

Hot and Bothered: On Eyre

Chapter 4: Keep in Good Health and Not Die

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VANESSA: In 2018, I was lucky enough to go on a pilgrimage to Sussex, England, with 14 women, two men, and Virginia Woolf's masterpiece "To the Lighthouse." One of the days on this trip, we hired a man to take us on a hike around the area. He was charming and informative. Towards the end of the day, we asked him if he liked "To the Lighthouse." He said, "No, I don't read Virginia Woolf. I don't tend to like books that take place in drawing rooms." I have never seen a group of people turn on someone faster in my life. Know what happens in drawing rooms, random hike-leader-man? Conversations about money, love, relationships, birthdays take place in drawing rooms, wakes, proposals, daily dinners. Life happens in drawing rooms. And most of this chapter, chapter 4 of "Jane Eyre," takes place in a drawing room. In chapter 4, Jane is officially shunned from Gateshead. At first, she's shunned and yet still trapped inside. She gets put into a closet to sleep and is ignored for months. Her only friends are her doll and a bird out her window. One day after this prolonged abuse of abject neglect, Jane is beckoned for. Out of nowhere she must go downstairs, with haste. What she finds in the room to which she was beckoned – the drawing room to which she was beckoned – are two people who believe she needs to spend her life humiliated and humbled and who have made it one of their missions to make sure that this happens. Aunt Reed has brought in a headmaster of an institution to take Jane away, Mr. Brocklehurst. Here is Miriam Burstein, associate professor of English at the college of Brockport State University of New York, who is currently working on a book on the spiritual life of Charlotte Bronte.

MIRIAM BURSTEIN: Mr. Brocklehurst, I think a lot of people know, is based on a real person, a man named William Carus Wilson. And he recognized himself, there was some angst about that. He stands for precisely the kind of evangelical cant that Charlotte Bronte really loathed. If we think about the moment where he catechizes her towards the beginning of the book, it's actually a parody of William Carus Wilson's own writing. So, she's deliberately working him into the text, and what she doesn't like about it, right, this great moment, "Do you know where the wicked go after death?" "They go to hell." "And what is hell? Can you tell me that?" "A pit full of fire." "And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?" "No sir." "What must you do to avoid it?" "I deliberated a moment: my answer when it did come, was objectionable: "I must keep in good health, and not die." This entire dialogue which represents a total mismatch between the adult's understanding and the child's really suggests the way in which he represents, you know, we're going to force feed you your religious belief. For him, religious belief is literally, let's utter a set of formal phrases. He's obviously a hypocrite, right, and when we see him later. And that's part of the point, that there's no sense here that he really grasps his own sinful nature. He's merely using it as a method of exerting power over other people.

VANESSA: Professor Burstein is pointing to one of the key themes of this book, and one that we're going to talk about a lot: how men use Christianity to get what they want from women. Charlotte Bronte had radical ideas about Christianity, many of which are embodied in Jane. Jane's Christian foil in this drawing room scene is Brocklehurst, a man who will tell a little girl that she is going to die and go to hell if she doesn't submit to him. Mrs. Reed tells Brocklehurst that Jane is sinful, and her sin is deceit. Brocklehurst and Mrs. Reed agree on a diagnosis and treatment. Jane is a poor liar with a bad disposition, and so she must be sent to the Lowood institution and be reformed with ugly clothes, pinned up hair, and vague other threats. Jane resists Brocklehurst's lecture as best as she can in the face of his painful Orthodoxy. She does pretty well, considering that upon first seeing him she thinks he's a literal, physical pillar. But

she really finds her stride and her voice once he leaves the room and she's left alone, in a drawing room, with Mrs. Reed. It does take her a hot minute to gather her courage. She's left alone in the room with Mrs. Reed and she stares at Mrs. Reed for what we believe to be minutes and minutes. Mrs. Reed finally gets so annoyed that she just asks Jane, "what's up?" Jane replies in a burst of brave honesty, "Deceit is not my fault," she exclaims, and then tells Mrs. Reed that she, Jane, will tell everyone who asks that Mrs. Reed was always cruel to her. Mrs. Reed, for some reason, is deeply shaken by this, so much so that she tries to convince Jane that it isn't true, that she's always been kind and generous to Jane over the years. Jane will not be gaslit. She knows her truth, and she holds onto it fast and hard. "I will never call you aunt again," she says. Even as destitution by way of the Lowood school comes for her, Jane can remember the truth and can keep repeating it to herself so she never forgets. [music] At the end of this chapter, she's shunned from the drawing room and from Gateshead, and will be off to Lowood. I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

LAUREN: And I'm Lauren Sandler.

