

## Listening to Voices in Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre is an acute and attentive listener. Though her eyes are keenly perceptive and the visual provides much material for her fancy as well as her judgement, it is through her ears that Jane's heart and soul are reached. She experiences affection and veneration, love and passion, conscience and values, through listening--to her inner voice and the voices of those around her. Through listening, Jane's moral character is shaped as a child, and as an adult her passion is awakened. This paper will examine the role of listening, first, in Jane's development, particularly with respect to her conscience or inner voice and, second, in her seduction by Rochester and her rejection of St. John Rivers.

Jane's childhood at Gateshead is a period of intense loneliness, and her utter isolation from her adoptive family is only somewhat ameliorated by the attention and affection afforded her by Bessie. As the major source of Jane's human contact, Bessie's influence on her is heightened. Jane gathers her first awareness of a world beyond her unhappy circumstance through Bessie: "[she] fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales...or from passages of Pamela" (p. 3).<sup>1</sup> (Given her source of information, i.e. Richardson, Jane's later distrust of romance is hardly surprising.) She also listens to Bessie's mournful songs, which serve to heighten her sense of melancholy in her isolation. Jane receives no physical affection from her family--indeed, she receives hostility--and therefore a few kind words from Bessie are her only consolation and nurture. While holiday festivities are under way at Gateshead, Jane sits upstairs "...listening to the sound of the piano or harp played below...the jingling of glass...the broken hum of conversation" (p. 21). The young orphan experiences her social horizon, her marginal status, through her separation from the center of social life: the drawing room. Listening to the voices from that room is her only connection with the social world beyond her grasp, and she reaches out, almost tactilely, in her loneliness. (Similar circumstances will confront her at Thornfield Hall, as she listens eagerly to the "joyous stir" below.) She must instead wait expectantly for Bessie: "Long did the hours seem while I awaited the departure of the company, and listened for the sound of

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1. All page citations from: Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, Easton Press (Connecticut, 1978).

Bessie's step on the stairs" (p. 22). Jane's sense of hearing must, in effect, compensate for her deprivation of visual and physical contact with her family. Her desire for education, or at least for escape to school, is likewise stirred by Bessie's descriptions of schooling's charms: "She boasted of beautiful paintings...songs she could sing and pieces they could play...till my spirit was moved to emulation as I listened" (p. 18). This emulation through listening is a general pattern in Jane's moral development, for she is continually striving to emulate those who stir her interest and admiration. Her decisive character and, perhaps, the first expression of her voice of judgement is indicated by her response to Bessie's description: "'I should indeed like to go to school' was the audible conclusion of my musings" (p. 19).

At Lowood, Jane first develops her sense of veneration for moral character when she meets Helen Burns. Jane is moved to love Helen by her eloquence, which reveals the elevated state of her soul: "[Helen's] soul sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell" (p. 65). Helen values Jane as an attentive listener, to whom she can confide her experiences and convictions, and Jane grows through this contact, expanding her "organ of veneration" (p. 65). The spirit-like Helen teaches Jane to connect listening and admiration; her flights of eloquence have the power to please and to charm. Miss Temple, on the other hand, commands respect, and listening to her produces awe rather than pleasure. "Miss Temple," she observes, "always had something...of refined propriety in her language...which chastened the pleasure of those who...listened to her by a controlling sense of awe" (p. 63). From Helen and Miss Temple, therefore, she discovers the ability of language to inspire love and awe and to produce pleasure. In their charmed circle she also experiences love, affection and even a sense of belonging, and thus, as in the case of Bessie, listening is a source of warmth and affection in an otherwise lonely life.

Jane is not entirely taken in by eloquence, however, for she realizes that beauty, in speech or form, is no guarantee of survival. Although--or, perhaps, because--beautiful words can move her, she remains distrustful of them. Her honesty (of which she is quite protective) impels her to generally prefer directness to eloquence. She expresses her decision to take a position thus:

A new servitude! There is something in that,' I soliloquized (mentally, be it understood; I did not talk aloud). 'I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet; it is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly, but...a mere waste of time to listen to them (p. 77).

Here her inner voice, her conscience, is at full strength, and she unfailingly listens to its dictates. As Rochester correctly observes: "[Jane] shall follow the guiding of the still small voice which

interprets the dictates of conscience" (p. 188). This voice provides Jane with practical information as well as moral admonitions, and she first makes use of the practical side when she decides to seek a position. She asks herself the way to proceed, but says "I could not tell: nothing answered me; I then ordered my brain to find a response quickly" (p. 78). In response to this prompting, the answers come rapidly. Finally, the voice issues moral commandments, to which Jane must listen, willingly or not. That this voice is not simply figurative is illustrated by the force with which it orders Jane to leave Thornfield: "I asked, 'What am I to do?' But the answer my mind gave--'Leave Thornfield at once'--was so prompt, so dread, that I stopped my ears"(p. 280). By the time Jane leaves Lowood, then, she has developed her listening acuity in order to experience affection and veneration, she has learned the power of words to charm and that they are sometimes to be distrusted, and she has experienced the first utterances of her inner voice.

