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CLASSIC

JANE EYRE

CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more

JANE EYRE

Charlotte Brontë

Supplementary material written by Cree LeFavour

Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Eyre:
THE THINKING WOMAN'S HEROINE



Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* came into the world accompanied by scandal. The sharp wit and passionate independence of its genteel, impoverished heroine rubbed against the raw edges of social class, women's roles, the limits of women's desire, and the strictures of family duty. As Elizabeth Rigby, an early critic, famously wrote: "we do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*." Rigby's response might seem overstated today, but *Jane Eyre* was a radical in her own time, a woman who decided her own future with regard to little but the dictates of her own mind and soul.

Originally published under the androgynous pen name "Currer Bell," the tantalizing mystery of the sex and identity of *Jane Eyre*'s author fueled the book's popularity. Who could have dared to brook so many Victorian taboos? But once

Brontë's identity was revealed, *Jane Eyre* still didn't sit easily with polite society in mid-Victorian England. Many nineteenth-century readers read *Jane Eyre* as an autobiography. (They might be forgiven for doing so given all the confusion and the striking similarities between Jane and her author.) Many found the book far more honest and direct than was quite proper and certainly more frank about desire and passion than was ladylike. In fact, precisely because of this passion, many readers initially concluded that the author of such a book *must* be a man, since women were assumed to be free of such earthy feelings.

Today, *Jane Eyre* is still fresh, even startling. The modern reader is unlikely to be shocked by the distinctly sexual tension between Rochester and Jane, or by Jane's professions of desire. But that sexual tension still carries a charge more than 150 years later, and Jane's outrage at the injustices done to her and her unwillingness to compromise her integrity are still meaningful—even inspirational. We still cannot take for granted the fully fleshed female identity that emerges in the pages of *Jane Eyre*. We are still hungry for it, still in need of defining and redefining it: both *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Brontë have been the subject of countless books and essays; the novel has been repeatedly reimagined and reinvented in plays, musicals, and movies.

And beyond the novel's capacity to shock is the way Jane's intensity and the richness of her imagined world can still capture the reader. Novelist Virginia Woolf wrote of reading *Jane Eyre*: "So intense is our absorption that if some one moves in the room the movement seems to take place not there but up in Yorkshire." *Jane Eyre* still has the ability to transport its readers into Jane's life and onto the moors.

Life and Work of Charlotte Brontë

Born to educated but poor parents, Charlotte Brontë lived with her five sisters and one brother in the isolated town of Haworth in Yorkshire, England, where her father was the cu-

rate. When Brontë was five, her mother died, and she and her sisters were left with their somewhat cold and ineffectual aunt to care for them. The children's lives were difficult and lonely but intellectually rich. Exceptionally bright and creative, the siblings enlivened their dreary world through fantasy, creating elaborate poems, drawings, plays, and stories. Most famously they invented creating the worlds of Angria and Gondal (some of which were later published as *The Legends of Angria*). The sisters grew up to be a truly famous literary family. Brontë's genius was in many respects matched by her sisters Anne (author of the widely respected *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*) and Emily (most famous for her somewhat scandalous novel, *Wuthering Heights*).

Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* in relative isolation (at Haworth) while helping to maintain a household that required her time and work. Surely, she must have had a burning need to write, one that overcame great sorrow and hardship. The most productive of her three sisters (in no small part because she outlived them), Brontë wrote two other major novels, *Villette* and *The Professor*. Because she was so isolated in her life, a great deal of what shapes and defines her very bookish novels (they are filled with references to the Bible and classical mythology) comes from books. But the limited experiences that Brontë had beyond Haworth made an indelible mark as they are recounted in her fiction. She was a governess, as Jane was, and *Villette* and *The Professor* draw heavily on her experiences as a teacher and student in Brussels, where she spent two years (1842–1844).

Brontë's life was awash in suffering and pain. Neither of her talented sisters lived long enough to write very much. Before Brontë reached the age of thirty-three, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other ailments had killed her sisters and brother in rapid succession, and she and her father were the sole survivors of what had once been a family of eight. The image of the Brontë children's seclusion and their tragic deaths in the damp, close house on the moors are difficult to erase from our minds as we read in *Jane Eyre*

of Helen Burns dying in the arms of young and fragile Jane at Lowood School. Charlotte herself survived only to the age of thirty-eight. She refused many offers of marriage before saying yes to her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, perhaps simply to escape the isolation of living alone in Hawthorth with her father.

