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This study guide takes a different approach from most study guides. It does not simply tell you more about the story and characters, which isn't actually that useful. Instead, it attempts to show how the author’s techniques and interests inform every single facet of this classic novel. Most study guides simply tell you WHAT is going on, then tack on bits at the end which tell you HOW the author creates suspense and drama at certain points in the book, informing you a little about WHY the author might have done this.

This study guide begins with the HOW and the WHY, showing you right from the start how and why the author shaped the key elements of the book.
Understanding Contexts

In order to fully appreciate a text, you need to appreciate the contexts in which it was written – known as its contexts of writing – and the contexts in which you read the book, or the contexts of reading.

This is a potentially huge area to explore, because ‘contexts’ essentially means the ‘worlds’ from which the book has arisen. For the best books, these are many and various. The most obvious starting point is the writer’s own life: it is worth thinking about how and why the events in a writer’s life might have influenced his or her fiction. However, you do have to be careful not to assume too much. For example, many critics think that the angelic, other-worldly character of Helen Burns in Jane Eyre is a representation of Charlotte Brontë’s ethereal sister Emily. This may be true, but you must remember that Helen is a character in her own right in the novel – a vital cog in the narrative wheel, a literary construct and NOT A REAL PERSON!

As a result, it is particularly fruitful to explore other contexts of writing. We can look at the broader world from which Charlotte Brontë arose (Victorian society and its particular set of values), and consider carefully how, in her writing, she both adopted and rejected the morals of her time. Other contexts might be the influence of the literary world that Brontë inhabited (what other authors were writing at the time), how religion shaped her views, and so on.

Just as important as the contexts of writing are the contexts of reading: how we read the novel today. Most of
us, before we read a classic novel by Charlotte Brontë, have a lot of preconceived ideas about it. Many of us will have seen one or more of the many film versions of the book, and/or been influenced by what we have already heard about the Brontës. Your own personal context is important, too. I think female and male readers may absorb this novel differently – female readers perhaps falling a little in love with Rochester themselves, and male readers perhaps considering carefully whether they would marry Jane. In order for you to fully consider the contexts of reading, rather than my telling you what to think, I have posed open-ended questions that I believe to be important when considering this issue.

**Contexts of Writing: Brontë’s Life**

Some eminent literary critics have argued that Charlotte Brontë was a sexually repressed woman whose only outlet for all her passion was through writing.

Surprisingly, this argument is not as absurd as it sounds. Brontë really does seem to have had a strong aversion to sex. She refused three offers of marriage, fell in love with a married man whom she knew she could never sleep with, and when she did eventually marry the Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls (near the end of her life, when she was 38) it was more out of pity than love. The dangers of having sex are amply illustrated in *Jane Eyre* (her most famous novel): Rochester and Bertha Mason’s sexual appetites get them into no end of trouble. It has been argued that the illness of which Brontë died was largely imaginary and that Brontë preferred the idea of death to that of a ‘normal’ married life.

But before we start suggesting that Brontë’s novels are the product of a sexually repressed, neurotic woman, a few points need to be taken into account. First, any sensible, intelligent woman living in Victorian England should have been scared stiff when contemplating the consequences of having sex: there were no effective contraceptives at that time, and a huge number of women died giving birth. Second, getting married – the only way for a ‘respectable’ woman to have sex – entailed losing the few rights women had at that time: wives were expected to hand over all their property entirely to their husbands, until the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 and 1882. And, as a married woman, Brontë had very little time to write, because she was too busy being a dutiful wife.

