

JANE EYRE

by Charlotte Brontë



THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1854) was born in Yorkshire, England, the third of six children of Patrick and Maria Brontë. Her father was appointed Anglican curate in the isolated hilltop village of Haworth four years later. When Charlotte was five, her mother died, and she and her siblings were commended to the care of her aunt, Elizabeth Branwell. With only a few brief exceptions, including a year spent in a boarding school (to which she later returned briefly as a governess), she spent the remainder of her life in Haworth.

The isolation of the Brontë children seems to have generated a rich life of the imagination. She and her sisters Emily and Anne began writing poetry at an early age, and actually published a book of poems under male pseudonyms in 1846. Before the publication of their book of poetry, while they were still in their teens, the Brontë children spent years writing their own fictional narratives; Charlotte and her brother Branwell wrote about an imaginary African kingdom called Angria. The three surviving sisters eventually opened a boarding school of their own in Haworth, which was a complete failure - not a single student enrolled in response to their advertisements.

Ultimately, the three Brontë sisters all had novels published. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was an immediate best-seller, but Emily's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, gained far less public acceptance, being generally viewed as a dark and depressing work, described by one critic as "odiously and abominably pagan." After Emily's death in 1848 and Anne's death a year later, Charlotte found that her fame as a novelist enabled her to gain some measure of acceptance in London literary circles. In 1854, Charlotte married A.B. Nicholls, an Anglican curate whom she had rejected two years earlier when her father objected to the match, despite the fact that she does not appear to have loved him. Shortly after the marriage, she contracted pneumonia and died.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens with ten-year-old Jane living in the home of her aunt, Mrs. Reed, where she is scorned by her aunt and abused by her cousins. After defending herself against John Reed's bullying, she is sent to Lowood School, a boarding school for orphaned girls. At Lowood, she falls into the clutches of the hypocritical clergyman Brocklehurst, who starves his charges and

singles Jane out for ostracism by the other girls. She is befriended by Helen Burns, a fellow student who dies in a typhoid epidemic that sweeps through the school. She also finds help and consolation from Miss Temple, a teacher in the school who refuses to implement the brutality. Eventually, Jane becomes a teacher in the school. When she reaches the age of eighteen, she advertises her services and is hired as a governess at Thornfield Hall.

At Thornfield, she finds she is to supervise the education of Adele, the ward of the master of the house, Edward Rochester. Rochester is a hard and bitter man, but he is impressed by Jane's intelligence and independent spirit. One night, Bertha escapes from her attic room and sets fire to Rochester's bed. Jane saves his life. Despite the widespread belief that he will marry gold-digger Blanche Ingram, he proposes to Jane instead. She joyfully accepts, and plans are made for the wedding. As Jane and Rochester stand at the altar, Bertha's brother, Richard Mason, rushes into the chapel and reveals the existence of a prior marriage. The principals then visit Bertha in her attic, and see little more than a maddened animal. Rochester then suggests to Jane that they go away and live as husband and wife where no one knows them, but Jane refuses and leaves Thornfield.

Having no idea where she will go or what she will do, she loses her suitcase while traveling and nearly starves to death. In the last throes of hunger, she arrives at the doorstep of St. John Rivers and his sisters. They receive her kindly and nurse her back to health. She earns her keep by teaching in a local school. She receives an unexpected inheritance from a distant relative, and in the process discovers that she is related to the Rivers family on her father's side. Despite their objections, she shares the money with her newly-discovered cousins. St. John proposes to Jane, asking her to accompany him on his coming missionary venture. She is on the verge of accepting when she hears the voice of Rochester calling to her, after which she leaves to seek him out.

Upon returning to Thornfield, she finds the mansion in ruins as a result of a fire set by Bertha. Rochester, seeking to save his insane wife, is blinded in the fire, and she plunges to her death from the burning roof. Jane finds Rochester, and they are finally married. He regains his sight, and they have a child as the story ends.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Jane Eyre - The narrator and protagonist, Jane is an orphan who lives until the age of ten with her deceased uncle's widow, Mrs. Reed, where she is abused physically and emotionally. She then spends eight years at Lowood, a girls' boarding school, where she is lonely and neglected apart from her friendships with Helen Burns and Miss Temple. From Lowood, she goes to Thornfield, where she is employed as governess to Adele, the ward of Edward Rochester. She and Rochester fall in love, and eventually marry after many intervening complications. Jane is honest, straightforward, and passionate.
- Mrs. Reed - Jane's cruel aunt who abuses Jane as a child and encourages her children to do the same. She breaks her promise to her deceased husband when she sends Jane away to Lowood. When Jane later seeks reconciliation, Mrs. Reed expresses nothing but hatred.
- Georgiana, Eliza, and John Reed - The three Reed children with whom Jane is raised, they are weak and mean. Georgiana is beautiful but shallow; Eliza lacks all human compassion; and John becomes a drunkard and gambler who wastes the family fortune.

