

Not Sorry Works

On Eyre

But what do you think? Chapter 13

Published August 27, 2021



[music fades in]

Vanessa [00:00:02] In Chapter 13, Jane and Rochester have their first proper conversation. But really, it's quite an *improper* conversation. They flirt, but it's weird.

Mr. Edward Rochester, the gravitational pull at the center of Thornfield, is back and is pulling the world into his orbit. Thornfield Hall is all aflutter. Adèle can hardly sit still for her lessons. The doorbell is ringing at regular intervals. Tenants and other people Rochester has business with want to meet with the master of the house for the short burst that he's in town.

At the end of the day, Mrs. Fairfax comes to get Jane. Rochester would like to see her. Mrs. Fairfax sends Jane upstairs to go put on a nicer dress and a brooch. Jane is so shy at the idea of spending time with Rochester that she physically hides behind Mrs. Fairfax. Jane only gets comfortable near Rochester because he doesn't seem to care much that she's there. He compliments Jane's work in teaching Adèle, who's feet away petting Pilot. Adèle is not smart and has no talents, he says, but she is improved under Jane's supervision.

Jane and Rochester then...flirt? He accuses her of bewitching his horse. She denies all charges. He calls her an elf. And she says the elves have been gone from England for a hundred years. Mrs. Fairfax drops her knitting confused by this banter. Rochester has Jane audition for him a bit. He has her play the piano for him and tells her to go get her painting portfolio so that he can look it over. She's auditioning as a governess, potentially to hold on to her position. But also, these skills that he asks about, they are the skills that all landed gentry look for in a wife. We get long descriptions of Jane's paintings, a common trope in novels of the time.

Here is Dr. Rachel Teukolsky, the writer of *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics*, on one of Jane's paintings.

[music fades out]

Dr. Rachel Teukolsky [00:02:17] You have this terrifying big black bird—the cormorant—holding a jeweled piece of jewelry in its beak, [chuckle] in the midst of this, like, raging sea. And there's been a shipwreck and you see the corpse. And all you can see of the corpse is the arm, where presumably the bird has picked this jewel off of the arm. And, first of all, this is a really familiar trope from paintings called "Vanitas," which is a Latin word, meaning emptiness, and you see it a lot in 16th and 17th century paintings, where the paintings juxtapose very luxurious items—you know, riches, treasures—with a skull or rotting fruit. So it's kind of a Christian message, right? No matter how wealthy you've been in your life, you're going to die, and those riches are not going to, you know, send you to heaven. They're not going to be any great reward. It's sort of the transitoriness of life and how those riches are pretty meaningless in the grand scheme of things. So the image seems like a version of that message.

Vanessa [00:03:32] Rochester seems impressed by the paintings, but the only word he really calls them is “peculiar.” He asks good questions, seemingly really wanting to get to know Jane. He asks about her art, her family, how she liked Lowood, how religious she is. There's something sparkling between them other than the fire that they sit near. When Jane, Adèle and Mrs. Fairfax are dismissed from Rochester's presence, Jane and Mrs. Fairfax have a minute to themselves.

[theme music fades in]

“You said Mr. Rochester is not peculiar,” Jane says. That word, “peculiar,” again. Jane and Rochester are both, at minimum, interesting to one another.

I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Lauren Sandler: [00:04:20] And I'm Lauren Sandler.

Vanessa [00:04:21] And this is On Eyre from Hot and Bothered.

[theme music fades out]

Okay. Lauren, what is it that you would like to elucidate for us before we jump into the specifics of the chapter?

Lauren [00:04:41] Oh, let's talk about bunk science. Let's talk about the gateway to eugenics. Let's talk about something that you may not have picked up on reading this chapter and even the prior chapter and certainly chapters to come.

So there was this pseudoscience called physiognomy, which was literally the science of reading a person's face. And it was a way of looking in the animal kingdom and looking to notions of Eurocentric beauty to try to understand who a person was based on what their face looked like. You know, the origins of the high brow taste versus low brow taste in terms of literally what your forehead looked like and what it seemed like you were capable of perceiving.

