Charlotte Brontë

The Life of Charlotte Bronte: April 21,1816 – March 31, 1855

The third of six children born to Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell, Charlotte Brontë suffered incredible loss as a young woman. Born in Thornton, Yorkshire, she lost her mother to cancer in 1821. Her father was an Irish clergyman, so the children were left to be cared by Maria's sister, Elizabeth Branwell. Due to the poor conditions of Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire, Charlotte lost her two sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, to tuberculosis in 1825. The dark and disgusting conditions of the school, which inspired the setting of Lowood School in Jane Eyre, caused her father to remove his remaining children from the school.

Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell began to write sagas of stories depicting imaginary kingdoms, focusing especially on the struggles and hardships in the lives of citizens. The sagas also had an invested interest in childhood development and early adolescence, another prevalent theme working in Jane Eyre.

From 1831 to 1843, Charlotte held jobs as a teacher and governess, all the while publishing her works under pseudonyms like Wellesley. Come 1846, Charlotte and her two sisters published a collection of poetry under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Exuding the idea that the authors of the works were Christian men, they did not want critics to chastise the work on the sole fact of its female authorship. Charlotte published Jane Eyre in 1847 under Currer Bell.

Charlotte lost her brother and Emily to tuberculosis in 1848, followed by Anne the same way in 1849. She stayed and cared for her dying father, but made frequent trips to London in the wake of Jane Eyre’s success. It was there that she became friends with fellow female writer Elizabeth Gaskell.

In June 1854, she married Arthur Bell Nicholls, and upon becoming pregnant with his child, became fatally ill, and died in 1855 at the age of 39.

Elizabeth Gaskell published the first biography of Charlotte Brontë following her death, where she told the story of Charlotte’s love for Constantin Heger, a married man and owner of one estate Charlotte worked in as a governess. She explained that Charlotte’s morals and love for her family and friends kept her from pursuing said love, and the relationship was the inspiration for that between Mr. Rochester and Jane in her novel.

Plot Summary

Charlotte Bronte’s novel follows the life of a young English governess, Jane. The story introduces Jane as an orphan who was abused by her relatives, the Reeds, at Gateshead. In response to her rebellious behavior towards the Reeds' authority, Jane is sent to Lowood, a charity school. Though the school's conditions are sickening and oppressive, Jane makes some friends and mentors, Helen Burns and Miss Temple. Upon becoming older, she eventually advertises and leaves when her advertisement to be a governess is answered. She travels to Thornfield Manor, where she is employed as a governess. She falls in love with the owner of the estate, Mr. Edward Rochester. Thornfield is filled with dark happenings for Jane, including ominous cries and laughter in the night, unexplainable fires, and attacks on guests. The mystery surrounding Thornfield, and a request by her dying Aunt Reed, cause Jane to return to Gateshead, where she discovers she will inherit her uncle's fortune. Jane returns to Thornfield, proclaims her love for Mr. Rochester, and they plan to wed. The wedding cannot proceed, however, because Mr. Rochester's previous marriage to a mad woman he keeps in the attic of the manor, Bertha Mason, is exposed. Jane leaves Thornfield, and heads North. She is rescued from begging by her cousin, St. John Rivers, and his sisters. He informs Jane she has been left a fortune by her uncle, and asks her to marry him, and travel with him, as his wife, to India. Jane refuses, and returns to Thornfield. Upon arrival, she discovers Bertha had died in a fire she started in hysteria. The fire caused Rochester to go blind, but he and Jane marry, have a son, and Rochester's sight returns in time to see their child.

Themes, Motifs, & Symbols

First-Person Narrative Style and Psychology

Jane Eyre, narrated by Jane Eyre herself, introduced the first-person narrative style to Brontë's audience. The entire novel is filtered through Jane's consciousness. Readers at the time may have wondered, "How do we get to know her character and rely on her narration if she always tells the story?" Though Jane does not epitomize the typical Victorian heroine, her practicality, honesty, and other redeeming character traits render her a reliable narrator. First person narration represented a newer idea in Brontë's era and was propelled by the new interest in psychology; specifically, an individual's complicated interior life and both their unconscious and conscious drives and desires. By utilizing pathetic fallacy, Brontë places the psychological and emotional state of Jane Eyre upon the landscape so that it may be further available to readers. The combination of first-person narration, psychological interest, pathetic fallacy, and plot building via traditional bildungsroman encourages a close relationship between the reader and the heroine Jane Eyre. Lastly, Jane Eyre's narration as an adult returning to childhood illustrates the space between memory and experience in the novel.

Bildungsroman
Traditionally, a bildungsroman describes a novel that details a character’s development and journey towards formation and growth. *Jane Eyre*, like other bildungsromans, emphasizes childhood development, obstacles, disillusionment, and the journey towards a character's self-acceptance, self-revelation, and understanding. Beginning with her difficult childhood, this psychological hardship sets the course for the course of the story through the emphasis on childhood trauma, insecurity, and neglect. Furthermore, the novel’s structure reflects Jane Eyre’s journey and marks changes in her life and character. The novel, divided into four sections, emphasizes the four places in which Jane resides during the novel: Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, and Marsh End.

