

Jane Eyre: Worksheet (c)ii Mr Rochester

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Edward Fairfax Rochester of Thornfield Hall is a man not easy to understand. He deliberately keeps much hidden, for a variety of reasons. He finds it difficult to trust other people, perhaps partly because of his experience over Bertha Mason: 'a being I was cheated into espousing' he calls her. Not only the Mason family, but also his own brother and father knew of Bertha's madness but 'joined in the plot against me'. It is no wonder he goes to such lengths to test out Jane and her feelings for him. He hardly dare think that she might be the complete human being with whom he can have a satisfying relationship. At their first meeting he doesn't even tell her who he is. Later, he goes to great lengths to disguise himself as a gypsy in order to find out more about her. As Jane herself says, 'It is scarcely fair, sir.'

He is not a happy man, feeling disillusioned by the hypocrisy and behaviour of his class. Perhaps it is significant that Jane is clearly of another social class, not interested in show and the accepted conventions of behaviour. There is a shallowness about the people at the party in Chapter 18, and Jane expresses surprise at Rochester apparently planning to marry Miss Ingram 'for interest and connections . . . I had thought him a man unlikely to be influenced by motives so commonplace in his choice of a wife.'

That he encourages Jane to believe this shows an apparently cruel side to his nature. In Chapter 23 he makes Jane believe that they will never see each other again, and he can speak harshly to Adèle. Yet he is inconsistent; he can follow harshness with signs of consideration which would be rare in men of his class. 'Miss Eyre, I beg your pardon. The fact is, once for all, I don't wish to treat you like an inferior.' He can also be generous. He cares for Adèle, housing her, employing a governess, and bringing her presents ('She says you have always been in the habit of giving her playthings.'). and he overwhelms Jane with presents before the wedding. Jane thanks him after she has been allowed to visit her sick aunt: 'Thank you, Mr Rochester, for your great kindness. I am strangely glad to get back again to you; and wherever you are is my home – my only home.'

Like anyone in his position, he is used to being obeyed. 'I am used to say, 'Do this,' and it is done: I cannot alter my customary habits for one new inmate.' 'I have a right to be a little masterful, abrupt,' he says. He is, of course, fascinated and attracted by Jane's honesty in response to his abruptness – a reaction he gets neither from the servants, who unquestioningly obey him, nor his peers, who flatter him. The best example of this is Jane's reply to his enquiry, 'Do you think me handsome?'

Throughout the story there is a self-centredness about his behaviour. He wants Jane to be his on his own terms (for example, he wants her to dress as he chooses, not as she prefers) and he expects her to accept his alternative plans for them both after the failed wedding (Ch.27). However, when Jane returns, it is to a man softened by having to wait for her, and changed by his suffering (including his heroism in trying to save his mad wife from the flames – which she hardly deserves) so that he is more suited to being married to Jane than he might have been earlier. Has all turned out for the best, after all? Could their marriage have been as good with the 'old' Rochester? As Jane summarises it: 'All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character – perfect concord is the result.'