*Jane Eyre*
By Charlotte Bronte
Published 1847

Note: These are discussion and essay questions that I have collected over the years. Reading them now is simply to help support idea-making for the Harkness Discussion. You may use them at any time as needed (of course, I reserve the right to actually use them as essay question **(-:** ).

1. Central to Jane Eyre's struggle for fulfillment is her ambition to transcend the limits placed upon women in Victorian society. How does Jane navigate the gap between society's expectations and her innermost desires? In what ways do traditional gender roles both hinder her progress and help her achieve a measure of contentment? Do the obstacles Jane confronts have parallels to the barriers faced by women today? Discuss sexual politics in the novel. How do other women in Charlotte Bronte’s novel respond to Jane's freethinking ways? Does the film's portrayal of male/female relationships stay true to the author's vision?
2. The protagonists in *Jane Eyre* are products of a class-conscious society in which financial security shapes personal freedom. In what ways are Jane and Mr. Rochester constrained by their social positions? Does *Jane Eyre*'s England allow for genuine social mobility? How does Bronte’s message of empowerment threaten the existing class structure? How are the class distinctions of Bronte’s day different than the way we understand them today? Does the fact that Jane ends up with the wealthy Rochester, not to mention an inheritance of her own, undermine the novel's argument for the irrelevance of riches?
3. Bound by honor and a sense of duty, Mr. Rochester brings young Adele to Thornfield. Is she universally embraced? How does her character contrast with -- and complement -- Jane Eyre's? As portrayed in the novel, what role do children play in Victorian society? In what ways does Jane's own troubled childhood influence her adult philosophies? What does Jane's technique as governess say about the author's vision of childrearing?
4. Despite her adherence to a strict moral code, Jane is not excessively pious. What do her characterizations of Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, and Eliza Reed communicate about her feelings toward established religion? How do her years at Lowood School contribute to her sense of alienation from the Church? Is this handled differently in the book and the film? Is it religion or virtue that impedes Jane's union to Mr. Rochester? And what, for Jane, is the difference?
5. When he arrives on the scene at Thornfield, Edward Rochester is shrouded in mystery. What is the nature of his secret? Why does he go to such lengths to prevent its discovery? Do his actions at concealment contradict his stated intentions, not only toward Jane Eyre but also toward his ailing wife? Why does he refer to Thornfield as a prison? What accounts for the sense of powerlessness that fuels his desperation and spurs his restless travels?
6. Discuss the role of physical beauty in *Jane Eyre*. What does the author suggest about its importance to individual happiness? How does outward vanity reflect on the inner character of Jane's cousin, Georgiana Reed? How does Jane respond to the young Adele's obsession with all things *tres jolie*? What makes Mr. Rochester reject the glamorous Blanche Ingram? What does Mr. Rochester mean when he tells Jane that he and she are like "twins"? What is the significance of Mr. Rochester's average appearance, which finds its match in Jane Eyre's plainness? How does lack of physical beauty enable each of them to express their truest selves?
7. Though possessing an inner strength that sustains her during the most difficult times, Jane also relies on the love and support of those around her. How does her friendship with Helen Burns ease Jane's transition to Lowood and inspire her intellectual achievement? Is the depth of their relationship fully realized in the film? How does Mrs. Fairfax's welcome of Jane at Thornfield contrast with the treatment she receives at Gateshead? What role do Diana and Mary Rivers play in restoring Jane's will to live after she abandons her post at Thornfield? What does Jane mean when she tells St. John that, though she has always known herself, Mr. Rochester was the first to recognize her?

**1.) [Gender Issues]** Consider the gender of the characters in *Jane Eyre.* How are

male and female characters portrayed? How does the work portray their roles in

society? How does gender influence the choices that are available to the

characters and the decisions that they make? Write a paper that explores how

gender affects the plot and character development in the novel.

Alternate Topics: Discuss how the novel would be different if the genders of the

main characters were reversed. OR, Discuss how the novel would change if the

events were to take place today—Compare the influence of gender on the choices

and decisions that the characters make in the world of the novel to the influence

that gender would have if these characters were here today.

**2.) [Positive/Negative Characters]** In *Jane Eyre*, some of the characters are given

positive, sympathetic portrayals. Others have negative, perhaps even villainous

portrayals. Still others may begin with negative qualities and gradually become

more and more positive. Rarely does an author rely on the reader's personal sense

of morality to determine which characters are positive and which are negative.

Instead, there are details, actions, and characteristics that help define who is

"good" and who is "bad." It's easy to know the difference in old westerns—good

guys wear white hats; bad guys wear black hats. But even then, there are other

details that help you know what it going on, details that even help you construct

hierarchies (e.g., slightly bad to fully evil). Think about your novel. How does the

author indicate which characters are positive and which are negative? In your

essay, explain how you can tell the difference.

