Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

Context

Charlotte Brontë was born in Yorkshire, England on April 21, 1816 to Maria Branwell and Patrick Brontë. Because Charlotte’s mother died when Charlotte was five years old, Charlotte’s aunt, a devout Methodist, helped her brother-in-law raise his children. In 1824 Charlotte and three of her sisters—Maria, Elizabeth, and Emily—were sent to Cowan Bridge, a school for clergymen’s daughters. When an outbreak of tuberculosis killed Maria and Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily were brought home. Several years later, Charlotte returned to school, this time in Roe Head, England. She became a teacher at the school in 1835 but decided after several years to become a private governess instead. She was hired to live with and tutor the children of the wealthy Sidgewick family in 1839, but the job was a misery to her and she soon left it. Once Charlotte recognized that her dream of starting her own school was not immediately realizable, however, she returned to working as a governess, this time for a different family. Finding herself equally disappointed with governess work the second time around, Charlotte recruited her sisters to join her in more serious preparation for the establishment of a school.

Although the Brontës’ school was unsuccessful, their literary projects flourished. At a young age, the children created a fictional world they named Angria, and their many stories, poems, and plays were early predictors of shared writing talent that eventually led Emily, Anne, and Charlotte to careers as novelists. As adults, Charlotte suggested that she, Anne, and Emily collaborate on a book of poems. The three sisters published under male pseudonyms: Charlotte’s was Currer Bell, while Emily and Anne wrote as Ellis and Acton Bell, respectively. When the poetry volume received little public notice, the sisters decided to work on separate novels but retained the same pseudonyms. Anne and Emily produced their masterpieces in 1847, but Charlotte’s first book, The Professor, never found a willing publisher during her lifetime. Charlotte wrote Jane Eyre later that year. The book, a critique of Victorian assumptions about gender and social class, became one of the most successful novels of its era, both critically and commercially.

Autobiographical elements are recognizable throughout Jane Eyre. Jane’s experience at Lowood School, where her dearest friend dies of tuberculosis, recalls the death of Charlotte’s sisters at Cowan Bridge. The hypocritical religious fervor of the headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, is based in part on that of the Reverend Carus Wilson, the Evangelical minister who ran Cowan Bridge. Charlotte took revenge upon the school that treated her so poorly by using it as the basis for the fictional Lowood. Jane’s friend Helen Burns’s tragic death from tuberculosis recalls the deaths of two of Charlotte’s sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who succumbed to the same disease during their time at Cowan Bridge. Additionally, John Reed’s decline into alcoholism and dissolution is most likely modeled upon the life of Charlotte Brontë’s brother Branwell, who slid into opium and alcohol addictions in the years preceding his death. Finally, like Charlotte, Jane becomes a governess—a neutral vantage point from which to observe and describe the oppressive social ideas and practices of nineteenth-century Victorian society.

The plot of Jane Eyre follows the form of a Bildungsroman, which is a novel that tells the story of a child’s maturation and focuses on the emotions and experiences that accompany and incite his or her growth to adulthood. In Jane Eyre, there are five distinct stages of development, each linked to a particular place: Jane’s childhood at Gateshead, her education at the Lowood School, her time as Adele’s governess at Thornfield, her time with the Rivers family at Morton and at Marsh End (also called
Moor House), and her reunion with and marriage to Rochester at Ferndean. From these experiences, Jane becomes the mature woman who narrates the novel retrospectively.

But the Bildungsroman plot of *Jane Eyre*, and the book's element of social criticism, are filtered through a third literary tradition—that of the Gothic horror story. Like the Bildungsroman, the Gothic genre originated in Germany. It became popular in England in the late eighteenth century, and it generally describes supernatural experiences, remote landscapes, and mysterious occurrences, all of which are intended to create an atmosphere of suspense and fear. Jane's encounters with ghosts, dark secrets, and sinister plots add a potent and lingering sense of fantasy and mystery to the novel.

After the success of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte revealed her identity to her publisher and went on to write several other novels, most notably *Shirley* in 1849. In the years that followed, she became a respected member of London's literary set. But the deaths of siblings Emily and Branwell in 1848, and of Anne in 1849, left her feeling dejected and emotionally isolated. In 1854, she wed the Reverend Arthur Nicholls, despite the fact that she did not love him. She died of pneumonia, while pregnant, the following year.

**The Angel of the House**

The popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman came to be "the Angel in the House," who was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure. The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women.

Believing that his wife Emily was the perfect Victorian wife, he wrote "The Angel in the House" about her (originally published in 1854, revised through 1862). Though it did not receive much attention when it was first published in 1854, it became increasingly popular through the rest of the nineteenth century and continued to be influential into the twentieth century. For Virginia Woolf, the repressive ideal of women represented by the Angel in the House was still so potent that she wrote, in 1931, "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer."
The following excerpt will give you a sense of the ideal woman and the male-female relationship presented by Patmore’s poem:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.

Initially this ideal primarily expressed the values of the middle classes. However, with Queen Victoria’s devoting herself to her husband Prince Albert and to a domestic life, the ideal spread throughout nineteenth century society.

**Idealized Gender in Victorian Times**

In the Victorian age, one of the fun socially-constructed gender role concepts was that men and women occupied separate spheres. I suppose you would call these separate spheres of being or existence. The sexes were considered two halves of a whole, hence part of the importance of the whole marriage thing (but much more in a moral and social than a biological sense). Men and women were seen as equal but different, the men dominant and the women subordinate.