VANESSA: And this is On Eyre from Hot and Bothered.

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VANESSA: So, Lauren, I've given my summary. What else do you feel like people need to know as we jump into chapter 4?

LAUREN: So, we've sort of set out this mission for ourselves to talk about Jane Eyre in terms of power and desire. And I'm so aware that, especially in these early chapters, all we're talking about is power. Power is on every page. Power is in every word of how Bronte has set up this book. And I just think about how childhood is so inherently disempowered, but I'm then looking at all of these different layers of the lack of Jane's power. And so, I think when she starts speaking truth to power in this chapter, it feels like such a revelation. And I think we need to understand this in the context of how, not only was this well before the second wave when women were thinking about voice and feminism in such radical ways, this is still way before even the first wave of feminism. This is decades and decades before the suffragists. And the notion of a girl speaking truth to power like this and being consumed by this will to articulate everything from what she really thinks about the Bible to how she's been abused; it blows my mind. And she does it in such a clever way, right. She's so cheeky and I love that about her as young Jane. And especially in that one line that Miriam Burstein says, right, that line, "I must keep in good health and not die," that rejoinder to this exchange about hell. And I know that's also something that you have written about, that you write about so brilliantly in "Praying with Jane Eyre." And I have to say when I've read the book before, I've sort of just moved right past that line. And there's so much in there. Do you want to pick it apart a little bit?

VANESSA: Yeah, I just find that I'm already disagreeing with myself from what I wrote in my book, which, like, came out a minute ago. Brocklehurst basically has her say Socratically that she's doomed to hell. And then he asks, "What must you do to avoid it?" The text says, "I deliberated a moment: my answer, when it did come, was objectionable." And then it's, "I must keep in good health, and not die." At some point I really thought that what she was saying was, like, "I am going to survive this moment. There is nothing I can say to you that you are going to accept, except for me saying I guess I'm gonna burn in hell. Or I guess I'd better become, like, sweet and pious and completely sublimate myself and do everything I can to prefer to learn the psalms than to eat. Right, like, "That is what you want to hear." And she's like, "And I can't tell you that, nor can I tell you that I'm going to hell. And so, there's nothing I can say to you." And so, the rejection of, "I must keep in good health, and not die," seems like, "I am gonna outlive you.

I'm not gonna die on your terms." And so that is where I was with this for a long time, that it was, like, I am going to commit to surviving my childhood and to surviving you. But now I just see her as, like, a woman at a bar who a guy is trying to make a point with, and who is just like, "Fuck you, I'm not gonna make the point you want me to make. You're trying to trap me in a corner, and it is a dumb corner." And I just feel it on that level now. He has to think he has outwitted her. And, she's like, I'm not playing your game. And, so that's how I see it now. But I think maybe it's about both, right.

LAUREN: Yeah, I mean, it's gotta be about both. To me it's about both. But I'm loving this second reading, especially because we're led to this moment with, you know, a prior moment in which she says to Mrs. Reed that Mrs. Reed's kids are not fit to associate with her. She's just telling everyone to kiss her ass through this whole thing. When Brocklehurst asks her if she reads the Bible, she, like, goes book by book essentially about what she thinks is valid, fascinating, boring. And he just lambasts her for it, and it's like, okay, listen, she's saying "People, I'm a reader, I'm a thinker, I'm a lover, I'm a fighter. You don't want it, what do you want me to do here? Fine, I'll just not die. You think I'm gonna go to hell if I die? I guess it's immortality's gonna be the only way that I avoid hell then." And it's so charming to me. [laughs]

VANESSA: Yeah, it's so charming. And I guess the reason that like this bar image keeps coming to me, is, like, it's this guy who keeps trying to, like, physically pin her into a corner, and is like, "I'm gonna buy you drinks that you didn't ask for and, like, make you financially beholden to me and physically scared of me," right. He's towering. She literally thinks he's a piece of building when she first sees him. And, he's trying to intimidate her in every single way he can. And just with her wits, she's like, "Your whole paradigm is bullshit," and, like, just calls scene. And the funniest part is, is that he's so dumb, he keeps trying the line. He's like, "Well, I don't know if you know the statistics about, you know, child mortality, but ..."