So we see this language in this chapter. Jane tells us that she recognizes his decisive nose, which is more remarkable for character than beauty. His nostrils, she says, denote cholera, which is in medieval sciences. It's one of the four bodily humors. It's based in the bile of the body, and it represents irascibility. She talks about his grim mouth, chin and jaw. I mean, we all know what a grim mouth is, but what is a grim chin, right? These are not things that we think of now, that we're aware of, at least when we look at other people.

But of course, part of this is about venerating how people imagined the ancient Greeks to look, because they were the paragon of beauty and intelligence and for some morality, which of course, meant an othering of anyone who did not conform to that facial quality. So people from Africa, people from Asia, not only were they seen as non-beautiful, but their features were seen as immoral. And we live with all of these issues today, of course. It's behind how we judge people's noses, how we judge their brows, how this gets racialized, right? How the

eugenics that determined what a Jew looks like and therefore what their character is might mean, the eugenics behind what someone who is African-American may look like in their facial characteristics, and therefore how intelligent or moral a white viewer might think they are. So this is one of these more subtle elements of the book that continues to be carried down. Just as a lot of literature from this era continues to carry these ideas down.

Vanessa [00:07:18] And Rochester is going to reveal himself to be doing the same thing about Jane again and again, later in the books. He's going to read her forehead and he's going to defend her character by describing what she looks like. I had never noticed how interwoven this is into the text, these ideas. Is she seeing him as a moral person based on how she describes him? Do you know?

Lauren [00:07:40] She's seeing him as dark, as angry. She uses the word irate at one moment to describe a facial feature, which is, you know, it's so interesting to have this emotional word describing something that actually doesn't connote emotion. But she's describing him in a way that would be familiar then, because this was so widely accepted. I mean, this was only something that we began to dismantle pretty recently in history, when you think about it. I mean, this sort of lasted into the middle of the last century, and we're only really fully undoing it right now. But she uses these descriptions to sort of really drill down on that "mad, bad and dangerous" trope and show that he is this angry, untamable presence—that he represents something that is unacceptable in some way.

Vanessa [00:08:36] And I feel like all of this really dangerous language is something that we have to consider when we think about what it is that we're inheriting from this novel. Right? You've pointed out to this horribly racist thing that's happening. I mean, not even subtextually right, only subliminally because we are not well-versed in this thing that existed for so long. I'm wondering, as the person on this podcast who's more skeptical of this book, what you think the inheritance is, as we're reading it now, of moments like this?

Lauren [00:09:12] I think that inheritance is always a tricky thing, and I think that what we tend to inherit is the work of people who had the privilege to write the work. And obviously within the world of having the privilege to write and publish, already being a woman is putting this in a different category. It is a radical act that this book exists from a gender perspective, but it isn't a radical act from a racial perspective. And what we keep finding in chapter after chapter is the sort of acceptance of bias that infuriates many of us when we read writing by men about women. Not all men, not all female characters. But it's certainly there, a certain element of language and characterization that gets taken for granted.

And I think that it's incumbent upon us as readers to take Brontë to the same task and to think about what it is that we are responding to. What is provoking the romantic in us? What is provoking our own way of relating and nodding along with Jane's experience? I am not someone who personally believes that we need to jettison history in order to make those corrections. I feel like, especially since it is so easy to research things now, all we have to do is take a moment and think: "Wait, what does that mean? That's unfamiliar to me." Or: "I'm just going to think about what I just read and make sure that it sits right with me, and if it doesn't, I'm going to spend some time thinking about it," which is tough, because that interrupts the pleasure of reading in some ways, right? I love getting lost in a novel more than anything, and

I love getting lost in this novel. But if we just ride those waves a little too easily, then I think we begin absorbing a lot of this bad material, too.