Any careful examination of Brontë’s life makes it clear that there were many other factors, other than sexual repression, which motivated her to write. It is often overlooked that the most significant spur for all the Brontë sisters’ mature writing was a desperate need for money. In September 1845, when Charlotte discovered some of Emily’s poems and tried to get them published, life was precarious at the Haworth parsonage. The Brontë sisters were the daughters of an ageing cleric from whom they would inherit very little money; their brother Branwell, on whom they had pinned great hopes of making the family fortune, had become an unemployed alcoholic and drug addict; and their other money-making ventures – such as engraving, being governesses and setting up a school at the parsonage – had all failed. As the eldest and most responsible child, Charlotte took it upon herself to promote all their writing as a way of securing an income. The sisters had always been writers: as children they had all invented fantastical, imaginary kingdoms, and written long and brilliant sagas about them. But Charlotte, a keen reader of fiction, was sharp enough to know that these private fantasies wouldn’t sell. So she set about writing a more commercial novel, called *The Professor*, which, although rejected by a notable London publisher,
received some favourable feedback. Encouraged, Charlotte wrote *Jane Eyre*, an even more commercial book, combining as it did all the Gothic, fairytale and realist elements which were popular at the time. She also took the wise step of publishing her novels and those of her sisters under genderless pseudonyms, so that they wouldn’t be dismissed by the male critics as ‘women’s novels’.

All the great Brontë novels – *Jane Eyre*, Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* and Anne’s *Agnes Grey* – appeared within a few months of each other and caused an immense stir. The critics were convinced that they were all written by the same person. In 1848, Charlotte, despite being chronically shy and reluctant to leave her possessive father, travelled with Anne to London and created huge excitement in the press by revealing the true identity of the authors.

But the next two years were horrific for Charlotte: her wayward brother Branwell died of alcoholism and her stoical and introverted sister Emily died of tuberculosis, which also claimed the life of Anne a year later.

Devastated by these losses, Charlotte persevered and articulated her sense of pain and loneliness in her most mature and difficult novel, *Villette*. This novel draws upon her experiences in Brussels where she had stayed a couple of times during 1842–3 while training to be a teacher. The culture and romance of the city had awakened her mind, while her unspoken obsession with her instructor, Monsieur Heger, a married man with children, had nearly broken her spirit. However, like *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte gained control of her feelings (unlike her brother Branwell, who had been rejected by a married woman to whom he had declared his love). The tale of her unrequited feelings was poured into a great deal of her fiction, *Villette* being the most obvious example, although fragments of her obsession with Heger can also be found in *Jane Eyre*.

So we are back to the issue of frustrated love, but only a very narrow-minded critic would claim that the sole reason for the existence of Brontë’s great novels was sexual neurosis.

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**Selected Reading on Brontë’s Life**

Elizabeth C. Gaskell
**The Life of Charlotte Brontë**
Two Volumes (Penguin Classics; first published 1857)
A controversial book and the first indispensable account of Brontë’s life; it remains indispensable today.

Juliet Barker
**The Brontës**
(Phoenix; 1994)
A landmark book on the family, brilliantly researched.

Lyndall Gordon
**Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life**
(Vintage; 1995)
A biography which sets out to overturn the conventional view of the suffering heroine. It paints the portrait of a passionate, complex woman and novelist.

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**Contexts of Reading**

Today we read *Jane Eyre* very differently from the way in which the Victorians would have read it. First, our attitudes towards marriage mean that the plot is undeniably set in the past. Unlike some Victorian novels, *Jane Eyre* could not be updated to a modern day narrative without losing the central dilemma of the book: today Rochester could easily obtain a divorce and would not have hidden his wife in the attic unless he was psychotic –
which, for all his passionate ways, he is not! This means we view the novel ‘historically’, appreciating that it makes sense within the context of its time, but that it depicts an era that has, mercifully, passed in the western world.

Nevertheless, it continues to inspire film-makers because, while its central plot device is outmoded, its theme of one woman’s search for love and justice is perhaps even more relevant now than it was in Victorian times. A well-educated, high-achieving, feisty woman like Jane Eyre would have been an exception in Victorian England, whereas today these characteristics are perhaps more common. The sort of problems that Jane has to confront – dealing with difficult men, soothing distressed friends, fighting against the prevalent sexism of the culture – are just as pertinent now as they were then.

Moreover, the central dilemma of the book – whether to choose a passionate, difficult partner who promises her an insecure but romantic life, or someone sensible but cold, who offers a secure but dull life – is very much an issue for men and women today. The binary opposites that Brontë sets up of insecurity/security, of passion/conformity, of male desire/female desire are all opposites that we try to juggle in our own minds.

