Study Guide: Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë
Introducing the Author

Charlotte Brontë (1816 – 1855)

Family

Charlotte’s father, Patrick Brontë, was born in Northern Ireland. The son of a peasant farmer, he taught himself to read and was befriended by a vicar in the neighbouring village who assisted him in gaining entrance into Cambridge. He was ordained an Anglican clergyman, met and married Maria Branwell with whom he has six children within eight years. The Brontës were well-read and educated, and both were aspiring writers. Some of his poetry and tales were published and this may have encouraged his children’s literary ambitions. Charlotte Brontë, born in 1816, grew up in the small mill town of Haworth on the edge of the rugged moors of West Yorkshire, in north eastern England. When Mrs Brontë died in 1821 of cancer, her sister, Elizabeth Branwell, came to help with the six children. She was never described as affectionate, but she did her duty in bringing up the children. The setting was isolated and made lonelier by the fact that Charlotte was only five when her mother had died. Charlotte, her four sisters—Maria, Elizabeth, Emily, and Anne—and their brother, Branwell, turned to each other for companionship.

Education

In 1824, Mr Brontë decided to send four of his daughters to a new school especially funded for daughters of the clergy. Less than a year later, the two eldest girls had died of tuberculosis and the remaining
two were sent home. Bitter cold, poor food, and harsh treatment had taken their toll on the Brontë family. For the next six years the children were educated at home. Mr Brontë taught Branwell Latin and Greek; Miss Branwell taught the surviving girls, Emily, Anne and Charlotte, domestic skills. Mr Brontë also encouraged the reading and discussion of varying political views found in the newspapers received at the parsonage. This period was important for the Brontës because they grew up in comparative isolation, roaming the countryside, amusing themselves by creating and later writing down fantastic tales of imaginary worlds. In 1831, Mr Brontë, with the financial assistance of Charlotte's god-parents, sent Charlotte to Roe Head School where she remained for a year and a half, winning several prizes for her academic ability. Two girls of widely different backgrounds became Charlotte's friends. Ellen Nussey came from a conservative, Anglican, Gentry-type family. Mary Taylor's family was radical, dissenting and merchant class. Both of these women have given us pictures of Charlotte when she attended Roe Head and Ellen Nussey kept all the letters Charlotte sent her over the years, increasing the information available about the author.

Charlotte's Teaching Career

When Charlotte was 19, she returned to Roe Head School as a teacher, although she never really liked teaching. At this time in history, she had few choices for a profession. In 1838, low in health and in spirit, Charlotte was advised by her doctor to leave Roe Head immediately. She later tried her hand at the role of governess but was unable to endure the difficult life. In 1844, she and Emily conceived the plan of opening their own school. The two went to Brussels to gain a better understanding of foreign languages. Whilst in Brussels, Charlotte fell madly in love with her married French teacher, with whom she had no hope of a future. On their return, Charlotte tried to open a school at Haworth parsonage but no applicants could be found.

Literary Efforts

The creative imaginations of the Brontës were stirred in early childhood by a gift from their father. Mr Brontë brought home a box of wooden soldiers and a model village. The children's imaginations built Great Glass Town, peopled by The Young Men, but soon this world grew in size and population. Branwell invented The Young Men's Magazine for which he and Charlotte wrote histories, essays, and poems of Glass Town, all in minute hand-printing in books made up of tiny-folded sheets of paper. Charlotte and Branwell later created Kingdom of Angria; Emily and Anne created Gondal. These early writings were important to Charlotte's later development for she worked out plots and developed characters in a training ground long before Jane Eyre. In 1845, Charlotte accidentally discovered one of Emily's notebooks. She realised the extraordinary quality of the poems and, after much discussion, convinced Emily to join with herself and Anne in publishing a joint edition of the poems. They chose the male pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell to conceal their authorship. Two copies sold. Undeterred, the sister each began a novel. Anne's Agnes Grey, Emily's Wuthering Heights and Charlotte's The Professor based on her experiences in Brussels, all went the rounds of rejection. Anne's and Emily's works were finally accepted, but The Professor was never published until after Charlotte's death. Instead she submitted Jane Eyre, which was immediately successful. She later wrote two other successful novels.
Charlotte's Later Life

Just as success appeared, so too did tragedy. Within two years, Branwell, Emily and Anne all died of tuberculosis. Charlotte enjoyed literary success for the next few years. In 1854 she married Arthur Bell Nichols, her father’s curate, but her marriage was of short duration. The following year she died of complications of pregnancy, probably combined with the dreaded tuberculosis.