- Mr. Brocklehurst - The cruel and hypocritical clergyman who runs the Lowood School, he starves the girls and demands that they dress plainly while he lives in luxury and his wife and daughters wear fancy clothes.
- Miss Temple - A gentle schoolteacher who befriends Jane at Lowood and gives her the strength and love of learning to endure the horrible conditions there.
- Helen Burns - Jane's best friend at Lowood, she is a pious Christian girl who trusts God even as she is dying of typhoid fever.
- Edward Fairfax Rochester - The master of Thornfield, a bitter man who is softened by his contact with Jane, with whom he falls in love. He proposes to her despite the fact that his wife, a madwoman, still lives. Ultimately, the two marry after the death of his wife and the temporary blinding of Rochester in a fire.
- Mrs. Fairfax - The housekeeper at Thornfield, she is a kindly old woman who befriends and advises Jane from the day of her arrival.
- Grace Poole - A physically imposing woman with a taste for alcohol, she is the nurse for Rochester's crazed wife.
- Bertha Mason Rochester - Rochester's wife whom he was deceived into marrying by the woman's family. She went insane shortly after the marriage took place. She is confined to an attic room at Thornfield, and dies after setting fire to the mansion.
- Adele Varens - Rochester's ward and Jane's pupil, she is the daughter of Rochester's former mistress, a French actress.
- Richard Mason - Rochester's former friend, Bertha's brother, and the man most responsible for arranging Rochester's disastrous marriage. He discloses the marriage just before Rochester and Jane are to be wed.
- Blanche Ingram - A local socialite who thinks to make her fortune by marrying Rochester, he pretends to seek her hand in order to make Jane jealous.
- St. John Rivers - Jane's cousin on her father's side, St. John is a fervently religious man with whose family Jane seeks refuge after she leaves Thornfield. He seeks to marry Jane, thinking her a suitable partner in the missionary work to which he intends to devote his life, despite the fact that they do not love one another.
- Mary and Diana Rivers - St. John's sisters, they reach out to Jane in her poverty and misery without knowing who she is.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“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.” (Jane, p.117)

“‘I knew,’ he continued, ‘you would do me good in some way, at some time - I saw it in your eyes when I first beheld you; their expression and smile did not - (again he stopped) - did not (he proceeded hastily) strike delight to my very inmost heart so for nothing. People talk of natural sympathies; I have heard of good genii - there are grains of truth in the wildest fable. My cherished preserver, good night!’” (Rochester, p.163)

“I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad - as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have no worth - so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane - quite insane: my veins running with fire, and my heart beating faster than I count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot.” (Jane, p.349)

“I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest - blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine.” (Jane, p.499)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, when Rochester begs with Jane to live with him despite the fact that they cannot marry, she says, “A hand of fiery iron grasped my vitals. Terrible moment: full of struggle, blackness, burning! Not a human being that ever lived could wish to be loved better than I was loved.” Discuss the metaphorical significance of fire in the novel. For what does it stand, and in what different ways does Brontë use it to advance both the narrative and the reader’s insight into the characters of the story?
2. At the end of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Rochester says, “I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut tree in Thornfield orchard.” In what context did the chestnut tree appear earlier in the novel, and in what way does it serve as a metaphor for the relationship between Jane and Rochester?

3. Discuss the concept of female independence as it is set forth in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. How do Jane's thoughts and actions indicate that she is dissatisfied with the role to which women are relegated in her society? How do other characters in the novel help the author to communicate her ideas on this subject?
4. Compare the pictures of love presented in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Would you say that the ideas expressed by the two sisters on this subject were more alike or more different? Why?
5. Compare and contrast the standards of sexual morality affirmed in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Do the two women hold the same standard? Is the idea of sexual morality found in the two books a biblical one?
6. Compare and contrast the characters of Jane in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Elizabeth in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. What personality traits do these two female protagonists have in common, and in what ways are they different? Which character do you consider more admirable, and why?
7. Compare and contrast the characters of Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. What personality traits and life experiences do these two romantic protagonists have in common? Which character do you consider more admirable, and why?
8. Compare and contrast the characters of Jane in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Eppie in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. What personality traits do these two female protagonists have in common, and in what ways are they different? Which character do you consider more admirable, and why?
9. Compare and contrast the roles played by the supernatural in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. To what extent do supernatural occurrences influence the plots of the novels? To what extent do they represent the inner lives of the characters?
10. When Jane rejects the marriage proposal of St. John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, do you think she has rightly discerned the will of God in the matter? Does she make her choice because she wants to do the will of God in her life, or because she is resisting God's will?
11. Compare and contrast the roles played by social class in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Which author's critique of class distinctions is more severe? Why do you think so?