LAUREN: "But I had a five-year-old die on me last week, and by the way, as a way of goodbye, I'm gonna give you this pamphlet about dead kids, so maybe you might want to repent." But I love this bar imagery because, you know, we've been thinking increasingly, and we'll continue to do so, about the ways that we carry Jane with us through our lives. And, thinking about all the bullshit patriarchal dynamics and how women are supposed to respond in situations where men have power and expectations and entitlement. We carry all this crap around with us all the time. And I love drawing a straight line between this pillar of a man and the dude in Levis on the next bar stool who thinks that he's got it made, and thinks that we are just going to participate in the performance. Because that is what Jane is being asked to do, that is what Mrs. Reed is doing, and that is frankly what so many of us are supposed to do with our entire lives, is just participate in the performance. And here's Jane saying, "Hell no."

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LAUREN: So, should we talk about where the power seems to be really concentrated in this chapter?

VANESSA: Yes, let's start really naming power.

LAUREN: So, I think most notably it happens with Mrs. Reed, and I think we should spend some time on that. But before we do, I feel like Brocklehurst is almost like Jane's warm-up act. This is where she's starting to say, "Wait a minute, you come in here with all of your power, all of your class, all of your performance, all of your expectations. And I am going to find that bit of power in my own little, tiny, female, pale, poor body. And I'm going to let you know who I am." And that moment of speaking truth, that then, she kind of can't stop, right. She even describes it as this elixir that she can't get enough of

until it starts to scare her a little bit. I think that her finding power in her voice is to me, as much as in the first chapter, we have that day where she acts out and we never go back. This in terms of questions of voice, this is the moment for me, where it's really Jane and her power.

VANESSA: Yeah, and I think you're absolutely right about this being a warm-up. She answers Brocklehurst but she doesn't disrupt his rhythm. I think that that might actually be about her hopefulness, right. It's like, well, Mr. Lloyd was nice, maybe this man is gonna be nice. And, like, she's figuring out, oh, he sucks, and then he's gone.

LAUREN: Well, you know what's interesting, too, which I haven't thought about before, Jane's whole experience of class has just been at Gateshead. It's just been within this family, right. And then Brocklehurst shows up in his sable and he starts talking about a world outside of Gateshead where we are going to see the system in play. And, that I think is really worth spending a moment with in terms of the power here. Because just through his own dialogue, not even through Jane's observation, we're starting to see a larger world, a world that she is going to be shaped by, a world that she's going to be fighting. And there's this one line where he talks about how his daughter has just been at Lowood and she says, "Oh, dear papa, how quiet and plain all the girls at Lowood look; with their hair combed behind their ears and their long pinafores." She says, "They are almost like poor people's children. They looked at my dress, and mamma's, as if they had never seen a silk gown before." And he's telling Mrs. Reed this as a sign of pride about the system that he maintains, where these girls, and we will be talking about them in future chapters, are literally the picture of poverty. And the girls who are better born, like his own daughter, show up in their silks and their pinned curls, and admire the poverty that he has maintaining. So, this is a foreshadowing of the world that Jane is about to enter. And it speaks to a level of power and oppression that I find really chilling.

VANESSA: I mean, it's the system that holds up the abuse that's allowed to happen in the house, right. Like, they are continuing the repression of this child. Like, the more she revolts, the more she'll be punished, is at least the paradigm that they're being explicit about. We'll see the ways that the people within Lowood might subvert that, but that is what the system is attempting to do, is saying no matter where you go, you might leave this bar, but like, your boss is gonna be a jerk to you tomorrow. And you might outsmart that boss, but the guy at the bank is gonna talk down to you, right like, you have nowhere to go.

LAUREN: And, if you're a girl in Victorian England, you have no way to better yourself, except through marriage. And, so, you'll be stuck in that system if you want to be anything except one of these poor girls. But even that system isn't bad enough, according to Mrs. Reed, right. It's not like Mrs. Reed simply leaves it at, "Yes, that's how I want things to be. I want Jane to be," as she keeps saying through this chapter, you know, raised according to her position, taught to be humble, etc. Then she needs to mark Jane as a liar. She needs to say that Jane is deceitful. She needs to destroy her reputation and foreshadow, not just this horrible system, but Jane's own ostracization and punishment before she even gets to show up and define herself. And so, we feel Jane's heartbreak and her ire alight because she is being defamed at the exact moment when she thinks she is going to be able to define herself in her next chapter of life. And that kind of power, the power to malign, especially within this system, is so, so devastating to her, and I mean, frankly, to all of us.

