



# FROM NOVEL TO SCREEN:

## *Analyzing "Jane Eyre" and its 1997 TV Adaptation*

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into the timeless classic novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and its 1997 television adaptation by Robert Young. *Jane Eyre* has inspired many directors and filmmakers to bring the story to the screen. It has frequently been adapted for film, radio, television, and theatre, and has also inspired a number of rewritings and reinterpretations. It has been adapted into many languages across several countries. These adaptations have fascinated audiences from the very beginning. This paper will focus on analysing the 1997 TV adaptation of the novel directed by Robert Young to see how he has portrayed and interpreted the essence of this classic novel. The paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the themes, narration, characterization, plot structure, language, and dialogue of both the novel and its TV adaptation. The primary emphasis will be on evaluating whether the actors accurately represented the personalities of the main characters of the novel, i.e. Jane and Mr. Rochester, and highlighting any significant differences in the portrayal of important characters and themes. It will assess whether the 1997 adaptation is a faithful adaptation of the source text or whether the director has taken the liberty in terms of characterization, dialogue delivery, narrative techniques, or plot development. The paper also aims to understand how the visual medium complements or diverges from the source text.

**Index Terms – adaptation, film, characterization, plot, dialogue, Jane Eyre**

### **I. INTRODUCTION: JANE EYRE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE VICTORIAN ERA**

The nineteenth-century Victorian era was a time of significant changes and disruption in England. The age was marked by rapid industrialization, social reforms, and shifting gender roles. Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* captures the essence of this age as it reflects many of these cultural and social changes. Charlotte has explored themes of individualism, self-identity, and the challenges a woman had to face in a male-dominant society. The novel was published in 1847. It is a story of a young orphan girl named Jane Eyre who faces many challenges and obstacles in her life but overcomes them all and eventually emerges as a strong and independent woman. The novel is an important piece of literature that continues to be one of the most beloved literary works of all time.

The novel is set in the Victorian era and is known for its exploration of feminist themes and social class issues. Through her portrayal of the protagonist in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. The woman in the Victorian era was supposed to be submissive, dependent on men, having no individual identity. In contrast to this image, Brontë presents a strong and independent female character in her novel who refuses to be defined by her social status or her gender. Jane's journey from a mistreated orphan to a successful and respected governess shows her strength. She has to face numerous obstacles and challenges to establish a place for herself in society. The class issue in Victorian society is also explored, depicting the stark divide between the rich upper class and the working-class poor. Through Jane's experiences, we see how people born in poverty are mistreated by the upper class and how their class determines opportunities and prospects in life.

When it was first published in 1847, it received mixed reviews. Some critics praised the portrayal of an independent female protagonist of the novel, while others criticized the unconventional character and its supposed immorality. However, the negative reviews didn't stop the novel's growing popularity over time, and it has since become recognized as a classic of English literature.

The novel's portrayal of a strong and independent female character was particularly groundbreaking for its time. In addition to its literary merits, *Jane Eyre* has also had a significant cultural impact. It has inspired several adaptations and works of art across multiple forms of media. It has become a beloved masterpiece of literature that continues to be studied and admired by readers and scholars alike.

### **II. ROBERT YOUNG'S 'JANE EYRE' ON SCREEN**

*Jane Eyre* has been adapted into various forms of media numerous times since its publication in 1847. The novel's enduring popularity and influence can be seen in its numerous film adaptations, stage productions, television series, and even in other works of fiction. There exist more than 70 adaptations of *Jane Eyre* across feature films, television, radio, and theatre. The first adaptation of the novel came up as a five-act play by John Brougham. It premiered in 1849. The first silent *Jane Eyre* film premiered in 1910, the first talkie feature film in 1934, the first radio adaptation in 1938, and the first television adaptation in 1949. And every few years, we can see a new adaptation coming up. Adapting the famous story across different entertainment mediums has been an ongoing endeavour.

The 1997 television adaptation of *Jane Eyre* by British television and film director Robert Young starred Samantha Morton in the titular role and Ciarán Hinds as Mr. Rochester. Notably, this version of the story omits several middle scenes, including those featuring Mrs. Reed, the relationship between Jane and the Rivers, and her uncle's inheritance. The film originally aired on ITV in the UK on March 9th, 1997, and on A&E-TV on October 19th, 1997, in the US. It is occasionally repeated on ITV3.