The Time and Place

The novel takes place in England around the 1840s, during the Victorian era. This period takes its name from Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901. The period was generally a time of peace and prosperity, and by the 1840s, England had emerged as the leading industrial society of the world and the hub of a vast colonial empire. The rising middle class was amassing unprecedented wealth, but for the working population the 1840s came to be known as the “Hungry Forties,” a time of poverty and economic upheaval. These class distinctions as well as the deprivations of the socially disadvantaged are evident in the plot, settings, and characters of Jane Eyre.

Activities

1. Undertake some research on the following topics in relation to Victorian England. This will give you an understanding of the world of Charlotte Brontë and her creation, Jane Eyre. Make notes so you are ready for discussion in class.
   a. Women’s place in Victorian society
   b. Role of religion and the clergy
   c. Position of governesses
   d. Charity schools
   e. Treatment of children
   f. Class system

2. Create a time line of Charlotte’s life, including significant details in her professional and personal life.
Reading Journal

As you read the novel, complete a reading journal. I set out below suggestions for the first four chapters. Complete this as you finish reading each chapter, and after Chapter 4, use this as a guide as to what to include for your journal for the remaining chapters.

Remember, over the two years of your Diploma, you will read a total of 15 texts. You will not be able to remember the details of all of them. It is, therefore, vital you maintain journals as you read each one so you don’t have to read the whole novel again!

Chapter 1

People:

Make brief notes on who each of the following are and how Jane relates to them:
- Mrs Reed
- Eliza Reed
- John Reed
- Georgiana Reed
- Bessie
- Abbot
PLACES

1. What does the drawing room look like?
2. What about the breakfast room with the window seat?
3. Why does the scene in the drawing room exclude Jane?
4. Why does she seek the window seat in the breakfast room?
5. Describe the scene outdoors.

REVIEW EVENTS

Summarise the storyline and/or main action in one or two sentences.

PERSONAL REACTION

How do you feel about the characters and events in this chapter? React especially to the last paragraph of Chapter 1: “Take her away ...”. What questions immediately come to mind?

CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE

1. Note new insights which are given into the characters of:
   - Bessie and Abbot
   - Mrs Reed
   - John
   - Eliza
   - Georgiana

2. What new information is given about Mrs Reed?
**PLACES**

3. Describe the red room. Give a physical description and the atmosphere created.

4. Why does Jane have such a fear of the room?

**REVIEW EVENTS**

Summarise the storyline and/or main events in one or two sentences.

**PERSONAL REACTION**

Reread the paragraph: “I was a discord in Gateshead Hall.” Do you feel that Jane’s analysis is true?

**CHAPTER 3**

**PEOPLE**

3. Make notes on the following:

   - Mr Lloyd
   - Jane’s family

2. Is there a difference between Bessie’s treatment of Jane and Abbot’s treatment of Jane?

**PLACES**

2. How is the nursery different from the red room for Jane?

2. Why does Jane choose to stay at Gateshead?

**REVIEW EVENTS**

Summarise the storyline and/or main events in one or two sentences.
**Personal Reaction**

1. Comment on Jane’s observation over Bessie’s kindness: “Vain favour! coming, like most other favours long deferred and often wished for, too late!”

2. Think about Jane’s poverty. Is poverty synonymous with degradation?

**Chapter 4**

**People**

1. How does the relationship between the Reeds and Jane change?

2. What about the relationship between Bessie and Jane?

3. What is the importance of Jane’s statement: “Human beings must love something.”?

4. Describe Mr Brocklehurst.

**Places**

How is Lowood described?

