

***Jane Eyre* (1847).** *Jane Eyre* was written by Charlotte Brontë. Brontë (1816-1855) was an English novelist and poet best-known for *Jane Eyre*. Despite its age *Jane Eyre* remains one of the world's most popular novels. Additionally, it was one of the most important novels of the nineteenth century.

*Jane Eyre* is a *bildungsroman* (a coming-of-age novel) about young Jane Eyre, an orphan. Her parents are dead, so she is forced to live, as a young child, with Mrs. Reed and her family, all of whom despise her and treat her awfully. When she goes to a boarding school for orphans, her luck does not initially improve, and she is underfed, exposed to typhus, and hectored by a religious zealot. She endures all of this, and eventually becomes an instructor at the school. Wanting more out of life than just her position at the school, she advertises for open positions, and accepts one as governess to a girl at a large mansion. Jane enjoys the position and the people, despite a series of strange occurrences at the mansion, but only slowly gets to know the mansion's master, Edward Rochester, who is haughty, proud, and treats her peremptorily.

However, Jane falls in love with Rochester, and after a time Rochester admits that he loves her as well. They are about to be married—literally at the altar—when a lawyer introduces an objection to the relationship: Rochester is already married. He admits this is true, but tells the whole story: that he married someone who turned out to be a crazy woman, and that she now lives in the attic of his mansion, cared for by a round-the-clock nurse. (The crazy woman was responsible for the strange occurrences). He wants Jane to be his wife, still, but she refuses to be his mistress (which is what she would be) and leaves him. After three days of wandering and begging, she is taken in by a good family of Christians, a brother (a zealous pastor) and two sisters. They befriend and care for her, and she becomes schoolmistress of the local school. The brother proposes marriage to Jane—but it would be a chaste sort of marriage—he wants a companion to help him when he goes abroad to preach the Bible and convert heathens, and he refuses to go with her if she is not married to him. She is tempted, but she hears a phantom voice, Rochester's, calling her name, so she leaves the family and returns to Rochester's mansion.

She finds it a burned-out shell, and soon learns the truth: Rochester's crazy wife burned the house down, and while saving the servants Rochester was blinded and lost a hand. Jane goes in search of Rochester, finds him, and marries him anyhow.

*Jane Eyre*, like *Pride and Prejudice*, inspires a fervor among many of its readers. Even readers who don't share this fervor happily admit the novel's many positive qualities as well as its historical significance.

*Jane Eyre*'s historical significance begins with when it was published, in the fall of 1847. The following year, 1848, was a year of revolution in Europe, with the Austrian Empire, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Poland most notably experiencing revolutions, and other countries experiencing significant unrest, both political and social. Great Britain did not experience a significant amount of unrest, but the upper classes feared it would, so that any novel that assaulted the upper classes and the status quo was strongly felt and reacted against. *Jane Eyre*, as loud a cry against the plight of the poor—specifically the mistreatment of governesses—and against callous religious zealotry as could be heard in that year, was bound to have an impact. *Jane Eyre* also included a strong feminist message in its portrayal of its protagonist, which added to the novel's impact, what critic Daniel Burt described as *Jane Eyre*'s “assault on established social hierarchies, conventional morality, and the novel's accepted methods.”<sup>1</sup> This led to

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Burt, *The Novel 100. A Ranking of the Greatest Novels of All Time*, Revised Edition (New York: Facts on File, 2010), 237.

criticisms like “altogether the autobiography of *Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition”<sup>2</sup> and that the book “might be written by a woman but not by a lady.”<sup>3</sup> Brontë intended *Jane Eyre* to be an attack on the hypocrisies of the era and of those who find it “convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth”<sup>4</sup>—and she succeeded splendidly in that intention.

It is fair to say that most notable contemporary critics were not prepared to read, or and were not fit to understand, as radical a book as *Jane Eyre*; its critical reception on publication was mixed, although it was a popular success. But in the twenty-first century readers and critics have the distance to properly appreciate the novel, and to understand its impact.

Brontë was one of the first English novelists, and *Jane Eyre* one of the first novels in English, to write a *subjective* novel. *Jane Eyre* has first-person narration (which Brontë popularized in *Jane Eyre*) and focused not on plot or dialogue-driven characterization but instead on the *inner* character of the protagonist, her thoughts and feelings and the path by which she develops psychologically. Such things had previously been poetry’s preserve, not the novel’s, and it was a revolutionary stroke on Brontë’s part. To quote Mrs. Oliphant in 1855, “ten years ago we professed an orthodox system of novel-making...suddenly, without warning, *Jane Eyre* stole upon the scene.”<sup>5</sup>

*Jane Eyre* is no traditional *bildungsroman*, no *Pride and Prejudice*-like quest for a husband and material comfort. Unusually, *Jane Eyre* is a coming-of-age novel but not the traditional form of the “female *bildungsroman*,” what is usually a quest for marriage and a stable place. *Jane Eyre* is a *bildungsroman* about the quest for equality and autonomy, a quest to grow up into an adult rather than grow down into marriage. *Jane Eyre* is the first major female *bildungsroman*, and one of the first major *bildungsroman* about a member of the working classes, rather than a middle- or upper-class protagonist.

