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Gothic Romance and Women's Reality in *Jane Eyre*

“If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now.”

His lips and cheeks turned white—quite white.

“I should kill you—I am killing you? Your words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue. They betray an unfortunate state of mind: they merit severe reproof. . . .

*JANE EYRE AND ST. JOHN RIVERS (438)*

The nineteenth-century writer who gave most audacious expression to the latent, subversive message of women's Gothic, and to the anger it implied, was Charlotte Brontë. Because *Jane Eyre* itself became a prototype for so much later women's Gothic and perhaps because *Villette* did not, the subtlety of Brontë's transformation of the genre in those two works has never received the attention it deserves. This extraordinary transformation develops the submerged meanings of the genre through an interlocking treatment of the themes of self-defense, knowledge, repetition, and transcendence. By this means, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* become both readings and reworkings of women's Gothic, using the genre to consider the problems of the boundaries of the self as an aspect of women's special psychological, social, and moral dilemmas. The result is a conflation of realism and romance that asserts the identity of ordinary women’s lives and the Gothic nightmare and explores the problem of the self and its boundaries specifically in the context of the modes of transcendence available to women.

When we first meet Jane Eyre, she is an alien in a world determined both to set her apart and to intrude on her. The result is the double obsession that Yeazell describes as a key to Jane’s psychic development
throughout the novel: "two central longings—to be independent and to be loved" (129). The Reeds perceive her as perversely inaccessible: a little girl with too much “cover” (44), whose true nature ought to be found out. In response to their prying, she retreats behind barriers and longs for escape, but she also suffers, ironically, from a desire to make herself known: to end her radical separation from a world incapable of understanding her. Thus the book opens with the heroine “shrined in double retirement” (39) behind a curtain, protecting herself from her “young master” (44) John and meditating, with longing and horror, on pictures of extreme isolation: Bewick's images of solitude, persecution, melancholy, and death.

"[T]he solitary rocks and promontories" . . . "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice . . . concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold" . . . death-white realms . . . the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray . . . the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; . . . the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking . . . the quite solitary churchyard . . . girdled by a broken wall. . . . two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed . . . marine phantoms. The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him . . . an object of terror . . . the black, horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows. (40)

This symbolic catalogue is Bronte's version of an old Gothic convention: the series of prophetic images that, in the form of a dream, sometimes prefigure the horrors in store for the Gothic protagonist. These images set forth the perils to which Jane is already subject and will be subject throughout the book. But paradoxically, they also offer release from her restricted world—escape, through seclusion, into wide spaces, distant lands. Jane's enthusiasm for such pictures reveals her imagination to be energetic, with an outward impulse toward the wild and distant and sublime. But the pictures themselves reveal the dangers to which such an imagination is peculiarly subject in the everyday world Jane inhabits. They evoke the perils of being alone and cut off ("solitary . . . alone . . . stranded on a desolate coast . . . quite solitary"); imprisoned ("the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars"); pursued ("the fiend behind him"); haunted ("marine phantoms"). In the image of the gallows is the peril of being isolated and misjudged—"always accused, forever condemned" (46), as she describes herself later. And there is another peril, too: the danger of being "becalmed" like the ships "on a torpid sea."
This inclusion of terrible calm in the catalogue of horrors to which the heroine may fall prey— as a horror equal to those of isolation, haunting, pursuit, imprisonment, condemnation, death—represents the insight central to Brontë's reading of the Gothic: that Gothic romance paints, in extraordinary forms, the deadliest but most ordinary peril of a woman's life. Opposed to that peril always is the activity, energy, "exercise" of human faculties that expand the heart "with life" (141) and, throughout the book, form the center of Jane Eyre's dream of transcendence. Emerson's chief article of faith could serve as the motto for all of Brontë's novels: "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul" ("American Scholar" 68).