**Review Events**

Summarise the storyline and/or main events in one or two sentences.

**Personal Reaction**

1. Why does Mrs Reed express fear in this chapter?

2. React to Jane’s words: “Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time; as aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy; its after-flavour, metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned.”
Chapters 5 onwards

Continue to keep a journal as you read, using the same headings:

People — note descriptions of new characters and their relationships with Jane
Places — note descriptions of places and how Jane feels about them
Review events
Personal reaction
Complete as many of the questions as you can. You can either answer them all once you have finished reading the novel, or attempt them as you go through each section, as indicated by the chapter numbers. With these study guide questions and your reading journal, you will be very well placed to perform a top-class oral presentation, which is the IB assessment for this text. Answer as fully as you can, but you do not have to write in complete sentences — bullet points, notes, diagrams — whatever way you choose which suits you best. We will use your answers to these questions as the basis for our discussions early on in the year, so you must come prepared.

For each section, there are some vocabulary words you may not know. Make a note of them, and any other words you don’t know. When you read a word with which you are unfamiliar, first try to work out the meaning from the context. If you still are unsure, look it up in a dictionary, being sure to write it down with your other vocabulary.
The novel opens with a modest statement about the weather: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day." It is winter; the weather is cold, dark, and rainy. Jane, taking refuge from the unfriendly Reed family, nestles on a window seat close to the glass, hidden by a heavy red curtain. There she reads a favourite book in search of comfort.

In this emblematic description of the setting, Brontë quickly conveys one of the main themes of the novel—emotional isolation and the search for self-respect. The bleak winter weather not only reflects Jane’s inhospitable surroundings but also her lonely state of mind. Jane lives without the warmth of family or friends. In this scene, she turns from people to nature, from society to her own imagination. As you read the novel, notice how Brontë continues to use the weather to represent Jane’s inner self and, in addition, to establish mood and underscore the action of the story.

In Jane Eyre, the storyteller and the main character are the same person. In other words, the story is told from the first-person point of view. Using the first person allows the writer to explore her heroine’s inner emotional life. The first-person approach also serves as a way of getting the reader to empathise with the main character. As you read, think about whether you are sympathetic to Jane’s feelings. Also, notice that the perspective in the narrative is that of an older, mature Jane looking back on her life. Jane is ten years old at the opening of Chapter 1 and eighteen at the close of Chapter 10. Another interesting feature of the novel’s point of view is Brontë’s direct comments to the reader. These comments occur more frequently after the first ten chapters.

**Vocabulary**

- **antipathy n.** strong dislike
- **ardently adv.** with passion or energy
- **ascertain v.** to find out for sure
- **audacious adj.** recklessly bold
- **chastisement n.** punishment
- **desist v.** to cease; to stop
- **ravenous adj.** excessively hungry
- **solace n.** relief from grief or anxiety

**Study Questions**

The novel does not begin with exposition of background and character, but rather with direct action. Yet by the end of Chapter 1, the reader knows a great deal about Jane Eyre and her situation. Discuss what is known about Jane and the Reeds and why this method of direction action is effective.
1. What vague ideas of school does Jane have when Mr Lloyd first suggests it? What additional ideas are given by Mr Brocklehurst’s description of Lowood? What is the actuality experienced by Jane at Lowood? Are Jane’s experiences at Lowood bad?

2. How are Jane and Helen Burns different in their attitude toward injustice? How would you explain this difference?

3. Before Jane leaves Lowood, Bessie comes to visit. What are the observations of Bessie regarding Jane’s growth and development? At eighteen, is Jane pleased with Bessie’s observations? Why does beauty seem so important to Jane?

4. What real people or places or incidents in Charlotte Brontë’s life may have contributed to her depiction of certain persons, places or incidents in the novel?