**Gothic Influences and the Supernatural**

Various settings, landscapes, and supernatural forces help illustrate *Jane Eyre*'s Gothic attributes. Jane's dreams, the looming evil in the story's background, the novel's omens, dark passageways, the architecture of the buildings Jane inhabits, the madwoman in the attic, and the desolate landscape all illustrate characteristics of Gothic novels.

The language used by other characters recalls elements of the supernatural as well. For example, Rochester often describes Jane in supernatural terms and calls her an elf, witch, fairy, etc. Furthermore, the characterization of Rochester illuminates his status as a “Gothic villain” and illustrates his role as a sexual threat—a threat that Jane avoids throughout the narrative. Examples of omens in the novel include the tree under which Rochester proposes to Jane, and the next day it has been destroyed in a lightning storm.

**Fire**

Fire and the color red are not only applied to Jane’s character, but they are also applied to her alter-ego (Bertha) in the novel. Fire symbolizes Jane's spirit and her expressions of rage. Jane's character is frequently associated with warm images, which have several functions. First of all, in Jane's childhood, she seeks revenge on her aunt and verbally blasts her with rage. The black and blasted landscape at Gateshead coincides with this rage via pathetic fallacy. Secondly, when Jane expresses anger or feminist dilemmas, the noise of the madwoman is heard. The madwoman represents Jane's angsty alter-ego, who, also associated with fire, nearly burns Mr. Rochester to death as he sleeps and later succeeds in burning down Thornfield Hall.

**Reversal of Victorian Expectations**

As the novel’s heroine, Jane embodies the reversal of Victorian expectations from the very beginning; that is, her childhood. In an era where children were seen and not heard, the authority figures in the novel regard young Jane as an "improper child" who constantly questions their authority. Jane goes as far as reversing authoritative roles and addresses her aunt as if she were a child herself (95). The novel continually presents ideal heroines—such as Helen Burns and Blanche Ingram—to form juxtapositions with Jane's character while illuminating differences from social norms. The reversal in Victorian expectations allows Brontë to reinvent the traditional heroine and insert feminist arguments into the novel as well. Near the end of the novel, class and gender expectations experience a reversal: while Victorian novels pushed for men to help a woman be financially free, *Jane Eyre* equalizes power balances between Jane and Mr. Rochester when Jane gains economic freedom.

**Challenges**

Along with the plot of the bildungsroman emerges many challenges in Jane's life. As a child, she's unwanted. Her orphaned status renders her inferior. Misbehaving and ceasing to be a “proper” child, Jane questions authority, especially that of her elders and her aunt. Generally miserable at Gateshead, she must survive the evil treatment at the hands of "the master of the house" aka her cousin John. Lowood nearly tames and destroys Jane's spirit, and she is constantly pushed into servitude. She must endure constant changes in environments; from the supernatural environment of Thornfield until her nearly fateful journey to the cabin of St. John and his sisters. Jane's gender pushes her into positions of servitude (she is always teaching) until she emerges as an heiress at the end of the novel. She must transcend gendered confinement and gain economic liberty for the weight of her burden to lighten.

**Orphans**

The "orphan" label in *Jane Eyre* furthers the emphasis on social isolation several characters experience. For example, Jane, Mr. Rochester, and Bertha Mason are all orphans and, coincidentally, represent deviance from social norms. At the beginning of the novel, readers learn of Jane Eyre's orphaned status. This position further illustrates her circumstances as an unwanted child, inferior to others because of her dependent status. Jane Eyre, commonly called an 'improper child,’ questions the authority of adults. Bertha, representative of a different race, is an outsider due to her insanity and her nonconformist femininity (or what the novel calls "unfeminine"). Mr. Rochester is an outsider due to his rebelliousness, moodiness, string of affairs, and his nonconformist attitude towards gender and class roles.

**The Red Room**
As a young child in Gateshead, one particular instance Jane's misbehavior incites her aunt to send her to the dreaded 'red room.' As a symbol, the red room further illustrates the challenges and ostracism Jane endures throughout the novel. As an unideal Victorian heroine and misbehaving child, the reader better understands Jane's social ostracism through her seclusion, and eventual breakdown, in this room. In the novel, the Red Room scares Jane because it is the room of Uncle Reed's deathbed. Although her Uncle Reed provided a source of comfort to her and made his wife promise to care for Jane as his own child before he died, Jane's aunt, Mrs. Reed, refuses his wishes. Thus, just as the death of her uncle gives way to Jane's struggle, the room, associated with seclusion and fear, foreshadows that Jane must overcome such challenges.

