



12-7-2015

The Blind Can See: Revisiting Disability in Jane Eyre

Gina Schneck

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Schneck, Gina (2015) "The Blind Can See: Revisiting Disability in Jane Eyre," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol8/iss2/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Blind Can See

Revisiting Disability in *Jane Eyre*

Gina Schneck

To be blind means (literally) to live without physical sight. This definition of blindness is absolute—you are blind or you are sighted, you are disabled or you are not. So what of phrases such as “What are you, *blind*?” Why do we sometimes use language of blindness to define those with physical sight? Julia Miele Rodas offers an answer: a “continuum of seeing and not seeing,” a “diversity of blindnesses,” which “obscures the imagined boundary between blind and sighted, confounding our abstract sense of blindness as an absolute” (119). Rodas speaks to the fact that those who can physically see are sometimes metaphorically blind, fumbling around in ignorance, while those who are physically blind can be visionaries. As such, she suggests a continuum rather than a binary—an in-between space where the sighted experience varying degrees of blindness and the blind can sometimes see. This in-between space has become a major focus of disability studies as it works to erase stigma and reintegrate the disabled into conversations of identity and ability—and in the case of *Jane Eyre*, sight.

As disability scholars have looked at Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, they have often criticized the novel for its antiquated approach to disability, most commonly in relation to Edward’s blindness. The earliest interpretations of his blindness rely on Freud, famously comparing the act of being blinded to a metaphorical castration that removes the possibility for both love and sexual pleasure (Bolt 46). Such an all-or-nothing approach to blindness closely represents

the early Victorian view that blind men had little access to intellectual faculties and therefore little access to pleasure (Kitto 241). Scholarly conversation *has* moved towards a more positive, nuanced interpretation of Edward's blindness, insisting that becoming physically blind opens his potential for spiritual sight (Joshua 123), or that his marriage to Jane despite his disability reveals Jane as a modern woman unshackled by nineteenth-century views of disability (Mintz 147). While I agree with the moves that scholarship has taken in recent years, I would argue that the scholarly discussion surrounding disability in *Jane Eyre* is inadequate. While scholars have accurately identified Edward as a focal point of disability within the novel, and have moved towards a more positive reading of his blindness, they have yet to pinpoint *social blindness*—meaning, in the case of both Jane and Edward, ineptitude in relationships—as disability; that is, they focus on physical or biological disability without delving into the in-between space suggested by Rodas. By exploring blindness on a continuum, we can see that both Jane and Edward experience blindness, and that they both must overcome their interpersonal naiveté in order to have a successful marriage. Their story, then, becomes one of learning to *see* through breaking down the binaries associated with blindness and disability.

To understand the blindness that Jane brings to her relationship with Edward, we must explore passages in which her gaze is turned to Edward. As we examine these passages, placing the terms *looking* and *seeing* on a continuum will prove useful, the former suggesting the physical ability to see with a lack of spiritual or transcendent insight and the latter suggesting a deeper level of spiritual sight with or without physical eyesight.

Let us first turn to a scene in which Jane and Edward reunite after an extended absence. “I had not intended to love him,” Jane narrates, “The reader knows I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected, and now at the first renewed view of him, they spontaneously revived, green and strong! He made me love him without looking at me” (Brontë 185). This is long before Edward is blinded; yet already we see Brontë experimenting with the power of seeing. In this scene, Jane is referring to the fact that Rochester has literally not glanced in her direction; however, it would be an oversight to ignore the implications behind this observation. Brontë seems to suggest that Rochester has yet to *see* Jane—has yet to comprehend all that she is worth, both as a woman and as a lover. The same can be said for Jane. That she believes herself to be in love “at the first renewed view of him” will—and should—be read as a shallow sort of love, even a sexual attraction.

In fact, much of what we know of Edward is translated into very bodily, and therefore shallow, descriptions. Just before the quote above, we get a description from Jane grounded in physical characteristics: “My master’s colorless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth . . .” (185)—all characteristics derived from looking. The novel is sprinkled with these descriptions, hinting at both young Jane’s inexperience with the nuances of romantic relationships as well as Edward’s current state of unknowability—that Jane knows him only through the external suggests a hardness of character that prohibits her from knowing him intimately.