Vanessa [00:11:12] So the other way that Rochester and Jane seem to be observing one another and describing one another is through this very strange metaphor of folklore characters. Right? Like, we know that Jane saw him as a Gytrash, and now Rochester accuses her of being an elf, and they talk about green people, right? There's all of this conversation about pagan characters from more ancient British history. And it's interesting, right, because she is taking a physical description of his. But they are also starting to make metaphorical descriptions of one another.

Lauren [00:11:51] And so he says to her, "When you came on me in Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales and had half a mind to demand where you had bewitched my horse. I am not sure yet." And of course, he keeps referring to her as a fairy figure, as this elfin figure. And I'm sort of of two minds about this, because I do think that there is this element of bewitching that speaks to what it feels like to feel unaccountably attracted to someone, and have that quickening, have that is-this-love moment that predates any real proof of deeper connection. And I think that there can be something that feels a little magical about Jane. People seem to feel this about Jane. But there is this element of how Rochester uses his sort of coarse, manly way of speaking that it feels more to me like this sort of elfin-speak is a way of diminishing her, of considering that she has some power that he doesn't understand. And yet, you know, like he's swatting her away, like she's buzzing around his head in some way. And it irritates me. I have to say, it's not hot to me.

Vanessa [00:13:08] Yeah. I'll be honest. This has never been one of my favorite chapters. And I think part of it is that: it is flirting that is really turning *them* on, and I'm happy for them, but watching two other people flirt when it's not the way you flirt is boring, right? Like, not hot. I really feel Mrs. Fairfax at one point is so-what-the-fuck-is-going-on that she drops her knitting and I'm like, yeah, me too.

What I do like about him in this moment is he's saying I *thought* unaccountably of fairy tales, and I have *half a mind* to say that you bewitched my horse, but I'm not sure yet. And over the course of the book, I think I'm going to want to argue that he allows her to become more and more human to him. That he moves past this fairy-elf language and really starts to see her for her. So yeah, I'm compelled by your reading that he's attempting to diminish her. But I guess my most generous reading is that he's trying to figure out why she has this effect on him, and he's like, Is it because you're an elf? Is it because you're a character from a fairy tale and you're so small and—or is there something else? And then the second half of the chapter is sort of the interrogation of "or is it something else." Do you play the piano? Show me your paintings, right? But I like that he doesn't just label her.

Lauren [00:14:32] I do too. I just wish it wasn't within the context of such egregiously sexist behavior. I wish it wasn't, you know, in the midst of him putting down Adèle for being just this flighty, unteachable, petty little French girl. And I wish it wasn't in this moment in which he's just demanding tea from Mrs. Fairfax in such an obnoxious way and sort of treating all the women around him as dismissible, or necessary only to provide his needs.

You know, he even says, "listen, I'm used to not treating women with respect. I can't change my behavior just for you now, Jane," in a way that just feels like, oh my God, Jane is not the person you need to change your behavior for. It's *all of these people*, all these—you've entered a house of women who exist just for your pleasure, essentially. How can you behave this way after you've spent your days conversing respectfully with men? So I think that that part of it really infuriates me.

But at the same time, he does want to know her. And in fact, the moment that always feels like the thunderbolt to me is when he says to her "But what do *you* think?" You know, it's this moment in which Adèle asks for a present from him, and then she asks if he had brought Jane a present, too. And he says, "Oh, well, Jane, would you like a present?" And she says, "I hardly know, sir. I have little experience of them. They are generally thought pleasant things." And then he says—and this to me is the big moment: "generally thought. But what do *you* think?"

And it's, to me, the first moment that anyone has ever asked Jane what she thinks. And she takes this, right? She runs with it and begins to really openly pontificate on the complexity of receiving a gift and what that means and what it means in the context of a relationship with someone who she barely knows. And from that moment, things are *on* in a different way. And so it does feel like he really wants to know what she thinks of things. He's been impressed by her teaching prowess. He's clearly curious about her in all these ways, but it's not like he just wants to get into her bloomers. He wants to know what she thinks about things.