**3.) [Realism and the Setting]** Perform a close examination of the setting in *Jane Eyre*.

What are the primary locations? How are these places made realistic — how does

the author use extended description, background information, and specific detail

to make the setting come alive for readers? How do the main characters fit in the

settings — do they seem at home? Do they seem out of place? How do their

reactions and interactions with the setting affect the realism of the locations? In

your paper, discuss the way that the techniques that the novelist uses to make the

setting vivid and real to readers, and the extent to which these techniques are

effective.

**4.) [Shaped by Period]** Writers can't help but be influenced by the events and

people that they see around them. The question is to what extent does that

influence become part of the works that they write and how do they communicate

their feelings and beliefs about the world around them. For your essay, think

about how the characters, setting, and themes in your novel relate to the period in

which it was written. How is the novel an analysis of the period? How is it a

reflection, and how is it a criticism? And how does the writer make opinions

about that world clear to the reader?

**5.) [Setting & Characters]** Consider the relationship between the characters and the

setting for *Jane Eyre.* Think about the way that the characters are described, their

characteristics, the conflicts that they face, the actions they take, and their

emotional reactions. Compare these qualities to the setting — to the way that it is

described, to the particular things that are described, and to the words that are

used to describe the place(s) where the novel takes place. In your paper, explain

how the setting of the novel is representative (or not) of the characters.

**6.) [Class Issues]** Think about the role that social class plays in *Jane Eyre.* What

social classes are represented in the novel? To what extent is each class depicted?

Are all the classes given equal representation? How do the classes shown in the

novel relate to the classes that realistically existed in the time and place where the

novel takes place? As you go through your novel, consider two important

questions: how does the author feel about the different social classes, and how can

you tell the author's opinion? Write a paper that explores the way that social class

and class issues affect the characters and plot of your novel.

**Discussion Topics for Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre***

**As you read *Jane Eyre*, please look for questions, problems and recurring issues in the text. You might begin by considering, and looking for examples of, the following issues:**

1.  Trace all references to change.  What are the characteristics of this novel that make it particularly Victorian?

2. Trace all references to bondage.  What is Bronte saying?

3.  Trace all references to binaries such as cold/hot, ice/fire.  What is the significance of this symbolism?

4.  In a recent adaptation of the novel for television, the story began with Jane's running into Rochester.  Are chapters 1-11 unnecessary? How does our understanding of Jane's childhood and child self contribute to our understanding of her as an adult?

5.  Consider the significance of specific houses and characters' relationships to them (Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Ferndean, etc.), as well as the significance of homes and domesticity generally.

6.  In what ways, and for what reasons, is Jane portrayed as an outsider?

7.  Some movie adaptations all but eliminate the chapters with St. John, or at least the romance with him.  Are they essential?

8.  Consider Jane and Rochester's relationship: What do they have in common; How do they establish a relationship; Is their relationship plausible?

9.  Many critics have faulted Bronte for blinding and crippling Rochester.  Why do you think she did it?

10.  Even though Rochester is often described as physically unattractive and bullying, and Jane, as plain, the romance between the two is one of the greatest in literary history.   Why?

11.  Imperialism: Note references to other countries in chapter one and throughout the novel.  Do you find Bronte demonstrating a superior British attitude over Others?  To what extent are characters and/or situations in *Jane Eyre* affected, or created, by British imperialism and colonialism?

12.  "Reader, I married him...": Does *Jane Eyre* have a happy ending?  What does the novel conclude with the death of St. John rather than with Jane's and Rochester's marriage?

**Look for examples of the following themes:**

1. The dehumanizing consequences of Pride:  Characters in the novel who suffer from pride all treat Jane and other people as objects--the Reeds, Mr. Brocklehurst, The Ingrams, St. John--even Rochester is guilty of this at first.

2. The individual role of religion: Bronte seems to favor a very individual relationship w/ God: faith should be a private matter of conscience-- a fairly humanistic stance. She deplores hypocritical, self-serving religiosity (Brocklehurst, St. John).

3. Money vs. Morality: *Jane Eyre* attacks middle class passion for respectability via possession and displays of money.

4. Difficulties of Female integration into society: Jane's "coming-of-age" (this novel is essentially a [*bildungsroman*](http://newark.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Terms/bildungsroman.html)) is dependent upon her learning to understand the world/society through learning to understand and accept herself.

5. "Status Incongruence": Jane Eyre explores the difficulties and perils of occupying social positions which are contradictory, unstable, contradictory or anxiety-producing.

6. Look for references to passion, dreams and the supernatural.

**Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855)**

*Jane Eyre*

Essay Questions

1. How does *Jane Eyre* challenge the class structure of British society? (How does the

use of a governess as a protagonist allow the novel to criticize these structures? Why is

a governess a wild card in the social structure? Where does she fit in the class

structure? Consider the factors of education, background, wealth, and gender.