Our knowledge of the Brontës colours much of what is in the text; before most of us read it, we are aware that the story comes shrouded in the misty Yorkshire moors, cloaked in the tragic story of the dying sisters and their alcoholic brother, and suffused with the mystery of the sisters’ brilliant, romantic imaginations. Many of us will have seen one of the numerous film versions, with our minds already coloured by Hollywood images of brooding passion and Gothic romance. In this sense, reading the text is like searching for the ‘real story’, an act of ‘unearthing the mystery’ of Charlotte Brontë’s mind as much as enjoying the narrative.

Remarkably for such an interpreted text, it remains fresh. What leaps out most is the living, vibrant relationship between Rochester and Jane, which must be the key reason why it remains such an enduringly popular book. How hard many authors have struggled since then to capture such a vivid romance! The power of Jane Eyre remains undimmed more than 160 years later because of Brontë’s characterisations of hero and heroine: their flirtatious, quick-witted banter, their ability to build upon each other’s thoughts, their genuine love for each other. At the heart of the novel is the power of their love; in this sense, the novel is timeless.
Structure and Theme

Narrative Summary

There are many ways of summarising this novel because it is so long and contains many sub-plots, all involving the main protagonist, Jane Eyre. However, at its heart is the notion that it is an edited ‘autobiography’ – the story of Jane’s life. This is fascinating, because an autobiography is, by its very nature, ‘non-fictional’ and ‘truthful’, a chronological personal account of a life; but clearly this is a fictional narrative. This element of autobiography enables Brontë to step aside from some of the problems that novelists encounter, e.g. that of generating a story in which all the events ‘interconnect’. For all its Gothic flights of fancy, there is a realism about Jane Eyre – particularly in its descriptions of the squalid conditions at Lowood school, which link it with the socially campaigning novels of Mrs Gaskell.

However, many of the settings and events are basically ‘Gothic’ in conception: lonely, desolate mansions; terrifying dreams; ghostly laughs in the night; troubled, charismatic, Byronic men; mad women in attics; and improbable coincidences. What makes the novel so enticing is the fact that there is realism in its psychology: Brontë creates a set of believable emotional responses in Jane Eyre that hook the reader from the first page. This is because the overwhelming emphasis of the book is its ‘autobiographical’ impulse: Brontë’s repeated insistence on
So Brontë shapes her narrative around Jane’s ongoing struggle to find love and justice in the world. Sometimes these two themes are quite distinct. At the beginning of the book there is no real sense that the young Jane is in desperate need of parental love (although this is hinted at); it is more that she is furious with the injustice of her treatment at the hands of the horrid, spoilt child John Reed and his mother, the despicable Mrs Reed. However, the two themes come together when the adult Jane learns of Rochester’s bigamy: she has to weigh up her need for just treatment against her craving for Rochester’s love. Her desire for justice wins out and she leaves Rochester. Similarly, the themes converge again when St John Rivers proposes to her: he suggests that they live married life as missionaries and bring justice to poor parts of the world, but he offers no real love. This time Jane’s need for love triumphs and she rejects him.

We could break down the novel into the following structure:

**OPENING**
- Orphan Jane Eyre’s childhood and schooling
- Her battles for justice and survival against her adopted family

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE NARRATIVE**
- Jane’s arrival at Thornfield and her growing love for its owner Mr Rochester
- Her acceptance of his proposal of marriage

**CRISIS**
- Jane’s discovery of Rochester’s mad wife in the attic, and her refusal, despite her love for him, to become his mistress because it would be morally unacceptable
- Her running away and finding sanctuary at Moor House

**CLIMAX**

- Jane’s refusal to marry her newly discovered cousin, the curate St John Rivers, and become a missionary wife in a loveless but ‘just’ marriage
- Her hearing of Rochester’s cry in her head, and her return to Thornfield to learn of the death of Rochester’s wife and the destruction of Thornfield itself

**RESOLUTION**
- Her marriage to Rochester

**The Influence of Genre – the Gothic Novel**

Having been stung by the rejection of her novel *The Professor*, Brontë very consciously shaped the narrative of *Jane Eyre* around events that might typically be found in Gothic novels. This was a hugely popular genre which had developed in the late eighteenth century. It usually involved a long and complicated narrative of a damsel in distress, trapped in some ghastly castle or mansion, besieged by a sexually rapacious and devious aristocrat, haunted by ghosts and ghouls, chased by innumerable nasties throughout the story, before being rescued by a knight in shining armour, a morally upright man.