Vanessa [00:16:54] Yeah, yeah. And he treats her like an intellectual equal from the outset, right? He's patronizing to her in many ways that are completely inexcusable, right? But he doesn't demean her.

And yeah, I mean, I think it speaks to the sad state of Jane's previous relationships that this is such a breath of fresh air. It's not enough. It shouldn't be enough. And yet, because of her upbringing, it is, right? And I feel like there's this defense of Rochester, if it was a different time, of course, he's arrogant. He has all this power and he is used to getting whatever he wants. But I just... I am so tired of those defenses being wholesale. Like, there were good men back then. There were men who said "please" to their housekeepers, even in 1830. I think you're absolutely right that he doesn't get a pass entirely. And I don't know how many times men have asked me "what do you think?" I'm touched by that question. And I know in every job I've had, up until working at Not Sorry, I have not felt like the men care about what I think. So as inexcusable [as] some of his behavior is, this offering that you're pointing us to still seems revolutionary. And I guess I love that what Charlotte Brontë is saying is *this* is how you treat women with respect. You give a shit about what they think.

Lauren [00:18:25] I love that too. I also think that this is another element of Jane's story of scarcity, right? She hasn't had family, she hasn't had food, she hasn't had a home in a traditional sense. She hasn't— She's come to this place after so much tribulation, and one of the things that she has, of course, had a total scarcity of is probably, outside of Miss Temple, anyone who's really wanted to know what she thinks about anything. And certainly in the same way that you pointed out, I thought so brilliantly a couple of episodes ago, it's the first time that she's come across a man who hasn't hit her! And part of me feels like, yes, that is not enough. It is not enough for the one jerk to make up for the scarcity of all other things.

And yet when we are hungry, when we are starving, anything that nourishes us tastes like the most delicious thing on earth.

And so, honestly, I think the first several times that I read this book, it was hard for me to even see that this was flirting at all. This just felt to me like some, you know, obnoxious, rude, sexist employer who is twice her age who she wasn't taking shit from. And it was like, okay, I'm going to demonstrate my worth. But in a way that to me did not feel tinged with eroticism or romance. And I find it hard to feel what I think Jane is feeling in this. I mean, I think that Brontë does this incredibly skilled job of writing the banter, of writing the rapport, of letting us feel our way into the flirtation. And yet I am so turned off by his behavior that it's hard for me to see it ignite something for Jane. It's hard for me to feel it myself.

Vanessa [00:20:06] I'm with you. This is the chapter, I think, with Rochester, where I feel least compelled to defend him and for a similar reason, which is that I don't intuitively find him attractive in this moment.

What I do recognize as attractive is the piling on of references. I remember a great first date that I went on, which had a horrible second date, but we knew and loved all the same books and movies and that feels like this shallow way that the two of them are connecting now, of the joking around and being able to follow each other's pathways. And I wonder if Brontë on some level is like, "I don't care if this is leaving you in the dust. Like these two people get each other. And that's the thing that matters." And it only matters because then they get to know each other and continue to like each other unlike that guy that it turned out that all we had in common were books and movies. But I guess I believe that this is hot for them.

I mean, the other moment of power that we have to talk about is the fact that he decides when he's in residence, when he speaks to Jane, when he doesn't speak to Jane, he summons her and dismisses her, and he could dismiss her from her job—and how irresponsible it is of him to be gone for so long! He has these tenants who are coming sort of desperate to meet with him and they don't know when he's going to leave town again. So the doorbell is ringing every 5 minutes because everybody is like, okay, shit, the boss is in town for one day and I need permission in the budget to fix the roof, and like, this is my only chance. And you hear that with Jane, which I think also is about desire, but she says "Thornfield had a master. For my part, I liked it better." I just think this house needs, like, CEO, right? And the like. There's just a power vacuum when he is gone and it is outright irresponsible to the lives that just, like, wait for him.

Lauren [00:22:12] Not to mention Adèle. I mean, he's adopted this child from France who says very openly, "he promised me that I would come and live with him and I'm not because he doesn't live here. Here I am all alone. I'm so glad that you're here, Jane, because this sucks."