The paradoxical exercise of Jane's "active soul" in the contemplation of the perils to which it is subject leads inevitably to disaster: John's intrusion on her painful and desirable isolation, his suspicion of her private self ("What were you doing behind the curtain?"); her violent physical self-defense against this "tyrant" and "murderer" (43), and Mrs. Reed's attempt to calm Jane forcibly by confining her to the Red Room. This confinement is a more extreme version of being shut away behind the curtain: in a family where the mother attempts to draw a "line of separation" (59) between Jane and the other children, Jane both desires self-enclosure for protection and suffers from the terrors of being "forced deeply into herself" (Gilbert and Gubar 340), confined in her own nightmarish interior.

The place of her confinement is the deserted suite, complete with secret drawer, old parchments, and miniature. In Gothic romance such places are secret repositories of identity, where the truth about the heroine, her family history, and her rightful place in the social hierarchy is hidden away. Brontë uses this convention to establish, ironically, Jane's lack of a family, her lack of place in the social hierarchy, and the resulting paradox that her identity is at once alien to her world and shaped by that world into a form alien to her. For the Red Room is, in two senses, an external image of Jane's own passionate interior. Imprisoned there alone, she encounters a strange spiritlike creature, "gazing at me with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still. . . ." (46). This fearfully alien thing is her own fearful self, a self in great part created by Mrs. Reed's tyranny: "What a miserable little poltroon had fear, engendered of unjust punishment, made of me in those days!" (63). Showalter identifies the Red Room, "with its deadly and bloody connotations, its Freudian wealth of secret compartments, wardrobes, drawers, and jewel chest," as "a paradigm of female
inner space" (114–15)—Jane's true self, in other words. But it also resembles the exterior world as Jane perceives it: "[T]he red-room, stately, chilly, swathed in rich crimson, with a great white bed and an easy chair 'like a pale throne' looming out of the scarlet darkness, perfectly represents [Jane's] vision of the society in which she is trapped . . . " (Gilbert and Gubar 340). In fact, this place is an image both of the external world that oppresses Jane with its alien rule (the stately room, the throne) and her most private inner life as that world has colored it. As Kinkead-Weekes says of the red-and-white color scheme, "The life of the heart in this prison seems to present only a choice between frozen wintriness and red passion" ("Place of Love" 81). Gateshead both takes the heart prisoner and makes it a prison by defining its only realities as extremes of ice and fire. Here the self is unrecognizably Other not just because Jane has yet to come to terms with her own depths but because something genuinely Other than the self—a force of external tyranny—has helped to define it and indeed to constitute it.

Thus from the beginning, Jane's perils of the night are neither exclusively internal nor external but identified doubly with a repressed self and an external oppressive Other. The "self behind the self concealed" is a threat, but its alien aspect is in part created by another, external threat. Jane must defend herself against interior perils, but also against an exterior force of oppression that makes her particularly susceptible to those perils and in important ways determines their form. The psychological insight here is developed more fully later, in the complexities of Bertha's relation to the hidden selves of both Rochester and Jane and still later in more refined form in Villette, in which a conflation of novel and romance identifies the inhabitants of the public world outside Lucy with the allegorical figures of her private psychomachia as that public world has shaped it.

Against Mrs. Reed, responsible for her confinement, Jane defends herself in the first of several incidents that associate saying "I" with self-defense and egress: "Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty" (69). It is not surprising that Jane should have such a sensation of liberty through speaking—through the act of forcing her world for once to know her as she is—for Mrs. Reed is particularly concerned with regulating her self-expression: "[U]ntil you can speak pleasantly, remain silent" (39); "Silence! this violence is almost repulsive" (49). Jane's defiant verbal act in the face of the compul-
The transcendence associated with fiery speech is described in images of power, energy, expansion, escape, and bursting bounds: all connected throughout the novel with acts of self-defense. But this transcendence through "fierce speaking" (70) turns out to be only an illusion: "A ridge of lighted heath . . . would have been a great emblem of my mind when I accused and menaced Mrs. Reed; the same ridge, black and blasted after the flames are dead, would have represented as meetly my subsequent condition, when half an hour's silence and reflection had shown me the madness of my conduct . . . ." (69-70).

