

Charlotte Bronte Jane Eyre

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Lecture 26

Introduction to Charlotte Bronte, and the plot of Jane Eyre

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Charlotte
Bronte
Jane Eyre



Week 6: Introduction to Charlotte Bronte, and the plot of *Jane Eyre*

[Image source: https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte](https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte)

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Hello, and welcome to week six's lectures on Charlotte Bronte's gothic novel Jane Eyre. In today's session, I am going to talk about the author, her early life experiences, and the plot of her novel Jane Eyre.

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Early Life—Charlotte Brontë

- “She was the third of six children of Patrick Brontë...

a perpetual curate at Haworth, in Yorkshire. Charlotte was only five in 1821 when her mother Maria died. Four years later her two older sisters died as a result of the harsh conditions in the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge, Lancashire to which they and the eight-year-old Charlotte were sent in 1824.”

- Source: <https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte>
- Image source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charlotte-Bronte>



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“Charlotte Brontë was a third of six children of Patrick Brontë, whom we know as a perpetual curate at Haworth, in Yorkshire. Charlotte was only five in 1821 when her mother Maria died. Four years later her two older sisters died as a result of the harsh conditions in the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge, Lancashire to which they and eight-year-old Charlotte were sent in 1824.”

Two aspects are significant to us from this set of information. Firstly, death is very common in the family. There is always a fear of dying in the family of the Brontë’s. Secondly, the experiences of the children at school were far from pleasant. We can see how the harsh conditions of the school at Cowan Bridge is directly related to the death of the children.

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Charlotte's Schooling



- “Charlotte’s experiences at the school influenced her portrayal of Lowood School in *Jane Eyre*. After the death of the two oldest Brontë daughters, Patrick and Maria’s sister Elizabeth gave the children a stimulating and wide-ranging education at home. Charlotte, her two younger sisters Anne and [Emily Brontë](#), and their brilliant, unstable brother Branwell invented complex imaginary worlds, which they wrote about extensively in tiny homemade books – a fruitful literary apprenticeship.”

- Source: <https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte>
- Image source: <http://jane-eyre.guidesite.co.uk/lowood-school>

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So, as a result of the death of the two oldest daughters, Patrick and Maria’s sister Elizabeth, Elizabeth is taking care of the children at the family home. So, they give the children a fantastic and wide range education. And Charlotte along with her younger sisters, Anne and Emily Brontë, and their brother Branwell, they get together and invent complex imaginary universes, worlds, such as Angria and Gondal and about which they write in tiny books that they make at home. So, this gives them the practice necessary to create complex plots later on.

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Roe Head School



- "Aged 15, Charlotte enrolled at a new school not far from Haworth. Roe Head School was less harsh than the Clergy Daughters' School, but Charlotte spent only 18 months there before returning home."

- Source: <https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte>
- Image acquisition: Jacqueline Banerjee
- Image source: <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/gallery/25.html>

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Aged 15, Charlotte enrolled at a new school not far from Haworth. Roe Head School was less harsh than the Clergy Daughters' School, but Charlotte spent only 18 months there before returning home.

Charlotte Bronte attends a new school, which we know as Roe Head School. This school was better than the one that they had attended previously, that is the Clergy Daughters' School. But even here, Charlotte did not stay for very long. So, she returns back to Haworth after spending just 18 months.

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Roe Head School

- “Much can be said about the influence of Roe Head on all three Brontë sisters. Charlotte left it in 1832, but returned to teach there in 1835, bringing Emily as a pupil. Emily, characteristically, was much less happy away from home. She was “unsuited to the life of a pupil, even in a benign environment such as Roe Head,” says Nick Holland (78). She left after only three months, after which Anne came.”

• Text source: Jacqueline Banerjee

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So there seems to be a repetition of events with one sister following another to a school environment. Charlotte seems to have lived at Roe Head longer than the others. Emily is completely unsuitable to being a student. She cannot survive outside of the Haworth environment and Anne also joins the sisters. So every daughter is sent for schooling by Patrick Brontë and this experience of life within the school is something which influences the daughters to a great extent.

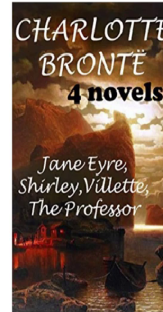
Charlotte does draw on the experiences of Roe Head School when she wrote her mature fiction, and Emily is traumatized by being away from home as well. So that kind of trauma is reflected in *Wuthering Heights* in a different way, when we see that the young Cathy is removed from *Wuthering Heights* for various reasons.

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Charlotte's Literary Output

- “As an adult, Charlotte worked as a governess and spent some years teaching at a boarding school in Brussels; her unrequited love for the school's headmaster, informed her novels *Villette* (1853) and *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857).”

• Source: <https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte>
• Image source: <https://edekoria.pl/gardening5wu2/charlotte-bront-4-novels-jane-eyre-shirley-villette-the-professor-307.html>



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Charlotte Bronte also wrote the novel called *Shirley*, which was about the industrial unrest in the middle of England. School life, teaching, the life of a governess, are some of the experiences which are discussed at great length in her fiction and which are also turned into plot aspects in her little fiction.

