

# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Beauty is in the Eye of the Gazer”?: Beauty, Power, and Disability  
Examined Critically in *Jane Eyre* and Other Classic Literature”**

written by

**Abigail Powers**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of the Carl Goodson Honors Program meets the criteria for acceptance and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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April 24th, 2024

OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

“BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE GAZER”?:

BEAUTY, POWER, AND DISABILITY EXAMINED CRITICALLY IN *JANE EYRE*

AND OTHER CLASSIC LITERATURE

HONORS THESIS

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**Preface: An Introduction to My Thesis, for the Honors Program**

My initial thought process for this honors thesis was to combine my major (Communication Sciences and Disorders) and minor (English) studies. With the liberal arts in mind, I wanted to be able to draw these two areas of study into one research study. I initially considered conducting a study on how children's perceptions of people with disability are influenced by the literature they read but decided against conducting a study as I am unfamiliar with how to navigate that research and wanted to do more studying on my own as opposed to conducting a study. My vision then was to select a few classic novels and reread them over the summer, where I would then divide my time spent studying them equally, and then write my thesis over the information. However, the more time I spent reading both primary and secondary sources throughout the summer, I found myself drawn more towards *Jane Eyre*. There were so many details I had missed during my previous readings and so much more information I was interested in studying further. I gave myself permission to ask the question "Is this true?" to the statement "Most true is it that beauty is in the eye of the gazer." Because of these findings, I considered making *Jane Eyre* more of a focus in my thesis. In the whole process of research, I wanted to consider how my two areas of study intertwined. In what areas did the texts I read include discourse about my areas of study? How are the classic novels I love portraying areas of disability? What discourse is already occurring that is connecting my two areas of study, and how can I add to this discourse? I selected *Jane Eyre* specifically because there were already many conversations circulating about Bertha Mason and disability, but not as many with Rochester and disability. How is the injury of Rochester impactful to the story of *Jane Eyre*? I wanted to dive deeper and learn more.

I explored themes relating to disability but also relating to power, wealth, and beauty. Through many conversations with Professor Smith, I became aware of the variety of ways that physical appearance and illness shapes and drives the story of *Jane Eyre*. I decided to follow my curiosity and felt this thesis would be the perfect outlet to learn more.

I imagined my audience to be anyone interested in engaging with the classics. Throughout this writing experience, I struggled with how to approach my audience. I wanted this to be a writing process, but also a creative one in the way that I wanted to format this as more of a guide than a rulebook or list of facts that I found. Classic literature can often be daunting. I did not want to write to an audience of scholars or anyone else experienced in this field necessarily, but rather to those discovering literature and looking for a place to start. For much of my research, I looked at both scholarly sources and more accessible sources to more fully immerse myself into the world of a beginning reader of classics. I considered how classics might be defined and where someone might go when trying to pick which classics to read, cross-referencing “100 Books to Read Before You Die” “BBCs The Big Read” and “Best Books of All Time” lists from places such as BBC, Goodreads, *The New York Times*, Penguin Random House, and Everyman’s Library. I selected books that showed up on all these lists, choosing to label classics as texts that stand the test of time and are valued by society for their timeless storytelling and universal appeal. Author Van Doren describes a classic as “a book that remains in print” (Introduction to *Seven Story Mountain*).

I began my research with these questions in mind: why did the author use disability? How is the character with disability represented? Did the author have the

authority to write about the character who is disabled? Who can write about disability? Is the disability a plot device?

While I wanted to answer each of these questions throughout my thesis, I decided that instead of attempting to teach my readers the answers to all of my questions, I wanted to lead them to a place where they could answer themselves. I wanted to create a space that encouraged my readers to think critically. I did this not to shy away from answering difficult questions: rather, I wanted to invite my readers into the world of active, critical thinking when it comes to literature.

The question of authority was one I also struggled with. While I researched who has the authority to write about disability, I didn't feel I had the knowledge and right to speak on who has authority. I also did not want to take a firm stance and in any way presume anyone else's feelings towards disability. Throughout my research, I even discovered that many people with disabilities disagree on this topic. Because of this, I have decided to include sources for interested readers at the end of my thesis. Some of these sources are written by modern-day disability scholars, while another is published by the Americans with Disabilities Act. I hope that through these resources my readers might, if not come to their own conclusions about who can write about disabilities, become more engaged with the dialogue on the subject. I hope that my readers can grow in their knowledge of the current and previous discourse, and keep these in mind when reading texts that include disability themes.

Another important aspect of my studies is how this research is furthering my own scholarly goals. While I certainly enjoy reading and learning about literature, I wanted to push myself to engage more critically. The more I consider my future career path, I

realize how important it is for me to ask good questions. As I look toward the future, I know that asking good, thought-provoking questions will be important as I work with different populations. I desire to be more knowledgeable about what I consume and how it relates to other aspects of my life, and this thesis has been the perfect outlook for my considerations.

One thing Ouachita has built for me is the value of liberal arts and the importance of interconnected learning. I had many discussions with Professor Smith through my writing meetings about the value of the humanities in all different aspects of study. Throughout my time in college, I have seen the value of learning different subjects outside of my immediate major classes and have even seen how seemingly unrelated classes overlap. This seems to me to be a testament to God's handiwork and craftsmanship in all His creation. Through the modeling of professors and fellow students, I have come to value learning as an interconnected web, and desire to learn as a form of worship. No time spent learning about what God has created is a waste, and I hope that throughout this project I create in myself a deeper sense of the value of learning, and hope to encourage others as well.

