KNOWING & DOING
C·S·LEWIS INSTITUTE
A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind

From the Spring 2017 issue of Knowing & Doing:

The Wisdom of Jane Eyre

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Imagine for a moment Charlotte Brontë's famous character Jane Eyre, recently parted from Mr. Rochester after the discovery just moments before their wedding of Rochester's still very alive albeit mentally incapacitated wife, sitting on the set of the popular television program *The View.* Shortly after their thwarted marriage ceremony—the brother of Rochester's wife having declared an impediment to the marriage—Rochester approached a devastated Jane and offered to whisk her away to his Mediterranean villa, out of the sight of prying eyes.

Whoopi Goldberg—"But Jane, Rochester is handsome *and* rich. How can you just walk away from him?" Barbara Walters—"But Jane, you love each other! Why shouldn't you be together?"

At this point in the novel, Jane Eyre found herself in a situation that would be the envy of many of her modern contemporaries. She and Rochester did love each other, and they had the financial resources to live and travel the world opulently. Remember, this was the world before Facebook, Twitter, and camera phones. Only a small circle of people would have ever known the truth. What then, is the value of a novel published almost 170 years ago, and what lessons could be applicable for us and how we are to live today?

In his attempt to persuade Jane to run away with him, Rochester was positively twenty-first century in his appeal. He asked, "Is it better to drive a fellow creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law—no man being injured in the breach?" In examining Rochester's question, it's important to recognize that it had two parts. First, he asked Jane whether his feelings and emotions, in this case his intense feelings for Jane, weren't more important than a human law: the law that once a person is committed in matrimony, he or she must forsake all others. And second, he asked Jane what could be so wrong with their being together as long as no one else was being hurt. These are questions we hear asked frequently today by the enlightened voices of "progress" in culture. Why should long-standing traditions get in the way of my happiness? What's the big deal if no one else is hurt by it?

Rochester's appeal to emotion in the first half of his petition to Jane was rooted in a self-preoccupation that elevated emotional intensity above the God-ordained institution of holy matrimony. As we see currently, self-preoccupation and desires easily attach to the language of rights, in this case, Rochester believed he had the "right" to be happy, even though he was still married to someone else. His desires, feelings, and wishes congealed into a central inner force willing to discard one of the fundamental societal and theological tenets of civilization, as self-preoccupation and feelings generally treat any form of restraint as a barrier needing to be bulldozed. For Rochester, as with many today, the only requirement necessary for moral approval of a relationship is the consent of the parties.

The second half of Rochester's question plays on the contemporary belief that if a behavior doesn't harm anyone else, it must be permissible. Rochester believed that he and Jane could cocoon themselves in their own world, and no one else would have been hurt. Both Rochester and contemporary society fail to recognize that there are two components to the "no harm, no foul" moral standard, and both are based on theological inaccuracies. The

first inaccuracy builds on the previously discussed elevation of the self. When an individual bases behavior on his or her belief that an action doesn't harm another, the person making the statement sets him- or herself up as the arbiter of right and wrong. This is a role reserved for God alone. Psalm 119:142 reminds us that "thy law is the truth." It's not "my law is the truth."

The second component of the "no harm, no foul" standard of morality is that it fails to take into account the spiritual effects of the behavior upon the internal (and sometimes physical) person. There are consequences for following a standard other than the Lord's standard. Scripture tells us that not following God's law can lead to separation from God, a darkening of understanding (both Eph. 4:18), a decrease in our desire for God (Rom. 3:11), and a coarsening of our wills that causes a turning from God (Rom. 3:12).

As Jane buttressed herself against Rochester's questions, she was confronted with considering both her personal happiness and her view of romantic love, two issues that have been elevated to divine status in today's culture. For those who know the story, how is it that Jane was able to choose and adhere to a standard she knew to be right despite Rochester's pressure and her own adoration of him? Perhaps a good place to look for the answer is to examine the life of the creator of *Jane Eyre,* Charlotte Brontë.

Charlotte Brontë, the third of six children, was born to a poor English clergyman in 1816. When Charlotte was five, her mother died of cancer. Her two older sisters died when Charlotte was nine, from tuberculosis brought on as a result of the poor conditions at the boarding school the three attended. For a time, she worked intermittently as a governess, until she and her younger sisters, both of whom would enjoy literary success (Emily with *Wuthering Heights* and Anne with *Agnes Grey*), decided to start their own school. Their venture failed miserably. Despite their advertisements, they didn't have a single enrollee. Fortunately for literature, the sisters focused on their writing, with Charlotte publishing under the pen name Currer Bell.