VANESSA: And Mrs. Reed is just using her power to say, like, "Even when you're not in my house, I'm gonna haunt you." And she's doing it so deliberately. She knows Jane isn't a liar, like she is really trying to use her power just to make sure that Jane has a miserable life.

LAUREN: And yet, when Jane accuses her of doing this, it really seems to set her back on her heels in a way that ...

VANESSA: Totally ...

LAUREN: I think is really fascinating. So, it's not like we are led to believe that Mrs. Reed has been generous, and just through Jane's own anger, hormones, emotions, you name it, has seen it as mistreatment. I mean, we begin this chapter learning that Mrs. Reed has not so much as spoken to her, invited her into a room for three months, that they've had Christmas, they've had birthdays, they've had all of these celebrations from which Jane has been completely excluded. The children have been forbidden to even look at her essentially. It's true abuse, and yet, when Jane says to her, when Jane gathers her own power, and in, to me, you know, the real show of voice and freedom in this chapter, is when she says to Mrs. Reed, "I am never going to tell anyone that you treated me well. I am always going to let people know how you abused me. I will never be grateful for this time in my life. How could you say that I was a liar? This was my chance." Mrs. Reed says, "I am your friend. I have been trying. I have only wanted what is best for you." And she seems truly shaken, not in the way that she's been shaken with anger and frustration by Jane in the past but because something really seems to have stuck in her. Jane has actually said something that was powerful enough to scare her about herself. And that is a real moment here. And I find it a slightly confusing moment, because Bronte doesn't give us any scaffolding around this. We don't have a real sense of Jane's response to it. And it feels really important. And I kind of wonder why those choices were made, and if they were even intentional or if this is what happens when you write the first third of a book at light speed, is she just needed to get Jane's anger out, and there needed to be a little bit of a reaction. And we don't actually get to parse it in the narration, in the narrative. I find it confusing. Do you?

VANESSA: I don't know. I have a family member in my life who I really have written Mrs. Reed onto. And, I love what you said that this version of Aunt Reed scares herself. I think that that's right, I think she really heard something about herself that she finds horrible, and who knows what her trauma is, right like, maybe she had a mother who she would have described in that way, and so to hear someone describe her in that way, she's like, "Oh my god I'm becoming my mother." But I think the real thing she's afraid of, is that Mrs. Reed knows the Brocklehursts and knows people at the school. And it's never occurred to her that Jane can go and tell other people the truth. And Jane says, "I'm gonna tell anyone who asks how horrible you are." And this is just a last-ditch attempt at brainwashing, right, of like, "No no, don't tell them I was horrible. I wasn't horrible, I was your friend, I always tried." Like, I think she's horrified. She's always abused Jane privately. It just hadn't occurred to her that she's about to be exposed.

LAUREN: I can't help but wonder though, if within the norms of the day, if she did on some level think that she was doing right for Jane. If she truly internalized the fact that Jane was going to be this pauper girl and needed to learn humility and needed to be excluded from higher society. And, there's just such a punitive form of child rearing that, you know, rich kids got indulged and everyone else suffered. And I do wonder if she felt like Jane needed to learn suffering to survive on some level. But as I'm saying this, I'm having this moment that I think about often since I wrote my last book. And it's something that comes up a lot when I talk about my last book, which is, you know, a book about a young homeless woman in Brooklyn who I spend an enormous amount of time with and I got very, very close to. And she went through very, very difficult things when I was reporting, and not just reporting but spending my time with a person who I care about. She was not simply a book subject but a person I came very quickly to

love. And there's a moment in which she is getting evicted from her homeless shelter and I have to think about whether I want her and her baby to come live with us. And I have all these things that I tell myself about how, as a journalist, that's crossing a line, and how in telling her story, I need to see what's going to happen next without me intervening. That's the whole purpose of me writing this, etc. But then, my daughter, Dahlia, who was 8 at the time, looks at me and says, "How can they not move in with us if they need this?" And I realize in that moment the hypocrisy of what I'm saying and doing, that I'm trying to come up with these systemic explanations or these ethical reasonings behind the fact that I don't want her and her baby living in my living room. And so, I think there may be some element like that with Mrs. Reed where she doesn't want Jane in the drawing room, she doesn't want Jane at her dinner parties or with her children. She doesn't want the anger, the mood, something that feels so unpleasant. And yet she can't just banish Jane and say, "I don't like your looks, kid, get thee to the nursery." She has to say that she's doing it for some greater good and for Jane's greater good in order to be acceptable to herself and to her gathered society.