However, Jane’s report of Edward’s physical characteristics doesn’t stop there. “The soul,” Jane argues, “has an interpreter . . . in the eye” (343). And so it is in Rochester’s eyes that Jane sees “energy, decision, will . . . [and] an influence that quite master[s] [her]” (185). She is able to decipher his soul (seeing) through the physical (looking), discovering an “influence” that spawns respect. Here we see the line between seeing and looking begin to blur. This blurring is perpetuated by the fact that the respect Jane fosters for Edward errs on the side of hero worship. As Jane watches Edward, she does so as an Olympian might look upon a god:

[M]y eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face: I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise, and the iris would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking—a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirstperishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (185)

Jane loses mastery over her own will; she is drawn in by the vision of Edward and blinded by the “divine” she perceives in him. Brontë casts this blindness as poisonous. As naïve Jane peers into Edward’s soul, striving for a communion of sight, she is poisoned by her inability to see beyond the god she has made of this human man. Several chapters later, Jane remarks,

[Rochester] was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world; almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature of whom I had made an idol. (295)

Jane admits her own *disability* to “see God” past the “eclipse” that consumes her sight: Edward. As she attempts to see him—and he to “read [her] unspoken

thoughts" (263)—she is blinded by all that he is, or all she perceives him to be, remaining ignorant of the sins and suffering of his past that color his character.

The object of Jane's gaze, Edward, experiences blindness as he puts *her* on a pedestal, calling her a myriad of otherworldly names that indicate he thinks her above the earthly sphere. He calls her "fairy" (263), "angel" (279), "unearthly thing" (273), and suggests that she has "the look of another world" (262). Jane rejects these titles, saying, "I am not an angel . . . and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me—for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate" (279). Edward strives to see Jane as something perfect rather than something human, and in doing so he blinds himself—perhaps willingly—to Jane's flaws. Rather than be offended, Jane uses these instances of blindness to teach Edward to see her as she is, and in doing so begins to establish more realistic expectations for Edward as well (that she will not expect anything "celestial" from him). She establishes a pattern of communication that proves essential to their later marriage, when Edward becomes physically blind and the pair must become one pair of eyes in order to see—a highly sophisticated form of communication predicated upon earlier attempts of both looking and seeing.

The turning point for both Jane and Edward occurs soon after the discovery of Bertha's existence. Jane says to Edward, "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if we both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (272). Here again Jane is able to see through Edward's exterior, and it is through comparing her soul to his that she deems herself and Edward equal. Ironically, this passage comes after Jane accuses Edward of thinking her "an automaton—a machine without feelings" (272) and proud Edward accuses her in turn of "know[ing] nothing about [him], and nothing about the sort of love of which [he is] capable" (325). Though at this point they meet soul to soul, and though they are both truly *seeing* each other in a moment of raw vulnerability for perhaps the first time in the novel, they both remain blind to the host of layers present in the other.

When Edward's blindness becomes physical in the fire that consumes "the madwoman in the attic," Jane approaches him with a surety of purpose—to cheer him—which affords a closeness that *reveals*. Upon hearing of the fire at Ferndean, she hastens to the spot with the intention never to leave. She approaches Edward, who at first believes her to be a spirit. Jane muses, "His

[Edward's] countenance reminded me of a lamp quenched, wanting to be relit; and alas! It was not himself . . . he was dependent on another for office!" (478). So she stays. And she sees. Edward's character is altered through his intimate interaction with Jane, his helper. Through her constancy, her *humanity*, he blooms. He allows her in, which dissolves the barrier that previously prohibited Jane from seeing him, as her Edward had been a proud, cold man. "Hitherto I have hated to be helped," he admits, ". . . but Jane's soft ministry will be a perpetual joy" (485). Now, in his vulnerability, he can be seen and, more importantly, he can see. Jane, in turn, moves beyond idol worship in order to accept Edward as he is—wounded both physically and emotionally—and she "love[s] [him] better now" (485). The pair comes together as they learn to navigate and communicate through one pair of eyes. They marry and the communion is complete.

Though scholars argue that Edward's blinding has cost him happiness and love, the language Jane uses to describe their marriage suggests that the very opposite is true. The passage bears reading in its entirety:

Mr. Rochester continued to be blind the first two years of our union; perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near—that knit us so very close; for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. . . . Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary conducting him where he wished to go; of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad—because he claimed these services without painful shame or dampening humiliation. He loved me so truly, that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance; he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes. (491)

As we pull apart this important passage, we play witness to the language of seeing that Brontë uses to describe a union of equals—not a nurse and her patient, not a subject and an object, not an able woman and a disabled man, but a successful marriage of two souls who have learned to see.

At the beginning of the passage, we see Jane admitting that the occasion of Edward's blindness has "knit [them] so very close." This is an interesting assertion as it suggests that disability serves a positive purpose: disability enables. Susannah Mintz argues that "Brontë's novel represents such an ethic of understanding across the boundaries of plurality that is the foundation of recognition" (131). Within the realm of disability studies, this passage gains significance; it

proves that the portrait of the incapable, fumbling, helpless patient does not adequately depict disability and blindness. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë suggests that physical blindness is useful, that it unites, and that it is perhaps less of a disability than the naiveté that previously prevented Jane and Edward from fully knowing each other.