The adaptation follows the story of a young orphan girl named Jane Eyre who becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall and falls in love with her employer, Mr. Rochester. However, their relationship is complicated by the fact that Mr. Rochester is already married and his wife, Bertha Mason, is kept locked away in Thornfield Hall.

This version is known for its faithfulness to the original novel. Many scenes and dialogue are taken directly from the novel. The atmospheric cinematography and haunting music help capture the gothic and mysterious elements of the narrative. The captivating chemistry between the two lead actors enhances the portrayal of Jane and Mr. Rochester's love story, making it more engaging for the audience.

### III. THE PLOT OF THE NOVEL VS. THE ADAPTATION

The plot of the novel revolves around its titular character, Jane Eyre, from her childhood as an orphan to her eventual marriage to her employer, Mr. Rochester. During her journey, Jane faces many challenges. But her strength, resilience, and integrity help her overcome all the obstacles that come her way. Though the plot of the 1997 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* closely follows the plot of the original novel by Charlotte Brontë. However, there are some minor changes and omissions that distinguish the two versions. Let's shed light on these changes.

**a) Chronological order:** While the 1997 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* is largely faithful to the plot of the novel, it does alter the chronological order of events in some instances. For example, in the novel, Jane's meeting with Mr. Rochester occurs shortly after she arrives at Thornfield Hall. In the adaptation, this meeting is delayed until later, after Jane has spent more time with Adele and Mrs. Fairfax. Another example of altering the chronological order in the adaptation is regarding the revelation of Bertha's secret. In the novel, Jane learns about this secret on the day of their planned wedding while in the adaptation, this revelation happens much before the wedding is planned. In the novel, Jane's time with St. John Rivers and his sisters occurs after she has left Thornfield Hall. In the adaptation, this storyline is interwoven with her time at Thornfield, creating a non-linear narrative structure.

The 1997 adaptation rearranges some events and alters the chronological order of the story, which can be confusing for those familiar with the novel's original sequence of events. However, they are done in service of the adaptation's storytelling goals and do not fundamentally alter the themes or characterizations of the story.

**b) Childhood scenes:** The adaptation spends less time on Jane's childhood at Gateshead and Lowood School than the novel, compressing these scenes to focus more on her time at Thornfield Hall. The portrayal of Jane's childhood is handled with a different emphasis compared to the novel. While Charlotte Brontë's original work delves into Jane's experiences at Gateshead and Lowood School in greater detail, the TV adaptation chooses to compress these early years in Jane's life, allocating more screen time to her later experiences at Thornfield Hall. In the novel, Jane's mistreatment by her aunt and cousins at Gateshead Hall is depicted in greater detail, showcasing the harsh conditions she endures. However, in the TV adaptation, this part of her childhood is condensed, and the focus shifts relatively quickly to her departure for Lowood School. Similarly, the TV adaptation compresses Jane's time at Lowood School. In the novel, her experiences at the school, her friendships with Helen Burns and Miss Temple, and her growth as a student are given more emphasis. In contrast, the adaptation briefly portrays her arrival, introduces Helen and Miss Temple, and moves forward to the next phase of Jane's life.

**c) Bertha's portrayal:** The adaptation portrays Bertha Mason in a more sympathetic light than the novel, depicting her as a victim of her circumstances rather than a purely monstrous figure. One notable instance occurs during the fire scene at Thornfield Hall. In the TV adaptation, the fire sequence not only showcases the intense danger and suspense of the moment but also reveals Bertha's vulnerable and distressed state. As the flames consume Thornfield, the camera captures glimpses of Bertha, trapped and consumed by the inferno, evoking empathy for her plight. This portrayal contrasts with the novel's more distant depiction of the event, providing a poignant visual representation of Bertha's suffering and desperation.

Furthermore, the adaptation incorporates additional scenes that delve into Bertha's past, shedding light on the circumstances that led to her current situation. These scenes highlight her marriage to Mr. Rochester, revealing the complexities of their relationship and the factors that contributed to Bertha's descent into madness. By offering insight into her background, the TV adaptation prompts viewers to consider Bertha's circumstances and the societal limitations that impacted her life.