So you can see how Charlotte's life as a school teacher in Brussels is drawn on extensively in two of her fiction, *Villette* and *The Professor*, and the life of a teacher is also reflected in an indirect way in the governess figure of *Jane Eyre*.

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Jane Eyre

- “It was the passion and rebellion of *Jane Eyre* (1847) that earned her fame, and when visiting London she moved in the best literary circles, befriended by [Mrs Gaskell](#) and Thackeray – the latter remembered ‘the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes.’”

• Source: <https://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte>
• Image source: <https://www.amazon.com/Charlotte-Bront%C3%AB-Oxford-Worlds-Classics/dp/019554765>



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So, *Jane Eyre* was a big success, and Charlotte Brontë becomes a known name in literary circles. She was particularly befriended by Mrs. Gaskell, who wrote *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and Thackeray made a comment which refers to her great honest eyes, which is in contrast to the trembling physique of Charlotte Brontë. The eyes are honest, but the frame is small and trembling.

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Jane Eyre



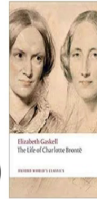
- “first published in 1847 as *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, with Currer Bell (Brontë’s pseudonym) listed as the editor. Widely considered a classic, it gave new truthfulness to the Victorian novel with its realistic portrayal of the inner life of a woman, noting her struggles with her natural desires and social condition.”

- Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>
- Image source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/18823/jane-eyre-by-charlotte-bronte/>

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I want to draw a comparison between the point, the points listed here on the slide with the previous slide, where we saw the reference to Thackeray’s description of Charlotte Brontë, where

he says she had great honest eyes in a small frame. And I want to point to your attention to the notion that Jane Eyre, is the realistic portrayal of the inner life of a woman. And I want you to think about how the inner life, which is described with great realism and clarity becomes an honest portrayal, a realistic portrayal of an ordinary figure in England.

So, there is a connection between the minute details, which are portrayed in a novel of an ordinary figure and the notion of realism. So realism can be about anything. It can be about the natural desires with which a woman fight against. It can be about ordinary condition, a social condition, which belongs neither to the high station in life, nor to the very low.

And once again, let us spend some time on the idea of truthfulness, the truthfulness resting on the idea of realism and on the honesty that one can see emanating from one's eyes. How do we connect this idea with the gothic? One can see that there is a connection between the notion of the gothic and the battles that are listed here on the slide which are the battles against one's own natural desires and social condition. And we know that Jane Eyre and other characters in this novel fight against their natural inclinations, their primitive passions and some also try to get free from the social condition which circumscribes them. Jane Eyre is a classic example of that kind of struggle.

So, what I am trying to get at here is that the notion of truthfulness, the idea of realism is also associated with the honest portrayal of the struggles of a woman against her natural inclinations and social class. So you can call it realism on the one hand and you can also put a gothic spin on the other by focusing on the plot with regard to natural desires.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot

- “When the novel begins, the title character is a 10-year-old orphan who lives with her uncle’s family; her parents had died of [typhus](#). Other than the nursemaid, the family ostracizes Jane. She is later sent to the [austere](#) Lowood Institution, a [charity school](#), where she and the other girls are mistreated; “Lowood,” as the name suggests, is the “low” point in Jane’s young life. In the face of such adversity, however, she gathers strength and confidence.”
- Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>



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Now, let us look at the plot of Jane Eyre. “When the novel begins, the title character is a 10-year-old orphan who lives with her uncle’s family; her parents had died of typhus. Other than the nursemaid, the family ostracizes Jane. She is sent to the austere Lowood Institution, a charity school, where she and the other girls are mistreated; Lowood, as the name suggest, is the low point in Jane’s young life. In the face of such adversity, however, she gathers strength and confidence.”

One thing that readily jumps to our attention is the reference to the school, Lowood, and you can see that there is a connection between the schools, the first school that the Bronte children attended, the Bronte daughters attended and this school Lowood. Both schools mistreat its wards and you can see, how Charlotte Bronte had been deeply affected by the experiences that she had when she was at the school for Clergyman's Daughters. So that experience is reflected in the novel Jane Eyre.

The second interesting phenomenon that strikes us is this orphan, young orphan. She is just 10-year-old. And she is a hanger on. She is not part of the family. She lives with her uncle’s family and the only one person who does not ostracize her is the nursemaid and you can see how the family gets rid of her by sending her to that school. And when the novel begins, the central

character Jane is always, already at a low point, not just at the school, but by staying in an extended relatives family, she is not much wanted there too.

