

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S



# JANE EYRE

“This excellent guide does justice both to the intricate design of Brontë’s novel and to its sheer strangeness.”

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PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by *Josie Billington*

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Connell Guide  
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# Jane Eyre

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# Introduction

The publication of *Jane Eyre* on 16th October 1847 was a milestone in the history of the English novel. An instant popular success, it was reviewed in countless magazines and journals, and everywhere praised for its exceptional originality and riveting power.

This is not only 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 years. It has little or nothing of the old conventional stamp upon it; none of the jaded, exhausted attributes of a worn-out vein of imagination... but is full of youthful vigour, of freshness and originality... It is a book to make the pulses gallop and the heart beat, and to fill the eyes with tears. (Anonymous reviewer in the *Atlas*, 23rd October 1847)

*Jane Eyre's* success owed a lot to its timing: “Brontë’s first novel made its appearance in the somewhat dismal interval between, on the one hand, Jane Austen and Scott, and, on the other, the most eventful period in the novel’s history,” wrote the critic Miriam Allott. Yet more than 150 years later, it still powerfully affects its readers with all the charge of a new-minted work. “Read by thousands who have no idea of its period, who

devour it unaware of difficulties, unconscious of any need for adaptation to unfamiliar manners or conventions, *Jane Eyre* makes its appeal first and last to ‘the unchanging human heart’,” said Kathleen Tillotson.

It is easy to forget, now, how shocking the novel was to its mid-19th century readers. Virtually every early reviewer felt obliged either to condemn or defend its impropriety. The most savage reviews denounced the “coarseness” of language, the “unfeminine” laxity of moral tone, and the “dereliction of decorum” which made its hero cruel, brutal, yet attractively interesting, while permitting its plain, poor, single heroine to live under same roof as the man she loved. What caused most outrage, perhaps, was the demonstrable rebellious anger in the heroine’s “unregenerate and undisciplined spirit”, her being a passionate law unto herself. “Never was there a better hater. Every page burns with moral Jacobinism,” wrote an early critic. As the poet Matthew Arnold was to say of Brontë’s “disagreeable” final novel, *Villette*, “the writer’s mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage”.

Though the view of the novel as “anti-Christian” was extreme, many readers criticised its melodrama, improbability and unnatural artifice. For most, though (then as now), these flaws are not only entirely explicable in view of the

writer's youth but are amply compensated for by Brontë's intellectual seriousness, moral integrity and depth of feeling.

Reality – deep, significant reality – is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography, – not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience... It is soul speaking to soul; it is an utterance from the depths of a struggling, suffering, much-enduring spirit. (George Henry Lewes, December 1847)

For all its compelling love interest, it is worth recalling that *Jane Eyre* was regarded even by the Romantic sensibility of late 19th-century poet Algernon Charles Swinburne as a work of “genius” first and foremost because of its realism:

The gift of which I would speak is that of a power to make us feel in every nerve, at every step forward... thus and not otherwise... it was and must have been with the human figures set before us in their action and their suffering; that thus and not otherwise they absolutely must and would have felt, thought and spoken.

## A summary of the plot

The novel opens at Gateshead Hall where orphaned 10-year-old Jane is the adopted child of her Aunt Reed. Neglected and emotionally rejected by her aunt, Jane is cruelly treated by her cousins, Eliza, Georgiana, and John, especially the latter. After one incident, where Jane uncharacteristically retaliates, she is locked in the red room in which her Uncle Reed had died and suffers terrifying delusions. Soon afterwards, Jane is sent to the charitable institution, Lowood School, where the director, to whom Mrs Reed has unfairly denounced Jane as deceitful, submits her to the public humiliation of being branded a liar. The tyranny of the school's regime is relieved for Jane by the friendship of Helen Burns – whose death from consumption is a direct result of the appalling conditions at the school – and the mentorship of the school's superintendent, Miss Temple.