**d) Ending:** The ending of the adaptation is somewhat different from the novel, with some scenes added and others omitted. Certain scenes at the end differ from the original novel, demonstrating the adaptation's unique interpretation of the story. One notable example of an added scene occurs towards the conclusion when Jane and Mr. Rochester are shown reuniting after the tragic fire at Thornfield Hall. In the adaptation, their reunion is depicted in a visually dramatic and emotionally charged manner, highlighting their enduring love and the resilience of their bond. This added scene accentuates the passionate connection between Jane and Mr. Rochester, providing a poignant and satisfying resolution to their tumultuous journey.

Conversely, the adaptation omits certain scenes that are present in the novel. For instance, the novel includes an extended exploration of Jane's time with her distant relatives, the Rivers family, where she discovers her true lineage and ultimately inherits a fortune. In the TV adaptation, the focus is primarily on Jane and Mr. Rochester, leading to the omission of some of the more intricate details of Jane's inheritance and her interactions with the Rivers family.

It is worth noting that while there are some differences between the plot of the novel and the 1997 adaptation, the adaptation generally stays true to the spirit of the original story and captures the key themes and characters of the novel. These differences in scenes between the TV adaptation and the original novel illustrate how the adaptation makes creative choices to prioritize certain aspects of the story and enhance its visual and emotional impact, while also needing to make adjustments to fit the format of television.

### IV. CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL VS. THE ADAPTATION

While doing a comparative analysis of the characters in the novel to their counterparts in the adaptation, there were found many differences. Here are some of the main characters of the novel and how they are portrayed in the 1997 adaptation:

**Jane Eyre:** In both the novel and the adaptation, Jane Eyre is portrayed as a strong, independent woman with a fierce sense of integrity. However, there are some differences in the way her character is depicted in each version. In the novel, Jane is portrayed as introspective and reflective, with a strong sense of moral duty and a deep love of nature. She is also fiercely independent and refuses to be constrained by societal expectations or the expectations of others. When Jane is punished unfairly by her Aunt Reed and locked in the red room, she does not give in to fear or despair but instead asserts her own agency and independence. She says, "I resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me."(Chapter 2)

Jane is not afraid to speak her mind and stand up for herself, even in the face of authority figures like Mr. Brocklehurst or Rochester.

In the 1997 adaptation, Jane's character is portrayed in a similar way to the novel, as a strong, independent woman with a fierce sense of integrity. However, the adaptation places more emphasis on the emotional and romantic aspects of Jane's story, highlighting her passionate and intense nature. For example, in the adaptation, there are more scenes that show Jane expressing her emotions and desires, such as when she confronts Rochester about his past or when she confesses her love for him. These scenes are often more dramatic and intense than in the novel, emphasizing the emotional journey that Jane undergoes throughout the story.

Additionally, the adaptation gives Jane more agency and independence in her relationships with other characters, such as Rochester and St. John Rivers. In the novel, Jane is often more passive and deferential to the men in her life, but in the adaptation, she is shown as more of an equal partner in her relationships, challenging and pushing back against their expectations and desires. In the adaptation, Jane's character is portrayed as more emotionally expressive and outwardly passionate. Her love for Rochester is portrayed in a more overtly romantic way, with more emphasis placed on their physical attraction and chemistry. The adaptation also portrays Jane as more vulnerable and fragile, with scenes of her crying or visibly struggling with her emotions.

**Edward Rochester:** Both the novel and the adaptation portray Rochester as a complex and flawed character with a mysterious past. However, the adaptation puts more focus on his physical appearance and romantic chemistry with Jane than the novel. In both the novel and the adaptation, Rochester is portrayed as a complex and flawed character who struggles with his own past and inner demons. However, there are some differences in the portrayal of Rochester between the novel and the adaptation. In the novel, Rochester is presented as a brooding and mysterious figure, with a dark and tragic past that he keeps hidden from others. He is initially aloof and distant towards Jane, but eventually reveals his vulnerability and feelings to her, leading to their intense and passionate relationship. Rochester's flaws and mistakes are also more emphasized in the novel, such as his attempted bigamy with his first wife Bertha.

In the 1997 adaptation, Rochester's character is portrayed in a similar way, but there is more emphasis on his charm and charisma, as well as his emotional journey throughout the story. He is shown as more of a romantic hero, with strong chemistry and connection to Jane. The adaptation also includes some additional scenes that delve more into Rochester's past and emotional struggles, such as his feelings of guilt and shame over Bertha, and his eventual redemption through his love for Jane.