The portrayal of Jane Eyre herself was shocking to some of Brontë’s contemporaries. Eyre herself is not a passive female or uneducated member of the working class. She is in many ways the antithesis of the Victorian female ideal, being neither docile, relenting, subservient to men, or even pretty. Jane Eyre is independent, assertive, stays in control of her destiny (at each point Eyre is the one to leave a job or position, rather than being discharged or cast out), and determines her own morality—it is Jane Eyre rather than Rochester who decides that living with Rochester as his mistress would be a sin, and it is Jane Eyre who decides that a loveless (but secure) marriage to Rivers—a marriage that a secondary Austen character, like Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*, would quickly accept—is not for her. It is Jane Eyre who says “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will”<sup>6</sup> and behaves as such throughout the novel. As Elaine Showalter says, “The influence of *Jane Eyre* on Victorian

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Rigby, *The Quarterly Review* (Dec. 1848): 174, qtd. in Richard Nemesvari, “Introduction,” in *Jane Eyre*, edited by Richard Nemesvari (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Literary Texts, 2000), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd in Burt, *The Novel 100*, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1885), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Oliphant, *Blackwood’s Magazine* (May 1855): 554-568, qtd. in Sandra M. Gilbert, “Plain Jane’s Progress,” *Signs* 2, no. 4 (Summer, 1977): 780.

<sup>6</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 216.

heroines was felt to have been revolutionary. The post-Jane heroine, according to the periodicals, was plain, rebellious, and passionate; she was likely to be a governess, and she usually was the narrator of her own story.”<sup>7</sup>

Brontë violates conventional class prejudices by giving Jane schooling and making her both literate and intellectually curious—she possesses a life of the mind, something many Victorian males would not admit to women having. Jane Eyre is a woman of both intellectual ability and substantial passion, both emotional and sexual—this, at a time when proper women were considered to be cool and passionless, or at least were supposed to be. Jane Eyre is rebellious against authority, whether Mrs. Reed’s, the teachers at Lowood Institution, or even Rochester’s. Even as a child Jane speaks out against the heartless treatment shown to her by Mrs. Reed. Jane is in control of her feelings and her relationships with her men—she is the one who decides that she will marry Rochester and not marry Rivers (the pastor), not they. The famous quote, “Reader, I married him,” deserves emphasis: Jane married Rochester, not vice-versa.

Little wonder that some contemporary reviewers found her appalling, and that modern readers see in *Jane Eyre* a feminist classic. (If *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* are early feminist works, then *Jane Eyre* is of the next generation, arguably written in reaction to them and others of the earlier generation).

*Jane Eyre* is also, in the words of Daniel Burt, “the literary fountainhead of the modern gothic suspense novel that has inspired such imitators as Daphne du Maurier’s best-selling *Rebecca* as well as countless sentimental romance novels featuring an unassuming though plucky heroine and a dark, Byronic bad boy ultimately redeemed by love.”<sup>8</sup> In 1847 the **Gothic** was essentially dead as a genre. The historical novel and changing literary tastes were responsible for its demise, and despite temporary revivals in the mid-1830s (following Harrison Ainsworth’s imitation Gothic *Rookwood* [1834]) and in the **penny bloods** of the mid- and late-1840s (following James Malcolm Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire; or, The Feast of Blood* [1845-1847]) the traditional Gothic was not returning. Brontë and *Jane Eyre* created a new Gothic (or what some critics have called an “anti-Gothic”). *Jane Eyre* has Gothic trappings, a Gothic atmosphere, and Gothic suspense, but the novel does not follow the Gothic conventions. (*Jane Eyre* is in fact at heart a **Romantic** novel). Although *Jane Eyre* has a haunted mansion and a young woman pursued by elements of the past, the novel ends with the domestication of the **Hero-Villain**, not his death, and with the female protagonist fully in control of her self-hood, rather than an object of the novel’s plot, to be manipulated and married off. *Jane Eyre* ended up creating a new set of novelistic conventions to accompany the Gothic atmosphere and suspense.

One of the objections contemporary reviewers had was the novel’s “murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God’s appointment;”<sup>9</sup> for reviewers and critics like that one, the poor were meant by God to be poor, and objecting against the treatment of the poor was objecting to God’s plan. Interestingly, the two groups that treat the poor, orphaned, young Jane Eyre—the Reed family and the charity school, Lowood Institution—are both homosocial or nearly entirely so, both the sphere of and controlled by women. So far, no different from the fictional

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 2009), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Burt, *The Novel 100*, 237.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Rigby, *The Quarterly Review* (Dec. 1848), 174, qtd in Nemesvari, “Introduction.”

worlds created by Jane Austen or other female writers. But unlike Austen, whose female worlds are for the most part positive, Brontë makes both the Reed family and the Lowood Institution greatly flawed, and the women in both a mixture of good and evil. Brontë was a feminist, of that there can be no doubt, but she was too deeply observant of human character, and had too much experience with bad people (much of *Jane Eyre* is autobiographical), to believe that female separatism was the answer.