**Chapters 11-19**

**Before you read**

In this portion of the novel, Jane embarks on a new phase of her life at a place called Thornfield Hall, where she will serve as a governess. At Thornfield, the novel takes on a more gothic feeling. Gothic novels take place in gloomy or eerie settings, such as old castles or dark mansions, and emphasize horror, mystery, and the supernatural. Gothic novels, read mainly for entertainment, were especially popular in England in the early 1800s. While *Jane Eyre* is not a gothic novel, it does contain gothic features. Even in earlier chapters, there is a reference to the supernatural, when Jane, in the red-room, thinks she sees a ghost. As you read Chapters 11-19, look for gothic features.

Many of the settings and characters in *Jane Eyre* are drawn from Brontë’s own life. The Clergy Daughters’ School that Charlotte attended at the age of eight was the real-life model for the fictional Lowood Institution. Like Mr Brocklehurst, its director, Carus Wilson, was a stern, aristocratic clergyman who believed that children were inherently wicked and should be kept in a state of humility. Another character at Lowood, the patient and wise Helen Burns, is believed to be a tribute to Brontë’s older sister Maria. The setting of Thornfield also has a counterpart in Charlotte Brontë’s life. Some of its features are based on the stately family home of Charlotte’s close friend Ellen Nussey, whom she met in her teens at Roe Head school.

**Vocabulary**

- abruptly adv. suddenly; without courtesy
- hector v. to harass; to bully
- imperious adj. commanding; dominant
- neophyte n. beginner; inexperienced person
- nonchalantly adv. coolly; without concern
- piquant adj. stimulating; spicy
prattle v. to babble; to talk non-stop about nothing in particular
quell v. to put to rest; to suppress
remorse adj. deep regret; sense of guilt
tenacious adj. persistent

Study Questions

1. Describe Thornfield Hall. What are Jane’s first impressions? How do they later change?

2. Consider Jane’s feeling towards Rochester:
   a. at their first meeting on the road;
   b. at the interview when he examines her paintings;
   c. at his later disclosures of his ‘sinful’ past;
   d. on the night of the fire;
   e. from his behaviour at the house party.

3. Reread the descriptions of Jane’s paintings (chapter 13). What do they tell the reader about Jane?

4. In what ways has Jane changed or grown since her arrival at Thornfield?

5. How does Brontë create a sense of suspense, tension, and uncertainty in Chapters 11–19?

6. In chapter 19, Rochester questions Jane’s loyalty. What are her responses? How might this scene be an example of the foreshadowing for the next section of the novel?

Chapters 20–27

Before you read

Rochester bears some similarities to a type of character known as the Byronic hero. This male character type is based on the poetry and life of Lord Byron, a dashing Romantic poet whose works influenced many nineteenth-century English writers. Ruggedly handsome, adventurous, and moody, the Byronic hero usually has a guilty or shady past and a magnetic personality. As you read, consider how Rochester exemplifies or contradicts the Byronic hero.

At the heart of every plot is a conflict—a struggle between two opposing forces. A plot is a series of events, carefully arranged by the writer to dramatize a central conflict faced by the main character. Brontë is concerned with portraying Jane’s struggles as soon as the novel begins. As a child, Jane faces conflicts with Mrs. Reed and later with Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood School. These are both external conflicts. In many well-crafted works of fiction, external conflicts often reflect an internal or psychological conflict within the
main character. Based on the novel so far, what external and internal conflicts can you identify in Jane? As you read Chapters 20–27, look for the climax, or point of highest tension, when the external and internal conflicts of the main character are sharply focused.

**Vocabulary**

atone v. to make amends  
balm n. soothing substance  
dubious adj. doubtful; questionable  
feign v. to pretend  
impediment n. obstacle  
inquisitive adj. extremely curious  
presentiments n. premonitions  
rake n. person of loose morals  
vehemence n. intense emotion or force  
verge n. brink; edge

**Study Questions**

1. How does this section of the novel test Jane's loyalty?  
2. How does Jane's return to Gateshead show her strength?  
3. Jane believes in "presentiments", "sympathies", and "signs". List as many of these as you can and explain each.  
4. Explain Rochester’s rationale in saying he has a right to marry Jane. Do you agree or disagree?  
5. Explain Jane’s rationale in deciding to leave Rochester. Do you agree or disagree.

