

Jane Eyre Reading Guide

Jane Eyre is Charlotte Brontë's most popular novel. In fact, it is one of the most widely read classics of English literature. It has been interpreted in many different ways since its initial publication in 1847. Although it was a best seller in Victorian England, the novel still attracted some negative criticism. Elizabeth Rigby, a popular author, historian, and literary critic, felt that *Jane Eyre* was dangerously unchristian and rebellious because of its critique of religious hypocrisy, upper-class prerogatives, and stratified social order. Twentieth century critics, on the other hand, often found the novel refreshingly feminist. It advocates for a woman's right to pursue and attain happiness as she understands it. More modern critics find fault with the novel's acceptance of imperialism and the stratified social order. With an understanding of how *Jane Eyre* is interpreted by the experts, I encourage you to develop your own interpretation as you read. *Jane Eyre* is a compelling narrative and remains one of the most popular English novels ever written.

Bildungsroman

- A novel about the growth and education of the main character
 - Take note of the changes in Jane's character over time

Setting

- Jane will spend time in five different places over the course of the novel, and she will learn a great deal about herself at each place.
 - Gateshead Hall
 - Lowood Charity School
 - Thornfield Hall
 - Moor House
 - Ferndean

Thematic Issues

- Social class
 - Jane lacks the status markers of wealth and family
 - She is an orphan who feels misplaced, misjudged, and mistreated in the social order
- Women's roles
 - Social class issues are complicated by gender issues because women have so few opportunities to use their talents and express their personalities
 - Confined and expected to be content when in fact they are often going mad inside
- Religion
 - Men use religious hypocrisy and religious zeal to control women

Historical/Social-Cultural Context

- 19th century saw the beginnings of the feminist movement in Europe

- Married women had few rights
- Unmarried women had more rights but even fewer opportunities
- Evangelicalism
 - Stressed faith and morality, but some felt the movement encouraged narrow-mindedness and fanaticism

Literary Devices and Craft

- Symbolism
 - Names (people and places)
 - i.e. Gateshead – the gate Jane must pass through at the head of her journey
 - Characters' physical descriptions, especially their eyes
 - Events and objects
- Hero's Journey
 - Ordinary World
 - Call to Adventure
 - Assistance
 - Departure
 - Trials
 - Approach
 - Crisis
 - Treasure
 - Result
 - Return
 - New Life
 - Resolution
- Opposing Pairs
 - Rochester vs. St. John Rivers
 - Eliza and Georgiana vs. Mary and Diana
- Allusions
 - Most are biblical
- Romanticism
 - Emotion over reason
 - Country over city
 - Freedom over restriction
 - Individual over society
 - Elements of supernatural/mysterious
 - Man is inherently good
- Dark romanticism (gothic literature)
 - Explored psychological effects of guilt and sin
 - Man is inherently prone to sin and self-destruction
 - Nature is dark, decaying, and mysterious
 - Focus on obsession, insanity, and revenge