12. At the end of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane concludes by quoting St. John Rivers' stirring cry of faith - "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus." Discuss the Christian faith of the protagonist in the novel. Is Jane a woman whose decisions are controlled more by her faith or her passions? Why do you think so?
13. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane rejects Rochester's proposal that they live together without benefit of marriage by saying to herself, "I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad - as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth?" Why is it important for a person to establish moral values *before* one is in a situation where decisions need to be made? What is the danger of thinking that one can never know what is right until one is in the situation? Illustrate your answer with incidents from the novel.
14. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane describes the depth of her love for Rochester after the announcement of their engagement in these words: "My future husband was becoming to me my whole world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature of whom I had made an idol." Later, after the revelation of Rochester's prior marriage, Jane says, "My hopes were all dead - struck with a subtle doom, such as, in one night, fell on all the first-born in the land of Egypt." Was she right to compare her judgment with the one that befell the Egyptians in the tenth plague? To what extent had her sin duplicated theirs?
15. Compare and contrast the characters of Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. To what extent do these characters reflect the author's understanding of Christianity?
16. Discuss the images used by Charlotte Brontë to portray the redemption of Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. How do the events of his life after the departure of Jane symbolize his moral and spiritual redemption without ever mentioning the subject specifically?
17. Compare and contrast the first and second courtships of Jane and Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Pay special attention to the language used in the two scenes in developing your assessment.
18. To what extent should the character of Bertha Mason be viewed as symbolic of unbridled passion in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*? What role does she play in teaching Jane to control her admittedly passionate nature?

19. Compare and contrast Helen Burns and St. John Rivers as representatives of evangelical Christianity in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Which is more like a Methodist, which more like a Presbyterian? Why? How does Jane's religion differ from that of these two people whom she so admired?
20. Discuss the growth of the protagonist in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from her arrival at Thornfield to the end of the novel. In what ways does the author portray Jane's development intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually? Are all of these changes positive ones?
21. As a young girl, Charlotte Brontë loved to create imaginary worlds. The life of the imagination became far more real to her than the daily routine of her somewhat boring life. How is this love for the realm of the imagination reflected in her greatest novel, *Jane Eyre*?
22. Critic Peter Bolt, in his discussion of the religious ideas expressed in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, compares Rochester with the Apostle Paul and St. John Rivers with the Apostle John, the author of the book of Revelation. To what extent are these analogies valid? In what ways do the characters of Jane's two suitors match those of the apostles to whom they are compared?
23. In what ways does Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* illustrate the truth of Proverbs 31:30 - "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised"? How does the novel contrast the shallowness of physical beauty with the inner beauty of a godly character?
24. Compare and contrast Jane's experience at Thornfield in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to that of the unnamed governess in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. What do the two governesses have in common in their personalities? Their emotional lives? Their loves?
25. Discuss the use of the first-person narrative in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. What are the advantages and disadvantages of seeing Jane's experiences through her own eyes? Is she a trustworthy narrator? To what extent does the reader come to believe her interpretation of events?
26. Discuss the structural balance of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, focusing particularly on the Reed and Rivers households. How does the contrast between these two families, each consisting of one brother and two sisters, and each related distantly to Jane herself, advance the narrative direction of the story and the character development of its protagonist?
27. How do the major settings of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* - Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Whitcross, and Ferndean - both symbolize and contribute to the character development of Jane as the novel progresses?

28. Many critics have viewed Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as an early feminist novel. Do you agree? Support your opinion using specific themes, characters, and incidents in the novel.
29. One of the major themes in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* involves Jane's search for a family to which she can belong. Trace the different situations in which she seeks a sense of belonging, evaluate her success or failure in each circumstance, and suggest what the novel teaches about what it means to belong.
30. Discuss the theme of deceit in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Choose three major characters who are deceitful, explain the nature of their deceit, and describe Jane's response and the lesson it teaches about the value and importance of integrity.