Jane Eyre

by Charlotte Brontë

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Notes

What are literary classics, and why are they important?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that says something important about life and the human condition—and says it with great artistry. It has withstood the test of time and is not bound by any specific time, place, or culture. For this reason, a classic is considered to have universal appeal and significance. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to readers when it was first written, and its power will continue to give future generations new perspectives on life.

Charlotte Brontë was born on April 21, 1816, in England. She was the third child of six, five girls and one boy. The Brontës moved to a village near the Yorkshire moors, a wild and desolate area, which was the inspiration for the setting of some of the sisters' books. Theirs was a difficult and tragic existence, with the specter of disease and death a constant presence. The mother succumbed to cancer when Charlotte was only five, and two sisters died of tuberculosis when Charlotte was eight. Elisabeth Branwell, an aunt, raised the remaining children. Although she was an authoritarian and imposing figure, Elisabeth did not stifle the children's imaginations; they read many books from the large family library and constructed their own worlds of imaginary people and situations.

In 1846, Charlotte and her two sisters, using male names, published a collection of their poems; it was titled *The Poems of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, pseudonyms that stood for Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë. The book, however, sold only two copies. This lack of success did not discourage them, and they each began writing a novel. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847 under her Currer Bell pseudonym, was an immediate success. When the true author was revealed as Charlotte Brontë, controversy erupted about the novel, with some critics stating that no woman could have written such a work and another declaring that he "cannot doubt" that *Jane Eyre* was the work of a woman.

Charlotte Brontë continued writing throughout the rest of her life, despite the difficulties that continued to haunt her. Her brother died of tuberculosis in 1848, and Emily, who had caught a severe cold at his funeral, passed away only a few months later; Anne died in 1849 after a long illness. Charlotte was left to care for her father, who was going blind, but who actually outlived his children, dying in 1857.

In 1854, Charlotte married her father's religious advisor, but she died within a year, a few months shy of her thirty-ninth birthday, due to complications during her pregnancy.

Reading Pointers

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

To fully appreciate the psychological and philosophical complexities of this classic Victorian novel, readers should be aware of the following:

1. **Genre**:
   A. Charlotte Brontë was greatly influenced by Romantic authors who wrote during the time in which she lived. Several characteristics classify a literary work as Romantic:
   - a passion for human emotion
   - the idea that comfort and healing can be found through nature
   - a need for individuality, despite social norms that demanded conformity
   - a belief in the supernatural
   - the advocacy of free thought

   B. *Jane Eyre* also contains elements of the Gothic genre, which includes the following characteristics:
   - an intensity of emotion
   - somber, gloomy surroundings
   - using weather to depict a character's mood
   - giving nature the power to destroy

   C. Transcendentalism is another prominent philosophy that Brontë was exposed to and used in *Jane Eyre*. Some aspects of Transcendental philosophy include:
   - a focus on self-reliance and intuition
   - a belief that the divine/God was present in everything, especially Nature and the individual; therefore, each person had the capacity to find God within him or herself. These beliefs become more prominent as the novel progresses.

   D. *Jane Eyre* is also characteristic of a Bildungsroman novel; it is a coming-of-age story in which the protagonist experiences psychological, spiritual, and intellectual growth.

2. **Themes:** Brontë includes numerous themes throughout the novel.

   A. **the importance of maintaining autonomy and not accepting the restrictions that Victorian society placed on women**
   From early childhood, Jane knows she is different from those around her; however, she understands that her role must be one of a submissive Victorian woman, and she follows that pattern for many years. Only when the societal norms threaten to compromise her integrity does Jane risk voicing her opinions.

   B. **the discovery and acceptance of one's own spirituality, regardless of any organized religious philosophy**
   Throughout the book, some aspect of religion surrounds Jane. She does not outwardly refuse this influence, but instead, she takes and digests what she has learned in order to find her own religion through love, nature, and morals.

   Three main religious figures—Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, and St. John Rivers—provide three different models of religion: Evangelical hypocrisy, complete acceptance of the Scriptures, and ambition combined with salvation

   While Jane eventually rejects all three aspects of religion, she does not abandon morality or spirituality. She uses prayer in times of need and uncertainty, and she bases her decisions on her own understanding of what morality is.