In health care, disability and illness is seen every day. While I plan to work in healthcare and will come across the treatment of disability regularly, some who are readers might not come across it as frequently in their occupations. However, everyone is surrounded by disability, and I think that it is valuable to consider how disability is treated and discussed in literature. There is value in considering deeply how disability is discussed.



## 1.) Introduction to Embracing the Classics: An Invitation for Reading Well

You might find yourself here because you want to read a great piece of classic literature. Maybe there was a specific novel you read in your high school English class that you remember vividly, even years later. You want to follow that feeling and find another title that sticks with you for years to come. Maybe you love reading modern literature but want to expand your interests to more classics. Possibly, you've picked up a copy of *100 Books to Read Before You Die* or want to check off more titles from a suggested classics "Goodreads" list. Whatever the case, you are in search of a great title.

Picture this: it's a rainy Saturday. The clouds are gray, and there is a chill in the air. With one glance out of the window, you decide a shelter from the rain is the best use of your day. Now what to do with this day of seeming leisure? You decide a day tackling a title from your TBR shelf is the plan. You stand in front of your towering bookshelf, titles all calling your name. What to pick? There are your personal favorites, of course, offering comfort in their dogeared, softly worn pages. But on this day, you're feeling adventurous. You take a deep breath, reach to the untouched corner of your bookshelf, and grab a copy of *Jane Eyre*, the one your great aunt gifted you years before. You grab your steaming cup of London fog, wrap yourself in the haven of your coziest blanket, and curl up in your squishiest chair. The rain is pounding on the window, but you've never felt safer than in this little corner of the world. You crack open the spine and breathe in the sweet smell of fresh pages and the anticipation of a world undiscovered. Now what?

As I set out to write this thesis, I knew I wanted to learn more about disability as it relates to classic literature. I started with some of my favorite classics and ended up finding many themes, including disability, but also relating to power, wealth, and beauty. I wanted to learn more about these themes, and how they were permeated through the texts I enjoyed. Through this research, a goal of mine was to become more knowledgeable, broad-minded, and critical so that I might be more actively engaged with the texts I interact with.

Classic literature is renowned for stimulating seemingly universal questions about its morals, themes, and values (which helps explain its enduring appeal), while also reflecting and revealing the particular social issues present within the literature and the historical moments that produced it. For centuries, the study of the classics has been its own area of study. The classics are acclaimed for being timeless pieces of art, made for years of reading and discussion. Many resort back to reading the classics for their timeless appeal. Part of what makes literature so valuable to its readers is its power to transform and inspire them: in the words of the esteemed author C.S. Lewis in *An Experiment in Criticism*, literature “admits us to experiences other than our own” (126). Given the widespread influence of classic literature, then, its readers need to think critically about the messages being transmitted through the words by the author. Both authorial intent and reader’s interpretation are important in considering what is consumed by the reader.

Classic novels are those that have stood the test of time. They are cherished worldwide for their timeless storytelling, memorable characters, and noteworthy plots. We might ask, “Why pick up classic literature, instead of reading a modern piece that is more representative of today’s culture and relevant to the reader’s personal life?” Literature written in another time forces the reader to actively engage. If you as the reader are immediately uncomfortable with the setting

and themes of the novel, then you must put in extra effort to combat the unfamiliar settings and outdated language. In the busyness of our culture, reading is often shoved to the side as a lost art. It is not often prioritized. However, as the humanities are becoming less prioritized, it is even more important that they are valued and preserved. With this rush of our society, we need to prioritize reading classic literature and reading it well. This call to treasure classics is not a call to passive consumption of texts that might harbor dated beliefs and harmful stereotypes. As readers, we need to be critical, active consumers. Learning involves much thought and consideration. When picking up a piece of literature, the reader is taken to faraway lands, foreign customs, and situations different than one's own. With this different exposure, one can either be a passive or an active participant in taking in the information presented and analyzing it for its truthfulness, character representation, and messages associated. With this in mind, and when handled well and appropriately, classic literature has the power to influence, broaden worldview, and challenge its readers. We should approach literature with an open mind and a discerning eye to engage with the text well.

Another reason that reading is necessary to cultivate and enrich our lives is because it necessitates empathy. Classic literature in particular: texts that have withstood centuries of study and criticism, contain characters and worlds vastly from the current one. Classic literature infuses past events, difficulties, and struggles, and brings the reader along in the journey. Through reading classic literature, we join in with the experience of the characters. Those characters in situations painful to read about often open our eyes to "rich messages for us to break down our self-absorption and deepen our perception" (Prude).

To discuss approaching texts one might not agree with, we must go about the texts with wisdom, knowledge, and discernment. It is important to wrestle with ideas that we do not agree

with, because “unless you understand where a worldview comes from and its key doctrines, you will never be able to respond to the concerns of those who believe it” (Prude). It is evident, through reading texts produced by authors in different periods, how culture as a whole was grappling with ideas, including disability and physical differences between people. Overall, this thesis seeks to invite readers to conversations about the texts discussed and equip those who haven’t yet read the texts. When researching and writing this thesis, my main goal was not to write for an audience of scholars and professionals, but rather anyone interested in engaging with classic literature. I desire for classic, well-known literature to feel accessible and approachable to all. As you are reading this, I hope you will feel encouraged by the accessibility to resources about these texts.

Here, I will provide some general reading response questions that will get you to start thinking in this format:

- What are the major themes (ideas, moods, lessons) in this piece? Are there any minor themes as well? Do you see a motif (a recurring pattern or theme) in this piece?
- What tenses does the writer use (past, present, future, speculative)? What are the effects of these tenses? How does the writer combine tenses to create layers of time?
- How does the writer structure the piece and to what effect? (Why does it begin where it does? Why does it end with the image or scene the writer chooses?) (Miller and Paola).

I would encourage my readers to keep these questions in mind when moving forward in their research. This will open up some more questions as we explore reading critically, further studying *Jane Eyre*, and considering *Jane Eyre* alongside other texts.

## 2.) Diving Deeper: Approaches to Reading Critically

As you will soon notice, I am not going to answer the question of “how to read critically” with one answer. I desire not to provide answers for you, but to provide resources that will bring you to your own answer. As you flip to the end of this thesis, you will notice there are some lists of questions and supplementary reading. You can use this to help your critical reading process. Instead of providing a blueprint to you as my reader on how exactly to be a critical reader, I want to provide a couple of approaches.

Consider the influence of literature on society. If someone in the future wanted to study the first quarter of the 21st century, certainly studying the arts, media, and entertainment of our time would give them insight into what it was like to live in this age. While simply looking at the media would not give every piece of information important to understanding, it would be an important aspect of the study. Consequently, writing often reflects the society of the time. As one reads and studies classic literature, one gets a glimpse into the society of the time. Just as we study history to learn about past mistakes, we also must study literature to learn from it. Should we scrub out every bit of history, simply because problematic choices were made? Of course not. Through access to history, we learn from mistakes. Part of learning about history is learning more about what society was consuming regularly. As Winston Churchill said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it” (History Repeating). While I will not provide you with an answer on “how,” I will provide a possible framework. Critical reading could involve: 1.) situating a work among contemporary social and historical contexts. This could include political agents, technology, major events and conflicts, and daily modes of life from the era the text was produced. 2.) Identifying some values (cultural, aesthetic, and/ or political) that have helped shape the work and how readers have interpreted it. 3.) Investigating texts through critical lenses-

such as reader-response, structuralist, postcolonial, Marxist, feminist, or disability theories. These could use specialized vocabulary and approaches to explore meaning in works of literature.

### **3.) Thesis Seeds: Initial Project Ideas and Questions**

As I sat down to begin writing this thesis, many thoughts and questions tumbled in my mind. How could I even begin to write about disability? While I love reading the classics, I haven't dipped my toe in the water of reading all of them. I am also no disability expert by any means. While I wanted to use this project to learn more about disability, I became quickly overwhelmed at the thought of actually writing about it, and having other people read my work. My biggest fear was saying something incorrectly, and causing harm to my readers or leading my readers astray from the truth. Throughout this experience of research, ideas shifted as I decided how best to approach the topic I was interested in writing, all while being respectful and conscientious to represent populations I am not a part of with respect and accuracy.

Through this thesis, I wish to both encourage and invite my readers to the joy and journey of reading classic literature, while equipping them with ways to do so critically and actively. No reading of any text is perfect, but I hope that through thoughtful engagement, one can learn well and join in the lifelong chorus of reading and reading well.

When exploring how to define "classic literature," I considered where lay people might go to find inspiration for their next great read. I used several lists of "100 Books to Read Before You Die" because I felt that those lists might be the most approachable and easily accessible for those interested in finding literature to read.

As I began writing this thesis, I sought to select which texts I wanted to focus on during my discussion of classic literature. While I had many texts that I enjoyed and wanted to research, I kept finding myself coming back to *Jane Eyre*. Because of this, I took it as a sign to focus this thesis predominantly on *Jane Eyre* and use it as a launching point to explore other pieces of classic literature.

#### 4.) Unexpected Fruit: *Jane Eyre* as a Case Study

*Jane Eyre* has been a favorite of mine for many years. I want to explore the intricacies of the text throughout this project. In this classic novel, Jane Eyre is an orphaned woman, who after experiencing many tribulations and abuse at her aunt's home and boarding school, comes to live at Thornfield Hall as a governess for a single man's ward. She quickly falls in love with him and then has to discover right and wrong when she finds out he has a hidden wife. There is a lot more to this story, of course, and readers who aren't familiar with the text might want to check out a more complete summary of the text here.<sup>1</sup> While I love the strong female main character found in other literature from Brontë's time, there is something so empowering about Jane Eyre's unwavering passion to do what is right, moral, and honorable. Her resilience and strong temperament is one I've enjoyed reading about many times over.

An appeal to *Jane Eyre* for many is Mr. Rochester. My initial thoughts for Mr. Rochester, however, were underwhelmed. I disliked his overbearing, slightly manipulative choices, and Jane and Rochester's struggle for power and independence felt concerning. However, when researching for this project, I wanted to reread the classic as unbiased as possible and tried to keep an open mind.

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<sup>1</sup>Go to page 28 for link to a plot summary

*Jane Eyre* is a piece of classic literature that is adored by many. The intrigue of Mr. Rochester and the mystery of his seemingly haunted estate have pulled its readers in and captured their hearts. This thesis will use *Jane Eyre* as a foundation for further exploration of the necessity of reading classical literature. *Jane Eyre* captivates the hearts of many through the affection of the reader for the main character. Jane is poor, plain, and average. Growing up an orphan, she is shunned by all and is unloved. The reader's heart goes to Jane out of sympathy for her lowly situation. Jane's childhood is miserable and lonely. Once she finally makes a name for herself in the world, she is met with another obstacle in the name of Mr. Rochester.

The introduction of the edition of *Jane Eyre* used in this research is riddled with discussion of social privilege. Jane was constantly belittled and bullied for her "insistence on her right to be loved and valued as an individual, and her equally passionate resistance to the rigidly hierarchical social distinctions of a class that informed Victorian society" (Weisser 15). Because of her economic inadequacies and physical differences from her cousins, her childhood was expressed exclusively as one of loveless pain and tragedy. In a way, the whole novel can be viewed as a discussion of human value and the Victorian social belief that "one should not base human value on differences in social or economic rank, presenting a kind of argument for meritocracy against deeply ingrained values of authority and social privilege" (15).

Once Jane is finally out of the house of her aunt and uncle and is under another roof (Thornfield Hall) she is placed under a different set of controlling ideals. Rochester is immediately dependent on her, both for Adele's education, but also in the possession of her thoughts and dependence. He desires her and wishes to claim her "thoughts, conversation, and company, for life" (308).



Throughout the novel, Jane is insistent in her demands of deserving love, and in wanting to do what is right. She is repeatedly commanded to control her passions and is put down because of her age. After the incident in the red room (where she is locked in a room filled with superstition and experiences a night filled with terror, ghosts, and isolation) Mrs. Reed tells her that “children can feel, but cannot analyze their feelings; and if the analysis is partially affected in thought, they know not how to express the result of the process in words” (20). Her character is passionate, and she is constantly being made to feel like her passions add to her character negatively.

*Jane Eyre* was written in a time marred by change in England. Written in the 1840s, British society was heavily influenced by the changes occurring because of the Industrial Revolution. Mines and factories allowed women to have jobs outside of their homes and consequently opened up other job opportunities as well. This financial and social freedom that was provided for women changed society in many ways. Because of this, the newfound opportunities for women stimulated many societal conversations on the roles of women in the home and where their loyalties lie.

All of these ideas snowball and create the perfect starting point for Jane. Many classics can connect with the themes and ideas that they share with *Jane Eyre*. Themes of disability, as well as wealth, power, and beauty, can be discussed and paralleled with *Jane Eyre*, and this thesis will seek to explore these comparisons.

### **5.) *Jane Eyre* and Disability**

Given my initial interest in disability studies, I want to spend some time exploring the themes of disability found in *Jane Eyre*. I want to note to my readers that I will not be focusing

on the most obvious use of disability, found in the character of Bertha Mason. While certainly much can be said regarding her character, I am choosing to focus on the more nuanced use of physical disability occurring to Mr. Rochester's character after the burning of Thornfield Hall.

A big theme in *Jane Eyre*, and one that demands attention from its readers, is the question of why Brontë chose to disable Rochester at the end of the novel. While the fire was certainly convenient in furthering the plot and getting rid of the biggest obstacle, Bertha, why did Brontë choose to alter his physical state? It would have been much easier for Rochester to remain physically unchanged, as he would have been able to transition to a life without his home with all of his faculties unchanged. However, Brontë made a conscious decision to make him handicapped.

Through Rochester's physical state of being blind, crippled, and helpless, he needs a caregiver. Because of Rochester's need for her to meet functional needs, critics argue that Brontë was

“perpetrating a kind of unconscious ‘castration’ of his masculinity. In other words, Jane's selfhood, including the ability to express, in satisfying her sexual and romantic desire, seems to be achieved only at the expense of Rochester's passion, which was the key to her sense of his ‘mastery’” (34).

Because of Rochester's sudden need for her, overwhelming even his desire, Jane can in turn control him. Does Jane need to control Rochester, or to ‘serve’ him to marry him?

“Through the caring for Mr. Rochester, Jane is able to satisfy an inherent desire, that of service: for ‘the greatest love Jane knows is intimately intermingled with nursing; to care for Rochester, in both senses, is the climax of her story’” (Schaffer 2).

*Jane Eyre* gives many opportunities to examine Victorian suffering through the injustices presented to many of the characters- chronic illness, malnourishment, alcoholism, mental and physical disabilities, nervous episodes, and trauma. This novel is one in which “people suffer and in which a significant measure of the moral virtue of a person is how well she or he works to alleviate that suffering” ( Schaffer 266). While one can certainly analyze the ethics of care through this novel, one can also strongly consider what it looks like to be a caregiver. Through Jane’s attentive, sacrificial care for Rochester, one can examine the care which “ is what names a living, complicated relation between people, an ongoing imaginative projection into the life of the other, a kind of love” (267). Since so many characters in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are disabled in some form or fashion, they are almost under-acknowledged. This is an interesting point, “Brontë gives us a set of fictional worlds in which disability is so much the norm that it need not be announced as such, and it is the very matter-of-fact, understated nature of her works’ depiction of disability that makes them so radical for modern readers” (268). These bodies are not extraordinary (269).