Much of what happens at Thornfield, the home of Mr Rochester, follows this pattern. In many ways, Rochester lives up to the stereotype of the morally suspect, sexually rapacious aristocrat: he attempts to lure Jane falsely into marriage, and then, when he is discovered to have a wife, still persists, Claiming that she could live as his mistress. His motivations are undoubtedly sexual. He is presented as a bad-tempered, tempestuous, passionate man who has scant regard for the strict moral codes of the day. Moreover, he inhabits a classic Gothic domain: the mysterious and wonderful Thornfield Hall. It is a place haunted by strange ghostly laughs in the night,
unexplained fires, terrifying and inexplicable acts of violence, vast, misty grounds and, perhaps most importantly, forbidden realms: corridors and floors and rooms that are out of bounds. It is, as Jane Eyre herself notes, a true Bluebeard’s castle.

This texturing of Thornfield Hall is deliberate upon Brontë’s part, and it is one of the reasons why the novel is so popular now. There is perhaps no better Gothic novel in English. It is marvellously, wonderfully, brilliantly well written because it is so convincing. As we noted before, it is the psychological realism that Brontë brings to the character of Jane Eyre – her feisty, earthy, indomitable reactions to the events and characters of Thornfield – which make the Gothic elements so plausible.

At the heart of this plausibility is Brontë’s refusal to allow her main protagonist to be painted as a stereotypical Gothic heroine. Parodied by Jane Austen in her take-off of the Gothic novel Northanger Abbey, your average Gothic heroine is forever frightened, forever terrified, always passively running away, avoiding calumny and destruction. Brontë makes a conscious choice for her Gothic heroine to be ‘active’. Rather contrary to the stereotype, Jane is forever rescuing the man. This starts with the very first scene in which she encounters Rochester: she helps him up after he has fallen from his horse. Later on, she saves him from being burnt to death in his own bed by his first wife. She even ignores his attempts to persuade her to stay at the house when she learns that her aunt, Mrs Reed, is dying, deciding of her own accord to leave the Gothic realm (a very unusual event in novels of this type).

She is, throughout, the decider of her own destiny. She rejects Rochester’s offer of living in sin and leaves; but then she more or less engineers her own proposal of marriage at the end of the novel, happy to be dominant over the ‘crippled, blind’ Rochester.

Critical Perspectives

Is Jane Eyre a Subversive Novel?

Is Jane Eyre a subversive novel? One contemporary critic, Mrs Oliphant, was quick to argue that it was. In May of 1855, eight years after the book was published, she wrote in Blackwood’s Magazine: ‘What would happen if social and sexual inferiors asserted that they were the equals of their superiors? ...here is your true revolution.’ Mrs Oliphant, along with numerous feminist critics, was convinced that Jane Eyre’s demand to be treated as Mr Rochester’s equal, despite her lowly social circumstances and her gender, made the novel truly radical.

During the Victorian age, women were considered inferior to men: they were not entitled to vote or study at university and there were few occupations open to them. Once they were married, all their wealth became their husband’s and they had no rights over their children or property. Within this context, Jane’s comment, ‘but women feel as men feel... they suffer from too rigid a restraint’, is a very radical one: most people considered that women did not have the sensibilities of men. Likewise, Rochester’s insistence that Jane was his equal was definitely shocking for contemporary readers: very few ‘respectable’ husbands of the time ever seriously entertained the notion that their wives were as intelligent as they were.

But there are aspects to the novel which are deeply conservative and seem to endorse an inequality between
the sexes and classes. Most troubling is the depiction of Bertha Mason. Rochester informs Jane that it is Bertha’s sexual appetites, together with a madness that runs in her family, that has destroyed her sanity. And yet Rochester himself has confessed to a promiscuous past. Whereas Jane’s marriage to Rochester indicates that he is forgiven for his past sins, Bertha’s imprisonment shows that she is punished for hers.

