Jane Eyre

A novel by

Charlotte Bronte

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*originally published in 1847 with the title Jane Eyre, An Autobiography under the pen name “Currer Bell”*
Charolette Bronte

- Born in Thorton, Yorkshire in 1816 in a family of six children

- Became a governess for various families in Yorkshire in 1839

- Some of Charlotte's inspirations were Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth, and Lord George Gordon Byron

- She became a teacher and later a governess.

- Most of Charlotte’s work was published under a pseudonym “Currer Bell”
The story of *Jane Eyre* relies heavily on key Gothic conventions.

- **The Haunted Castle** – Thornfield as an mysterious and threatening atmosphere

  “…the staircase window was high and latticed; both it and the long gallery into which the bedroom doors opened looked as if they belonged to a church rather than a house. A very chill and vault-like air pervaded the stairs and gallery, suggesting cheerless ideas of space and solitude…” Chapter 11

- **Lies, Madness, and Secrets** – The laughs that Jane hears throughout Thornfield hints at a terrible secret lurking in the mysterious attic…

- **The Hero** – Mr. Rochester as a Byronic Hero.

- **The Supernatural** – *Jane Eyre* is full of unexplained occurrences, such as the turning point in the novel rest upon an unexplained event…
Themes in *Jane Eyre*

- **Love vs. Independence** - Jane’s desire for love, and also to be valued, and of belonging

> “…to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest…” Chapter 8

- **Religion** – Jane’s struggle between moral duty and earthly pleasures
  - Three figures of religious importance in the novel: Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, and St. John Rivers
Illness in Jane Eyre

• Specifically Jane becomes ill at two points in the novel:
  o After the incident in the red room
  o After Jane runs away from Thornfield

• What do these instances have in common?
  o Jane is cast out as a result of male injustice
  o The illness she experiences is one of “nerves”
  o These bouts of illness are stimulated by “passion”

**OED Definition of Hysteria:**

“A functional disturbance of the nervous system…[which is] usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties.”
Masculinity and Femininity in Jane Eyre

Jane is the ultimate androgynous Victorian character.

**Masculine**
- Outspoken nature
- Works for a living (being a governess is a state of class/gender limbo)
  - Ill-tempered
  - Rebellious

**Feminine**
- Governess=maternalesque
  - Rochester’s moral compass
  - Her fate is at the mercy of men.
  - Experiences bouts of hysteria
Jane Eyre and Phrenology / Physiognomy

- OED definition of Phrenology:

  “The theory that the mental powers or characteristics of an individual consist of separate faculties, each of which has its location in an organ found in a definite region of the surface of the brain, the size or development of which is commensurate with the development of the particular faculty”
What's in a Name??

• Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre* under the pseudonym: Currer Bell.

• As did her two other sisters Emily and Anne, under the names of Ellis and Acton Bell.

• The “Bells” were of constant speculation as to what their true sex was and whether they were actually three persons or one.

WHY did they do this??

• They did not want to expose themselves to the prejudice that woman writers were often given by critics.
Because Charlotte chose to publish her novel under a pseudonym, there was much speculation about the sex of the author.

When it was published in 1847, it became a best seller. Even the queen praised it.

Overall, the response to *Jane Eyre* was positive and most reviews were favorable.

However, when Charlotte revealed her true identity, the reviews became much more negative.
Why did people like Jane Eyre?

• People who liked the novel thought it was raw, fresh, youthful and nothing like it had ever been produced before.

• Suggested that part of its appeal comes from its fulfilling common fantasies and wishes.

• Readers were fascinated with its gothic setting and plot.

• Charlotte bravely contradicted the views of women in society in *Jane Eyre* – it speaks volumes for the oppressed woman.

• The *Atlas* review praised the novel…

• This is not merely a work of great promise; it is one of absolute performance. It is one of the most powerful domestic romances which have been published for many years…


Why did it receive harsh criticism?

- *Jane Eyre* was thought to be anti-Christian and unfeminine—no way a woman could have written it.

- *Jane Eyre* was published during a time of “fear and social unrest” in England, known as Chartism.

- At the time it was considered a radical book that deposed authority, violated human code, and fostered rebellion and Chartism in the homes of society (Victorian Web)

- Eliza Rigby of the *Quarterly Review* gave some of the harshest criticism …

  
  Jane Eyre is throughout the personification of the unregenerate and undisciplined spirit….

  Altogether the autobiography of Jane Eyre is preeminently an anti-Christian composition