At Lowood Jane encounters another attitude toward both speaking and self-defense. To Helen Burns she explains her ideas on the proper response to oppression: "When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard . . . so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again" (90). Helen replies that this is the view of "a little untaught girl" (90). Her own philosophy links the complete rejection of self-defense to a vision of complete transcendence—beyond the grave. "If we were dying in pain and shame, if scorn smote us on all sides, and hatred crushed us, angels see our tortures, recognize our innocence . . . and God waits only a separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward" (101). Helen herself is characterized by a capacity not to speak fiercely against unjust accusation, indeed not to speak at all: "Burns made no answer: I wondered at her silence. 'Why,' thought I, 'does she not explain . . . ?' " (86). Helen's philosophy is not whether one is rightly known on earth; that the angels "recognize our innocence" is enough. For her, self-vindication is not necessary in the face of mere earthly tyranny. Her mentor Miss Temple is similarly associated with verbal restraint, responding to Brocklehurst's accusations by becoming colder and harder in deathly silence. "Miss Temple had always something . . . of refined propriety in her language, which precluded deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager . . . ." (104).

At Gateshead, Jane discovered that the transcendence associated with fiery speech was illusion; at Lowood she is drawn to a view of transcendence associated with restraint rather than passion, ice rather than fire, self-containment rather than self-justification. Helen and Miss Temple are clearly admirable figures, and yet the version of escape they offer proves, for Jane, to be one with unbearable confinement. She comes to see the place where she learned this philosophy as "prison grounds, exile limits" and finds herself at a window looking out, longing for escape beyond the "boundary of rock and heath," for "liberty . . . liberty . . . liberty" (117). Miss Temple has played the role of the special mentor who edu-
cates the Gothic heroine in a bounded world; the limitations of that edu-
cation are implied in Jane’s sudden realization as she looks out her win-
dow “that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and
fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to
go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils”
(116). “School rules, school duties, school habits and notions, and voices,
and faces, and phrases, and costumes, and preferences, and antipathies:
such was what I knew of existence,” she says. “And now I felt that it
was not enough” (117).

Both the feeling that the heroine’s limited sphere of knowledge is “not
enough” and even the suspicion that the beloved educator’s system of
education was somehow bound up with a system of ignorance infuse
women’s Gothic, but never, before Jane Eyre, were they expressed so
bluntly. Even the picture of the heroine longing for “real knowledge of
the world” is a departure from women’s Gothic: not a departure from
what their narratives actually represent—the female quest for experi-
ence” (Roberts 105), the lure of “traveling heroinism” (Moers Chap. 7)—
but a departure from their overt ideology, which portrays heroines pro-
elled by external forces into a confrontation with experience but rarely
choosing it deliberately over the innocence of their first bounded world.
Characteristically, Charlotte Brontë reworks Gothic romance to bring to
the surface its representation of reality. Jane is harassed not by repeated
encroachments on her person, but by the deadly, mundane iteration of
“school rules, school duties, school habits.” Accordingly, Brontë’s ver-
sion here of the room with a view and the heroine’s flight of imagination
ends not with rapturous romantic expansion into spiritual ecstasy but with
plunge to earth and common sense. Liberty, perhaps, is too much to
hope for. Jane opts for “a new servitude,” and where the Gothic heroine’s
longings for egress would have found expression in an improvised ode to
nature or to melancholy, hers find expression in a newspaper advertise-
ment: “A young lady accustomed to tuition is desirous of meeting with a
situation in a private family where the children are under fourteen” (118—
19).