**Chapters 28-38**

**Before You Read**

Have you ever thought of life as a journey, with twists and turns as well as ups and downs? For Jane, the road of life has been especially bumpy. Her early life was one of almost unrelieved hardship and injustice. At Thornfield, she meets "flowers and pleasures" as well as "thorns and toils." Life as a journey is a metaphor, or comparison, that many fiction writers use. One of the earliest and most famous examples is John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress (1678). In this highly symbolic morality tale, the main character, Christian, journeys from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, where he finds salvation. He carries a heavy bundle
on his back, signifying his sins, and along the way struggles with giants who represent his doubts. As you read the next part of Jane Eyre, think about the life-as-journey metaphor. With whom or what does Jane struggle in this section?

The scene shifts again in these next chapters as Jane finds herself in a remote moorland region, surrounded by bare, heather-clad hills. This landscape is much like that found in northern Yorkshire, where Charlotte Brontë grew up. The Brontë family has made this region of England so famous that the tourism bureau has dubbed it “Brontë Country.” Contemporary author James Herriot has focused his writing on the same general setting. Herriot, a veterinarian, travelled to villages, farms, and homes across the Yorkshire countryside to tend to countless cats, dogs, and farm animals over a period of forty years. He has written about his experiences in several collections of stories, including All Things Bright and Beautiful and All Creatures Great and Small.

Vocabulary

approbation n. approval
austere adj. harsh; severe
averse adj. opposed
countenance n. face; expression
desolate adj. alone and apart
despots n. rulers with absolute power
discourse n. thoughtful conversation
famished adj. starved
fetters n. chains; restraints
inexorable adj. relentless; inflexible
lachrymose adj. tearful
relapse v. to fall back to an earlier state
stoicism n. indifference to pain
vainly adv. without success

Study questions

1. Describe Jane’s life at Moor House. How does she get along with Diana and Mary? Why is this section important in her growth?
2. How does St. John Rivers act as a foil (a contrast) for Rochester?
3. How may the proposal of St. John Rivers be paralleled to the proposal of Rochester?
4. Jane returns to Rochester before she finds out about Thornfield and Bertha. Is she now willing to accept the position of Rochester’s mistress?
Why can Jane find happiness with Rochester now? Note the importance of each of the following to Jane:

a. Rochester’s freedom from a wife
b. Rochester’s injuries
c. Jane’s inheritance
d. Jane’s discovery of a family at Moor House
e. Jane’s knowledge of her true self
The following activities will be of direct help in thinking about a topic for a possible individual oral presentation, one of your internal assessments for the Diploma in Language A1.

**Creative**

1. Jane had little choice in becoming a governess: it was one of the few ‘respectable’ things a woman could do. What profession do you think Jane would choose today? Why?

2. If Jane were living today, what kind of books would she like? What style of dress? What type of music or entertainment?

3. Write a letter to Jane criticising or commending her decision to leave Rochester.

4. Write an obituary for John Reed or an epitaph for St. John Rivers.

**Research**

1. What is a Gothic novel? What elements of the Gothic novel may be seen in *Jane Eyre*?

2. Identify the term “Byronic Hero”. How might the qualities of a Byronic hero be applied to Rochester?

3. What is phrenology? Physiognomy? How does Charlotte Brontë make use of these studies in her novels?

4. Helen Burns is seen reading *Rasselas*. Find out who wrote the book and what it is about. Why is this book appropriate or inappropriate for Helen Burns?

**Other activities**

1. Watch a film version of *Jane Eyre*. Prepare a report on the film. How closely does it follow the novel? Are there additions or deletions? Do the actors portray the characters as you imagined them from the novel?

2. Read *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. Compare the characterisation of Bertha and Rochester in each novel.