Vanessa [00:22:28] Yeah.

Lauren [00:22:29] There's also this element in that sentence about her preferring the house with the master. How that suits her better. Actually, I think it's the next sentence in which she talks about how he brings the world into the house, how he brings all the places that he's roamed there. And she's felt so trapped, so imprisoned in all of these circumstances. And she's just had this incredible hunger for travel and newness and experience. And bringing the

world in with him is this thing that he can do. He can bring her the world in that way. And I think that that element of desire, which she expressed so clearly in the last chapter, is what he represents for her in this moment.

Vanessa [00:23:13] Yeah, I mean, the door is literally open more often, right? There's like a literal breath of fresh air that's coming through this house, right? There's energy and vitality to it. I mean, and the other power, right? Like he's not only this breath of fresh air of bringing the world in with him, it's also the power of his personality, right? He is an extrovert and he craves people's presence and energy. And Jane is a deeply, deeply shy person. She describes wanting to physically stay in the shadow of Mrs. Fairfax and she has to be drawn out, right? She's made comfortable by him once it is clear that he kind of doesn't care about her, right? Like that creates some space for her to be quiet in his presence and so she gets drawn out by him. But that is a description that Mrs. Gaskell writes about Charlotte Brontë: that in Mrs. Gaskell's house, when Charlotte Brontë was a guest, Elizabeth Gaskell had these like recessed window seats, right? That had drapes over them. And Charlotte Brontë would—like the opening paragraph of *Jane Eyre*—while there were people in the parlor socializing, she would hide behind the curtain. And so she was someone with, I mean, just what we would call now real social anxiety. And so I think that that is another power difference between the two of them. He has no social anxiety, and she has a tremendous amount of it.

Lauren [00:24:37] Well, he has so much power. And also she has been abused. She was an abused child. And I think that we are seeing some traits of that, especially in the moment when he summons her in a way that seems really gruff and powerful. But she tells us he doesn't have the power, I have the power because I don't care, because I can refuse to engage with his overpowering me. And that, to me, sounds like such the defense mechanism of an abused child, the way that she taught herself to respond to John Reed, the way that she now knows how to protect herself against these men. And that's part of the defense that he's going to need to dismantle in order to get close to her.

[transition music fades in and out]

Vanessa [00:25:36] Okay. So, Lauren, we have to talk about the paintings, right? The paintings take up, I mean I feel, like half of the word count of this chapter—the descriptions of the paintings. And I am just going to be honest, I always skip reading these paragraphs. I'm like, I don't care what her paintings look like. I don't need to be convinced that she's interesting and smart. I know she is. She has a deep weird in her life, I know. Like, Rochester doesn't, but I've just spent 200 pages with her and she is part of my soul. But this time I really sat down [laugh] and looked at these paintings and they are *fucking weird*.

Lauren [00:26:15] They're so weird. They're so weird. And the descriptions in them are so weird. It's almost like Brontë wasn't quite able to figure out how to clearly describe the thing because they're weird to her, too. And I had to read these paragraphs a few times over [crosstalk] to fully try to picture them.

Vanessa: Me too!

Lauren: It was an act of discipline to do it, because they're so out and they're so totally not part of the aesthetics of what this book is so far. But I feel like the visual language of these

paintings are also so gothic and so occult-y and, you know, so redolent of these themes that we've been talking about. They are also, to me, pretty erotic, right? I mean, we've got this woman-shape to the bust, and her forehead crowned with a star and her eyes dark and wild and her streaming, shadowy hair. I mean, it's hot. And I'm not even going to get into the description of the swollen sea with the half submerged mast [laughter], which, as we heard earlier, clearly is about Christianity and how you can't take it with you. But it's also, it seems like there's all this sexual language and that description of this painting. So I feel like she's definitely trying to froth up a little feeling about sex and death and something that feels ornate, Baroque. And it's super weird. It's super weird.