VANESSA: And we hear that with Brocklehurst, too, right, and we'll talk more about that later in the Lowood chapters. But he is so good at justifying every cruelty, as like, "Well I need you to be ready for the cruelties ahead." And this, like, backward mapping of ethics based on your own instincts. I don't know, it's a very human thing to do, right, like this makes Mrs. Reed human, it's just that her instincts are so horrible. Your instincts I do not think were horrible. Someone moves into your house, you don't know when or how they're moving out, you don't know how you're gonna operate your life. Right, like that's a complicated situation. This is, like, her instinct is to be cruel to a child. But I want to pick up on just one phrase you used which is that you said in this drawing room. And I mentioned the story in my opening essay for today's episode because I wanna talk about the setting of this scene. And when that man Alistair was saying I don't like books that take place in drawing rooms, which we can talk crap about all day as a theory, what he means by the drawing room novel is this idea of the Jane Austen, like, falling in love drawing room novel. Right, 30 years before Charlotte Bronte, there was Jane Austen. And Jane Austen was essentially saying, like, "We don't need Gulliver's Travels. We don't need to travel the world in our literature. The whole world is unfolding in a drawing room; people are falling in love and gossiping and lying and fighting, and it's all happening in this tiny room, the women's space of these drawing rooms." And then Charlotte Bronte is also saying that, right, like, a kid can find her voice in a drawing room and this is where women have to find their voices. They're not going off to war, they're not going off in the navy to find new lands, whatever it is. They're not going to commerce or to school. They have to find their voice in the drawing room. And I'll say, I looked up, I was like, I wonder if Charlotte Bronte was writing sort of, like, in response to Jane Austen. And I guess I always assumed that Charlotte Bronte was a fan of Jane Austen. She was not. She wrote to a friend who introduced her to Jane Austen, she wrote, "Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* until I read that sentence of yours and then I got the book and studied it. And what did I find? A highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers, but no glance of a bright world, no open country, no fresh air, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses." These are both books about, like, landed gentry with beautiful houses and lots of land. And Charlotte Bronte is like, "I'm gonna write about the drawing room, not where someone's hems are being discussed. I'm gonna talk about hypocrisy of religion and a young girl finding her voice." And to be clear, I love Jane Austen's drawing rooms. I'm not throwing any shade at them; Charlotte is.

LAUREN: And also, what she's doing through this whole book is she's taking Jane farther and farther and farther from the drawing room. So, she has this moment, right, where Jane is exploding the drawing room at the end of chapter four. And then she's taking her outside of it. Jane is not going to return to a

drawing room for a long time. And then when she does return to a drawing room, it will be in a very different circumstance. And then, she's gonna flee that drawing room, and time after time after time, she's going to be running from these drawing rooms for a variety of reasons. And it's interesting thinking about the Brontes because this is what all three of them write about, right. Women who leave the confines of the house, who go out into the moors, who are whipped by the wind, and to really end up in situations of real struggle both inwardly and outwardly because of it. I keep thinking about the very first sentence of this book which we discussed a couple episodes ago, right, where it begins with her not even being able to take a walk. And the confines of her life. And so, the notion that she's pushing back against all of this, not just what she does within these spaces but how she experiments with getting her characters out of them, I find so fascinating.

VANESSA: Yeah. Well, this is the moment to transition explicitly to talking about desire, right. I also think that's the other reason that Jane yells at Mrs. Reed. I feel like her desire is to leave on her own terms. It's, okay, our relationship is now over. And I am not going to leave anything unsaid. Like, you're the one who kicked me out, you're the one who put me in a closet and is now deciding that I'm leaving in the morning. But the emotional situation that we're leaving in, that's gonna be on me. And this desire to rewrite a narrative, it's, like, one that I really feel like, right, at the end of breakups or something, where you're like, that's not why we're breaking up, this is why we're breaking up. Right, like, this like, I have to be the one who writes the story about what this was. And then of course, she literally becomes the person to write the story.

