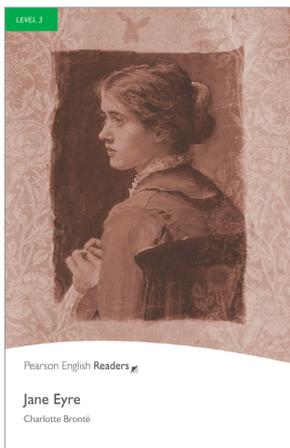


Jane Eyre

Charlotte Bronte



About the author

Charlotte Bronte comes from one of the most famous families in British literary history. Born in 1816, Charlotte Bronte was the third child of a Protestant clergyman. She was one of six children, five girls and a boy. Charlotte's mother died when she was five, and the children were brought up by their father and an aunt in a lonely parsonage on the wild Yorkshire moors.

Charlotte's two elder sisters died when she was nine, leaving Charlotte with a younger brother, Branwell, and two younger sisters, Emily and Anne. The children attended school, but their real education was at home, where they read their father's many books and listened to the wonderful folk tales of the family servant.

The four children started writing fiction and poetry as teenagers. In 1846, the poetry of the three girls was published under pseudonyms. Charlotte's pseudonym was 'Currer Bell'. By this time, the three young women were each writing novels. Emily and Anne had their novels accepted for publication, but Charlotte's novel, *The Professor*, was rejected. She immediately started on a second novel, and the book, *Jane Eyre*, was published to instant success in 1847, still under her pseudonym.

Tragedy now struck the family. In 1848, both Branwell and Emily died, and Anne died the following spring. Despite these losses, Charlotte published a third novel, *Shirley*, in 1849, and a fourth, *Villette*, in 1853. In 1854, Charlotte married her father's curate, but died ten months later, probably of an illness associated with pregnancy.

Summary

This powerful, groundbreaking novel was instantly successful upon its publication in 1847.

At the beginning of the book, Jane Eyre is a poor, ten-year-old orphan living with her uncaring aunt and bullying cousins. Her aunt sends her to a school which is so terrible that a serious illness kills many of the girls. After this the school regime becomes kinder and Jane remains there until, at eighteen, she finds a post as governess to a child. Her employer, Mr Rochester, is the child's guardian. He is a serious man who is not conventionally handsome. He and Jane become friendly, and he treats her as an equal. But strange events occur. Someone sets fire to Mr Rochester's bed while he is sleeping. A young man, Mr Mason, comes to visit Mr Rochester and is violently attacked.

Then, to Jane's astonishment, Rochester proposes to her. She accepts, being deeply in love with him. But just as the couple are about to exchange wedding vows, it is revealed that Mr Rochester is already married. What is the mystery of Rochester's wife? Jane loves Rochester, but how can she remain with him now? Jane flees, intending never to see Rochester again. But destiny eventually intervenes, and in a strange, half-happy, half-melancholy ending, the two are re-united.

Background and themes

During her lifetime, Charlotte Bronte was regarded as the best writer among the Bronte sisters. *Jane Eyre* was considered to be a story told with wonderful clarity and immediacy. There were many, however, who did not think it suitable reading for young ladies (although young ladies loved it!). The moralists were quite right about this, because, although there is no unacceptable sexual behaviour in the book, there is a steady building of sexual tension in the relationship between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester.

Both Rochester and Jane are extraordinarily lifelike characters. Jane is quiet and simple, but she is also fiercely intelligent and direct. Rochester, some seventeen years older than Jane, is similarly intelligent and direct. Despite the barriers of class and position, the two meet as intellectual and emotional equals.

Rochester is Jane's employer, her 'master'. For a long time he holds the power in their relationship.

Jane Eyre

Feminists claimed that Jane Eyre was an early feminist, and with good reason. Jane is short and plain, not worth a second glance. Yet Rochester falls deeply in love with her as a person – this is the feminist dream! Moreover, Jane is fiercely independent, determined to make her way in life and remain true to her own principles.

Rochester, also, is not a conventional hero, his face being grim and rather frightening. But he is of a type – the extra-masculine hero who nonetheless is tender and passionate when in love. At the end of the story, however, Rochester – through his own heroism – loses a hand and much of his sight. Now Jane becomes the strong one. Twentieth-century literary critics have suggested that the author may have had an unconscious desire to make Rochester's masculine energy less threatening to female independence.

The melodramatic events in *Jane Eyre* are accompanied by sharp observation and a narrative skill which make the story believable. The Brontë sisters had a love of high drama and what some have termed 'emotionalism'.

What were the influences that caused Charlotte Brontë to write this great novel? Biographers have stressed the family's relative isolation, the children's closeness to wild and lonely countryside, and their access to their father's large library. The children's religious aunt terrified them with threats of 'the fires of hell' if they were not good. The family servant told them local folktales and superstitions. All this fed Charlotte's imagination. But life quickly taught her hard lessons. She lost her mother at the age of five. The terrible school in *Jane Eyre* is based on the school that Charlotte and her sisters attended as children.

Discussion activities

Pages 1–7

Before reading

- Project:** Talk about Charlotte Brontë. Put students into small groups. Have them find the facts about Charlotte Brontë using the introduction section in the book. Give each group a big sheet of paper, and have them prepare for the poster sessions. When they are ready, ask some students to give a presentation and talk about Charlotte Brontë.
- Get ready:** Have students read the first two paragraphs of the Introduction in the book. Then have them answer these questions.
 - When Jane Eyre is a child, who does she live with?
 - Which school does Jane Eyre go to?