Compelling and wrenching at once, the lives of the Brontës have long formed an essential pairing with the novels, their prose and lively descriptions mingling and commingling in our minds with a vision of the Brontë house on the desolate, but lovely, moors.

Charlotte Brontë died barely a year into the marriage, on March 31, 1857, under mysterious circumstances, perhaps from complications of the early stages of pregnancy.

Historical and Literary Context of *Jane Eyre*

Industrialization and Imperialism

Charlotte Brontë lived amid the rapid and disturbing changes of the Industrial Revolution, which brought social upheaval, unrest, and poverty to many of the working classes while it brought great prosperity and wealth to others. Brontë certainly knew poverty from her own country life, just as she understood the instability and fluidity of class status from her experiences as a governess and teacher. The social upheaval and intimations of class fluidity were part of what disturbed many about *Jane Eyre*. Also of great significance for the evolution and development of *Jane Eyre* were changes in the British Empire and the place of racial minorities in British culture and society. With all forms of slavery outlawed in the British colonies in 1833, Charlotte was certainly aware of the debates over slavery. Many critics have noted that Bertha Mason may be read as a symbol of the dark underside of racial and sexual exploitation that was an integral part of British imperialism throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Brontë's incorporation of these

themes in her work might seem unavoidable given their significance and prominence in British society over the course of her short life.

Realism, Romanticism, the Gothic, and Genre

Jane Eyre shows the marks of various literary movements that were influential in England during her life. With Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* published in 1818, the same year of the first successful blood transfusion, we see how science and various anxieties over its potential power influenced literature. *Frankenstein* is often seen as a marker for the Gothic in literature. This genre was distinguished by decaying houses, ghosts, monsters, bleak landscapes, and gloomy weather and was made famous and popular by writers such as Wilkie Collins writing in England and by Edgar Allan Poe in America. *Jane Eyre* contains many Gothic elements, with Jane's imaginings of ghosts, monsters, and sprites and with the mysterious noises and dark presence at Thornfield Hall.

Equally important, *Jane Eyre* is part of the move toward realism in literary expression—a movement defined by social activism and a less flowery sensibility that was taken up by writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and W. M. Thackeray. Seemingly in contradiction with this realistic expression are the Romantic elements of the novel as distinguished by its emphasis on emotion (notably love and pain) and in the novel's attentiveness to nature, beauty, and self-expression. Jane's drawings of landscapes that she imagines in great detail are an example of the way the novel fits into the Romantic sensibility.

Its mixed influences emerge most clearly in the number of genres it crosses. *Jane Eyre* can be read as a bildungsroman—the story of a person's education and development from childhood to adulthood. When the story opens we meet an outraged and powerless girl, one who lacks a definite sense of her self and her own desires. By the end, we have

witnessed the emergence of a woman and a painter whose purpose and desires are known to herself and to those around her. But *Jane Eyre* is also, and no less so, a romantic love story. You might say that Jane's journey through hardship, from Lowood to Thornfield and from Moor House to Ferndean, are mostly about the desire to consummate her love for Rochester. But *Jane Eyre* is also mystery—what is the noise in the attic? What is Rochester's secret? Finally, *Jane Eyre* is a fantasy of love and happiness such that Charlotte herself never attained.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1816: Charlotte Brontë born in Thornton, England, on April 21.
- 1820: The Brontë family moves to Haworth in the Yorkshire moors where Charlotte spends most of her life. Her father is the curate.
- 1821: Charlotte's mother dies of cancer; her aunt Elizabeth is left to care for her and the other children.
- 1824: Charlotte, along with her three oldest sisters, enrolls at Cowan Bridge which becomes the model of Lowell School in *Jane Eyre*.
- 1825: Charlotte's sisters Maria and Elizabeth leave school because of illness and die of tuberculosis at home soon after. Charlotte and Emily leave school.
- 1829: Charlotte and her sisters and brother begin writing down their imaginary tales based on the fantasy world they have created together. They are eventually called *The Legends of Angria*.
- 1831–32: Charlotte attends Roe Head, Miss Wooler's School where she later teaches (1835–38).
- 1839: Charlotte works for the first time as a governess at