After eight years as both pupil and teacher at Lowood, Jane accepts a post as governess at Thornfield Hall. Before leaving Lowood, she is informed by the Gateshead servant, Bessie, that her other uncle, John Reed, has been seeking her. At Thornfield, Jane's pupil is Adèle, ward of the absent master, Rochester. Before Rochester's return, Jane hears strange laughter as she wanders the third storey of the mansion and is

informed that the laughter is that of a servant, Grace Poole. Walking out one winter's day, Jane unwittingly comes to the aid of Rochester when he falls from his horse. Rochester is drawn to Jane, seeks her companionship, and the two become passionately close. Rochester confesses to a sinful history of sexual indiscretion, including his affair with French mistress Céline Varens, of which liaison Adèle is apparently the offspring. That same night, Jane is disturbed by the strange "demoniac" laughter and by smoke issuing from Rochester's bedchamber. She finds Rochester asleep, his bed aflame, and douses the fire. He thanks her for saving his life, addressing her as his "cherished preserver".

Following an unannounced absence of several weeks, Rochester returns to Thornfield with house guests who include Blanche Ingram, whom, to all appearances, Rochester is wooing and intends to marry. During the house party, Rochester disguises himself as a fortune-telling gypsy and uses this cover, which Jane eventually sees through, to probe Jane's feelings as well as to disabuse Blanche Ingram of her notions of his wealth. That night the household is disturbed by the violent attack, accompanied by a savage cry, upon a visitor to Thornfield, Richard Mason. As Jane tends Mason's wounds at Rochester's request while he seeks medical help, she hears wild animal snarls in the room her patient has

come from. Mason leaves Thornfield directly and Jane is herself recalled to Gateshead by the dying Mrs Reed, who wishes to confess to Jane that, when Jane's uncle John had come in search of his niece to make her his heir, Mrs Reed had claimed that Jane was already dead.

When Jane returns to Thornfield, Rochester admits that his intentions toward Blanche Ingram were never serious, and proposes to Jane, who accepts. That night the chestnut tree under which they had been sitting is split by lightning. On the eve of the wedding, Jane is visited by a spectral woman who tears her bridal veil. At the wedding ceremony, Mason returns accompanied by a lawyer who declares the intended marriage is invalid as Rochester is already married. Rochester takes the guests to his living wife – Mason's sister, the mad Bertha, who inhabits the third storey like a caged wild animal, and immediately attacks her husband. Rochester tries to persuade Jane to live as his mistress, but she refuses, and leaves Thornfield in the dead of night, destitute.

Wandering miles without shelter or food and close to death, Jane is taken in by the Rivers family at Marsh End, where she assumes a false name and begins in the lowly post of village school teacher offered to her by John Rivers. When John discovers her true identity, he realises that she is the unknown relation to whom his deceased uncle John Reed left his fortune, and

that Jane is his cousin. Jane shares her inheritance with her cousins, but resists John's insistent request that she join him as his missionary wife in India. On the point of accepting, despite her reluctance, she hears Rochester's voice calling her name. Returning at once to Thornfield, she finds a burned-out ruin, set alight, she learns, by Bertha, who died in the flames, though not before Rochester had lost a hand and the sight of one eye in trying to save her. Jane finds Rochester at Ferndean, and the couple marry.

## What is *Jane Eyre* about?

In outline, *Jane Eyre* is a love story; a Cinderella fable, depicting the transformation from forlorn, neglected childhood to happy, prosperous marriage; the ancient story of thwarted lovers who overcome obstacles and are finally united. Yet *Jane Eyre* interrogates, at every turn, the archetypes upon which it rests, especially, perhaps, the archetype Brontë inherited from her immediate literary forebear, Jane Austen. It is not simply that Jane is not pretty, humble or submissive, nor that her lover, Rochester, is not young, handsome or chivalrous. Though the couple's enduring sympathetic appeal against the

grain of these conventional merits remains a *tour de force*, Jane Austen's heroines had already broken that mould.

The key difference is that, where sensual love is morally suspect and dangerous in Austen, in *Jane Eyre* it is a potential force for mutual good and growth as much as it is a catalyst for despair. Love, even when wildly and deliriously exciting, is not merely seductively pleasurable; nor is it benignly bountiful either. It is anger, jealousy, sex, joy, fear, desire, longing, pain, friendship, loss: its ground is moral, metaphysical and cosmic, as much as it is personal and carnal. It is as deeply satisfying as it is apparently incapable of offering the fulfilment of peace and serenity.

The difference between Austen's and Brontë's ideas of love is almost synonymous with the distinction between 18th-century rationalism and 19th-century Romanticism. At one level, the authors represent sense versus sensibility, as Brontë herself recognised in her famous scathing attack on Austen's novels.

She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement... the Passions are perfectly unknown to her... Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes