

Jane Eyre Teaching Guide

Teaching Brontë's Novel with Confidence

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Approaches and Discussion Questions

Jane's Identity Quest: *Jane Eyre* is touted among scholars and critics as a quintessential *bildungsroman*, a literary genre loosely translated as a “coming-of-age story.” The *bildungsroman* is more formally defined as a novel focusing on the formative years of its protagonist, specifically personal and moral development from childhood to maturity. Highlight key turning points in the text regarding Jane’s character development, and discuss why they are significant. Suggested chapters: II, IV, XXVII, XXXV, and XXXVII.

- **For discussion:** How does Jane’s character change from the novel’s beginning at her early childhood at Gateshead to her ultimate marriage to Rochester as she enters adulthood at the end? In what ways does her character stay the same—or rather, the same, yet more refined or matured? What are some of the most important lessons Jane learns along the way?

Jane as an Empowered Woman: *Jane Eyre* is an influential text in the history of feminist literary criticism and is regarded as a key proto-feminist text, meaning it forwards feminist themes written before the coining of this specific term and movement in the 20th century. Gender equality is a central theme of *Jane Eyre*, the power dynamics between Jane and Rochester crucial factors in the development of their romance. While the Victorian period was male-dominated, and rigorous in its practice of strictly demarcated gender roles, it was also a period in which British women gained serious headway in questioning their subordinated status. As a cultural artifact, *Jane Eyre* is a testament to this movement. Discuss the significance of Jane as a proto-feminist heroine looking for independence in a patriarchal society. Suggested chapters: XII, XIII, XIV, XXIII.

- **For discussion:** Do you think Jane achieves genuine equality in her relationship with Rochester in the end? Is Jane confirming Victorian expectations of women by marrying him, or is she rebelling against these expectations by following her own heart and marrying a man seen as “unfit” for her?
- **For discussion:** Birds are a key motif throughout the text and a symbol to which Jane is frequently compared. What is the significance of this motif with particular regard to the theme of women’s independence?

Rochester as Byronic Hero: Rochester is widely regarded as a textbook Byronic hero, a romantic character trope which is the figure and persona of poet Lord Byron transformed into a staple character type: dark, sultry, passionate, and mysterious. Teach students the traits of the Byronic-hero character archetype, have them close read specific passages looking for how Rochester exemplifies this archetype, and discuss trope awareness as a useful rhetorical reading skill. Suggested chapters: XXVII, XXXVII.

- **For discussion:** What do you think being a “Byronic hero” does for Rochester’s character? Does it make him more or less complex, more or less relatable? Do you think Rochester remains a Byronic hero throughout the entire text, or has he changed? Why or why not, and what might this suggest about his character?

Tricky Issues to Address While Teaching

Victorian Prose Style: While the writing in *Jane Eyre* is reasonably accessible for present-day readers, students typically think of Victorian literature as extremely verbose. Generally, most Victorian novels use eloquent diction, long-winded sentences, long paragraphs, and plot-dense chapters.

- **What to do:** As your class progresses through the novel, ask students to keep a vocabulary journal of words they aren't familiar with. Have them look up and write definitions for these words, and make class-generated vocabulary lists for routine quizzes for SAT prep.

Parlez-vous français? One of the characters in the text, Adèle Varens (Rochester's ward and Jane's pupil), speaks only French. As Brontë's 19th-century English audience would have generally had some familiarity with the French language, Adèle's less-complicated dialogue often goes untranslated.

- **What to do:** Let your class know beforehand that small phrases of French will appear periodically as they read. Tell students that Adèle is a child, and that her dialogue is easy to follow using context clues or an online translator.

Phrenology and Victorian Pseudoscience: At certain points throughout the text, characters mention the "physiognomy" of a given individual or the personal qualities that facial features express. One example is in Chapter XXIX, in which St. John makes assumptions about Jane's history and character based solely on the features of her face. Such scenes are due to the popularity of phrenology in the 19th century, a now-debunked pseudoscience which theorized that the characteristics and tendencies of individuals are externally represented in their facial features. An incredibly socially dangerous theory, phrenology has since been disproven by the tenets of modern science.

- **What to do:** A brief lesson on various strange Victorian pseudoscience phenomena is educational, fun, and works to distance more impressionable students from the danger of outmoded theories. From poisonous make-up to seances with the dead, the prim and proper Victorians were wild in their own way.

Rochester in Disguise: A strange and inconsistent part of the novel is Chapter XIX, in which Rochester dresses up as an old fortune-telling gypsy woman from a traveling gypsy camp come into the area. These "gypsies" were most likely Romani, a nomadic culture often subject to discrimination and stereotyping throughout history.

- **What to do:** Ask students their impressions of this chapter—was it humorous, surprising, weird? Explain the social-historical background of Rochester's costume, and discuss the subtle yet serious dangers inherent in this style of racialized humor.

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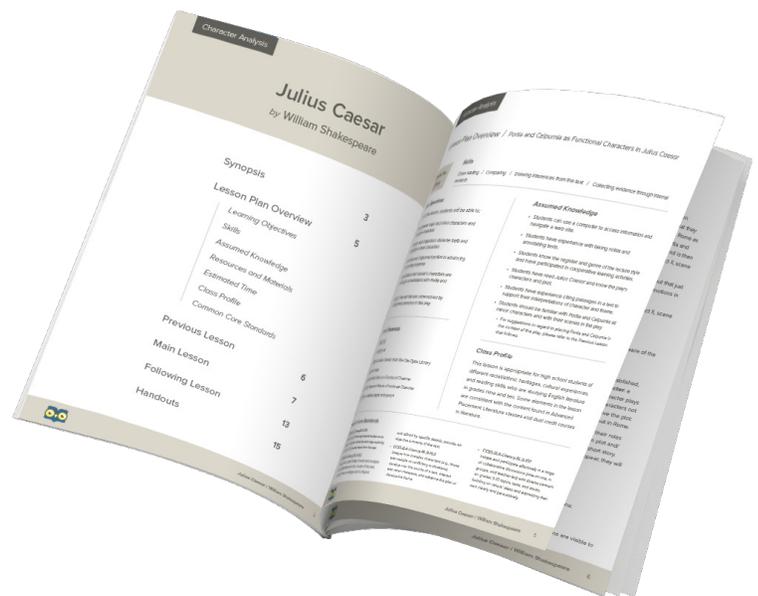
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