#### a.) *Jane Eyre* and Disability in Context

Not only can *Jane Eyre* be studied as a stand-alone text, but it can also be studied alongside other pieces of literature as we attempt to learn more about its content and connection to disability studies. Some of these classic texts include *Little Women*<sup>2</sup>, *A Christmas Carol*<sup>3</sup>, *The*

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to page 23 for a supplementary reading guide

<sup>3</sup> Refer to page 25 for a supplementary reading guide

*Secret Garden*<sup>4</sup>, and *Frankenstein*<sup>5</sup>. These texts give us perspective and help us to think critically about the comparisons between stories.

**b.) *Jane Eyre* alongside *Little Women***

When I thought of what other texts I wanted to include alongside *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women* came to mind. It has always been a favorite of mine and one that I know is endearing to many. I also associated the role of Helen Burns in a lot of ways with Beth March, and wanted to explore some similarities within their relationship further.

For characters such as Helen Burns from *Jane Eyre*, heaven is a destination approaching soon. Helen Burns is a sickly character, introduced from the beginning as being weak and small. For Helen, God is her comfort in illness, and she looks to heaven as the answer to her prayers and as a refuge from her sickness. Jane decides to follow her whims and passions, which leads to many pitfalls and turns in her story. Since Helen is a perfect character, she needs no development and serves almost as an alternative choice to the story. Either Jane could submit to the misfortunes against her and look to heaven as her immediate future, or choose to fight and let her rebellious nature take her through twists and turns on her way to maturity.

Beth March of *Little Women* is another character that lacks all “ambition or self-interest” and instead has no character flaw to overcome, unlike the rest of the sisters (Keith 54). Being another character utilized by classic literature as the “perfect ill child,” Beth stands almost as a two-dimensional character off which the others could springboard as they develop in maturity through the course of the series. Each of the other sisters have strong feelings that come from false wishes and passions that must be overcome throughout the story.

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to page 26 for a supplementary reading guide

<sup>5</sup> Refer to page 27 for a supplementary reading guide

“Like Helen, illness visits Beth because she is not fully engaged with life. She too has an ‘other-worldly’ quality about her- a dreaminess which keeps her happily at home whilst others long to have adventures. Like Helen Burns, Beth is also part of the pilgrimage of another, stronger, life-loving character- in this case her unconventional, clever, difficult, older sister Jo” (54).

Both girls are taken from the world in girlhood, and both are during pivotal transitional times. Beth was thirteen years old during *Little Women*, but “not destined for womanhood” (55).

The characters also serve as moral role models for the other characters. In *Little Women*, during Beth’s first touch of death, the other girls make promises to God to be better girls if only their sister survives. Because of the eventual death of both Beth and Helen, the other characters are drawn towards virtue and become better people. Just as “Beth has never been fully part of this world but now her body reflects her more or less complete disengagement from life” (62) the other girls become more human and more developed through the process of their sister’s illness.

In many stories of classic literature, there is a character filled with goodness and virtue that is set as the “morally pure” character in the story. This character is often too good to live and dies sometime during the story. As a reader, one wonders why the author chooses to kill the character, and what the death means for the overall story. Causing heartbreak and often despair for the reader, one may wonder what the purpose is behind the character’s death. Similar to each other, these characters often are meek, saintly creatures, known for their virtuous decisions and wisdom. They are often passive weaklings. One might wonder if they serve as character buffers to the stronger personalities of the main characters, and are used to demonstrate the character

flaws that the main characters attempt to defeat throughout the story. These characters “do not have to learn how to ‘be’ in the world; they are already well on their way to the next one” (34).

## **6.) Other Angles on Jane Eyre- Beauty, Power, etc.**

When first deciding to do most of my research on *Jane Eyre*, I knew I wanted to incorporate disability, but upon further reading, I realized there were many other themes that I could not overlook. Many go under the umbrella of selfhood, identity, and societal norms and expectations. They felt necessary to me in adding another element of depth and explanation to my project, so I read with an open mind and ended up finding many elements including beauty, power, and wealth as key to the story. These themes feel adjacent to my project, as self-identity and combatting society’s perception and understanding of selfhood is a big theme in disability discussion.

### **a.) *Jane Eyre* and Beauty**

“Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you!” (294)

*Jane Eyre* argues extensively about the impact of beauty on traditional Victorian culture. Beauty is an idea that is fundamental to the story of *Jane Eyre*. Poor and plain, she starts the story in a home where she is unloved and shunned. She is treated as “less than” and she struggles to be heard and represented. Little girls, above all, need love and acceptance, and she gets little. With parents who have passed away, she has no one on earth to love her except for her caretakers who do little nurturing. Even the servants look down on her for her ugliness and stark contrast to

her cousins. Her physical appearance plays a role in her being unwelcome. The Reed children look quite different, and are dressed lavishly and carry themselves with an air of wealth and disdain for those who possess less. These relationships with other characters and how they treat Jane based on her physical appearance speak volumes to Brontë's discussion of how influences such as beauty and wealth impact loveability. "A beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition," said one of the servants at Gateshead Hall (30). Another said, "If she were a nice, pretty child, one might be compassionate to her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that" (22). The other characters are always telling Jane how she should be different: how she should act more boldly, be less passionate, and be less frightened (37, 39).