Women were seen as the more moral of the two sexes. They were expected to take care of all the finicky emotional nurturing bits of life, such as running the household, entertaining, teaching, and bringing up children. The “womanly arts”, as it were. The house was the woman’s sphere, and she reigned at the center of it (if she were the mistress of the house. Otherwise she circulated around in a cooking and scrubbing floors sort of way). The house was the center
of family life, and the woman--the wife and mistress of the house--was the moral backbone of the family. She was supposed to use her womanly powers and graces to keep the men from being too immoral: to provide a haven from the immoral outside world. You might check out Coventry Patmore's very, very long poem "The Angel in the House" for some examples of idealized female virtue at the time.

Men were therefore the less moral. They occupied the sphere consisting of "the rest of the world". Yes indeed. They went into business, took care of money matters, and generally were not a part of the family unit within the household. They would come home and be served a newspaper and a drink in the study. The man--master and husband--was the head of the household, yet played no such central familial role as the woman. He spent his days out of the house, and came home to be situated in comfort, to take his place at the head of the table, and to carve the roast beef (and there's a symbolic action if I ever saw one).

Source:

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**Jane Eyre Study/Discussion Questions Chs. 1-9**

You are not responsible for writing answers to all of these questions, but letting them guide your thinking about these early chapters may be useful. You may also want to make up your own questions as you go along.

1. What are the differences between Jane and the Reed children? How is Jane treated differently from them?

2. Describe the place where Jane hides in Chapter 1. Notice the colors. What is she reading? What is its mood?

3. John Reed is the first male character introduced. How is he presented?

4. Jane is taken into the red room as punishment. Describe the room and what happens there. Why do you think it has such an impact on Jane?

5. The servants Bessie and Miss Abbott talk to and about Jane. How would you characterize their attitudes toward her? Are they the same?

6. Note the song Bessie sings to Jane. What strikes you about it? (Keep it in mind as you continue through the book.)

7. The apothecary discusses with Jane the possibility that her father may have surviving relatives. Why is Jane reluctant to go to them if they exist?
8. Jane’s idea of the curriculum of a girls’ school is presented in these chapters (and since Brontë had taught at such a place, I am willing to trust her presentation to a degree). Describe it.

9. Chapter 4 shows Jane speaking out against her Aunt Reed. Characterize what happens and Jane’s reaction to her own actions.

10. The Reverend Mr. Brocklehurst makes his appearance in chapter 4. Describe his appearance and behavior. (Don’t be surprised if he reminds you of a fairy tale character.)

11. An early reviewer described *Jane Eyre* as “preeminently an anti-Christian composition,” and Lady Rigby saw in it a spirit of rebellion akin to that of the European revolutions of the 1840s. Based on what you have seen in the first four chapters, what do you think provoked these extreme reactions?

12. Describe the regimen of the Lowood School. In what ways is it useful to Jane? In what ways is it horrifying?

13. Characterize Miss Temple and Helen Burns.

*Jane Eyre Questions, Chs. 10-19 (and afterwards)*

1. When Jane decides to leave Lowood, she prays for “liberty,” or “at least a new servitude.” At Thornfield, she settles into her new job but is not completely contented. Go to the passage in Ch.12 that begins “Anybody may blame me who likes” and ends with “necessary for their sex”. What does Jane claim is necessary for a meaningful existence? How does this relate to the Victorian ideals of “separate spheres” and “the angel in the house”?

2. Jane and Mr. Rochester converse in Ch.13. Describe their conversation. How does he treat her? What does this nearly initial encounter suggest about what the relationship between them will be?

3. In Ch.14, Rochester tells Jane about himself. How would you describe him? What do you think of him so far?

4. Some early readers of *Jane Eyre* were shocked by the story Rochester tells Jane in Ch. 15. How does Jane respond to the story? Why is she not shocked?

5. Rochester faces the peril of the burning bed in Ch. 15. Hang onto this and relate it to other images and incidents of fire and burning throughout the book. Keep a list and speculate on the various meanings of fire.

6. Describe Blanche Ingram, both physically and in terms of character.
7. Why is Jane so drawn to Mr. Rochester?

8. Rochester and his guests play charades in Ch. 18. What are some of the terms they act out? What do they suggest to you?

9. Characterize the gypsy we meet in Ch. 19. How do most of the young ladies react to “her”? What is the nature of the fortune “she” tells Jane?

10. Were you surprised to learn that the gypsy was Mr. Rochester? What is the effect on you of his taking on a female disguise?

11. Keep a list of all the major female characters. What is each like? How is she like or unlike Jane? In what sense may she serve as a role model, either positive or negative, for Jane? What parallels are there between Jane and any of these other characters?

12. Jane Eyre contains a number of fantastic elements, which some have described as lending a fairy-tale atmosphere to the book. What are some of these elements? Do they seem to you to predominate? Are they appropriate? What effect do they have?

13. Jane goes to see the dying Mrs. Reed, thereby breaking the vow she had made as a child. What do you think of her for doing so?

14. Ch. 23 features the courtship scene between Jane and Rochester, including Jane’s famous outburst. What is to be the nature of the union between them?

15. Rochester’s treatment of Jane changes after they become engaged. How?