Vanessa [00:27:44] I mean, I love the idea of Jane using these paintings to show herself to Rochester, right? Rochester asks [for] them in this audition-y way that we talked about. But it is—it's a very vulnerable thing to show someone your art, especially because, contrary to what he expected, they're from her head that is sitting on her shoulders, right? Like these are images that she has conjured. And it's like showing someone your diary, like this is so personal. And so the fact that he is interested in them, again, I feel like it's supposed to tell us that he's interested in her subconscious, right? And her dreams, right? She has visions of them.

Lauren [00:28:24] And he also asks her if she was happy while she was painting, which is such a sensitive question. I mean, he's seeing these incredibly dark, moody paintings and wondering if she got lost in some sort of artistic experience that felt like happiness to her. And she's so delighted to be asked this question. And he's so enamored with her mind already. He asks her if there's more in her mind like this, and she says "yes, even better." And he's thrilled by that response. So there is this communing around a woman's creative output, a woman's artistry. I mean, I think [it] probably certainly reflects something that Brontë herself wanted to feel around her writing, and I imagine didn't much of the time. Maybe did with her siblings, in a way that she had lost. Maybe did with her lover, who this book is honoring and dishonoring all at the same time, in her actual biography. There is something that feels so deeply personal, but also very reverential of a woman's creative prowess and creative imagination.

Vanessa [00:29:39] Yeah, I love seeing this as a window into how Charlotte might have felt about her writing.

The other thing that I learned, in researching around these paintings, is that the Arctic and the Poles were a place that captured the imagination of Victorian writers as a place where nature is still in full, horrifying bloom. It hasn't been tamed at all and it hasn't been understood at all, which is similar to one understanding of the Gothic, which is that the Gothic comes out of the Enlightenment. That Gothic novels in particular start getting written as the church gets demystified by science. It's not that kids die because, you know, the poor and meek die, but kids die because of public health problems, right? And science is beginning to understand and answer these questions that religion was the only place that we could answer them. And so, people are moving further and further afield in order to place these ideas of mystery and the new things that are scary, as science is starting to answer these other questions. And so, apparently in Victorian literature, you know, with Dickens and Mary Shelley, the North Pole, the Poles, the Arctic are constantly metaphorically used as a place that's been unexplored and that the nature is terrifying.

And so it's another form of this post-Enlightenment imagery that is saying, the world is scary. And that is just something I feel in my whole body. It's why I don't like horror movies. I'm like, "I don't need monsters. The world is scary." And so I just love that there is a conversation going on about sprites and green men and fairies. And then also there's this bitter cold arctic that is just terrifying, right? This very real scary thing in this chapter.

[transition music fades in and out]

Lauren [00:31:50] So there's this other element of the conversation about power here, which I really want to talk about, which is—it almost feels like a coda to this chapter. What we learn about Rochester's own powerlessness, or perhaps it's where he evinced his power in which...

After this conversation, Jane and Mrs. Fairfax are chatting and they're talking about whether he is peculiar or not, which is what his moods might come from. And Mrs. Fairfax tells Jane, actually, this is a man who is hurting. This is a man who is taking great risks. This is a man who is troubled. And though she doesn't say this directly, she's also saying this is a man who's an orphan like you, Jane. This is a man who was the second born and who was not given Thornfield initially because that went to his brother. And instead, he was sent abroad to do the family bidding in a business that he abhorred. She says "what the precise nature of that position was, I never clearly knew, but his spirit could not brook what he had to suffer in it."

Now, I think that there is a pretty clear reading of this that will be revealed later on as we make our way through the book. You know, I don't want to spoil some of the mystery here, but I do want to note—within the context of our previous and ongoing conversations about this book being written, in the context of abolition and thinking very much about the plantations in the Caribbean. I can't help but wonder if part of what Rochester found so insurmountably impossible to brook with, as Mrs. Fairfax called it, is what it means to participate in the economy of enslaved people in the Caribbean, whether it's as a master, whether it's as an inheritor, whether it's as someone who is literally just living surrounded by enslaved people. And he clearly has something that he needs to escape from. It is clearly worth burning the bridges of his family and possibly thumbing his nose at his own family fortune and his role that has been bequeathed to him in expanding that family fortune. And only at this point, after everyone is dead, he gets to show up at this house and try to figure out who he is now.