So there is a lot of pathos surrounding the character of Jane Eyre even from the very beginning of the novel. She is not with her own family. Her parents are dead. She spends life with her uncle's family, who immediately displace her to a school, which is not very kind. So, we have a series of misfortunes faced by Jane Eyre right from the beginning. However, despite this set of misery, she does face it with a lot of courage and strength. So she is hardened in a good way by her experiences, which are not very pleasant.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot



- "In early adulthood, after several years as a student and then teacher at Lowood, Jane musters the courage to leave. She finds work as a governess at Thornfield Hall, where she meets her dashing and Byronic employer, the wealthy and [impetuous Edward Rochester](#). At Thornfield Jane looks after young Adèle, the daughter of a French dancer who was one of Rochester's mistresses, and is befriended by the kindly housekeeper [Mrs. Alice Fairfax](#)."

- Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>
- Image source: <https://lucchiagrav.com/tag/adele-varens/>

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You can see how there is a kind of an upward curve in Jane’s life when she quits her life at Lowood where she was a student and then a teacher. She finds, as it is pointed out here, she finds courage to leave the school. She finds a position as a governess. She has become independent of that oppressive atmosphere of Lowood. She finds a position of the governess at Thornfield Hall. Thornfield is an interesting name. One can see that the name suggests that life of Jane Eyre is not going to be a bed of roses. Thornfield Hall gives Jane Eyre a tough life experience too.

But as you read the novel, you will understand how Jane Eyre comes out successfully, despite the adverse experiences, despite the nature of its master Edward Rochester. So that Byronic hero is, of course, Rochester. We can make comparisons between Rochester and Heathcliff. He is extremely wealthy and he is also impetuous, impulsive, just as Heathcliff was as well. Of course, Heathcliff got his wealth halfway through suddenly, but Edward Rochester has inherited his wealth.

In Thornfield Hall, she is expected to look after and tutor Adele, who is the daughter of a French dancer, who was one of Rochester's mistresses. Then we understand that Adele is the illegitimate daughter of Edward Rochester. And the one thing that is interesting for us to notice is that the housekeeper at Thornfield Hall Mrs. Alice Fairfax is kindly towards Jane.

And if you go back to the previous slide, we do understand that even when she was with her uncle's family, it was the nursemaid who was the only one who did not reject Jane completely. So, this set of characters, the nursemaid and the housekeeper are not part of the family, they are employees, they are part of the working class, they are part of the servants class, and they look upon Jane in a kindly manner, and that is significant to us because of the class similarity between Jane Eyre and these figures that is the nursemaid and the housekeeper.

When Jane Eyre becomes the governess she becomes a paid employee of the household at Thornfield Hall. So, you can see how there is a kind of a similarity between all these working women in that they are at the mercy of the employer.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot



- "Jane falls in love with Rochester, though he is expected to marry the snobbish and socially prominent Blanche Ingram. Rochester eventually [reciprocates](#) Jane's feelings and proposes marriage. However, on their wedding day, Jane discovers that Rochester cannot legally marry her, because he already has a wife, [Bertha Mason](#), who has gone mad and is locked away on the third floor because of her violent behaviour;"

• Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>

• Image source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2006/04_april/18/janeeyre.shtml

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her, because he already has a wife, Bertha Mason, who has gone mad and is locked away on the third floor because of her violent behaviour.”

So this slide tells you about the climactic sections of this novel, Jane Eyre, despite her indeterminate position that is, she is a lady because she is a clergyman’s daughter, a gentleman’s daughter, but she is also part of the working classes, because she works for money as a governess in the household of Rochester.

Despite her indeterminate class position, she falls in love with, she dares to fall in love with this Byronic hero and master of this hall Rochester and the readers are given to assume that he is expected to marry with socialite Blanche Ingram. And at a very important moment in the novel, Jane declares her love for Rochester and Rochester reciprocates her feelings and they are engaged.

However, on the wedding day, it is revealed that Rochester cannot possibly marry Jane because he is already married and he has shut up his wife in the attic of Thornfield Hall. It is also revealed to us that the wife of Rochester, Bertha Mason, has been incarcerated in this hall because she has gone mad and is extremely violent in her behaviour.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot



- “her presence explains the strange noises Jane has heard in the mansion. Believing that he was tricked into that marriage, Rochester feels justified in pursuing his relationship with Jane. He pleads with her to join him in France, where they can live as husband and wife despite the legal prohibitions, but Jane refuses on principle and flees Thornfield.”

• Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>

• Image source: <https://inbreakthrough.org/jane-eyre-bertha-mason/> Windows
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So, when she comes to know about Bertha Mason, she realizes that the strange noises and sounds that she had been hearing in the hall are now cleared up, because they have come from Bertha Mason’s movements. And Rochester justifies his behaviour by stating that he had been tricked into that marriage with this mad woman and he begs Jane to run away with him to France. Jane, of course, refuses because of the moral nature of the quandary in which she is in and she quits Thornfield, she flees this place.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot

- “Jane is taken in by people she later discovers are her cousins. One of them is St. John, a principled clergyman. He gives her a job and soon proposes marriage, suggesting that she join him as a missionary in India. Jane initially agrees to leave with him but not as his wife.”

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Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.