An Introduction To

JANE EYRE
An Introduction to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

By

Stephanie Forward

Cover illustration courtesy of Stephen Collins

This eBook was produced by OpenLearn - The home of free learning from The Open University.

It is made available to you under a Creative Commons (BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.
‘It is a book to make the pulses gallop and the heart beat, and to fill the eyes with tears.’

(From a review in the *Atlas*, 1847).

The life of Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855)

Charlotte Brontë was the third child of six born to the Reverend Patrick Brontë and his wife Maria, and from 1820 she grew up in Haworth, Yorkshire. After her mother died from cancer in 1821, Aunt Elizabeth Branwell came to look after the family and stayed for the rest of her life. Four of the children, Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily, became pupils at the Clergy Daughters’ School, Cowan Bridge, Lancashire in 1824. Here the unhealthy conditions made Maria and Elizabeth ill, leading to their deaths from tuberculosis in 1825. Later Charlotte used the institution as a model for Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*, and Maria inspired the stoical character Helen Burns.

Reverend Brontë decided to keep the children with him at the parsonage. He encouraged their keen
interest in reading: they even produced their own extraordinarily tiny books, which they filled with minuscule writing and illustrations. Branwell, the only son, once received a set of toy soldiers, which inspired the youngsters to invent an imaginary world. Their fantasies about the kingdom of Angria continued into their adult years.

Plans had to be made for future employment, but the children’s options were limited. At that time tutoring seemed the obvious solution. Charlotte attended Roe Head School in Mirfield in 1831, at the age of fifteen, to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for her career. Subsequently she left to educate her sisters at home, before returning to the school in 1835 as a teacher.

When Charlotte was twenty she sent a selection of her poems to the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey. His response was not encouraging:

The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind...Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those
duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity. You will not seek in imagination for excitement...

In 1839 Charlotte duly became a governess with the Sidgewick family, leaving after only three months. That same year she rejected two marriage proposals. Her next post was with the Whites, for six months in 1841. Money from their Aunt Branwell provided funds for Charlotte and Emily to study at a Pensionnat in Brussels. Although the girls came home when she died, Charlotte decided to go back to Belgium, where she was besotted with the married headmaster, Constantin Heger. Her unrequited passion for him permeates the pages of her novels Villette (1853) and The Professor (which was published posthumously in 1857).

In 1844 Charlotte returned to Haworth, and the sisters attempted – unsuccessfully - to found their own little school. They hoped to publish their poems, producing a selection in 1846, under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Unfortunately only two of the copies were sold! Also at this time Charlotte’s novel The Professor was rejected. However the year 1847 proved to be a remarkable one for the three young women,
with the publication of Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*, Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* and Anne’s *Agnes Grey*. Their real identities were revealed in 1848. In the course of that year Charlotte was devastated by the deaths, from tuberculosis, of both Branwell (in September) and Emily (in December); then Anne passed away in May 1849.

*Shirley* was issued. Charlotte was now beginning to move in literary circles, and would soon be mixing with celebrated authors including W.M. Thackeray and Mrs Gaskell; but – understandably - it was difficult for her to enjoy her fame. Her grief was clear when she reflected: ‘A year ago - had a prophet warned me how I should stand in June 1849 - how stripped and bereaved - had he foretold the autumn - the winter, the spring of sickness and suffering to be gone through - I should have thought - this can never be endured.’ Thackeray recalled their first meeting: ‘I remember the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes. An impetuous honesty seemed to me to characterise the woman.’

Charlotte married her father’s curate, the Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls, in 1854; sadly, her happiness was brief. She died on 31 March 1855, in the early stages of pregnancy.
The story

Young Jane Eyre is an unwanted, neglected orphan. She is sent away to Lowood School, a supposedly charitable establishment, run by harsh Mr Brocklehurst. Her choices in life are narrow, and she eventually becomes a teacher there. Her next position is at Thornfield Hall where she is to care for Adèle, the ward of the enigmatic Edward Rochester.

Jane is deeply attracted to her master, and actually saves his life. Assuming that he will marry Blanche Ingram, she is astonished when her employer proposes to her. On the day of their wedding she learns that he is already married: in fact his wife, an insane woman called Bertha, is housed in the attic. Even though Jane genuinely loves Rochester, she is not willing to live as his mistress.

Impoverished and desperate, she is befriended by three siblings named Rivers. In one of those coincidences that are so common in Victorian fiction, it transpires that they are Jane’s cousins! Furthermore, she gains financial security from an
unexpected inheritance. St John Rivers is eager to marry her, hoping that she will accompany him to India: he believes he has a ‘calling’ to be a missionary there.

Suddenly Jane senses that Rochester is crying out to her. She rushes to his aid, only to discover that Bertha has burned down the house and has died despite her husband’s attempt to rescue her. Rochester has been blinded and maimed in the conflagration. Jane is now prepared to marry him, because she feels that there will be true equality in their relationship. It is thought that Rochester was modelled on Constantin Heger. Brontë had become infatuated with him when she was in Belgium, to no avail; but writing *Jane Eyre* enabled her to envisage a different ‘outcome’: ‘Reader, I married him.’