LAUREN: And she describes the experience almost in terms of physical pleasure.

VANESSA: Yes!

LAUREN: And it's the first time we've seen this sort of language, right, where she says, right after she yells at Mrs. Reid, "You are deceitful." Bronte writes, "Ere I had finished this reply and my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt." And then on the next page she says, "Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time. An aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy." It's just such adult, almost sexualized, language that is provoked not at any other moment except for the moment when she speaks truth for the first time in this way. I love it. I feel like it's a way of letting us know that there's going to be an adult Jane emerging with all of the pleasures and struggles that that sort of emancipated adulthood might represent.

VANESSA: The other big desire, you know, going back to the beginning of the chapter, is this desire to be loved and if not loved then at least seen. Jane is talking about almost how pathetic it was, how much she loved this doll. She was like, "It's nothing more than a scarecrow of a doll." But like she just wants to be needed by something and so even though she's 10, which adult Jane thinks is too old; I am not an expert on childhood development so it sounds perfectly reasonable. But, like, she cannot sleep without this doll. And like she's reaching out to feed this bird. And then John Reed is walking by her one day, she just smacks him in the face, right. Like, he's acting like she doesn't exist, and she's like, "Screw it, I exist." I mean, there's this line, right, "You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness." And it's like, "But I can't, right, I can't, and if I try to, I'm gonna go around screaming and hitting people," which seems like a reasonable response.

LAUREN: I think we're also told that Lowood is going to be a place in which girls are taught to live without love. Girls are supposed to expect to live without love, that scarcity of so many things, including emotional tenderness and care, is part of their preparatory education. And I think it's not coincidental

that after Brocklehurst approaches her in the way that he approaches the Lowood girls, that is when she erupts at Mrs. Reed and says, “Of course I have feelings and of course I need love. And now in your household, and now in this whole system, right, this school, this religion, you know, this whole elite society, I am told I am not supposed to feel or want, but I do. I am like anyone else.”

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VANESSA: So, Lauren we’re about to leave Gateshead, the, like, house that Jane spent her childhood in. She’s about to go to Lowood and start a new chapter. I’m wondering what you make of this section of the book and of Gateshead as a setting.

LAUREN: Well, it’s been our introduction to her, right, and as we discussed, it’s been a really formidable one because it begins on that day, that day that she strikes out, that day she can’t come back from. And it bridges right to this moment that she speaks out, that’s going to sort of burn inside her for a long time. And, I don’t know, it’s interesting thinking back on some of the scholarship and ideas that we’ve discussed around that bridge into womanhood, right, you know, whether the red room is like the chamber of menstruation, what her hormones mean, what it means to go from childhood into womanhood even at the very sweet age at 10, though of course for Jane it doesn’t get to be a sweet age at all. I feel like this was sort of her big tween moment and from here forth we are going to see her step into womanhood in a different way. And it is interesting, I think, to think about even the name Gateshead, right. This is a little bit, like, both English major-y and stoner talk, so [laughing], forgive me for a moment.

VANESSA: That is my favorite fragrance. It’s what I wear.

LAUREN: [laughing] It smells like patchouli with a little bit of rose.

VANESSA: Uh-huh.

LAUREN: But, okay, so like Gateshead, right, she’s throwing open the gate to something. And also, things have come to a head. I know I sound like, yeah man, she’s throwing open the gate to something. But it’s interesting to think about these place names and, you know, they’re not real place names. Charlotte Bronte could have located things in very, very specific spots on her own geography, and instead she invents these things.

VANESSA: The other thing that this is is physical distance. She’s gonna see Mrs. Reed and her cousins again but she’s never gonna see John Reed again. And sometimes physical distance from a toxic person is everything. She is just getting away from him. And I think that those things can be life-giving, right, getting away from a horrible boss or from an abusive relationship. That can and will change everything. So, to some extent Gateshead is John Reed and she’s getting the fuck out.

LAUREN: And yet she’s going from one form of abuse to another. ...

VANESSA: Totally

LAUREN: And that’s what I’m excited to start talking about next week, is when the abusive system is not a family system anymore but something far more vast.