Vanessa [00:34:28] I mean, the other thing that I'll just say is interesting is, you know, Jane and Mrs. Fairfax's desire to see him in the best possible light. Their whole livelihoods rely on him and so anything nefarious that he's wrapped up in, they are also complicit in. You know, even as they, they don't necessarily have any other options but complicity. But Mrs. Fairfax is very defensive about Mr. Rochester and she's like, "oh, he's still grieving. His brother died nine years ago." And Jane is like "nine years ago? That's a tolerable time." And she's like, "Yes, right. But it was really hard." And I just love Mrs. Fairfax's desire to defend him for multiple reasons, right? You know someone for long enough, you come to care for them, but also it's a representation of her: she works for him and her identity is entirely consumed by him.

Lauren [00:35:18] And she's related to him.

Vanessa [00:35:20] She is related to him, but she never calls upon the acquaintance.

Lauren [00:35:23] Which is also weird.

Vanessa [00:35:24] But yeah, I just so feel that, and I feel like Jane is getting roped into that. The only other thing that I love is that Jane is—Jane leaves it unclear as to how much Mrs. Fairfax knows. She's like, "Mrs. Fairfax either could not or would not say more about the topic, but I dropped it." And that's just another little element of the mystery here. The extent of the mystery and who knows what, I feel is brilliantly done at the end of the sort of like cliffhanger chapter of like and [mysterious voice] who knows what she knew and like, ooh, who does know?

Okay. Lauren, what are you excited about? Next week we're doing chapters 14 and 15: two whole chapters.

Lauren [00:36:06] Well, I am excited for their discourse to become more thrilling and relatable to me, which it will. And I am also excited about Céline.

Vanessa [00:36:18] Yeah, we learn about Adèle's mom and Rochester's past and whoo! It is a doozy.

Lauren [00:36:25] It is French.

Vanessa [00:36:26] It is. It is *French*, indeed.

[transition music fades in and out]

Lauren [00:36:46] So we have talked about the paintings in this past passage that we have read, I realize, and we even heard Vanessa talk about them with some expert guidance in her introduction. But they feel so important and so out there that we thought we would get Rachel Teukolsky back on the phone. She is a professor of English at Vanderbilt and the author most recently of *Picture World: Image, Aesthetics and Victorian New Media*. Let's give her a call.

[phone ringing]

Lauren [00:37:26] Hello? Rachel.

Rachel Teukolsky [00:37:27] Hey, Lauren.

Lauren [00:37:28] Hi! Hi! So, okay, can we just dive back into these paintings? We've spent some time talking about them already on this episode, but it feels like there's so much more to say, in part because it is really our way of understanding what is happening in Jane's mind as an artist and as a thinker. And I wonder if you could first give us some context about even what it would mean to have a young woman painting, and proudly painting at this time.

Rachel [00:38:00] Mm hmm. For the 19th century, we should remember that Jane is not a professional painter. She's not being paid to make her art. And in fact, it was very difficult if you were a woman to become a professional painter. There definitely were women who

succeeded in the art world professionally. But when women were making art for the most part in the 19th century, they were doing it because it was expected of them as an accomplishment. And I would put that word in quotation marks. "Accomplishment" is what women were expected to do in order to compete on the marriage market. You had to show that you had mastered a certain set of skills: drawing, certain types of painting, playing music, learning the piano, learning French or a foreign language. Think about all the things that Jane is basically tutoring Adèle to learn. So that's the context for what women were expected to do.