This act of self-expression, at once mundane and bold, brings Jane to
Thornfield. Here the heart of the Gothic plot is discovered to the reader
through a sequence of related scenes, all reworkings of Gothic set pieces:
the pause at the threshold, the meeting with the housekeeper, the tour of
the deserted wing, the panoramic view from confinement, the encounters
with the man of mystery and the Evil Other Woman, the intrusion in the
heroine’s room by night, the narrow escape from the villain’s domain,
the expulsion from Eden. The key to Brontë’s changes in all of these set pieces is the way her rendering of the Gothic conflates realism and romance to suggest the true meaning of women’s Gothic. The technique is best illustrated in the most original of these scenes, in which Jane, returning from the walk on which she has met Rochester (but without knowing it was he), hesitates before entering the gloomy house from which her outing was a temporary escape.

I did not like re-entering Thornfield. To pass its threshold was to return to stagnation; to cross the silent hall, to ascend the darksome staircase, to seek my lonely little room, and then to meet tranquil Mrs Fairfax, and spend the long winter evening with her, and her only, was to quell wholly the faint excitement wakened by my walk—to slip again over my faculties the viewless fetters of a uniform and too still existence; of an existence whose very privileges of security and ease I was becoming incapable of appreciating. . . . I lingered at the gates; I lingered on the lawn; I paced backwards and forwards on the pavement: the shutters of the glass door were closed; I could not see into the interior; and both my eyes and spirit seemed drawn from the gloomy house—from the gray hollow filled with rayless cells, as it appeared to me—to that sky expanded before me—a blue sea absolved from taint of cloud; the moon ascending it in solemn march, her orb seeming to look up as she left the hilltops, from behind which she had come, far and farther below her, and aspired to the zenith, midnight dark in its fathomless depth and measureless distance; and for those trembling stars that followed her course, they made my heart tremble, my veins glow when I viewed them. Little things recall us to earth: the clock struck in the hall; that sufficed. I turned from moon and stars, opened a side-door, and went in. (147-48)

This unusual reworking of the heroine’s pause at the threshold reveals much, both in itself and in connection with other such scenes, about how Charlotte Brontë read the latent content, and the latent potential, of Gothic romance. There is, first, the double status of the house as exotic Gothic mansion and ordinary, boring domestic space—and the fact that the Gothic imagery functions as a description of the boredom rather than a contrast to it. This double view of the house goes back to Jane’s arrival at Thornfield when she was given the usual tours of the Gothic mansion, beginning on the first night with the “eerie impression” created by a “dark and spacious” staircase, a “high latticed” window, and a “long, cold gallery” suggestive of “a church rather than a house.” Through the “chill and vault-like air” of the stairs and gallery, “suggesting cheerless ideas of space and solitude,” Jane passed to her room—not, however, a vast,
gloomy room full of dimly-perceived dangers but a room "of small dimensions, and furnished in ordinary modern style," a welcome "safe haven" from the outside world of her journey (129).

The mixture of everyday realism and Gothic atmosphere here means that from the beginning of Jane's stay at Thornfield the usual boundary in Gothic romance between the everyday world and the oneiric world—a boundary ordinarily equated with the Gothic threshold itself—is blurred. And this blurring applies both to the house and to the events that occur there. Jane begins her stay at Thornfield, for example, by confusing Mrs. Fairfax, who is merely the keeper of the house, with its owner. The novelty of this confusion is particularly striking in view of the iconography of class distinctions in the romance of Radcliffe and most of her imitators. For all the misinterpretations to which Gothic heroines are prey, they are not subject to the delusion that the aged retainer is the mistress of the house. In a sense, however, this first misreading is correct: in terms of both Jane's own initial experience of Thornfield and the perils it represents for her, Thornfield is the domain of a housekeeper and of housekeeping. In Gothic romance, housekeepers are often the only people looking after an old deserted mansion, but the mansion itself is never described preeminently as a housekeeper's domain. Thornfield as Jane first experiences it, however, is such a place. The inmates on whom the narrative focuses are women, and the primary activities of this female world are, as far as Jane can see, raising a child and running an ordinary household.

