

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre was the first novel by Charlotte Brontë to be published, under the pseudonym Currer Bell in 1847. It is a first-person narrative, considered the first of its kind in Victorian literature. As is typical of novels written at the time, it is a long book with a considerable amount of moral discussion that modern readers might find difficult. Some of the group also found it quite repetitive.

The story is well-known to many people: orphan girl brought up by heartless aunt, sent to inhuman boarding school, becomes governess in household of tormented man, Edward Rochester, falls in love with him, then discovers on her wedding day that he is married to insane woman who later sets fire to house and dies, causing him serious injury but leads to them being able to marry after all. That's the Hollywood version, anyway.

Needless to say, *Jane Eyre* is a lot more complex than that. The subtle references to early Victorian society and religion are usually subsumed in screen adaptations in favour of the romance angle. The gothic part of the story is accentuated by Thornfield being portrayed as dark and foreboding on screen, whereas it comes across as a warm home in the book.

A significant aspect of the book is that Jane is described as being small and plain, while Rochester is considered to be far from handsome. On the other hand, beauty is not regarded as an indicator of good character; Georgiana Reed is spoiled and arrogant and Blanche Ingram is haughty and overbearing. Rosamond Oliver, also exceptionally beautiful, is rather shallow, although with a kind heart.

Jane Eyre is very strong on characterisation with significant details being described for even minor characters. Madame Pierrot, the French teacher at Lowood, barely appears in the novel, but still '*wears a shawl, and has a pocket handkerchief tied to her side with a yellow riband*'. When Jane first meets Rosamond Oliver, she sees someone '*clad in pure white – a youthful, graceful form ... a face of perfect beauty*'.

Early reviews of *Jane Eyre* considered the book to be almost anti-Christian and there is no doubt that those who represent the Church come across badly. Mr Brocklehurst, the director and treasurer of Lowood School, is a harsh hypocrite who spends as little as possible on the school, since '*man shall not live by bread alone*' while having a family decked out in the latest finery. St John Rivers, who takes in Jane when she was in dire need, turns out to be a parson with rigid, uncompromising

attitudes. A rigid approach to life and religion was also shown by Eliza Reed, who took herself off to a nunnery in Lisle following her mother's death. By contrast, Helen Burns, with whom Jane forms a close friendship at Lowood, displays a Christianity that is much closer to Christ's teaching, which Jane, with her rebellious character, finds difficult to understand; a view probably shared by most in the modern world.

When Jane first meets Rochester, she examines his face in order to assess his personality. This is an example of phrenology, which was very popular during the 19th century. Late in the book, Jane thinks she hears Rochester calling her name and on meeting him after he became an invalid, he tells her that he had called out in despair at about the same time, which indicates that Charlotte Brontë was aware of the contemporary idea of emotions being transmitted across distance. Although Jane is prepared to question authority, she also displays the Victorian superiority of the English race, particularly as regards coloured people in her descriptions of Bertha.

Most of the group had read the book when much younger and found it very different on this occasion. A particular feature that the modern reader may be more likely to notice is the acceptance of male dominance. Jane finds herself being almost forced to study 'Hindustanee' to assist St John Rivers in his preparations for becoming a missionary in India. She appreciates his intellect and is willing to go with him, but only as his sister, not as his wife, since she knows he doesn't love her. St John has a point, since such a relationship would be regarded with suspicion, and Jane nearly gives way to his pleading. Then she 'hears' Rochester's 'call', which re-ignites her passionate love. Jane had refused to continue with Rochester after she learns about Bertha, despite her passion for him. When they meet again, Rochester is now the dependent while Jane has independent means.

At the end of the meeting, a point of discussion took place, with clearly no conclusion, that posed the question; what would have been Jane's future if there had been no Bertha to prevent her being able to marry Rochester?