#### **b.) Beauty and Wealth as Power**

Jane is in a unique position socially, because she is more well-off than the servants, but less privileged than her cousins and aunt, so she lives in a perpetual limbo between the two—never really fitting in anywhere or having anyone around her that can sympathize with her situation and relate to her rank. Since she is orphaned, her social class is ambiguous, which further isolates her from everyone in her surroundings.

This ambiguity is explored further as Jane takes the position of governess at Thornfield Hall. Having little funds of her own, and no family money to back her up, she offers her educational services as a means of providing for herself. She was cultured and highly knowledgeable, with accomplishments equaling those of aristocratic ladies, but because of her social standing, society forced her down from a possible higher status and forced her to use her talents as a means of providing for herself only. Because of this, upon entering her job position as governess, she was intelligent but powerless and penniless. Thus begins the struggle for power

between Jane and Mr. Rochester. In intelligence and spirit she isn't lacking and stands as an equal to him. She can challenge him and stand up to him, which helps push their relationship forward. Because she is equal in intelligence but he has extreme wealth and power, she is lesser than him. Her status is consequently much lower.

It is only through his physical deformity that they are able to be on equal footing, and she is able to hold some power over him, therefore making their status more equal. After his initial marriage proposal, Jane is hesitant to marry him, worrying that him stooping down in social class he might be "condescending" to marry her. This is largely influenced as a critique of Victorian class. In Chapter 23, beauty is mentioned again. One of the book's most influential lines "if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you." (294) once again, references her appearance as hindering her ability to be loved and maintain class standing.

She came into money from her uncle which gives her financial status, but some deeper rooted status is fulfilled through Rochester's illness. Through their departure and ultimate reconciliation, Jane and Rochester are able to come together when she proves herself able to be independently wealthy and equal in social status.

### **c.) Servitude as Home**

Jane associates home as a place where she can be loved and also be useful. At Gateshead, she serves no purpose in the family structure. Even at Lowood as a student, she feels largely unloved and unwelcomed, but once she becomes a teacher and finds a role that she can serve, she is able to find her place. Her desire for belonging is compounded with her desire to be useful and important to another, as we see in her comfort with her cousins and ultimately at Thornfield.



Through her depiction and descriptions of Jane Eyre as being a heroine without good looks or outward charm, Brontë “unapologetically defies not only class expectations but also romantic expectations, and fearlessly refused to conform to any standards of how her heroine should be portrayed” (Sparling). Jen Cadwallader says that Charlotte Brontë’s use of a plain female heroine “[condemns] an upper-class system of values which, by emphasizing the importance of a woman’s appearance, limited her ability to develop selfhood and achieve autonomous action” (234).

### **7.) Continuing the Adventure: Resources and Next Steps for Your Reading**

The rainy day is waning away. Your London fog was sipped away hours ago, and what little light was peeking through the storm clouds throughout the day is gone from sight. You read the last few pages of *Jane Eyre* and close the cover, letting out a sigh. “What a wonderful use of my day!” you think to yourself.

Now what? After spending your day in the pages, where do you go from here? You’ve embraced the call to action, and feel excited at the possibility of exploration. However, you’re also feeling overwhelmed. You have so many questions. Don’t fear! I am going to provide you with some next steps that can serve as a reference tool as you continue your journey.

#### **a.) Suggestions for Further Reading**

As part of this research, I read many titles that did not end up being the main focus of my thesis. However, I wanted to honor my research and my readers, and include some of these titles as supplementary reading options. For example, if after reading *Jane Eyre*, the discussion on how Jane’s caretakers treated her and how their behavior resulted in her altered perception of herself, as well as how her friendship with Helen Burns impacted her, I’d recommend *The Secret Garden*<sup>6</sup>. If the Victorian approach to disability as a commentary on sentimentality interests you,

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to page 26 for a supplementary reading guide

refer to *A Christmas Carol*<sup>7</sup>. If physical appearance and disfigurement utilized in *Jane Eyre* is a topic you would like to read more into, see *Frankenstein*<sup>8</sup>.

### **b.) Where to Go From Here**

As readers, you might be asking yourself, “Okay, so what does this all mean for me?” I have provided notes on my personal research, and I hope these tools will be beneficial for you as readers. However, my goal for readers, above all, is to make this thesis a call to action. I wish to encourage my readers to not be intimidated by the seemingly daunting task of reading classic literature, but rather to be mindful of elements. Be curious. Notice areas that might seem to be problematic, and research them. Do not be afraid to ask questions. So much more learning will occur if you step outside your realm of comfort and explore. To refer back to my initial thoughts—it’s typical to be uncomfortable about topics you aren’t familiar with. However, what is important is to explore this discomfort and seek to become more knowledgeable. Instead of ending this thesis providing a perfect conclusion and note takeaways, I want to open this up as an opportunity for you to do your own research. I have provided some supplementary reading and questions for you to come to conclusions on your own.