**Social Class and Economic Freedom**

From the beginning of the novel, money issues and social class represent key issues. Indeed, many of Jane's decisions involve economic security. At Lowood, Jane and her peers are disciplined into certain class mindsets in order to adhere to and adjust to a lower-class position. Females without family, such as Jane, are disciplined into such a position. Thus, upon entering Thornfield, Jane realizes her plainness. She insecurely criticizes herself and becomes very aware of her status in the house as she continues to experience the Lowood mentality. Jane's orphaned status complicates her economic position, and she must fulfill positions of servitude until the end of the novel when she unexpectedly inherits money after her uncle's death. Although Jane begins the novel without any economic support, the novel's interest in the reversal of gender roles eventually grants Jane financial power. This also represents another instance in which Victorian expectations are reversed: when Jane becomes financially independent, her relationship to everyone changes.

**Governess and Status**

Various stereotypes involving the class status of governesses resonate within the novel. After leaving Lowood, Jane takes a governess job at Thornfield Hall to teach her pupil Adele. The status of the governess is in-between: although Jane is a working woman, her status places her above the servants, who she is not expected to associate with since it would be beneath her dignity. Jane's position as a governess allows her certain privileges, like eating with the family. In her position as a governess, Jane also endures gossip on the part of Mr. Rochester's upper class friends, specifically Miss Blanche Ingram and her mother. In Brontë's era, stereotypical governesses embodied the threats of dishonesty and seduction.

**The Madwoman in the Attic**

Bertha Mason, better known as "the madwoman in the attic," is Rochester's first wife and the ultimate "other." Rochester, tricked into a marriage by his brother and father, was forced into marriage with this mixed-race woman. The madwoman in the attic illuminates notions of race in the Victorian era while functioning as the figure of female rage. On one hand, Bertha's character shows Victorian racism through the association with eastern images of subjugation. Isolated in a tower, she's disempowered and segregated from Mr. Rochester and the rest of white Victorian society. On the other hand, Bertha embodies female rage and her evil laugh echoes throughout Thornfield after the heroine, Jane, entertains ideas of equality in her feminist monologues. In this way, Bertha functions as Jane's alter-ego.

**Character Profiles & Important Quotes**

**JANE EYRE: Protagonist and narrator**

"'I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad -- as I am now.'" Volume 3, Ch. 27 (408)

This passage takes place after Rochester's wife has been discovered, preventing his marriage to Jane. Here, Jane defiantly tells Rochester that she does not need him or anyone else to care for her. This reveals that she is most content when she is not a burden to anyone. She shows how important self respect and virtue are to her; she refuses to forsake her principles, although it would be easy to do so in her delicate mental state. Jane admits that she is mad after such a trying ordeal; the fact that she can recognize and admit this shows her strong sense of self.

"'I know no medium: I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters, between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the very moment of bursting, sometimes with volcanic vehemence, into the other.'" Volume 3, Ch. 34 (499)

This passage deals with Jane's submission to St. John in agreeing to go for a private walk with him. This not only foreshadows her passionate refusal to his proposal, but looks back to her life leading up to this moment, explaining her other outbursts that have appeared throughout the novel. Her declaration that she knows no medium emphasizes her conviction -- her feelings and beliefs are never lukewarm.
Throughout the novel, Jane shows regard for beauty. The way she remembers Bessie as “pretty” with “very nice features” reinforces Bessie as a light in her unhappy childhood at Gateshead.

Jane recollects Mrs. Reed with strong, masculine words—robust, stout, solid. Jane describes her very specifically, but in a cold, matter-of-fact way. This emphasizes Mrs. Reed’s harshness, her lack of compassion, and her coldness toward Jane.

Jane’s regard for beauty comes out very strongly in this passage. The meticulous details about Miss Temple’s appearance, right down to her eyelashes and her watch, show how enchanted Jane was with her. In addition, there are many allusions to light and whiteness, which foreshadows Miss Temple’s purity and goodness.

The refreshing meal, the brilliant fire, the presence and kindness of her beloved instructress, or perhaps more than all these, something in her own unique mind, had roused her powers within her. They woke, they kindled; first, they glowed in the bright tint of her cheek, which till this hour I had never seen but pale and bloodless; then they shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes, which had suddenly acquired a beauty more singular than that of Miss Temple’s—a beauty neither of fine colour nor long eyelash, nor penciled brow, but of meaning, or movement, of radiance. Then her souls sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell; has a girl of fourteen a heart large enough, vigorous enough to hold the swelling spring of pure, full, fervid eloquence? Such was the characteristic of Helen’s discourse on that, to me, memorable evening: her spirit seemed hastening to live within a very brief span as much as many live during a protracted existence.” Volume 1, Ch 8 (137)
Jane describes her close childhood friend Helen in a very interesting way, using words that emphasize brightness and warmth—kindled, glowed, lustre, radiance, etc. This coincides with Jane's fiery personality while showing how powerful and beautiful Helen appears to Jane in this moment. Jane seems bewitched by Helen, especially with the emphasis on "her powers" that have been roused within her. Helen's mind, heart, and spirit are all given significant attention in this passage, showing that, while she is physically weak, she is strong in these areas. In the novel, Helen and Jane embody different belief systems: Helen represents a more "appropriate child" than Jane. She has a Christian sense of duty while Jane has no sense of duty. Her patience influences Jane's temper. Additionally, her older age and maturity cause her to view obstacles as lessons. Helen represents the perfect Victorian heroine in her acceptance of her own life, duty, and fate.