Such a world has its own horrors, as de Beauvoir points out in her comparison of "housework, with its endless repetition," with the torture of Sisyphus (504). For de Beauvoir, repetition is an aspect of immanence, her term for the state of self-enclosure and stagnation that is the opposite of self-transcendence through outward-directed "projects." That Jane herself associates her work at Thornfield with exactly this kind of repetition and stagnation is evident in Charlotte Brontë's version of another Gothic set piece: the scene in which the heroine looks out of her prison castle toward the possibility of transcendence. In earlier Gothic romance, that transcendence is represented, or even attained, in the heroine's exalted apprehension of sublime Nature. Thus Ellena di Rosalba climbed to her tower room and looked out over the mountains, feeling the greatness of God and the smallness of her oppressors (The Italian 90–91). In Jane Eyre, the heroine climbs to the battlements of Thornfield and looks out, longing for a "power of vision which might overpass" the limits of her narrow life (140). The object of Jane's transcendent longings here, how-
ever, is touchingly ordinary, just as it was in the similar scene at Lowood. There she wished for more “real knowledge of life” (116); at Thornfield she yearns for “the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen . . . more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character . . .” (140–41). In retrospect, Jane the narrator comments on these longings:

Who blames me? Many, no doubt; and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it; restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes. . . . It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (141)

These meditations on the lot of women are especially interesting in the context of Gothic romance, because they defend Jane’s longing for transcendence by suggesting the banal truths hidden in women’s Gothic all along: that most women are “confined”—not to a dungeon but to “making puddings and knitting stockings”—and that they are victims of repetition—not because specters haunt them night after night but because they do the same things day after day. The passage suggests also that women suffer silently and in secret—not because no one knows in what castle or convent or dungeon they have been hidden away, but because no one knows the restlessness hidden beneath their apparent calm. Indeed, as Jane looks out from the battlements, there rages just beneath her a hidden life even she herself does not know, the as-yet unsuspected life of the madwoman.

Jane encountered hints of this life on her tour of the deserted wing, a place where “no one ever sleeps” (137) anymore, complete with “hush” and “gloom”; the “imperfect light” of “narrow casements”; old tapestries that "would have looked strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight"; decaying embroideries wrought by those whose fingers now are
“coffin dust.” The tour led up to the sunlit battlements. Coming down again into this darker world, Jane had to “grop[e]” her way into the passage “narrow, low, and dim,” lined with “small black doors all shut” like the doors “in Bluebeard’s castle.” From one of these identical doors a strange laugh emanated, repeated horribly in an echo seeming to come from all of them (138). But again the Gothic realm became “ordinary” and “mod-ern” (129) with the emergence of the apparent source of the laugh: Grace Poole. “[A]ny apparition less romantic or less ghostly could scarcely be conceived” (138).