Just as *Jane Eyre* was experiencing commercial success, the specter of death appeared again for Charlotte. Her sisters Emily and Anne and brother Branwell all died during an eight-month period. The earlier tragedies Brontë had suffered bled into the themes of *Jane Eyre*—struggle, long-suffering, and endurance. Even C.S. Lewis, in a letter written to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves (a letter, it is important to note, dated March 6, 1917, when Lewis did not yet believe in God), acknowledged the prolonged struggles of Charlotte Brontë. Lewis wrote, "When God can get hold of a really first rate character like Charlotte Brontë to torture, he's just in his element: cruelty after cruelty without any escape."[1]

Through sufferings and hardships the roots of our faith often take hold and grow, manifesting themselves in our worldviews. Jane's response to Rochester's persuasive enticement appears to be a derivative of Charlotte Brontë's personal orthodoxy, perhaps sourced in her own sorrows and difficulties. Encapsulated in this response is a theological underpinning that is almost nonexistent in our culture: the concept of self-denial.

Jane responds to Rochester,

> *I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man … Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation; they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be.*

In these words are the faint echoes of Jesus telling us, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23–24 NIV).

Today self-denial stands almost no chance against the relentless pursuit of self-love, which is often fanned into a flame by technology and entertainment. J.R.R. Tolkien discussed the concept of denial in a letter to his son, Michael, dated March 1941. Interestingly, Tolkien is providing Michael with marriage advice. He writes, “the essence of a fallen world is that the best cannot be attained by free enjoyment, or by what is called ‘self-realization’ (usually a nice name for self-indulgence, wholly inimical to the realization of other selves); but by denial, by suffering.”[2] Jane might have gone from poor governess to material wealth and comfort combined with an exciting life with the man she loved dearly if only she had succumbed to her emotions and Rochester’s persuasion. From a temporal standpoint, this seemed ideal, but from an eternal standpoint, Jane knew this wasn’t the “best,” to use Tolkien’s word. It was only by saying no to Rochester that she could ever hope to have this “best.”

In fact, this may lead to the greatest lesson we can learn from both the novel *Jane Eyre* and the character Jane Eyre. As we consider Mr. Rochester’s fixation on his emotional feelings, his elevation of the self as the judge of right and wrong, and Jane’s refusal of his offer of a life of seeming temporal happiness, it may appear to the untrained eye that the whole of Christian life consists of a long list of “thou shalt nots” capped with a resounding deistic no! The truth is quite the opposite. Since sin is an enslaving power (“people are slaves to whatever has mastered them,” 2 Pet. 2:19 NIV), it is only through and in Christ that we are truly set free. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1 NIV). “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36 NIV). Freedom as the world sees it is choosing to do what we think we like. Freedom in Christ gives us the resounding yes to live in obedience the life God has for us. We are free to choose God’s will for our lives, “his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2 NIV).

Those who have read *Jane Eyre* know how the book concludes. “Spoiler alert” for those who have not: Jane and Mr. Rochester finally end up together. After the thwarted wedding, Jane becomes a school teacher in another town. Then a distant relative leaves her a fortune. She returns to visit Mr. Rochester and while on her journey learns that his mentally incapacitated wife has perished in a fire and that Mr. Rochester lost his sight trying to save her. A happy reunion ensues, and it appears they lived happily ever after as husband and wife. In his essay “On Reading Old Books,” C.S. Lewis remarks that by reading old books, we can gain a “standard of plain, central Christianity … which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective.”[3] *Jane Eyre* is an old book that certainly puts the controversies of the moment, such as the elevation of the self and the relentless preoccupation with feelings and happiness, in perspective. For this reason, I commend *Jane Eyre* and its wisdom to you. ■

Notes

[1] C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, March 6, 1917, in *They Stand Together: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 1914–1963,* ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 175.

[2] J.R.R. Tolkien to Michael Tolkien, March 6–8, 1941, in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 51.

[3] C.S. Lewis, “On Reading Old Books,” introduction to *St. Athanasius’ The Incarnation of the Word of God,* by a Religious of CSMV (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 6

The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison… in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

C.S. Lewis

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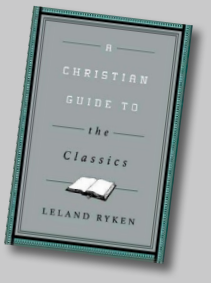
RECOMMENDED READING

Leland Ryken, *A Christian Guide to the Classics* (Crossway, 2015)



We've all heard about the classics and some of us have even read them on our own. But for those of us who remain a bit intimidated or simply want to get more out of our reading, this companion to Crossway's Christian Guides to the Classics series is here to help. In this brief guidebook, popular professor, author, and literary expert Leland Ryken explains what the classics are, how to read them, and why they're still valuable. Written to help you become a seasoned reader and featuring a list of books to get you started, this guide will give you the tools you need to read and enjoy some of history's greatest literature.

Knowing & Doing is published by C.S. Lewis Institute; 8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301; Springfield, VA 22151 | www.cslewisinstitute.org.