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CRITICAL APPROACHES



QUESTION

Consider each major character's narrative function.

CHARACTERISATION

JANE EYRE

Jane Eyre is essentially a young woman who is trying to grow up in a society that does not value her or her skills, and as such carries the theme of the novel. She is an advocate for her sex, and asserts herself, liberates herself and makes herself happy because she believes she has a right to be so. Jane is a credible and realistic character and it is therefore all too easy to treat her as a real person who has an independent existence beyond the text. We get to know her innermost thoughts and deepest feelings through the course of the novel; in fact the heart of the novel actually lies in Jane's descriptions of what is going on in her own mind, and we are therefore drawn into a very close relationship with her. However, Jane is also Cinderella-like, or like the heroine of 'The Beauty and the Beast', though unlike these fairytale characters Jane is plain both as a child and as an adult. As Mr Rochester's servants comment at Ferndean in the Conclusion, '*she ben't one o' th' handsomest*' (Vol. III, Ch. 12, p. 499).

Jane is born poor, is soon orphaned and lives out her childhood with her Aunt Reed and three cousins who detest and bully her. Unlike Cinderella she does not have to work as a servant, but her life at Gateshead and then at Lowood school is one of drudgery. Even when she becomes a governess she is still placed in an awkward social position, because at the time governesses were a social anomaly. Neither servants nor members of their employer's family, governesses had to be respectable young ladies when respectable young ladies were not supposed to work for their living. Jane's prospects finally pick up, however, when she discovers that she has an alternative set of cousins who will treat her as an equal and when, rather than a fairy godmother, her rich uncle finally leaves her enough money to become independent. Eventually, she marries her very own handsome 'prince', Mr Rochester, and the novel ends '*My Edward and I ... are happy*' (Vol. III, Ch. 12,

CONTEXT

The Governesses Benevolent Institution was established in 1841.

p. 501). It is, therefore, the complex psychic development that Jane undergoes and the everyday setting of the novel that manage to make her such an impressive character, rather than her somewhat implausible story.

Jane dominates and controls the narrative – incidentally, remember that a first-person narrator is not the author despite the subtitle – and her reactions and feelings always form the focus of attention, even when another character is talking about him or herself. And because we are privy to her innermost thoughts, we generally take her to be a reliable observer. But it is important to remember here that Jane is narrating events ten years after they have happened. Though she is a child at Gateshead, she tells us about this period as a mature woman, and she herself reminds us of this.

Jane is not a wholly sympathetic figure, either, for example, as we see in Volume I, Chapter 3, she is quite a precocious child. She is middle class by birth and though impoverished herself she has to learn that the poor are not just an amorphous mass. She can therefore be quite a snob. As an adult, she is also thoroughly imbued with the idea that everything foreign is intrinsically unhealthy and immoral. She makes sure that little Adèle learns to be English, or at least as English as possible, given that she is a French Catholic, and she assumes that the Indian climate will kill her. These are the attitudes of her time and of her class.

At the beginning of the novel Jane is angry, rebellious and hungry for adventure, but as she grows up she learns how to temper her wilder passions so that, unlike many characters in Victorian novels, she is not destroyed by them. Her feelings, especially '*conscience*' and '*passion*' (Vol. III, Ch. 1, p. 335), are often given voices of their own when she is suffering some particular anguish and these moments of **personification** help us to understand why she acts as she does. Torn throughout the novel between her true nature and social convention, in the end she is able to resolve this inherent division by marrying for duty and for love. Yet that victory is one that only she can achieve by force of will and the sacrifice of the characters who are closest to her.



QUESTION

Is *Jane Eyre* a simple fairy story?



QUESTION

To what extent are Jane's attitudes and prejudices typical of her class?

World events

1811 First Luddite riot, Nottingham

1813-17 Luddites executed, York. Movement broken

1815 Napoleon escapes from Elba, becomes Emperor and is defeated at Waterloo

1820 Death of George III (end of Regency), and accession of George IV, who attempts to dissolve his marriage to Caroline. Death of Napoleon

Charlotte's life

1812 Patrick Brontë, an Irish Protestant clergyman marries Maria Branwell, a Cornish Methodist from Penzance

1813 Birth of Maria

1813-18 Patrick publishes a collection of poems and two novels

1815 Birth of Elizabeth

1816 Birth of Charlotte

1817 Birth of Branwell

1818 Birth of Emily

1819 The Brontë family move to Haworth in Yorkshire

1820 Birth of Anne

1821 Mrs Maria Brontë dies of cancer, and her sister, Elizabeth Branwell, comes to care for the children

Literary events

1813 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

1815 Byron, *Completed Works*

1816 Jane Austen, *Emma*

1817 Death of Jane Austen

1818 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

1821 Death of poet, John Keats

1824 Death of poet, Lord Byron

World events

1825 First railway opened between Stockton and Darlington

1829 Catholic emancipation in Britain

1830 Death of George IV and accession of William IV

1830s Abolitionists of Slave Trade active in America; articles in *Monthly Repository* by W.J. Fox and W.B. Adams influenced by Harriet Taylor

1831 Cholera epidemic

1832 First Reform Act

1833 Slavery abolished

1834 Establishment of Union Workhouses; Tolpuddle Martyrs

1837 Death of William IV; accession of Queen Victoria

Charlotte's life

1825 Both Maria and Elizabeth die of tuberculosis at Cowan Bridge School

1831 Charlotte boards at Roe Head school, Mirfield

1835-8 Charlotte returns to Roe Head as a teacher, with Emily as a pupil, but after 3 months of homesickness Emily returns to Haworth

Literary events

1832 Death of Walter Scott and Goethe; Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy*; Anna Jameson, *Characteristics of Women*

1836 Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*