The next line of the passage tells us that Jane has become Edward's eyes: "I was then his vision." Jane and Edward have literally and figuratively become one pair of eyes—Jane is tasked with navigating for blind Edward, and in that they begin to see the world and each other through a shared comprehension. In this respect, it does not matter who is physically blind. That Edward is the "chosen one" is not a commentary on his "bad" soul nor does it suggest what Georgina Kleege terms Jane's "rise to power" (70). Their coming together is a journey of learning to see spiritually, and they do so through sharing Jane's eyes. They are thus both "limited" by Edward's blindness—just as Edward must learn to navigate without physical sight and to use other means to see the world, Jane must also learn to navigate for him. They are both "limited," both "punished" for their previous artlessness in love, and yet they both see. Again, disability is problematized by both its limiting and enabling qualities.

As we return to the passage, we find a significant turn of phrase in Jane's monologue: "Literally, I was . . . the apple of his eye." This familiar phrase indicates that Jane is dearer to Edward than all else; it also carries religious undertones, signifying the spiritual insight that Jane and Edward now share as man and wife. Here again, Brontë plays with the language of sight—for though Edward is blind, his eyes still play a significant role in the novel. That his love of Jane comes across through the language of sight suggests the importance of *seeing*, both to the novel as a whole and to the Rochesters' marriage. Edward's physical disability, his physical lack of sight, is downplayed in light of their shared spiritual sight.

The remainder of the passage suggests the equality of their marriage—that Jane never wearied of caring for Edward and Edward never felt shame in accepting Jane's help. As the passage concludes with "[h]e loved me so truly" and "I loved him so fondly," Edward's physical blindness seems almost insignificant; it would be ridiculous to argue that this marriage suffers as a result of his disability. In my estimation, it would also be ridiculous to suggest that their happy marriage is predicated upon Edward's disability, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, and upon Jane's resultant "rise to power" as Kleege suggests. Instead, as Mintz argues so masterfully, "If we read those injuries [disability] in the context of

recognition and the novel's sustained interest in challenging too quick assessments of subjectivity based on bodily traits, it becomes possible to understand the end of *Jane Eyre* as a continuation, rather than a reversal, of its protagonists' relationship" (147). Edward's recovery of sight in one eye works to further prove that Jane and Edward are equal with or without Edward's physical disability, for it is not the presence of disability that defines their relationship, but the transcendence of disability—both their own disabilities and their judgments of the disabilities of others.

Jane Eyre, then, works to normalize disability by revealing the shades of disability present in all of us. If it is not only the madwoman and blindman that are disabled, but also Jane, the "perfect" protagonist, then surely disability is not so strange, not so "other" as Victorian critics thought it to be; all struggle with blindness and deafness and madness. Jane and Edward's journey to happily ever after involves overcoming metaphorical blindness (in regards to each other), with Edward's physical blindness serving as a tool that perpetuates their success, demanding "the hard work of acceptance—not only, or not even, of the apparently monstrous *other* but of the innately strange *self*" (Mintz 131). In this respect, one character is not privileged over the other—they are equally blind and they can equally see.

Works Cited

- Bolt, David. "The Blindman in the Classic: Feminisms, Occularcentrism, and *Jane Eyre*." *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*. Ed. Julia Miele Rodas, Elizabeth J. Donaldson, and David Bolt. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 32-50. Print.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999. Print.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Feminist Disability Studies." *Signs* 30.2 (2005): 1557-87. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Nov. 2014.
- Gezari, Janet. "In Defense of Vision: The Eye in *Jane Eyre*." *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. 59-89. *EBSCO*. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, eds. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress." *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 336-71. Print.
- Joshua, Essaka. "'I Began to See': Biblical Models of Disability in *Jane Eyre*." *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*. Eds. Julia Miele Rodas, Elizabeth J. Donaldson, and David Bolt. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 111-28. Print.
- Kitto, John. *The Lost Senses: Deafness and Blindness*. New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1852. *Google Books*. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.
- Kleege, Georgina. *Sight Unseen*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999. Print.
- Mintz, Susannah B. "Illness, Disability, and Recognition in *Jane Eyre*." *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*. Ed. Julia Miele Rodas, Elizabeth J. Donaldson, and David Bolt. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 129-49. Print.
- Rodas, Julia Miele. "On Blindness." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 3.2 (2009): 115-30. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 13 Nov. 2014.
- Rodas, Julia Miele, Elizabeth J. Donaldson, and David Bolt. "Introduction: The Madwoman and the Blindman." *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. 1-10. Print.
- Stiker, Henri-Jacques. *A History of Disability*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. Print.