   C. **the desire for psychological and emotional completion**
   Jane's quest for love and spiritual balance is ultimately a search for wholeness. Many critics view Bertha Mason as a manifestation of Jane's subconscious—especially of her inner rage against oppression. Bertha's role in the disruption of Jane's life actually mirrors Jane's own developing sense of self.

3. **Motifs**

   A. **Class Conflict**
   As a child, Jane lives with distant family members, who view her as a poor orphan and see themselves as better than she because of their wealth and social standing. Even her situation as an adult exposes her to ridicule and condescension because of her poverty.

Chapter I

THERE WAS NO possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so somber, and a rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed.

The said Eliza, John and Georgiana were now clustered round their mamma in the drawing room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her (for the time neither quarreling nor crying), looked perfectly happy. Me, she had dispensed from joining the group; saying, "She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she heard from Bessie, and could discover by her own observation, that I was endeavoring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and child-like disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner—something lighter, franker, more natural, as it were—she really must exclude me from privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children."

"What does Bessie say I have done?" I asked.

"Jane, I don't like cavilers or questioners: besides, there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent."

A small breakfast-room adjoined the drawing-room. I slipped in there. It

contained a book-case: I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged like a Turk;† and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.

I returned to my book—Bewick's "History of British Birds:"† the letterpress thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of "the solitary rocks and promontories" by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindeness, or Naze, to the North Cape—

> "Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls,
> Boils round the naked, melancholy isles
> Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge
> Pours in among the stormy Hebrides,"†

Nor could I pass unnoticed the suggestion of the bleak shores of Lapland,† Siberia, Spitzbergen,† Nova Zembla,† Iceland, Greenland, with "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulations, of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and concenter the multiplied rigors of extreme cold." Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own; shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive. The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking.

I can not tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary church-yard, with its inscribed head-stone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of eventide.

The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him, I passed over quickly: it was an object of terror.

So was the black, horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows.

Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humor; and when, having brought her ironing-table to the nursery-hearth, she allowed us to sit about it, and while she got up Mrs. Reed's lace frills, and crimped her night-cap borders, fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and other ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of "Pamela," and "Henry, Earl of Moreland."

With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption, and that came too soon. The breakfast-room door opened.

"Boh! Madam Mope!" cried the voice of John Reed; then he paused: he found the room apparently empty.

"Where the dickens is she?" he continued. "Lizzy! Georgy!" (calling to his sisters) "Joan is not here; tell mamma she is run out into the rain—bad animal!"

"It is well I drew the curtain," thought I; and I wished fervently he might not discover my hiding-place: nor would John Reed have found it out himself; he was not quick either of vision or conception; but Eliza just put her head in at the door, and said at once:

"She is in the window-seat, to be sure, Jack."

And I came out immediately, for I trembled at the idea of being dragged forth by the said Jack.

"What do you want?" I asked, with awkward diffidence.

"Say, 'what do you want, Master Reed?'" was the answer. "I want you to come here;" and seating himself he intimated by a gesture that I was to stand before him.

John Reed was a school-boy of fourteen years old; four years older than I, for I was but ten; large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious, and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. He ought now to have been at school; but his mamma had taken him home for a month or two, "on account of his delicate health." Mr. Miles, the master, affirmed that he would do very well if he had fewer cakes and sweetmeats sent him from home, but the mother's heart turned from an opinion so harsh, and inclined rather to the more refined

idea that John's sallowness was owing to over-application and, perhaps, to pining after home.

John had not much affection for his mother and sisters, and an antipathy to me. He bullied and punished me, not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually; every nerve I had feared him and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he come near. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired, because I had no appeal whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions; the servants did not like to offend their young master by taking my part against him, and Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence; more frequently, however, behind her back.

Habitually obedient to John, I came up to his chair; he spent some three minutes in thrusting out his tongue at me as far as he could without damaging the roots: I knew he would soon strike, and while dreading the blow, I mused on the disgusting and ugly appearance of him who would presently deal it. I wonder if he read that notion in my face; for, all at once, without speaking, he struck suddenly and strongly. I tottered, and on regaining my equilibrium retired back a step or two from his chair.