This scene marks the beginning of Grace Poole’s role as interface between the routine and the romantic, the boredom of repetition in women’s ordinary lives and the Gothic nightmare of the Bluebeard’s doors and reiterated laugh. In her association with the madwoman, the taciturn Grace Poole is the very type of the duality of outer calm and inner restlessness. Her name suggests a smaller, bounded version of the “torpid sea” on which Jane feared being “becalmed” and the ironic assumptions that such calm is both the chief grace of women and a chief sign of God’s grace to them. (One thinks of Father Anthony’s doctrine that Providence has “graciously rescued” the young women from “a terrible large place called the world.”) Her job consists of endless solitary sewing, “as companion-less as a prisoner in his dungeon” (194), while she keeps stolid watch over the madwoman whose restlessness may erupt into violence at any moment. Once a day she comes out to “glide along the gallery”; a romantic activity associated with ghosts, but one that Grace performs in a most unghostly way, stopping in the “topsy-turvy” rooms to comment on “the proper way to polish a grate, or clean a marble mantlepiece, or take stains from papered walls” (194). That this boring woman is for a long time perceived by Jane Eyre to be the madwoman she guards, to be a “living enigma . . . mystery of mysteries” (232), hints at their essential identity. As Gilbert and Gubar say, it is “almost as if, with her pint of porter, her ‘staid and taciturn’ demeanor, she were the madwoman’s public representative” (350). Although Jane is wrong literally, symbolically she is right. Grace is an emblem of those ordinary women who do, in fact, guard silently a mystery “nobody knows”: their true feelings. Herself “a person of few words” (142), with “miraculous self-possession” (185), Grace is the supposedly calm and uncomplaining woman “con-fined” to sewing, and Bertha is the carefully guarded inner nature of such women, locked away but still violently and angrily alive. Appropriately, one of Grace’s chief duties is to keep Bertha from speaking “I” in her distorted way: “Too much noise, Grace,” calls Mrs. Fairfax after the laugh: “Remember directions!” (139).
Thus it is natural that at the end of the passage describing Jane's visits to look out from the battlements in secret discontent with her domestic routine, Grace Poole—in her double aspect as both the Hidden Woman and the woman who hides her—should put in an appearance: "When thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh. . . . Sometimes I saw her: she would come out of her room with a basin, or a plate, or a tray in her hand, go down to the kitchen, and shortly return generally (oh, romantic reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth!) bearing a pot of porter" (141-42). Heilman reads such intrusions of realism on romance in Charlotte Brontë's work as "infusion[s] of the 'anti-Gothic' " functioning to achieve a "partial sterilization of banal Gothic by dry factuality and humor" (123). The function of these "infusions," however, is more complex. First, the question of the relation of romance and realism in Jane Eyre is bound up with the question of their relation in Gothic fiction in general. When the copresence of realism and romance in the Gothic is discussed, one or the other, or the copresence itself, tends to be regarded as some kind of failing or incongruence. Thus Haggerty sees "a confusion of intention" in the clash of realism and romance in Gothic writers: "We find ourselves laughing again and again at the Gothic novel. Whether Walpole's ghost marches 'sedately,' Radcliffe's greatest horror turns out to be a waxen image, Lewis muses over the social implications of the Inquisition, or Maturin preaches fiscal responsibility, we experience a confusion of intention which results in a sacrifice of Gothic intensity for the sake of more 'realistic' narrative concerns" (381). In Maturin and Lewis, Haggerty sees a move toward a way of overcoming the dichotomy which Walpole first recognized as inevitable in Gothic fiction. Objective and subjective states blend in the depths of a perceiving consciousness in tales such as theirs, and, as a result, the limits of the real can be extended to include detail of a kind that is inadmissible in objective narrative. Moreover, subjective reality begins to achieve a kind of objective force in these works: metaphorical language attains the representational power of the metonymical, and the metonymical becomes understood as metaphor. (391)

The final effect of such discussions is to valorize the way Gothicists, and later writers in the Gothic tradition, extended the territory of the "real" to include the "psychological realism" that Ewbank praises as Charlotte Brontë's most successful fusion of "her two kinds of truth,
realism and poetry" (178). While the most successful aspect of the Gothic romance may well have been its insistence on the reality of the irrational, nonetheless it is disturbing that the social reality Maturin and Godwin were presenting in their Gothic novel-romances (or, in Brontë's case, a novel-romance that made use of the Gothic) somehow vanishes in these final summings up of the writers' achievements, just as, conversely, the ghostly nun is all too shadowy a presence in Eagleton's very "social" reading of *Villette*. Maturin's lectures on "fiscal responsibility" may be ineptly funny, but it is important to acknowledge that poverty, in all its brutal reality, is a central subject of his Gothic tale. The same is true of *Pierre*, a romance in which Lucy Tartan is the hero's "good angel" (437) and a novel in which, desperate to stave off poverty, she sells portraits for $1.75 (461). The conjunction of sordid financial detail with metaphysics reveals that the psychological realism of these writers, achieved through symbol and dream, is inextricably woven into a social context and that the social content is set in the context of private nightmare.