The psychoanalytic feminist critics S.M. Gilbert and S. Gubar are of the opinion that Bertha represents the truly subversive element in the novel. In their celebrated book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (London, 1979) they argue that Bertha breaks all the conventions to which women were expected to conform: she is strong, violent and promiscuous, and from a totally different culture compared to everyone else in the book. The ultimate conservatism of the book is underlined by the way in which Bertha’s spirit and culture are either crushed or ignored.

Other critics, such as Hermione Lee, have countered this theory, suggesting that Jane is constantly rebelling against the male-dominated culture of the time and carving her own ‘feminist’ path. Her initial outcry against John Reed’s bullying, her rebuke to Mr Brocklehurst, her abandonment of Rochester, and her rejection of St John Rivers are all indications that she won’t be bullied, cajoled or persuaded into accepting a status quo with which she is not content.

But, as Felicia Gordon points out in her excellent book *A Preface to the Brontës* (Longman 1989), for all her rebellious spirit, Jane does yearn for a benevolent man to take her under his wing. At the beginning of the novel Jane wishes that her uncle, Mr Reed, were alive so that she wouldn’t be subjected to the tyranny of Aunt Reed’s rule. At the end, once Rochester is relieved of his mad wife and the question of breaking one of the Lord’s commandments has been dismissed, Jane finally does submit to the authority of her husband.

Charlotte Brontë herself was a deeply conservative, God-fearing woman who, despite arguing that women should enjoy more rights, did not want to question the fundamental tenets of the patriarchal society in which she lived. However, her genius as a writer forced her to subvert many of the literary conventions of the time: no romantic novels of the period contain such a strong, wilful heroine as Jane, while no Gothic novels depict a character as disturbing as Bertha Mason or a protagonist as complex as Rochester. Even today, very few romantic novels would have the heroine rescuing the hero even once, let alone twice.

The brilliance and complexity of *Jane Eyre* are derived from its being simultaneously a very subversive novel and a deeply conservative one, a novel which radically questions the patriarchal status quo of society and yet ultimately argues for a benevolent male authority.

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**Selected Reading on Jane Eyre**

 Felicia Gordon  
 *A Preface to the Brontës*  
 (Longman; 1989)  
 Part of the Longman Preface series. An excellent short introduction to the Brontës: Gordon’s concise grasp of the historical and literary context makes this my favourite Preface book of this superb series.

 Penny Boumelha  
 *Charlotte Brontë*  
 (Key Women Writers; 1990)  
 A feminist critique of the book.

 Pauline Nestor  
 *Charlotte Brontë*  
 (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; 1987)  
 This provides a more traditional critique of the novel and Brontë’s work.
Notes, Quotes and Discussion

Important extracts and quotations from the novel with commentary and discussion points.

The discussion points below are deliberately questions with no right or wrong answers given. They are there to help you think in more depth about particular aspects of the book.

N.B. All the following quotations are from the complete, unabridged text.

From Chapter I

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

Here, Brontë introduces the key theme of the novel: injustice. And she creates in the reader huge sympathy for her character by showing the young Jane Eyre battling against her oppressors without any signs of self-pity.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
Where else in the book do we see the writer presenting tyrants in a harsh light?
From Chapter II

I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp...

Imprisoned for being disobedient, Jane Eyre is locked in a Red Room and sees herself in the mirror, believing herself to be ‘half fairy, half imp’, almost a ‘real spirit’. Thus, Brontë introduces a heavy Gothic element into the novel, but also subverts the Gothic by making the heroine a ‘phantom’ herself. Later on, Rochester’s key way of flirting with Jane will be to call her an ‘elfin fairy’.

I thought the swift darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I uttered a wild, involuntary cry; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort.

The Gothic atmosphere intensifies when Jane thinks she sees the ghost of the deceased Mr Reed in the room. Brontë sets the tone for the novel in this chapter, always making the reader anxious to question whether the ‘Gothic’ horrors Jane is encountering are real or supernatural.