2. Helen Burns, St. John, and Mr. Brocklehurst represent three possible approaches to

religion. (How does the novel represent each of these characters? What does Jane

learn each of them? What is the relationship between gender and religion? What is the

relationship between class and religion? How do these three characters fit with the

developing theme of personal freedom? What obstacles do they represent?)

3. Mrs. Reed accuses Jane of being deceitful. How is deceit a major theme in *Jane*

*Eyre*? (What are the consequences of deceit? Do deceitful people always know they

are being deceitful? How is deceit related to hypocrisy? How does Jane’s life

experience prove Mrs. Reed’s accusation wrong? How is deceit related to Jane’s

devotion to her principles? In what ways does Jane remain true to herself when others

try to deceive her?)

4. Ethics and morality play a crucial role in the decisions Jane makes. In fact, many

times Rochester seeks Jane’s advice on theoretical moral dilemmas. Analyze Jane’s

moral beliefs. From what do they emanate (Religion? Personal experience?)? Are her

beliefs the result of youthful idealism? How would you characterize those beliefs?

What is more important to Jane, feelings or reason?

5. Presentiments, dreams, intuition, fortune telling, portentous occurrences in nature

(e.g., lightening splitting the oak tree) all are examples of the mystical in *Jane Eyre*.

Analyze the use of mysticism in the novel and its purpose. Is it used to emphasize

theme? Propel plot? Aid in characterization? Or, is it just part of the gothic and

romantic movement?)

6. Discuss Jane’s obsession with appearances. (Is it healthy? Normal? Is it

contradictory considering she values the intellect, creativity, independence and

uniqueness so highly? What does this preoccupation with beauty and lack of it say

about Jane?)

7. Examine *Jane Eyre* as a satire of the gothic novel? How does her novel fit gothic

criteria? In what areas does the novel deviate? What do you think Bronte was trying to

say about societal expectations by twisting typical gothic conventions?

Essay Topics for *Jane Eyre*

*1.   Jane Eyre* the book contains a number of significant female characters, who may serve as foils to or models for Jane the character. These women may also serve as doubles for Jane in a political or psychological sense, illustrating either her status in the book’s society or some aspect of her personality. Discuss **four** of the following characters in terms of the traits they exhibit, their function in Jane’s life, and the ways in which they demonstrate characteristics Jane needs to develop, tame, avoid, or outgrow:  Miss Temple, Helen Burns, Mrs. Fairfax, Grace Poole, Blanche Ingram, Bertha Mason Rochester, Adèle Varens, and the Rivers sisters.  You **must** deal with Bertha, and the Rivers sisters count only once.

2.   Not to ignore the male characters, compare and contrast Mr. Rochester and St.John. Do not confine yourself to the obvious differences, and pay special attention to how each relates to Jane.

3.  Jane is repeatedly tempted in the book, beginning in her childhood at Gateshead and continuing at least until her decision to leave Marsh End.  Explore the various temptations she faces, their respective strengths, and the ways in which she does or does not escape them. Make sure you deal with St. John’s marriage proposal and why Jane finds such an unromantic offer so hard to resist.

4.  The ending of *Jane Eyre* has been criticized on several levels: its supposed lack of realism; the maiming of Mr. Rochester; Jane’s retreat from the work she had previously longed for, among others.  Evaluate the ending of the book.  For example, what are some reasons why Mr. Rochester “must” meet the fate he does?  Does Jane’s sudden discovery of wealth and family make sense on any level?  What do you make of the voice she hears?  How do you feel about the retreat to Ferndean? You might want to consider Joseph Campbell’s idea of the hero’s quest as it relates to Jane, or the idea of a “Pilgrim’s Progress” of Jane’s soul.

5.   In the nineteenth century, some conservative readers were horrified by what they saw as the “anti-Christian” nature of *Jane Eyre*; Jane seemed to people such as Lady Eastlake to embody a rebellious spirit at odds with the Victorian ideal.  Bronte herself, however, was the daughter of one clergyman and the wife of another; her preface to the book asserts its affinity with Christianity.  Write an essay in which you explore the presentation of religion in the book, paying special attention to those elements that may have upset Lady Eastlake..

6.   The places and place names in *Jane Eyre* are suggestive, perhaps even symbolic.  Explore the suggestions made by the names of the following places, and relate those possibilities to what Jane experiences in each of the places: Gateshead, the red room, Lowood, Thornfield, Marsh End, and Ferndean.

7.  Jane Eyre the character is often seen as making a feminist statement, yet she espouses a number of the traits seen as appropriate for Victorian ladies.  Write an essay in which you explore the ways in which Jane embodies and rebels against the gender conventions of her day.  (The Overview of Bronte linked to from our *Jane Eyre* page may be helpful here, as will the section of “the woman question” in our book.)