### **c.) Authority**

One area I sought to find answers to throughout this research was who can even write about disability. In walking into this project, I expected there to be one universally agreed upon answer. However, the more I researched, the more I found that even scholars disagree on who can write about disability. This served as an interesting topic to research. I encourage you to explore some of these articles, and become more familiar with this topic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to page 25 for a supplementary reading guide

<sup>8</sup> Refer to page 27 for a supplementary reading guide

<sup>9</sup> Refer to page 28 for more resources

**e.) My Final Thoughts**

Reflecting on my studies, there were many areas that my eyes were opened to. I love classic literature, and have been reading it for upwards of 10 years. This thesis was an encouragement to me in answering the “why classic literature?” question that I think is constantly being asked. I felt affirmed in my desire to continue reading texts from ages past. This also translated to my academic and professional studies. As I mentioned previously, I have an appreciation for the intricacies in connections of the liberal arts. I desire to use the knowledge I have gained through this research to continue to be an active participant in what I desire to engage in. I hope that through every novel I read, I gain knowledge and understanding about the world around me, and how I can better treat others. I plan to continue to be a lifelong learner, and seek to learn in and outside of my field.

If you have taken my advice, then you have likely delved deeper into the world of classic literature. It would be safe to assume that you have found connections between different texts. Likely, you have seen characters that have been exploited and treated wrongly. You have also seen commentary on topics such as wealth and beauty. Also, I am sure you have come across topics unique to this research. I will conclude my thesis, as a final thought, with a few questions that will help you tie these texts all together, in a classic, liberal arts fashion.

## 8.) Questions for Readers

### a.) For readers of *Jane Eyre*

- Consider the ways the servants and Reed family treat and talk to Jane in the beginning of the novel. How do you think Jane's surroundings impact the way she views herself and dictate her life?
- Consider how the use of caretaking is used throughout *Jane Eyre*. Poor caretakers, such as the Reeds and the cruel teachers at Lowood, led Jane to spiraling and illness.
- How does Helen help Jane endure her abuse from Mr. Brocklehurst? What impression does this create about Helen? (Jerry W. Brown)
- Why does Rochester describe Jane as a caged bird? How accurate is this description?
- How has Jane's Judgment of Rochester softened as a result of her love for him? (Jerry W. Brown)
- Rochester tells Jane, "if you are cast in a different mould to the majority, it is no merit of yours; Nature did it" (p. 153-54). Are you intended to agree or disagree with this statement? (Reading Guide from *Jane Eyre*)
- Jane asserts her equality to Rochester (p. 284), and St. John (p. 452). What does Jane mean by equality, and why is it so important to her? (Reading Guide from *Jane Eyre*)
- What is the balance of power between Jane and Rochester when they marry? Does this balance change from the beginning of the marriage to the me ten years later that Jane describes at the end of the novel (walReading Guide from *Jane Eyre*)
- Rochester's disastrous marriage to Bertha was based on passion, while St. John refuses to marry Rosamund because of his passion for her. What is Brontë saying about the role passion should play in marriage? (Reading Guide from *Jane Eyre*)

- Brontë populates the novel with many female characters roughly the same age as Jane—Georgiana and Eliza Reed, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram, Mary and Diana Rivers, and Rosamund Oliver. How do comparisons with these characters shape the reader's understanding of Jane's character? (Reading Guide from *Jane Eyre*)
- Contrasting, the loving care of the Rivers family, serves as an almost healing to Jane's spirit.
- With this in mind, how might you perceive Jane's role in caring for Rochester after his accident?
- Should an individual who holds a position of authority be granted the respect of others, regardless of his or her character? What do you think Brontë's answer to this question is (Reading Guide from *Jane Eyre*)
- How was the destruction of Thornfield Hall foreshadowed? (Jerry W. Brown)
- How has Rochester helped redeem himself for his hatred of Bertha? Or do you think he has at all? Consider how you felt as a reader when reading the destruction of Thornfield and Bertha's resulting death. (Jerry W. Brown)
- Rochester acknowledges that God has judged him but says God has also been merciful. What does he mean? (Jerry W. Brown)
- Why does Jane finish her story by speaking of St. John? (Jerry W. Brown)
- Compare and contrast Jane Eyre to other iconic female heroines from this literary era. (Using Contextual Clues)
- How does Jane resist many of the stereotypes placed on women during her time period? (Using Contextual Clues)
- How does the inclusion of a plain looking female character help advance women's literature as a whole?

- Read this quote by critic Talia Scaffer “In Brontë’s fiction, disability is an omnipresent condition of life, like poverty or hunger, and the need to give care can be restorative or corrosive, produce tender mutual love or destroy one’s psychological authenticity” (4).