DISCUSSION POINT
Where else in the novel are we uncertain whether an event is real or supernatural? What are the genuine supernatural events of the novel? Or are there any? What do you think the author’s attitude is towards the supernatural?

From Chapter IV

‘Psalms are not interesting,’ I remarked. ‘That proves you have a wicked heart; and you must pray to God to change it: to give you a new and clean one: to take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’

Mr Brocklehurst’s visit to the Reeds to prepare Jane for Lowood School leads to Jane’s negative judgement of the Psalms and Brocklehurst’s response. It sets the tone for the book’s continued attack on religious fundamentalism.

DISCUSSION POINT
Where else in the book do we see Brontë attacking religious fundamentalism in her presentation of the characters? For example, Brontë’s presentation of Brocklehurst is highly satirical, suggesting a mockery of his ridiculously rigid thinking about the Bible; how and why does she do this here, and elsewhere in the book? What points arise from her implicit criticisms?

From Chapter V

Ravenous, and now very faint, I devoured a spoonful or two of my portion without thinking of its taste; but the first edge of hunger blunted, I perceived I had got in hand a nauseous mess; burnt porridge is almost as bad as rotten potatoes; famine itself soon sickens over it. The spoons were moved slowly: I saw each girl taste her food and try to swallow it; but in most cases the effort was soon relinquished.

Brontë’s portrayal of Lowood School was based on the author’s own experience of attending a school for daughters of clergymen. The most persuasive presentation
of the horrors of the school is in the description of the food – its vile tastes and textures. Notice the novel’s shift in tone here, moving from the high Gothic melodrama that was generated at Gateshead to the realistic descriptions of a nightmarish girls’ school.

‘It is partly a charity-school; you and I, and all the rest of us, are charity-children. I suppose you are an orphan: are not either your father or your mother dead?’

Here, the young Jane, mystified about why she is attending the school, asks another pupil about it. This leads to a long conversation in which aspects of the school’s set-up and history are explained to her. Notice how Brontë decides to deliver much of this important information through dialogue, conveying implicitly Jane Eyre’s bewilderment at being at the school and providing a convincing child’s eye view of the world. Unusually for a writer of her time, she doesn’t smother the narrative in adult explanation.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

When and why does Brontë use dialogue at this point in the novel?

**From Chapter IX**

*I did so: she put her arm over me, and I nestled close to her. After a long silence, she resumed, still whispering – ‘I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day, and the illness which is removing me is not painful; it is gentle and gradual: my mind is at rest. I leave no one to regret me much: I have only a father; and he is lately married, and will not miss me. By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings. I had not qualities or talents to make my way very well in the world: I should have been continually at fault.’ ‘But where are you going to, Helen? Can you see? Do you know?’ ‘I believe; I have faith: I am going to God.’ ‘Where is God? What is God?’ ‘My Maker and yours, who will never destroy what He created. I rely implicitly on His power, and confide wholly in His goodness: I count the hours till that eventful one arrives which shall restore me to Him, reveal Him to me.’ ‘You are sure, then, Helen, that there is such a place as heaven, and that our souls can get to it when we die?’ ‘I am sure there is a future state; I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to Him without any misgiving. God is my father; God is my friend: I love Him; I believe He loves me.’ ‘And shall I see you again, Helen, when I die?’ ‘You will come to the same region of happiness: be received by the same mighty, universal Parent, no doubt, dear Jane.’

The death of the saintly Helen Burns, who together with the aptly named Miss Temple has guided Jane through the horrors of Lowood, marks the end of this section of the book. Once again, the theme of justice is implicitly raised. Underlying much of the dialogue that Jane has with the dying Helen is the question: would a fair God do this? Helen’s answer, like Brontë’s sister Emily’s, is emphatic: there is a better place. But notice the ambivalence in Jane’s tone. It is one of the best of the many Victorian death scenes in literature because of its relative lack of sentimentality, which makes it all the more moving.
**DISCUSSION POINT**
How does the death of Helen contrast with the death of Mrs Reed? What point do you think Brontë is trying to make about the way death reveals people’s true natures?