Jane's sojourn at Thornfield Hall again places her on the outside, and she must work her way in by developing her capacity as a listener. Rochester appreciates her value as a listener, and he therefore allows her the intimacy with his soul that awakens her love. Rochester observes: "People will instinctively find out, as I have done, that it is not your forte to tell of yourself, but to listen while others talk of themselves" (p. 126). While this certainly describes part of his interest in Jane, it also looks ahead to the appeal she has for St. John, who confesses a great deal to her about his love and his ambition. For Jane, Rochester's voice becomes her link to the world. At Thornfield Hall, Jane again listens from upstairs to the sound of festivities, to the "joyous stir" below. She hears "gentlemen's deep tones and ladies' silvery accents blent harmoniously together" (p. 154). This virtual chorus of the aristocracy expresses their unity as a group apart and Jane's isolation. She can hear them, as she could as a child, but she cannot make out their conversation. But reaching Jane in her seclusion, connecting her to the downstairs room, is the sound of Rochester's voice:

I listened long: suddenly I discovered that my ear was wholly intent on analyzing the mingled sounds, and trying to discriminate amidst the confusion of accents those of Mr. Rochester...[and] framing those tones...into words (p. 156).

Her unconscious focus on his voice is one of the first indication to Jane that she is in love with Rochester. But it is his singing voice which proves truly seductive. She analyses its effect, and her feelings, thus: "Rochester possessed a fine voice...finding a way through the ear to the heart, and there waking sensation strangely" (p. 168). (Singing is to Rochester what sermonizing is for St. John: they are media to affect the part of Jane's soul that the desire to reach.) Jane's conscience,

however, is not entirely incapacitated by Rochester's seduction. When she wishes to maintain propriety and abjure affection before their marriage, she can be quite cold. When Rochester sings a love serenade and she remains (apparently) unmoved, he retorts: "...any other woman would have been melted to marrow at hearing such stanzas crooned in her praise" (p. 257).

While music, as an audible medium, focuses on hearing rather than sight, there is another encounter which leaves Jane with no recourse to visual clues, namely the fortune-teller scene. Rochester elicits Jane's feelings for him, and makes her conscious of feelings she hasn't yet acknowledged. He reminds her of her value as a listener, and she echoes the evaluation back, saying to herself as well as him: "The eagerness of a listener quickens the tongue of a narrator" (p. 186). By employing a disguise for Rochester, in this instance, and by casting him and Jane as not impressive in their appearance, Bronte emphasizes the spiritual nature of their attraction for one another. Just before Rochester proposes marriage, Jane states the nature of the communication between them: "It is my spirit that addresses your spirit..." (p. 238). Her love is so powerful that it is almost capable of overwhelming the dictates of her inner voice. She admits that Rochester's entreaty that she become his mistress is so persuasive that "...while he spoke my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me...they spoke almost as loud as Feeling" (p. 299). Jane almost accepts Rochester's claim as right, but her conscience regains ascendancy, and it is not until she can hear his entreaty as her own voice within that she can accept him.

St. John Rivers' attempt to seduce Jane has at least an initial plausibility because he attempts to enlist Jane's conscience in his service. If she cannot love him, she can at least venerate him, which is an emotion she is familiar and comfortable with. Indeed, she connects it with the only spiritual affinity she experienced prior to meeting Rochester, i.e. with Helen Burns. But veneration is not as strong as heartfelt love and passion, and it is for this reason that Jane can hold out against St. John. Her inner voice does not respond with assent to St. John's proposal of marriage: "Nothing speaks or stirs within me while you talk...no voice counselling or cheering" (p. 383). The voice of her heart, which stirred when Rochester sang or spoke to her, is silent. St. John asks her what her heart says in response to his proposal, and she replies "My heart is mute--my heart is mute" (p. 382). He therefore attempts to stir her conscience, which she has learned to connect with veneration, by employing sweet words with moral fervor. The similarity between Rochester's "fine voice" while singing and St. John's fine voice while sermonizing is made explicit: "It was at all times pleasant to listen while from his lips fell the words of the Bible: never did his fine voice sound

at once so sweet and full" (p. 396). Although she knows that St. John does not love her, he excites Jane's moral sense and her capacity for awe, and brings her to a pitch where she nearly succumbs: "I felt a veneration for St. John--veneration so strong that its impetus thrust me at once to the point I had so long shunned" (p. 398). Jane hears the imperatives of religion in St. John's sermon: "Religion called--Angels beckoned--God commanded" (p. 398). Nevertheless, she is able to resist this torrent of duty and conscience because she finally hears Rochester as the voice within her, as the voice of her own will which is about to be engulfed and sacrificed. Seeking guidance for what is right, Jane prays to God--and hears Rochester: "I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry--'Jane! Jane! Jane!'--nothing more" (p. 399). Jane reclaims her soul when she heeds Rochester's cry. The "still small voice" of her conscience and the urging of her heart are reconciled when she hears his summons as a moral imperative. The affinity of their spirits is a claim that transcends the dictates of religion or society, and she finally realizes the full force of something she had said to Rochester before:

I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities or even of mortal flesh;--it is my spirit that addresses your spirit...equal,--as we are!" (p. 238).

The sanction of their relationship, and the basis of their happiness, is the affinity of their souls. All of the forces that shaped Jane's character--her attempts to establish warmth and contact through listening, and her special attunement to Rochester's voice; her veneration and awe for the beauty of soul expressed in words; her faithful attention to and obedience toward the inner voice of her conscience; above all, her listening to the judgement of her ears and her heart rather than her eyes--all are combined in her response to Rochester. In a final vindication of the ability of their souls to communicate directly, Jane becomes Rochester's means of sight, "impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye" (p. 429). Theirs is an intimacy that remains aloof from the dictates of the world around them, and which is accessible to none but themselves: "We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and audible thinking" (p. 429). Jane and Rochester's union is expressed as the harmony of souls made audible to their attentive listening.