**Narrative style and genre**

Originally the novel bore a subtitle, *An Autobiography*, which was removed in later editions. Brontë’s use of an androgynous *nom de
was not unusual. Contemporary female authors often chose ambiguous, gender-neutral pseudonyms: male writers tended to be prioritized; they were paid more than women, and were less likely to suffer from prejudice and censorship.

Brontë employs first-person narration, although the ‘voice’ is not consistent throughout. Sometimes we ‘hear’ young Jane; at other points a more mature woman seems to be addressing us; there is also an extremely wise, more rounded speaker. Furthermore, Jane is not the sole narrator: Mr Rochester and St John Rivers contribute to the text. Indeed it is St John who is given the last word.

Jane Eyre can be categorized as a Bildungsroman – a novel of education and development – but Brontë, in keeping with many nineteenth-century writers, blended genres. We accompany the heroine on her troubled journey through life. Each stage is marked by a named location that is redolent with symbolism: Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Marsh End and Ferndean. These landscapes are both literal and metaphorical.

There is a foundation of realism in Jane Eyre. Jane’s
poverty and suffering grip the reader because the account is believable and distressing. In some regards, the text ‘fits’ with the domestic fiction that was popular in Brontë’s day. Critics have explored *Jane Eyre* as a ‘governess novel’. Tutoring was one of the few available options for impoverished middle-class spinsters, who could find themselves placed in an anomalous position: not part of the family; yet not at ease with the servants either. The author engages with social issues, in keeping with the ‘condition of England’ theme addressed in other well-known novels of the period: for example, by Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, Mrs Gaskell and Charles Dickens. There were deep-seated fears of social unrest. The Chartists were seen as dangerous revolutionaries, and 1848 was to be the Year of Revolutions in Europe.

Brontë also experiments with romantic modes: the Romantic movement had set a trend for certain literary stereotypes. Byron’s *Childe Harold* (1812-1818) introduced the figure of a melancholy, dark, brooding, rebellious ‘Byronic hero’; an image that lingered. Such protagonists were regarded by men as ‘cool’ and by women as alluring. The poet’s untimely death had fuelled the appeal, inspiring a number of complex and intriguing fictional heroes.
There is something of the Byronic hero about Rochester. Another generic strand of the book is the Gothic. Incarcerated in the red-room, Jane’s plight echoes that of an imprisoned Gothic heroine.

The passages about Bertha enhance our sense of the uncanny – the disturbance of the familiar. In their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret Bertha as ‘Jane’s truest and darkest double’. She can be seen as ‘the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead’. The text is endlessly fascinating because it lends itself to so many different readings, in terms of gender, class and race issues. The portrayal of Bertha can be problematic for modern readers: she is described as a Creole, and is depicted as deranged, violent and lascivious. Yet it is important not to impose twenty-first century values on a writer from a different era.

**Publication and response**
Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* while nursing her father, during his recuperation after a cataract procedure. On its publication, by Smith, Elder and Co., it received extreme reactions. John Gibson Lockhart, an author and the editor of the *Quarterly Review*, enthused: ‘I have finished the adventures of Miss Jane Eyre...Worth fifty Trollopese and Martineaus rolled into one counterpane, with fifty Dickenses and Bulwers to keep them company; but rather a brazen Miss.’

There was a good deal of speculation about the identity of the author. When it became known that a woman was responsible, there were qualms. Throbbing passionate moments met with invective from critics. The *Rambler* judged the novel to be ‘one of the coarsest books we ever perused’. Those who heartily disapproved of the book denounced it as ‘dangerous’, with its ‘outrages on decorum’, its ‘furious love-making’ and its ‘grossness’. Although Jane is constrained by her circumstances, we see flashes of her rebellious nature; hence, in the *Quarterly Review* Elizabeth Rigby viewed the heroine as ‘the personification of the unregenerate and undisciplined spirit’.
The lasting appeal of *Jane Eyre*

Jane is not a flawless heroine: perhaps this helps to explain why readers have warmed to her down through the decades. Physically, she is very ordinary: indeed Brontë specifically rejected the convention of having a good-looking protagonist. Mrs Gaskell noted:

She once told her sisters that they were wrong – even morally wrong – in making their heroines beautiful as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, ‘I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours.’

In terms of her personality, Jane has to learn to control her imagination and her outbursts. She veers between submission and transgression: sometimes she is restrained, demure and passive; on other occasions, we witness her anger. Jane can be seen as a subversive heroine: for example,
there are nuances of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, yet Brontë seems to *invert* John Bunyan’s famous allegory.

Forced to make her own way in life, Jane faces her ordeals with courage, retaining her dignity and integrity. Above all she asserts her right to think for herself, insisting to Rochester that they are equals:

_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!...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!_ (chapter 23)
What next?

If reading this text has inspired you to learn more, you may be interested in joining the millions of people who discover our free learning resources and qualifications by visiting The Open University.

More on *Jane Eyre*

*Mary Shelley: The expert view*

*The rise of Gothic fiction*

A note on copyright

Except for third party materials and/or otherwise stated (see terms and conditions) the content in this eBook is released for use under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence.

In short this allows you to use the content throughout the world without payment for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the
Creative Commons non commercial sharealike licence. Please read this licence in full along with OpenLearn terms and conditions before making use of the content.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.