- How old is Jane Eyre when she leaves school and finds a teaching job?
- Who does Jane Eyre work for? Describe this person.
- Who does Jane Eyre teach?
- Who does Jane Eyre love?
- What do you think Mr Rochester's terrible secret could be?

After reading

- Role play:** Put students into groups of three and have them act as Jane.

Student A: You are Jane. You live with the Reeds. Tell the other students about your life there.

Student B: You are Jane. You have been at Lowood School for a few months. Tell the other students about your life there.

Student C: You are Jane. You are eighteen. You are going to work at Thornfield Hall as a teacher. Tell the other students about your hopes for your life.

 After this, decide who is the unhappiest of the three 'Janes'.
- Discuss:** Talk about the important words in the story. Put students into pairs. Ask them to choose ten words that tell the story of this section. These must be separate words, not sentences. Then as a whole-class activity, elicit these words from students and write them on the board. There should be more than ten words at this point. From these words the class must agree on the thirty most important words.

Pages 7–12

After reading

- Pair work:** Put students in pairs and have them exchange their opinions.
 - Who do you think set fire to Mr Rochester's bed?
 - Why do you think it happened?
 Ask some pairs to share their discussions with the rest of the class.
- Write:** Have students write a letter as Jane. This could be done in class or as a homework assignment. The letters they wrote could be shared by reading aloud some of them in class or by making a classroom wall display.

Imagine you are Jane. Write a letter to a friend about your life at Thornfield Hall.

Pages 12–21

Before reading

- Guess:** Have students guess what will happen by asking these questions.
 - *Why do you think Mr Rochester will stay with his friends for some weeks?*
 - *Is Miss Blanche Ingram a nice person?*
 - *Do Mr Rochester and Miss Blanche Ingram like each other?*
 - *Do you think they will get married?*

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After reading

- 8 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and have them discuss the following questions.
- Why does 'Grace Poole' attack Mr Mason, do you think?
 - Why doesn't Mrs Reed tell Jane about the letter from her uncle when she gets it?
 - Why doesn't Mr Rochester tell Jane immediately that he wants to marry her? Why does he first make her think that he is marrying Blanche Ingram? Do you think he is right to do this?

Pages 21–25

Before reading

- 9 Discuss:** Have students look at the picture on page 22. Ask the following questions and have a whole-class discussion.
- Who do you think this woman is?
 - What do you think she is doing?
 - Why do you think she is doing it?

After reading

- 10 Pair work:** Have students work in pairs and discuss the following questions.
- Do you think Mr Mason is right to stop the marriage?
 - Do you think Jane is right to leave Thornfield Hall? Do you think she is right to leave and not to say goodbye to Mr Rochester?
 - Why do you think Jane leaves Thornfield Hall with only a little money?

Then, ask some pairs to share their opinions with the rest of the class.

- 11 Role play:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to role play the following conversations;
- Imagine that Jane and Bertha Mason have a conversation when Bertha comes into the room and tears her dress. Role play the conversation.
 - Imagine that Jane and Mr Rochester have a conversation after Jane learns the truth about his marriage. Role play the conversation.

Pages 25–32

Before reading

- 12 Guess:** Predict the story. Go over the story up to page 25. Put students into small groups and have them guess how the story will continue. Ask each group to present their predictions to the rest of the class.
- Now Jane Eyre has left Thornfield Hall, what do you think will happen next? Is Jane Eyre going to be happy?

After reading

- 13 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and have them discuss the following questions.
- How does Jane feel about St John? Do you think she will marry him? Give reasons for your opinion.
 - Jane hears Mr Rochester's voice in a dream. Do you think this can really happen? Give reasons for your opinion.

Ask some groups to share their opinions with the rest of the class.

- 14 Role play:** Have students work in pairs. Have them act out the conversation between Jane and St John Rivers when he tells her that he wants to marry her. Encourage students to use non-verbal language, e.g. gestures, facial expressions, distance between them, etc. while acting.

Pages 32–37

Before reading

- 15 Discuss:** Have students put themselves in Jane's place and think about what they would do if they were Jane. Use the following questions.
- Imagine that you are Jane. Now you want to go and find Mr Rochester. What will you do first?
 - You see Mr Rochester at Thornfield Hall. What will you say to him?
 - You cannot find Mr Rochester at Thornfield Hall. What will you do next?

- 16 Guess:** Predict the story. Ask students if they think Jane Eyre can find Mr Rochester again or not. Encourage them to tell you the reasons why they think so.

After reading

- 17 Role play:** Put students into pairs. Have them imagine a conversation between Mr Rochester and a friend of his. Then ask pairs to act out the dialogues.
- Student A: You are Mr Rochester. Talk to a friend about the fire that killed your wife and hurt you badly. Talk about Jane and your marriage.
- Student B: You are a friend of Mr Rochester. Ask him questions about the fire and his marriage to Jane.

- 18 Pair work:** Have students summarise the story. Have students look at the last sentence of *Jane Eyre*: 'Our story was a strange and sad one, and terrible things happened to us, but now at last we are happy together.' Put students into pairs and have them discuss the following questions.
- Why was the story of Jane and Mr Rochester a strange and sad one?
 - What terrible things happened to them?