And as you can imagine, that kind of artwork is really supposed to be pretty and nice and picturesque, right? And fitting with expectations surrounding women more broadly, the gender role of the 19th century that she's supposed to be sort of submissive and meek and kind and maybe slightly an invalid. And think about that compared to what those paintings actually look like, right? They are *so intense*. And Rochester even says, right, they are "peculiar for a schoolgirl." So it's clear that Jane is accomplished, right? She has mastered the skill that gives her social standing.

But these paintings really go beyond that. Notice in that third painting, right? There's a quote from Milton describing death. The figure of death in Hell is alluded to in that third painting. And so there's just this, like, intensity to these artworks that Brontë is really claiming Milton here for Jane. And let's just notice that that's really breaking the gender code for the Victorian woman here.

Lauren [00:40:12] Do you think that readers would get the *Paradise Lost* reference in the third painting, or do you think that that's more Brontë having had Milton seep into her own consciousness and this is how it comes out?

Rachel [00:40:27] I absolutely think they would have gotten the reference. There were certain touchstone texts in the early 19th century and Milton was definitely one of them. Milton, Shakespeare, and the Bible. The elite readers that she's targeting would have seen the reference and understood it.

Lauren [00:40:46] So what do you think they would have made of that reference? That there's some foreshadowing, that there's already some sort of risk in the attention that he's giving her for these paintings?

Rachel [00:40:59] Yeah. So that third painting, right, is the one with the really creepy, bony head with this look of despair on its face, kind of chin-on-the-arms. It's a very weird, surreal image, and it certainly seems to be drawing on the Gothic associations. So this novel is really influenced by the Gothic, and I think that painting in particular and the Milton death, right? We know really terrible things are going to be happening in this novel, especially, I think, in relation to some of the male figures who are quite tyrannical. And Milton in particular is writing about various tyrannical male figures, whether it's Satan or even a kind of patriarchal God in that retelling. So that energy is really kind of underlying the foreboding of that image.

Lauren [00:41:55] Are the pages in which the paintings are described—are those pages that feel really significant to you in the book or that resonate with you in a certain way? Because one thing that Vanessa and I have both admitted is that every time we read this book, we skim these descriptions. [laughter]

But somehow, once we stopped and slowed down to work through it together, they just felt so redolent, so impregnated with meaning that I wonder, as someone who thinks about visual aesthetics, how significant they seem to you.

Rachel [00:42:25] They do seem hugely important. And I think what you're talking about is the difference between reading a book for pleasure, to kind of immerse yourself in the characters and what's going to happen, versus that moment of going back and analyzing and really digging into, "well, what does this book mean now that we've done the kind of first read through, that pleasure reading?" Where do we go to really find the moments where the novel is signaling to us, "this is important, you better pay attention because I am flagging some really important images, symbols and themes." And I think that's one reason why on your reread, on your second reading, you're going to go back to those paintings. And critics over time have been so drawn to those paintings. If you look online, there's so many different interpretations that people have come up with for those images. So I definitely think it's that moment of rereading that those images really contribute to.

Lauren [00:43:22] Well. Thank you so much, Rachel. That was fascinating.

Rachel [00:43:25] Thank you so much for having me on. It's so fun to be here.

[ending credits music fades in]

Vanessa [00:43:34] You've been listening to On Eyre. We are a small show, so we need your support to run. If you can please consider supporting us on Patreon at Patreon.com/HotAndBotheredRomPod. If you love the show, please leave us a review wherever you listen to this podcast. We are a Not Sorry production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman, our associate producer is Molly Baxter, and we are mixed by Erica Huang. We are distributed by Acast. Special thanks this week to Rachel Teukolsky, Julia Argy, Lara Glass, Emma Smith, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our patrons.

[ending credits music fades out]

Transcribed by Vardit Samuels on 12/31/2022

FOR HOT & BOTHERED

- Listen & read the show notes on any podcast listening platform or read more at the individual episode page on [our website](#).
- Stay in touch on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)
- Become a sustainer on our [Patreon](#).
- Sign up for the email list and learn more at [our website](#). You can also learn more about our other work at [NotSorryWorks.com](#)