**b.) Sickly Saints: *Jane Eyre*'s Helen Burns and *Little Women*'s Beth March**

- In the first two chapters, the girls use John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a model for their own journey to becoming "little women." What was Alcott trying to say by using such a strongly philosophical piece of literature as the girls' model? (Reading Guide from *Little Women*)
- Some critics argue that the characters are masochistic. Meg is the perfect wife, Amy is the social gold digger, and Beth is the eternally loving and patient woman. Do you believe these characterizations are masochistic? If so, do you think Alcott could have characterized them any other way while maintaining the realism of the society she lived in? And if this is true, what of Jo's character? (Reading Guide from *Little Women*)
- What do the fates of Meg, Beth, and Amy suggest about Alcott’s view of the options available to American women at the time? (*Discussion Guide for Little Women*)
- What purpose does Beth's death serve? Was Alcott simply making a sentimental novel even more so, or was this a play on morality and philosophy? Do you think Beth was intended to be a Christ figure? (Reading Guide from *Little Women*)

- One of the themes of "Little Women" is the struggle the young women have between their personal growth and societal duties expected of them in a 19th-century society where women didn't have many rights. How does each of the March sisters and Marmee deal with these constraints?
- Do you feel Beth's death was necessary for Jo's growth in the novel?
- Why is Beth's illness used to make Meg appreciate the "real blessings of life?" (Chapter 18) (*Discussion Guide for Little Women*)
- Why are we told that Beth's life represents "the true success which is possible to all"? (Chapter 40) (*Discussion Guide for Little Women*)
- The last two chapters find Jo putting aside her budding career to run a school with her husband. Why do you think Alcott made her strongest feminine figure sacrifice her career and life path for that of her husband's? (Eney)
- In light of the last question, in what ways does Beth's character embody sacrifice and servanthood and parallel Jo's tendencies?

I have included some reading guide questions I felt would be the most helpful, but if you are interested in more, here are some sources from which I pulled some of these questions:



c.) *Sentimentality vs. Scrutiny: Brontë's Jane Eyre and Dickens's A Christmas Carol*

*A Christmas Carol* showcases the use of disability for sentimentality, which in many ways contrasts with the harsh, bleak depictions of illness and disability in another Victorian piece, *Jane Eyre*. Brontë's depictions of illness and physical impairment are in many ways devoid of the frilly, hazy, sentimental depiction Dickens adopts.

- What are the conflicts in *A Christmas Carol*? What types of conflict (physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional) did you notice in this novel? (Lombardi)
- How does the ghost's responses and attitude towards Tiny Tim influence the story?
- How are the themes of moral responsibility, sentimentality, duty, and redemption utilized through the novel? In what ways does Tiny Tim's illness necessitate these themes?
- How necessary is the setting of Christmas to the story? Could the story be set in any other season, or is the atmosphere of Christmas necessary?
- What does *A Christmas Carol* teach us about life and humanity? (Using Textual Clues)

I have included some reading guide questions I felt would be the most helpful, but if you are interested in more, here are some sources from which I pulled some of these questions:





**d.) Unlikely Saviors: *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Garden*'s Mary Lennox**

In many pieces of classic literature, characters with disabilities are seen as mean or belligerent in some way, and the root of their negative behavior stems from their physical state. These characters read often as two-dimensional characters. Often, the attitudes of the disabled characters are encouraged or fueled by the way other characters treat them. In *The Secret Garden*, both Mary and Colin are treated poorly by their parents and adult figures, but Colin is discussed more often due to his physical impairments.

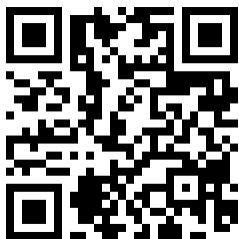
- What emotions does Colin's original health status evoke for you?
- Could Mary and Colin have found the path to spiritual and physical healing without Dickon? (*The Secret Garden*- Reading Guide)
- In your opinion, does Mr. Craven, after subjecting his son to years of neglect, deserve redemption? (*The Secret Garden*- Reading Guide)
- How does Mr. Craven's treatment of Collin at the end of the novel, after he is healed, further emphasize the undercurrent of disability throughout the novel?
- Are there implications with this story that there can "be no self-respect and, even more important, no love where there is an imperfect body, not even from a parent?" (Keith 139).



**e.) Monstrous Mirrors: *Jane Eyre*'s Helen Burns and *Frankenstein*'s Monster**

Shunned as an outcast for her looks and other differences from her cousins, Jane Eyre is trained to be indifferent of her “poor and plain” image. When she flees Thornfield after discovering the secret Bertha Mason, she also flees “a man who wishes to recreate her, to distort her perception of herself by attempting to force on her extravagant clothes, unwanted bridal veils, and ultimately a false identity as Mrs. Rochester” (Young 328).

- Consider the role of caretaking and parenthood in this text, and how it shapes character relationships and outcomes.
- One of the novel’s tragedies is the inability of characters to recognize the humanity of the creature. What qualities make us human? Which of these qualities does the creature possess? What qualities does he not have? (*Discussion Questions for Frankenstein*)
- Why are Frankenstein and his monster both ultimately miserable, bereft of human companionship, and obsessed with revenge? Are they in the same situation at the end of the novel? (*Discussion Questions for Frankenstein*)
- Throughout the story, Frankenstein blames himself and fate for what occurs. Would you consider him to be a victim of fate, or merely is what follows a result of his choices?
- Is the monster’s body a problem, or just people’s response?



**9.) Supplementary Reading Guide- Blindness and Other Physical Disabilities in Literature**

If you are looking for books that accurately represent blindness and other physical disabilities, consider perusing these lists for your next read:



**10.) Who Can Write about Disability?**

This is what some have to say about who has the authority to write about disability.

Consider these articles as food for thought when you read texts that discuss disability.



BBC- Jane Eyre Plot Summary



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