Both contexts are interrelated and inseparable parts of a whole. It was Brontë's special achievement to recognize the true meaning of that whole in women's Gothic, in which the social context of the private nightmares had traditionally been displaced or disguised. Whereas in one sense the "infusions" Heilman refers to do "undercut" the Gothic (Heilman 120), in another they bring to the surface its true, and "real," subjects, the mundane details of women's ordinary lives. These details are themselves, in all their "dry factuality," responsible for the kind of "feeling that is without status in the ordinary world of the novel" (121) and that Heilman identifies with Brontë's "new Gothic." Similarly, when Hook says, "There is much in *Jane Eyre* that is Gothic, romantic, extravagant... But there is an equally strong awareness of the 'plain and homely,' of the realities of pain and suffering in the most ordinary contexts of life" (142), the two phenomena he is describing are in fact the same; Charlotte Brontë's romantic, extravagant Gothic is bound up with, and indeed expresses, her awareness of the "realities of pain and suffering" in their "most ordinary contexts."

"Oh, romantic reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth!" In retrospect the narrator's apology is ironic, since the real mystery behind Grace Poole turns out to be anything but prosaic. And on the other hand, the passage just before this—the description of ordinary women's hidden anger at being "confined" to domestic tasks—asserts that Gothic romance is the "plain truth": just as the stolid seamstress is the madwoman and, at one level, the exotic Bertha is plain Jane. This overt identification of the
oneiric world of Gothic inner space with the everyday world of women’s domestic interiors reveals Bronte’s perception of the hidden life buried in all female Gothic romance: an insight central to every aspect of her Gothic vision.

At the core of that vision is the perception, introduced in the images from Bewick, that being “becalmed” is a source of Gothic honor. At the threshold of the Gothic domain, most heroines tremble in fear of what they know not, feel unaccountable dread, go cold with a sense of unimaginable doom. It is characteristic of Charlotte Bronte’s rendering of Gothic terrors that her heroine should be overcome, not by nameless sensations of fear and trembling, but by a sharp, specific sense of her peril: the prospect of boredom. Jane’s pause at the threshold after her outing has to do not with any gloomy forebodings of “vice and violence” but with a fear of the “viewless fetters of a uniform and too still existence” (147). For her the “gloomy house” with its “rayless cells” (148) is not the realm of a tyrant-outlaw but of “tranquil Mrs. Fairfax,” and Jane knows that by crossing the threshold she will be subject to the darkness, repetition, and confinement not of a terrible villain but of women’s work. The “rayless cells” and the “viewless fetters” are sources of dread because they represent the lack of a “power of vision” that would connect Jane with wider knowledge, more varied activity, a larger world.

This “gloomy” place of “confinement” to making puddings and knitting stockings has also been presented as a Gothic mansion complete with battlements, decaying embroideries, a row of doors reminiscent of Bluebeard’s castle, and mysterious sounds echoing through the dim, deserted wing. But the mysterious sounds occurred at high noon; at the end of the vaultlike hall the heroine’s room was small and modern; although the tapestries would have been “strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight” (137), that is not when the heroine saw them. The constant superimposition of realism on Gothic romance equates the darkest, eeriest Gothic mystery with the dullest version of an ordinary woman’s life. That life is what Jane seeks to evade by lingering at Rochester’s door. Her pause there, significantly, itself marks a repetition she would like to evade: “I did not like re-entering Thornfield.” Like many Gothic heroines, she has effected a temporary escape from her prison only to find herself brought back to it again. “Brought,” however, is not quite right; Jane approaches the house herself, alone, and the compulsion to reenter it—to commit the act of repetition that will again subject her to the horrors of repetition the house embodies—is a compulsion produced by external circumstances, but internalized as a sense of duty. Jane must earn a living, and Thorn-