VANESSA: Yeah, there's a lot of good stuff coming up but I think you're exactly right. The thing to look forward to is that we're going to Lowood. We're gonna meet Helen Burns, who's a lot of people's favorite, not a favorite of either yours or mine. But we are gonna meet one of my favorite characters, who's Miss Temple, who is like the quiet revolutionary in my opinion. So, I'm really excited to see Jane start to meet other people and refract against other people, and really learn who she is.

LAUREN: And I'm really excited to see Bronte really get super political and super angry about public health, about religion, about class. I feel like all these big ideas are about to really come out in the next section of the book, so, let's go.

[music]

LAUREN: So, we were talking about drawing rooms earlier in the episode and I was thinking, what even is a drawing room? How is it different from a living room? Why are these considered to be such female-coded spaces? So, I decided to call up my friend Darrick Borowski who is an architect and has a design studio at the School of Visual Arts here in New York.

[music]

DARRICK BOROWSKI: Hello?

LAUREN: Hi Darrick.

DARRICK BOROWSKI: Hi Lauren.

LAUREN: So, okay, I'm calling to talk drawing rooms. I know that you think a lot about how we live and how our living spaces are created and defined. Can you take us back a little bit into the Victorian era and into the drawing room? First of all, how is it not just a living room?

DARRICK BOROWSKI: So, the drawing room comes into existence in a time in society when it was fashionable for rooms to have very specific purposes. And so, all of the sudden, we went from, you know, 200 years earlier it was not uncommon for even the richest of families to, you know, live in two rooms, like, there was a chamber and then there was, like, the hall. But over, you know, this period I think from 1600 to 1800, we see this evolution of home in which it becomes fashionable to have very specific rooms for specific purposes. And the richer you are, the less multi-purpose your rooms were. So, the drawing room comes out of what was originally called the with-drawing room, and both of them were kind of evolutions of a parlor, which was, the parlor was the main room where you'd receive people. And so, the withdrawing room was originally off the parlor because it was actually where the women would withdraw to so the men could have their bawdy conversations, drinking liquor, smoking cigars, talking politics. And that's literally I found I think those three activities, like, were the most commonly quoted as what women were being saved from.

LAUREN: It's so funny because I always assumed that drawing actually meant drawing, the way that, you know, there would be a sewing room or a music room. I always assumed that that was a place where girls would gather, women would gather to sort of practice some sort of leisure activity. But the notion of withdrawing is so interesting because not only does it mean that women were not integrated into these sort of male-coded conversations but also this notion was that they would have to sort of disappear, right, that they needed to go deeper into the domestic environment. And it was a place where speech

would be limited in some way, which is so interesting to me in terms of the chapter we just discussed in this episode in which Jane finds her voice and lets it out. It's her big truth-telling scene. In fact, two of them, and they both happen in the drawing room, so I love how Bronte is flipping that. But I also think it's really fascinating that there would be spaces for women to speak in a certain way and for men to speak in a certain way.

DARRICK BOROWSKI: Yeah, and I think what's interesting is the readers at that time would have been well aware of these customs, much more aware than we are today, and I think these decisions would have had even more punch at that time to the reader. I think they would have been really aware of those choices as an author.

LAUREN: Did you find anything else around gender with the drawing room? I'm really curious.

DARRICK BOROWSKI: Yes, so Victorian rooms would be, they all had genders assigned to them, or a gender feeling, I suppose. Not that they were all, like, for men or for women, but as the drawing room was primarily for women, it was considered a feminine space. The parlor was for both sexes but it was considered a masculine space. Masculine/feminine spaces would have design fashions or design direction associated with them. And there was actually quite a bit of criticism around drawing rooms because they were feminine spaces. It was almost like the design was not as serious because they were feminine spaces, that they were designed for entertaining for women, that, like, the design of them somehow wasn't considered as serious as say the parlor, which was considered a masculine space.

LAUREN: Like, it was frippery instead of stateliness?

DARRICK BOROWSKI: Yeah, and just, like, you know, the way they were designed and the way they were sort of fitted out were all as flippant as women's fashions. And they would, like, you know, change with the seasons.

LAUREN: And this is of course the criticism which is levied against books written by women as well. Such as this one and to this very day. Darrick, thank you for picking up the phone and answering my questions. I love talking to you about this and I'm hoping that we will keep doing so as we visit other spaces which really shift radically throughout the book. So thanks a lot for joining us.

DARRICK BOROWSKI: Lauren this was a lot of fun. I'm glad that I am your go-to on space and design history. I love it! Call me again.

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