As the foremost female practitioner of the *bildungsroman* before Brontë, Jane Austen would in fact seem to be the natural comparison for Charlotte Brontë. But Brontë famously didn't like Austen, writing

Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works: all such demonstrations the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as outré or extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him with nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood ... What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study: but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death--this Miss Austen ignores....Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (not *senseless*) woman, if this is heresy--I cannot help it.<sup>10</sup>

This criticism, that Austen lacks anything approaching the passion that *Jane Eyre* is full of, may lie at the heart of why some readers take to *Jane Eyre* with a fervor and others, like myself, react somewhat coolly to it. Some readers are thinkers, others are feelers, and the former take to Austen as the latter take to Brontë.

No reader can deny *Jane Eyre*'s innate qualities. The book is well-written, the prose the product of great thought and careful crafting, the phrasing far less dated than, for example, Dickens' later *Bleak House*. The imagery is fine, the prose often poetic and full of potent symbolism. (T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative," the external objects which provide insight to a character's internal thoughts and emotions, is in full play in *Jane Eyre*). Although *Jane Eyre* was a rebellion against fashionable realism (see *Vanity Fair*) in its use of the uncanny and the supernatural and the Gothic elements, the novel's tracing of Jane Eyre's development and maturation is realistic; Jane becomes fully three-dimensional. (As well as a pleasingly different heroine from much Victorian fiction). Mr. Rochester does not quite approach that, but he remains one of the most memorable of the Gothic Hero-Villains, as well as a model for countless modern romance heroes. For those not exposed to any of the numerous film or television versions of *Jane Eyre*, the plot is pleasantly twisted--the revelation of Rochester's wife comes as a genuine surprise, if one doesn't already know about it--and Brontë always plays fair with the reader about the consequences of characters' actions.

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<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Brontë, letter to W.S. Williams, April 12, 1850, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume Two: 1848-1850*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 383.

*Jane Eyre*'s references and homages—to Shakespeare, to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, to Cinderella, Bluebeard, Samson, Cupid and Psyche—work to strengthen *Jane Eyre*, to reinforce its familiarity, rather than reduce the novel to a mere set of allusions. And the central theme of repression—emotional, sexual, and political—and what critic Lucy Hughes-Hallett calls “the hideous but ultimately salutary consequences of confronting the repressed”<sup>11</sup> are played out strongly.

Still, *Jane Eyre*, at least for some readers, will inspire respect rather than affection. Its historical importance is indisputable and it is inarguably a part of the literary Canon, and one can gladly argue for its finer points as a novel. But...Jane and Rochester are not exactly *likable*. One cares for what happens to them, and is glad for the happy ending, but one doesn't wish for them to step out of the pages of the novel and into reality, the way one does with Elizabeth Bennett or *Lorna Doone*'s John Ridd. If the reader is not naturally inclined to extreme passions, the inflamed hearts and swirling emotions of *Jane Eyre* will not touch them, at least not in the deep and lasting way that *Jane Eyre* does with its devotees. It's said that the golden age of science fiction is twelve; perhaps the best age for reading *Jane Eyre* is sixteen?

Moreover, the novel has a troubled relationship with issues of race—Rochester's first wife, Bertha Mason, is a mixed-race Creole, and described in animalistic terms—and imperialism—the role of Rivers as converter of foreign heathens, a role applauded by Jane Eyre, is a purely imperialistic one. The work of Jane Austen can be seen, arguably, as an argument for whiteness, with non-whites notable by their absence; non-whites, conversely, are present in *Jane Eyre*, and portrayed in racist terms. Brontë, in *Jane Eyre*, was agitating for the oppressed of the 1848 revolutions—hence the famous quote that “millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth.”<sup>12</sup> But Brontë was purely of her time when it comes to race and imperialism.

*Jane Eyre* is worth reading—once—for its prose, and to understand its historical significance. More than that I cannot say.

**Recommended Edition:**

Print: Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2006.

Online: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100486388>

**For Further Research:**

Lucy Hughes-Hallett, “Introduction,” *Jane Eyre*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1991.

Joyce Carol Oates, “Jane Eyre: An Introduction,” *Jane Eyre*. New York: Bantam Classic, 1988.

Sally Shuttleworth, “Introduction,” *Jane Eyre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

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<sup>11</sup> Lucy Hughes-Hallett, “Introduction,” in *Jane Eyre* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1911), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 92.