"That is for your impudence in answering mamma awhile since," said he, "and for the look you had in your eyes two minutes since, you rat!"

Accustomed to John Reed's abuse, I never had an idea of replying to it; my care was how to endure the blow which would certainly follow the insult.

"What were you doing behind the curtain?" he asked.

"I was reading."

"Show the book."

I returned to the window and fetched it thence.

"You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense. Now I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows."

I did so, not at first aware what was his intention; but when I saw him lift and poise the book and stand in act to hurl it, I instinctively started aside with a cry of alarm; not soon enough, however; the volume was flung, it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp; my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded.

"Wicked and cruel boy!" I said. "You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!"[†]

I had read Goldsmith's "History of Rome,"[†] and had formed my opinion

Glossary

Chapter I

Turk – an inhabitant or native of Turkey

Bewick's "History of British Birds" – a book written by English wood engraver and bird expert (ornithologist), Thomas Bewick (1753–1828); Jane's choosing this book is significant because of the imagery birds lend to literary works. Jane also desires freedom and longs to leave her current situation; the need for freedom and the instinct to migrate are two concepts associated with birds.

" '**Where the Northern…stormy Hebrides…**' " – an allusion to a poem written by James Thomson (1700–1748), a Scottish poet; this poem appears in a compilation Thomson wrote called *The Seasons,* which he published in four parts. This particular poem is included in the "Autumn" edition. The Hebrides are rugged, isolated islands located in a particularly stormy area of the Atlantic, near Scotland. Note the symbolic similarities between Jane's present circumstances and these islands.

Lapland – an area of Europe that includes parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwest Russia

Spitzbergen – *[Spitsbergen]* islands belonging to Norway that are located in the Arctic Ocean

Nova Zembla – *[Novaya Zemlya]* a cluster of islands in the Arctic, belonging to Russia

" '**You are like a murderer…the Roman emperors!**' " – With these insults, Jane is essentially commenting on social class. John has always ridiculed Jane about her social status, claiming that she is not worthy of reading the same books as he does, mocking her plainness, criticizing her financial status, etc. Jane's statement stresses the corruption evident in the upper and ruling classes. For Jane, this social distinction becomes apparent from a physical standpoint as well. She views herself as physically insignificant in comparison to the Reeds. This argument with John also brings up another issue that is a motif throughout the novel: gender conflicts and female oppression. Jane is viewed as weaker than others, not only because she is of a lower social status, but also because she is a woman.

Goldsmith's "History of Rome" – Also known as "Dr. Goldsmith's Roman History" or "The Roman History," it was written in 1769 by Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774), who also wrote novels, plays, poetry, and essays

Nero, Caligula – two Roman emperors who are infamous for being corrupt and using their authority immorally

red-room – The color red is used throughout the novel as a symbol for fire, passion, and destruction.

Vocabulary

CHAPTER I

antipathy – having a strong dislike
bilious – bad tempered
bleared – blurred; cloudy
borne – taken along
cavilers – fault-finders
diffidence – shyness, insecurity
fervently – earnestly
gallows – a structure made for hanging people
impudence – boldness, rudeness, nerve
lamentable – regrettable
lineaments – facial features
melancholy – depressed, sad
moreen – a heavy woolen cloth
predominated – prevailed
pungent – sharp; pointed; a strong taste or smell
sprightly – lively
subjoined – added at the ends
sweetmeats – candy; candied fruit
thence – from there
torpid – inactive, sluggish
tottered – stumbled, faltered
tyrant – a cruel authoritarian figureE
vignettes – small designs on pages of a book
visage – an appearance, face

CHAPTER II

abhor – despise, hate
acrid – biting, bitter, harsh
artifice – trickery
captious – critical; fault-finding
disposed – likely to; **inclined**
divers – various
duplicity – deception
heterogeneous – completely different
ignominy – humiliation; disgrace
imp – a small evil spirit, devil
incredulous – disbelieving
influx – a large arrival