Key Characters of Thornfield Hall

MRS. FAIRFAX: Housekeeper of Thornfield Hall

"A snug, small room; a round table by a cheerful fire; an arm-chair high-backed and old-fashioned, wherein sat the neatest imaginable little elderly lady, in widow's cap, black silk gown and snowy muslin apron; exactly like what I had fancied Mrs. Fairfax, only less stately and milder looking. She was occupied in knitting; a large cat sat demurely at her feet; nothing in short was wanting to complete the beau ideal of domestic comfort." Volume 1, Ch 11 (162)

This passage foreshadows Mrs. Fairfax's position as a houskeeper and not the owner of Thornfield Hall, as Jane first assumed. Her plain, expected appearance emphasizes her traditional ways. The fact that she is knitting alongside a cat gives her some warmth, foreshadowing the warmth that Jane begins to feel for her.

ADELE VARENS: Mr. Rochester's ward and Jane's Pupil

"I looked at my pupil, who did not at first appear to notice me: she was quite a child, perhaps seven or eight years old, slightly built, with a pale small-featured face, and a redundancy of hair falling in curls to her waist." Volum 1, Ch 11 (168)

Adele's failure to immediately notice Jane foreshadows her somewhat selfish ways. The redundancy of curls emphasizes Adele's preoccupation with extravagant things and superficial beauty.

MR. ROCHESTER: Jane's Employer and Master of Thornfield Hall

"Half reclined on a couch appeared Mr. Rochester, his foot supported by the cushion; he was looking at Adele and the dog: the fire shone full on his face. I knew my traveller with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognised his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw—yes, all three were very grim, and no mistake. His shapes, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonized in squareness with his physiognomy: I suppose it was a good figure in the athletic sense of the term—broad chested and thin flanked; though neither tall nor graceful." Volume 1, Ch 13 (190)

In this passage, Jane gives a lengthy description of Mr. Rochester's appearance. She is not attracted to him, saying that his nose is not beautiful, his features are grim, and his figure is not graceful; despite his lack of beauty, Jane is transfixed with him. This strange transfixed foreshadows their future relationship, where Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester despite the fact that he often treats her with indifference.

GRACE POOL: Servant at Thornfield Hall, caretaker of Bertha Mason

"The door nearest me opened, and a servant came out; a woman of between thirty and forty; a set, square-made figure, red-haired, and with a hard plain face: any apparition less romantic or less ghostly could scarcely be conceived." Volume 1, Ch. 11 (175)

Jane describes Grace as sturdy and strong with words like "set," "square-made," and "hard." This foreshadows Grace's true position as Bertha's caretaker. Although Jane later begins to believe that Grace is mad, this initial observation that she is neither romantic nor ghostly foreshadows the truth that Grace is not the mad woman of Thornfield Hall.

BERTHA MASON: Mr. Rochester's first wife and the "madwoman in the attic"

"In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell; it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face." Volume 2, Ch. 26 (380)
Bertha's running backward and forward emphasizes her restlessness and discontent; her hostile animal-like behavior emphasizes her madness and anger, and perhaps her jealousy of Jane.

Key Characters of Marsh End

St. JOHN RIVERS: A clergyman that rescues and shelters Jane after she leaves Thornfield Hall; he is also Jane's cousin

"[He] was easy enough to examine. Had he been a statue instead of a man, he could not have been easier. He was young -- perhaps twenty-eight to thirty -- tall, slender; his face riveted the eye: it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline; quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin. It is seldom, indeed, an English face comes so near the antique models as did his. He might well be a little shocked at the irregularity of my lineaments, his own being so harmonious. His eyes were large and blue, with brown lashes; his high forehead, colourless as ivory, was partially streaked over by careless locks of fair hair." Volume 3, Ch. 29 (438-439)

Jane examines St. John as if he were a statue, foreshadowing his cold, stoic demeanor. His "pure" features emphasize his Christian devoutness. Jane compares him to Greek and Athenian "antique models," distancing him from herself and foreshadowing their lack of chemistry. This is further emphasized by the way Jane compares her irregular features to his harmonious ones. It is also worth noting that St. John's fair, elegant features are a stark contrast to Mr. Rochester's.