- Stonegappe House, but only for a little over two months before returning home.
- 1841: Charlotte again tries work as a governess, this time for ten months at Upperwood House.
- 1842-44: Charlotte teaches and studies at Pensionnat Héger in Brussels, Belgium. She later bases her novel *The Professor* on her experience there.
- 1844: Charlotte settles in Haworth and attempts to establish a school there but gains no pupils.
- 1846: A collaborative venture, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* is published. Only two copies are sold.
- 1847: *Jane Eyre* is published by Smith, Elder in London. *Jane Eyre* is reprinted in the United States by multiple publishers in the absence of international copyright law.
- 1848: Branwell Brontë dies of tuberculosis in September; Emily Brontë dies two months later.
- 1849: Charlotte's novel *Shirley* is published by Smith, Elder. Anne Brontë dies in May.
- 1850: Charlotte edits and helps to reissue her dead sisters' writing including *Wuthering Heights*, *Agnes Grey*, and *Poems by Ellis and Acton Bell*.
- 1853: Charlotte's novel *Villette* is published.
- 1854: Charlotte marries Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls and after a brief honeymoon, begins living in Haworth parsonage.
- 1857: Charlotte dies on March 31 at age thirty-eight from a severe cold and other illness.
- 1857: Charlotte's novel *The Professor* is published. Charlotte's friend, the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, publishes *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Jane Eyre*



Revolution and Romanticism

- 1760· Benjamin Franklin establishes the electrical nature of lightning through experiments using kites.
- 1764. James Hargreaves invents the spinning jenny for textile manufacture Horace Walpole publishes *The Castle of Otranto*
- 1769· James Watt patents his steam engine
- 1771. Richard Arkwright produces the first textile spinning mill. Luigi Galvani discovers the electrical nature of nervous impulses
- 1774 Joseph Priestley discovers oxygen.
- 1776. The American Declaration of Independence is signed in July.
- 1777· Antoine Laurent Lavoisier establishes the oxygen and nitrogen basis of air
- 1781 Immanuel Kant publishes the *Critique of Pure Reason*
- 1785 James Watt and Matthew Boulton install a steam engine in an English cotton factory
- 1789· The storming of the Bastille begins the French Revolution

- 1791: Thomas Paine publishes *The Rights of Man*, Part I.
- 1792: Mary Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
- 1793: Reign of Terror begins in Paris.
- 1794: Robespierre is executed, ending the Reign of Terror.
- 1797: Coleridge writes "Kubla Khan" and the first version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."
- 1800 Alessandro Volta develops the electric battery.
1806. The first steam-driven textile mill opens in Manchester, England.
- 1813: Jane Austen publishes *Pride and Prejudice*. Percy Shelley publishes *Queen Mab*.
- 1814: The British navy develops the first steam-driven warship. George Watson invents the steam locomotive.
- 1818: James Blundel, a London surgeon, performs the first successful human blood transfusion.
- 1825 The first railroad starts operation in England.
1837. Samuel Morse makes a public demonstration of the electric telegraph in New York.
- 1840: Charles Darwin publishes *Zoology of the Voyage of the Beagle*
1848. The first Women's Rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York. Marx and Engels publish *The Communist Manifesto*.

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	<i>vii</i>
CHRONOLOGY OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S LIFE AND WORK	<i>xiii</i>
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF <i>JANE EYRE</i>	<i>xv</i>
JANE EYRE	<i>I</i>
NOTES	<i>567</i>
INTERPRETIVE NOTES	<i>583</i>
CRITICAL EXCERPTS	<i>589</i>
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION	<i>599</i>
SUGGESTIONS FOR THE INTERESTED READER	<i>601</i>

JANE EYRE



To
W. M. Thackeray, Esq.

This work
is respectfully inscribed,
by
the author

NOTE ON THE TEXT



The manuscript of *Jane Eyre* survives in the British Museum (Add. MSS 43474-6). This is the actual manuscript used by the printers to set the first edition of the novel, published in October 1847. The latter was not completely free from errors, and there were also differences between the manuscript and the first edition, which were probably due to Charlotte Brontë's proof-corrections. The immediate popular success of *Jane Eyre* meant that a second edition quickly appeared, in January 1848. In this edition some of the earlier errors were corrected, but others crept in. Again, there were alterations, which were almost certainly due to the author. Almost at once (April 1848) there was issued a third edition of this best-selling novel. Here the pattern continued of correction of old misprints, introduction of new, and revision by the author (Charlotte's own list of errata in the second edition survives). There was one more edition of *Jane Eyre* in Charlotte's lifetime, the one-volume edition of 1850. It does not seem that she was involved in the preparation of this version.

The text used in this Washington Square Press Enriched Classics *Jane Eyre* is from the third edition: in other words, the last edition published in Charlotte Brontë's lifetime in which she is known to have been responsible for revisions.