**Bertha Mason:** In the novel Bertha Mason is portrayed as a mysterious and dangerous character who is kept locked away in Thornfield Hall. She is described as being insane and violent, and her presence threatens to destroy Jane's relationship with Rochester. In the adaptation, Bertha's character is also portrayed as being mysterious and dangerous, but with more emphasis on her sexuality and sensuality. The adaptation also explores Bertha's backstory and her relationship with Rochester in more detail, showing how she was brought from the West Indies as his wife and how he kept her locked up after she became mentally ill.

However, the adaptation also presents Bertha as a more sympathetic character than in the novel. While she is still portrayed as being mentally ill and violent, there are also scenes that show her vulnerability and her desire for freedom and escape. The adaptation also emphasizes the oppressive and patriarchal society that contributed to Bertha's confinement and mistreatment.

**St. John Rivers:** In both the novel and the 1997 adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, St. John Rivers is portrayed as a strict and disciplined character, but there are some differences in his characterization. In the novel, St. John is primarily depicted as a religious and moral figure, who believes in strict self-discipline and the importance of duty and service. He is portrayed as cold and reserved, with little regard for emotions or personal connections. He sees Jane primarily as a tool for his missionary work, and attempts to persuade her to marry him and accompany him to India as his wife and fellow missionary.

In the adaptation, St. John's character is given more depth and nuance. While he is still portrayed as strict and disciplined, the adaptation explores his relationship with his sisters and his conflicted feelings about his own desires and emotions. He is shown to be genuinely attracted to Jane and to struggle with his own desires and the expectations of his religious and social background.

**Mrs. Reed:** In both the novel and the 1997 adaptation, Mrs. Reed is portrayed as a cruel and vindictive woman who mistreats Jane during her childhood. However, there are some differences in the portrayal of her character between the two versions. In the novel, Mrs. Reed is shown to be a more complex character than in the adaptation. While she is certainly harsh and abusive towards Jane, there are moments where she shows regret and attempts to make amends for her past behavior. For example, on her deathbed, she confesses to Jane that she treated her unfairly and asks for forgiveness. This moment humanizes Mrs. Reed and shows that she is not entirely one-dimensional. In the adaptation, Mrs. Reed is portrayed as a more straightforward villainous character, without much nuance or complexity. She is shown to be unrepentant in her treatment of Jane, and there are no moments where she expresses regret or attempts to make amends. The adaptation presents her as a more one-dimensional antagonist.

We can say that although there are some differences between the characterization between the novel and the 1997 adaptation, these both stay true to the essential traits and motivations of each character.

## VI. DIALOGUES IN THE NOVEL VS. THE ADAPTATION

The novel contains memorable and impactful dialogue which is included by Young in his adaptation too. However, as with any adaptation, there are some differences in the way that dialogue is presented. Here are a few examples:

In the novel, Rochester says to Jane:

"I am no bird, and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you."(Chapter 23)

This line is an important moment in the novel because it shows Rochester's determination to be with Jane even though their relationship is socially unacceptable. However, this line is not included in the 1997 film adaptation, which means that the impact of Rochester's statement is lessened.

In the novel, Rochester tells Jane the story of how he was tricked into marrying Bertha Mason, his mad wife:

"I married her, sir, [...] Leah the housemaid and Sophie the French nurse, were decent women; but Grace Poole, the cook, was not a loose woman, but a madwoman, and as soon as she knew [...] what my intentions were, and what part I had been induced to act in his drama, she held me down on a chair, and placed me under confinement." (Chapter 26)

This story is an important part of Rochester's backstory and explains why he cannot legally marry Jane. However, in the adaptation, this story is changed. Instead of being tricked into marrying Bertha, Rochester tells Jane that he married her out of love and that he has been unable to obtain a divorce due to Bertha's mental illness. This change alters the dynamic of Rochester's relationship with Jane and the significance of his marriage to Bertha.

"Reader, I married him." (Chapter 38) This famous closing line of the novel is included in the adaptation, and is delivered by Jane in voiceover as she and Rochester walk through the gardens of Ferndean Manor.

Some conversations in the novel are condensed or changed in the film adaptation. For example, the lengthy dialogue between Jane and Rochester in which they discuss their feelings for each other and Rochester's past is shortened in the film adaptation, with some lines being cut or changed.