DIANA AND MARY RIVERS: St. John's sisters and Jane's cousins

"I thought them so similar I could not tell where the old servant (for such I now concluded her to be) saw the difference. Both were fair complexioned and slenderly made; both possessed faces full of distinction and intelligence. One, to be sure, had hair a shade darker than the other, and there was a difference in their style of wearing it: Mary's pale brown locks were parted and braided smooth; Diana's dusky tresses covered her neck with thick curls." Volume 3, Ch 28 (426)

Jane describes the sisters together, emphasizing their closeness and their many similarities. Their slightly differing styles of hair foreshadow the differences in their personalities: Mary's smooth, reserved style represents her quiet, gentle ways; Diana's free flowing curls represent her lively, assertive nature.
Settings

As is typical in a bildungsroman novel, Bronte uses a distinct set of different settings to separate important periods of her protagonist’s life. Each of these settings has its own character and tone, and represents a different landscape both literally and figuratively for Jane, offering unique obstacles and comforts. Some of these places are revisited later after Jane leaves them, to emphasize the changes that have occurred in her character since she was last there.

Gateshead (and the Red Room) – Childhood

Gateshead is the house of Jane’s aunt, where Jane spends her childhood. At Gateshead Jane is abused and ignored – her aunt alienates her from Jane’s cousins, and does not attempt in any way to keep it a secret that Jane is only around because Mrs. Reed promised her late husband that she would be taken care of. The house of the Reeds is an oppressive prison, just like the haunted Red Room inside it, where Jane is locked as punishment for standing up to her cousin John’s cruelty. It is a representative portrait of Jane’s childhood as a period of confinement, anger, disrespect, fear, and unkindness. Bessie, while strict, is often the only source of love that Jane has at Gateshead. Because of the early experiences suffered and endured there Jane grows to be passionate and proud.

Lowood – Adolescence

Lowood is a place almost entirely opposite of the Reed’s house. It is the girls’ school that Jane attends during her transition from childhood into adulthood, and because of this, it is the setting that probably shapes Jane’s character development most profoundly. Lowood Institute is a cold and plain place; the students live in great discomfort with drab clothing, bland, often burnt food, and ice-cold water in the mornings to wash in. All of this is, as Mr. Brocklehurst dictates, to purge the girls of sinful luxuries and prepare them for a life which will quite blatantly free of them, due to their poor class status. Jane learns this lesson well, and it becomes an integral part to her character; as an adult she is plain and practical in her lifestyle, and shies away from anything too extravagant. As a school, of course, Lowood also shapes Jane’s intellect and abilities, and offers her diverse learning experiences. While Gateshead offered Jane material comfort, it denied her freedom; at Lowood, Jane is unprivileged and impoverished, but she is free to become what she wants, and to earn her treatment through her own displays of character.

Thornfield - Young Adulthood

Jane takes up residence at Thornfield when she becomes a governess there. Of all the settings, there is the most mysticism present in the descriptions and moods surrounding Thornfield, and a gothic quality to the place itself. Even the name, Thornfield, is strange, dark, and ominous – a “field of thorns”, it presents an image of mystery and danger. Fittingly, it is here where Jane encounters and eventually falls in love with Mr. Rochester, a man who projects just as much of a “thorny”, mysterious and dangerous image as the manor where he resides. Thornfield is a place of secrets, from every angle; this is only intensified by the introduction of Grace Poole and what Jane is told is her laughter, which echoes strangely through the house. The events that occur at Thornfield always seems to have either an uncanny or supernatural quality to them, which presents us with a feeling of uneasiness, even when things are going right - the tone builds uncertainty and suspense, and brings us with fluid storytelling to the revelation of the things that are hidden at Thornfield Hall. In regards to Jane’s development, Thornfield is where she spends her early adulthood, and makes her first major decisions without the guidances of mentors, caretakers, or teachers. She reaches maturity and falls in love for the first time, naively, with a man of much higher standing than her (who also happens to be her employer); this experience of temptation and emotional challenges is consistent with the drama of Thornfield. Most importantly, however, Thornfield is where, for the first time in her life, Jane feels that she has a true home. This is reflective of the way that she feels about Rochester, who is a human mirror of the hall he inhabits.

Moor House - Adulthood

Jane undergoes a brief self-exile from Thornfield after the wedding disaster with Rochester and the discovery of Bertha. After wandering the moors alone and falling sick, she is taken into Moor House by a group of young people she later discovers to be relatives - St. John Rivers and his sisters, Diana and Mary. At Moor House Jane experiences a life much different, and much plainer, than her complicated entanglements at Thornfield. At first, it is a place of recovery for Jane. It is a clean and simple arrangement, and suited to Jane's practical personality. However, Jane’s situation is complicated when the persuasive and ambitious St. John insists that Jane marry him and accompany him to perform missionary work in India. The offer, also a simple one which suits Jane's character (not a match of love, but of practicality), is attractive if only for that. Jane's time at Moor House is a period of self-inflicted testing and trial. Attempting to regain the dignity she almost lost in her failed, invalid marriage to Rochester, she is testing her strength and ability to live independently, with the will of mind to resist feelings that might otherwise overpower and shame her. It is here that she is exposed to over-simplicity, and over-practicality, and finds the way to balance heart and mind. After this lesson, she is ready to return to Rochester, no longer with naive love but with mature love, and the dignity of a strong woman who has found family, a monetary inheritance, and a decision not based off of a loss of control of her heart, but off of what she feels is true and right. In a way, Jane's life is a long search for a home; it is not until she finds and leaves it (Thornfield), and comes back to see it destroyed, that she is able to understand that her home is not in a place, but in a person.
Discussion Questions & Important Quotes

**TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. In relation to Jane, how are St. John and Mr. Rochester foils for each other? What kinds of options does their companionship represent for Jane?
2. Does Jane Eyre's character fulfill Victorian female stereotypes? How does she transcend these stereotypes? Consider Jane's journey from a child to a woman and examine her different living situations.

3. How do Victorian perspectives on gender, race, and class influence readings on Bertha Mason's character? Does Charlotte Bronte fall victim to any of these prejudices in her portrayal of this character?

4. Why does Mr. Rochester deceive Jane again and again, pretending to be a gypsy, pretending to be engaged, and pretending to be unmarried? How does Jane respond to these pretenses?

5. In this conclusion, Jane says that Adele's English education "corrected in a great measure her French defects" (553). What are these "defects"? What do you make of Bronte's portrayal of the French through Adele and her mother?

6. In a particularly mystical scene Jane is talking to a gypsy who is actually Rochester. What does it say about Rochester's character that he is disguised a mystical and all-knowing woman? Why is it important that he is the character disguised as a gypsy?

7. When Rochester first meets Jane he claims that she is a witch. Throughout their relationship he calls her a witch and a fairy. What do these nicknames say about how Rochester sees Jane? Do they say anything about Jane's true character?

8. Consider the romantic relationship between Rochester and Jane, and its progression throughout the novel. In what ways does it defy a conventional romance of the time period, and in what ways is it different from romances found in other Victorian novels? What makes their relationship so one-of-a-kind, to both the reader and to the two of them? Is there any way in which this is challenged during the course of the novel? (The two of them are constantly referred to as "akin". What makes them so?)

**KEY QUOTES:**

"Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity, or registering wrongs. We are and must be, one and all, burdened with faults in this world." Helen Burns to Jane (120)

Helen shares this notion with young Jane after she has told her all about Mrs. Reed's unkindness. This is such an interesting way for a child to deal with cruelty: Helen realizes that life is too short to spend so much time being upset—a remarkable realization, since few children are preoccupied with /aware of the brevity of life; she also acknowledges that everyone has their flaws—another valuable life lesson that children don't always catch on to.
"I had had no communication by letter or message with the outer world: school-rules, school-duties, school-habits and notions, and voices, and faces, and phrases, and costumes, and preferences, and antipathies: such was what I knew of existence. And now I felt that it was not enough: I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon. I desired liberty; for liberty I grasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it, and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus, that petition too swept off into vague space. "Then," I cried, half desperate, "Grant me at least a new servitude!" (151).

This passage examines Jane’s feelings about the prospect of having a new job, while it expresses her desires for world change. A large portion of Jane’s character is influenced by Lowood, those very "school-rules" and "school-duties" to which the quote alludes. One key feature of the quote involves its examination of women’s confined options in Jane’s era. First oppressed as an orphan in her childhood, she must later search out “a new servitude” after teaching at Lowood. Jane desires freedom and change, but she must back into positions of servitude due to the small number of roles society provides women.

"It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it." (178)

At this point in the novel, Jane reflects on the discontent and restlessness she felt at Thornfield Hall. She steps back from her own story for a moment here and makes a critique of society, making the point that humans prefer action, whether good or bad, to peace. When deprived of it, they will create it themselves. Jane sees the truth of this not only in herself, but in the existence of rebellions and revolts.

"Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex." (178)
Jane continues her reflection on her discontent and restlessness at Thornfield Hall. Here, she moves into a feminist critique, arguing that women feel the need to use their minds just as much as men do. She doesn’t completely scorn traditional womanly pastimes, but wishes women were free to use their time in less conventional ways without being ridiculed. She is rather harsh, calling men that do limit and ridicule women “narrow-minded” and “thoughtless.”

“I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, not 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!” Jane to Mr. Rochester (338)

At this point in the novel, Mr. Rochester is playing with Jane’s feelings. She believes that he is engaged and loves another woman, but he is inexplicably asking her not to leave him. She is sick of him toying with her and insists that he see her as his equal. Although it is embedded within dialogue, the feminist critique that shows up throughout the novel is present here with Jane’s proclamation that she and Rochester are equal. She doesn’t want to think of herself as a woman and Rochester as a man--she wants to think of herself and him as two spirits, free from the confines of their flesh.

“Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour: stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth -- so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane -- quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster that I can count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot.” Jane to Mr. Rochester (408)
This passage takes place after Mr. Rochester and Jane’s marriage has been stopped, due to his marriage with Bertha. Rochester tries to convince Jane to stay with him as his mistress, but she refuses. This is a very passionate moment -- Jane is so emotional that she feels insane. The phrase “my veins running with fire” emphasizes her passion and perhaps her anger at having been put in such a situation. Although she feels mentally unstable, Jane shows great integrity and clings to her principles, saying they would be worthless if she abandoned them now. She is resolute in her decision to do what is right rather than what is easy -- that is, to leave Rochester rather than stay and love him. The phrase “there I plant my foot” emphasizes her resolution and her courage in defying Rochester.

“Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt! May your eyes never shed such stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears as poured from mine. May you never appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless and so agonized as in that hour left my lips: for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love.”

(413)

This passage takes place just after Jane has ran away from Thornfield Hall. It is one of several interesting moments in the novel where she directly addresses the reader. This really emphasizes how painful this moment is for Jane. She wouldn't wish this agony on anyone--not even those that she will never know (her reader(s)). This passage also brings up the fascinating theme of causing evil without being evil. Jane herself is not evil, but fears that Mr. Rochester will do something evil because of her. Her deep love for Rochester makes her situation even more complicated.
Resources and Links

**Brontë Blogs:**

- **Brontëana** is written by a graduate student doing research about the Brontë sisters. Posts include information about Brontë inspired movies and books as well as updates about the student's research.

- **Brontë Parsonage Blog** is updated by the Brontë Parsonage museum and society. Posts include information about the museum and research done there and occasionally posts about new novels and movies based on the Brontë family.

- **BrontëBlog** has updates about anything newsworthy in the Brontë world.

- **Brussels Brontë Blog** and **The Brussels Brontë Group** have information and updates about Charlotte's time in Brussels, Belgium, where she attended and worked in a school.

- **The Literature Network** has an extended biography of Charlotte Brontë as well as a collection of her literary works.

**Books on Brontë**

- **Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and the Mentor-Lover** by Patricia Menon.

- **Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë** by Diana Peschier

- **The Brontë Myth** by Lucasta Miller

- **The Oxford Companion to the Brontës** by Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith

- **The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës** edited by Heather Glen

- **Imperialism, Reform and the Making of Englishness in Jane Eyre** by Sue Thomas

- **The Life of Charlotte Brontë** by Elizabeth Gaskell

**Additional Materials**

*The Illustrated Jane Eyre* was published by Penguin Group in 2006. The illustrations were done by Dame Darcy, a popular comic book artist. Dame Darcy said she became interested in the Brontës through Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Around the time that she read the book, her agent got her a book deal for *Jane*
Putnam Penguin liked the "turn of the century illustrative style" she incorporates. In regards to how Dame Darcy chose which events she wanted to illustrate she said, "When I reread it with illustrating it in mind, I drew the scenes that I could visualize the most clearly. A very eerie coincidence occurred when as I was illustrating the scene where Jane sees a ghost in the corner, a got a phone call that notified me shockingly that my friend died. Other coincidences occurred throughout the process of illustrating of this book, but this was the most poignant. I could relate to Jane because I grew up in a very cold, dark place and went to Catholic school too. I also was teaching children art at the time so I was a teacher like Jane as well." Dame Darcy said she liked the symbolism of Jane's strange artwork and Mr. Rochester's fascination with it upon their meeting. She said she tried to incorporate what she imagined the drawings might look like in her own illustrations.

The illustrations for the novel were drawn on a bristol board with a smooth ink and pen. Dame Darcy said these are called archival mediums. All the illustrations for Jane Eyre were exhibited and sold when the book came out during the promotion for it. Dame Darcy's website can be found here. Examples of illustrations from the book can be found in our Image Gallery, complements of Dame Darcy.

**Jane Eyre: The Musical**, premiered in Kansas in 1995. The music and lyrics were written by Paul Gordon and the script was written by John Caird. The musical was nominated for five Tony Awards. Many of the songs deal with the theme of blindness, connecting to Edward Rochester's blindness at the end of the story. There are over eleven versions of the Jane Eyre musical at present. To listen to some songs from the musical go here. Images from the musical can be found in our Image Gallery.

*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, written by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, accentuates Jane Eyre's motif of "the madwoman in the attic" through feminist analysis and literary criticism.

**Film Adaptations:**
The most recent film version of Jane Eyre is a series produced by Masterpiece Theatre for PBS in 2006. Jane Eyre was played by Ruth Wilson while Toby Stephens played Edward Rochester. The film is divided into two episodes. The first episode follows Jane's life from Gateshead Hall through Lowood School and her first time at Thornfield and ends with Mrs. Reed's illness. The second episode begins with Mrs. Reed's death and Jane's return to Gateshead and follows her growing relationship with Rochester through her time at Moor House. The second episode ends with Jane's return to Thornfield and the family she starts with Rochester. The setting of Thornfield Hall was filmed at Haddon Hall, pictured below.
For more about this film version, go here. YouTube.com has several clips from the film, including Jane and Rochester's confession of love to each other and Rochester's proposal. Film adaptions of Jane Eyre surfaced in the years 1944 and 1996.

