her the thrill of physical contact while upholding her virtue and purity under the guide of caregiving. (87)

Jane finds attraction to a man with a disability, something that is not often found even in modern novels, and it is taken as a positive in Torrell’s article. Jane is attracted to Rochester in his impaired state because he is helpless and needs her assistance, which does not read as a positive to me. Torrell’s tie of the caregiving to the sexual attraction is phrased in Jane’s needs and attraction, not in Rochester’s (as the disabled character).

Jane is using her guise as a caregiver to be able to touch Rochester and be intimate with him, which is discomfoting, and Torrell provides no actively positive response from Rochester responding to Jane's touch. The example provided, of Rochester using touch to figure out who Jane is when she returns, turns Rochester's attempt at identifying Jane into a situation of desire. Brontë writes that "He groped; I arrested his wandering hand, and prisoned it in both mine... The muscular hand broke from my custody; my arm was seized, my shoulder — neck — waist — I was entwined and gathered to him" (Brontë 386). Torrell writes that this touch "is just as longed-for by [Jane]" (87) and only once in this argument mentions an "erotic touch that is desired by *both* Rochester and Jane" (87, emphasis added). Torrell seeks to disprove the stereotype of the blindman as a lecherous character, but I do not agree with the idea that Rochester initially sought for an erotic touch. As Jane withholds her identity from him, it is all Rochester can do to gain information by reaching out to touch her—it is Jane who takes his hand and turns the situation sexual.

Jane discovers she now has a power over Rochester that she did not have previously, and wants more than anything to be with Rochester knowing they are now equals. Through her assistance to him as a person with a disability, Jane is able to control Rochester in the way she was controlled, and while this works as a positive for gender studies, this only emphasizes the limits imposed on disability. Bolt describes this "reversed marriage plot" in terms that the "underpinning hierarchies of normativism over disability and 'the sighted' over 'the blind' remain intact" (35), rendering their union as problematic. Jane will forever hold some amount of power over Rochester due to his disability and their marriage will never truly achieve the equality that Brontë was aiming for in the first place. The "happy ending" that Jane and Rochester experience is even dependent on Rochester's blindness. Brontë has framed "the

misery of the blindman [as] integral to the happiness of not only the sighted woman but also the sighted man who Rochester becomes” (Bolt 49). Because Jane views Rochester as dependent she feels comfortable enough to accept his marriage proposal. In his remorseful state, Jane sees their marriage as a means of control—disguised as assistance and love—as well as experiences a newfound sexual attraction to his helplessness. If Rochester was not dependent on Jane, Jane could not have married him and the two would not have experienced a future together.

Rochester regains his sight in the final pages of the novel and the narrative “endorses the ocularcentric belief that a person cannot live happily ever after without sight” (Bolt 49). We must remember that in Rochester’s disabled state he is most closely linked to the stereotype of the adult beggar, but the “dependency in an adult beggar spurs disgust and outrage because even if he is blind or otherwise physically impaired, the cause is constructed as moral failure” (Holmes 102). Brontë must prove that Rochester deserves to be helped and to be happy, and she cannot give him a happy ending while he is still disabled. The two ideas stand at odds in the Victorian social class hierarchy—one who is a moral failure cannot possibly deserve a happy ending, which is why Rochester’s disability is partially reversed. Though Rochester does not fully regain his sight, Brontë makes it a point for Rochester to regain enough of it that “When his firstborn was put into his arms, he could see that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were—large, brilliant, and black” (402). Rochester is able to happily see his own visage and eyes in his offspring, instead of living life as a truly blind man unable to see the faces of his children.

Though the novel begins with a man having power over a woman and reverses, the reader must keep in mind that the woman now has power over the disabled man. This is important to note because *Jane Eyre* is hailed as a Victorian work in which the female protagonist is able to achieve some means of power over a man, which was unheard of at the time. The context of her

power is troubling to disability theory, however, because it is not until Rochester is blinded that Jane is able to take that power into her own hands. Brontë, whether consciously or unconsciously, set up and encouraged a power dynamic in which the able-bodied person has power and control over the disabled person. While it is easy to brush this story off as an early feminist success, we can see through Brontë's treatment of Rochester's character that the situation is not positive for all parties. Brontë's stereotyping of Rochester as a victim and a depressed character frames disability in a negative light. Rochester's experience of blindness and Jane's treatment of him as a dependent victim do not speak to the true nature of living with a disability. Recognizing the power dynamic that Jane holds over Rochester is important to today's work of breaking down the hierarchy—if we can recognize the mistakes made by writers of the past, we can be conscious enough to prevent them in the future.

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