



Dr. Jeffrey Jackson

“There was no possibility of taking a walk that day...”

So begins Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, one of the most taught and most read novels in English studies if not also one of the most beloved. The novel, a fictionalized autobiography, is about the growth of a hero – both in literal truth and in praise by the novel’s champions. When I teach the novel, we start by considering this line and heroism. Do we have heroes any more, in modern times (which includes the novel’s publication date of 1847) or are they a relic of a more martial, less ironic era? (In 1847, Jane Eyre’s dedicatee William Makepeace Thackeray, long thought to be the

prototype for Jane’s love Rochester, began his urbane and ironic *Vanity Fair*, subtitled “A Novel without a Hero” as a resounding answer in the negative.) We consider what may have been a question on Brontë’s mind, Can a heroine – particularly a poor, orphaned, rather plain governess – be a hero? Overall, too, I like to ask, Can one – pace Joseph Campbell – be a hero when the sphere of action is utterly foreclosed, when there is “no possibility of taking a walk that day”? Or does a hero need a journey?

Jane doesn’t think so. By her admission, she “never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight.” (Her story, after all, is one of imaginative, epistemological journeying.) I long would have agreed. In middle school, when reading *The Lord of the Rings* gave me a short-lived obsession with mass-market, post-Tolkien fantasy novels, I quickly tired of the errant quests and world-saving journeys (all strangely interchangeable): do our heroes always have to go on an epic journey, I thought, always have to “heed the call” as Campbell would put it? Just once, can’t they decide to stay home? (Those hobbit holes are so snug.)

I am considerably less inclined to feel that way now.

I am not about to pretend, either, that these last few weeks, anteroom to an indeterminate future, have not been very hard, have not been a banal despair. Now is not the time for sentimental pieties about the virtues of peace and quiet or the comforts of home, that you can’t lock up the indomitable human spirit, that I could be “bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space” (*Hamlet* II.ii). As *Jane Eyre*, again, puts it, “It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility.” Meanwhile, its still being 2020 means that our furtive glances at the news seems largely to remind us that our most vulnerable populations are even more so now.

And yet we have all seen countless acts of everyday heroism, what the poet Wordsworth has called the “little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love.” And I have realized how acutely I miss and how acutely I cherish my colleagues. This year has been an auspicious one for the English Department. Two new assistant professors, Dr. Anwar Uhuru and Dr. Patrick Love, have joined our ranks and enriched our community.

And I have very much missed being with my students, all of them, every day, seeing and

hearing them. At this time, albeit remotely, we are celebrating our students. Reading their work and surveying their accomplishments reminds us why we chose this profession. In contacting this year's Student Award winners with celebratory news, I have been touched and humbled by the deep gratitude and appreciation for good news in these trying times. It was not so very long ago, after all, that our annual Student Award Ceremony marked the 2017 passings of two beloved departmental colleagues. To conclude, we will now, as we did then heroically endure.