**Jane Eyre and Charlotte Brontë: Vehicles of Inspiration and Literary Influence**

In addition to Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* inspired several books. Unlike Jane Austen, the majority of these contemporary fiction novels are about Brontë herself, and not about characters from her novels. Some of these novels include *The Eyre Affair* by Jasper Fforde, *The Secret Adventures of Charlotte Brontë* by Laura Joh Rowland, *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* by Syrie James, and *Jane Eyre's Daughter* by Elizabeth Newark.

**Bertha Antoinette Mason in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea***

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Modernist prequel to *Jane Eyre*, elaborates upon Bertha's character in contrast to her one-dimensional persona as the "madwoman in the attic." Indeed, readers of Wide Sargasso Sea discover that "Bertha" was a name given to Antoinette Mason- the real name of Rochester's Creole wife-in order to manipulate her and re-define her identity to such an extent that she loses it. Referring to her as "Bertha" and "Marionette" throughout the novel, Rochester oppresses her Caribbean identity and defamiliarizes her Caribbean personality through his intrusion of English values.
Narrated by Antoinette "Bertha" Mason in part 1, *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins on Coulibri estate, the name of the house inhabited by Antoinette Mason, her disabled brother Pierre, and her mother Annette. Antoinette's father, Mr. Cosway, has died years ago, and Antoinette's family suffers from poverty. Once rich landowners, their own servants disrespect them since they do not have money. The arrival of new neighbors, the Masons, irritates this disrespect when Annette marries Mr. Mason. Mr. Mason's ignorance of the West Indies and their native people leads to a series of events in which Coulibri estate is burned down as the emancipated slaves rise against the oppressive English power. The riot ceases when Annette's parrot catches on fire while trying to escape and fly away. To see a parrot die represents an omen of bad luck, and the crowd retreats. The effects on Antoinette's family, however, haunt her for the rest of her life. Six weeks after the fire, Antoinette wakes out of a delirious fever in Spanish Town with her Aunt Cora. She discovers that her younger brother has died and that her mother has gone insane. When her aunt takes her to visit her mother, Annette violently shoves her daughter away. Unfortunately, Annette's new living arrangement perpetuates the insanity stimulated by past hardships, her son's death, and Mr. Mason's ignorance and refusal to listen to her. In conjunction with all of these factors, Annette's mentally unstable mother is also at the sexual disposal of her caretaker. Meanwhile, Antoinette attends a religious school in which she is taught by nuns. On the way to school, bullies occasionally follow her and taunt her. Upon reaching the age of 17, Mr. Mason, her stepfather, summons her from school in order to marry her to a man named Rochester.
Rochester's arrival to the Caribbean marks a narrative shift in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and his voice dominates part two of the novel. In this sequence, readers begin to understand the complex marriage dynamics between Antoinette and Rochester. At the beginning of the marriage, Antoinette appears full of love and happy at their house Granbois. However, the marriage quickly sours. Antagonizing each other, the novel’s protagonists cannot relate to each other's cultures. Rochester fails to understand that Antoinette does not represent the Victorian model of "the sexless angel in the house" while Antoinette cannot understand his fast deceit and betrayal. Robbing Antoinette of her agency, her dowry, and all options (even hating him by the end of the novel), he cements the end of the romance by engaging in sexual intercourse with a servant who soothes him after Rochester suffers negative effects of a love potion. Antoinette's limited options as a Creole woman married to an English husband (who embodies colonial procedures) eventually results in the abandonment of Granbois for Rochester's beloved England. Throughout the novel, Rochester writes to his father, attempting to hold back his anger since he claims someone must have known that Bertha was mad and descended from a mad family. When his father and brother (the heir) suddenly and unexpectedly pass away, Rochester gains more fortune and moves from Granbois to Thornfield. The next and last section of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is narrated by Antoinette. Locked in the attic with Grace Poole, a servant who is paid twice the wages of regular servants in order to keep Rochester's secret, Antoinette dreams of walking down the halls, dropping candles and lighting curtains until Thornfield is ablaze. The differences in narrative time and psychological time disjunct in this section: Antoinette's memory frequently blacks out from rage and she does not understand how long she has been kept in the hall. Waking from a dream in which she lights the house on fire, Antoinette confesses, "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (190). Waiting until Grace Poole begins to snore, Antoinette removes the keys from her apron and the novel ends with her shielding her candle down the dark passage.
Works Cited


Group Members

Website by Ash Bruxvoort, Robin Hellmann, Shannon Hewson, Amy Locke, and Hannah Rounds.

Image Gallery