In the novel, there are several extended conversations between Jane and characters like St. John Rivers and Mrs. Reed that are not included in the film adaptation. These conversations are important because they provide insight into Jane's character development and her relationships with other characters in the story. For example, in the novel, Jane has a lengthy conversation with St. John Rivers about her religious beliefs and her sense of duty. St. John urges Jane to accompany him on his missionary work in India, but Jane realizes that she cannot marry him or devote herself to his cause because it would mean sacrificing her own desires and sense of self.

Here is an excerpt from the novel that illustrates Jane's conversation with St. John Rivers about her religious beliefs and her sense of duty:

"Mr. Rivers! I interrupted: 'Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature! If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose. Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling place. And it is you, spirit—with will and energy, and virtue and purity—that I want: not alone your brittle frame. Of yourself you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will, you will elude the grasp like an essence—you will vanish ere I inhale your fragrance. Oh! come, Jane, come!'"

St. John stopped, tapped me gently on the cheek, and said, with seriousness, 'Cousin Jane, I want to speak to you earnestly. 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. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!'

'As we are!' repeated Mr. Rivers. 'So,' he added, enclosing me in his arms. Gathering me to his breast, pressing his lips on my lips: 'so, Jane!' (Chapter 35)

This conversation demonstrates the tension between Jane's sense of duty and her desire for personal fulfillment. St. John urges Jane to accompany him to India and marry him in order to devote themselves to missionary work. However, Jane realizes that doing so would require her to sacrifice her own desires and sense of self, and ultimately chooses to follow her own path instead of St. John's. This conversation highlights Jane's strong sense of self and her refusal to compromise her own values for the sake of others. Whereas in the adaptation, this conversation between Jane and St. John Rivers is much shorter and less detailed than in the novel. In fact, it is almost entirely omitted from the adaptation. Instead, the adaptation focuses primarily on Jane's relationship with Rochester and her struggles with social class and gender roles.

While the adaptation captures the emotional intensity and chemistry between Jane and Rochester, it sacrifices some of the novel's nuanced exploration of Jane's character and relationships with other characters. The decision to omit the conversation between Jane and St. John Rivers about her religious beliefs and sense of duty means that the adaptation does not fully explore the conflict between Jane's desire for personal fulfillment and her sense of duty to others. This makes the adaptation a more focused and streamlined narrative, but it also means that some of the novel's complexity and depth are lost in the process.

Similarly, in the novel, Jane has a conversation with Mrs. Reed on her deathbed. Mrs. Reed finally apologizes for the mistreatment she inflicted upon Jane as a child and expresses regret for the way she treated her. This conversation provides closure for Jane's difficult childhood and helps her to move on from the pain of her past. In contrast, the adaptation focuses primarily on Jane's relationship with Rochester and leaves out these important conversations. By doing so, the 1997 adaptation prioritizes the romantic plotline over Jane's character development and her relationships with other characters. While this may make for a more streamlined and focused story, it also means that the film adaptation misses out on some of the nuances and depth of the novel.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The 1997 TV adaptation of *Jane Eyre* directed by Robert Young beautifully brings to life Charlotte Brontë's timeless story. This adaptation was generally well-received by critics and audiences alike. The series was praised for its faithfulness to the original novel and its strong performances. Samantha Morton's portrayal of Jane Eyre was particularly lauded, with critics noting her ability to capture both the character's strength and vulnerability. Ciarán Hinds was also praised for his brooding and complex performance as Mr. Rochester, which brought depth to the character. The series was also commended for its visual and

atmospheric elements, with many critics noting the haunting music and stunning cinematography that helped to bring the gothic elements of the story to life.

The 1997 version has a more traditional and formal look, with the costumes and sets reflecting the Victorian era in which the novel is set. Its exploration of complex themes and its portrayal of a strong and courageous woman has cemented its place as a classic of English literature. Throughout this paper, we explored how themes, dialogue, characters, and the story's structure were transformed for television. The adaptation successfully keeps the heart of *Jane Eyre* while adding new layers that make it feel fresh and relatable to today's audiences. By staying true to the original while using the visual power of TV, the adaptation keeps the spirit of the story alive. It's a powerful reminder of the enduring magic of *Jane Eyre*, which continues to touch the hearts of people, both old and young.

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