From Chapter XI

I thought, ‘I continued, ‘Thornfield belonged to you.’
‘To me? Bless you, child; what an idea! To me! I am only the housekeeper – the manager. To be sure I am distantly related to the Rochesters by the mother’s side, or at least my husband was; he was a clergyman, incumbent of Hay – that little village yonder on the hill – and that church near the gates was his. The present Mr Rochester’s mother was a Fairfax, and second cousin to my husband: but I never presume on the connection – in fact, it is nothing to me; I consider myself quite in the light of an ordinary housekeeper: my employer is always civil, and I expect nothing more.’
‘And the little girl – my pupil!’
‘She is Mr Rochester’s ward; he commissioned me to find a governess for her. He intends to have her brought up here, I believe. Here she comes, with her “bonne,” as she calls her nurse.’ The enigma then was explained: this affable and kind little widow was no great dame; but a dependant like myself. I did not like her the worse for that; on the contrary, I felt better pleased than ever. The equality between her and me was real; not the mere result of condescension on her part: so much the better – my position was all the freer.

Brontë builds up a considerable degree of suspense before she introduces Rochester, at first making him a mysterious and absent landlord. And she deliberately makes Mrs Fairfax as bland as possible.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
Why do you think Brontë takes so long before introducing Rochester, her main male protagonist, into the novel?

While I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless. I stopped: the sound ceased, only for an instant; it began again, louder: for at first, though distinct, it was very low. It passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber; though it originated but in one, and I could have pointed out the door whence the accents issued.
‘Mrs Fairfax!’ I called out: for I now heard her descending the garret stairs. ‘Did you hear that loud laugh? Who is it?’
‘Some of the servants, very likely,’ she answered: ‘perhaps Grace Poole.’
‘Did you hear it?’ I again inquired.
‘Yes, plainly: I often hear her; she sews in one of these rooms. Sometimes Leah is with her; they are frequently noisy together.’
The laugh was repeated in its low, syllabic tone, and terminated in an odd murmur.
‘Grace!’ exclaimed Mrs Fairfax.

The description of the laugh here is chillingly effective, creating mystery, suspense, a real sense of threat. Notice how Mrs Fairfax’s bland response only serves to heighten the mystery.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
When and why does the laugh surface again in the novel?
From Chapter XII

He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked irreful and thwarted just now; he was past youth, but had not reached middle-age; perhaps he might be thirty-five. I felt no fear of him, and but little shyness. Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked. I had hardly ever seen a handsome youth; never in my life spoken to one. I had a theoretical reverence and homage for beauty, elegance, gallantry, fascination; but had I met those qualities incarnate in masculine shape, I should have known instinctively that they neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me, and should have shunned them as one would fire, lightning, or anything else that is bright but antipathetic.

Brontë presents Rochester as ‘stern’, ‘ireful’ and ‘thwarted’ from the very start of her introduction to him. In many ways, the ensuing narrative between Jane and Rochester will be both a dramatisation and explanation of these very qualities, with ‘thwarted’ being the operative word. He is, above all, presented as discontented and accident-prone. This episode sets up the pattern for most of their significant interactions: a discovery and a rescue on Jane’s part, and some sort of tortured, flirtatious, elliptical explanation on Rochester’s part, which never quite satisfies Jane or the reader; each time a significant event happens we tend to find that Jane ‘rescues’ Rochester – namely from a fire, from a mad wife, from insupportable immorality, from desolate loneliness – and discovers a little more about him in the process. However, whenever she discovers something about him, the story is never fully unearthed. We are always asking questions about the situation – even at the very end of the novel. Their major interactions are focused around these discoveries.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

What is attractive and mysterious about this presentation of Rochester?

‘I cannot commission you to fetch help,’ he said; ‘but you may help me a little yourself, if you will be so kind.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You have not an umbrella that I can use as a stick?’

‘No.’

‘Well try to get hold of my horse’s bridle and lead him to me: you are not afraid?’

I should have been afraid to touch a horse when alone, but when told to do it, I was disposed to obey. I put down my muff on the stile, and went up to the tall steed; I endeavoured to catch the bridle, but it was a spirited thing, and would not let me come near its head; I made effort on effort, though in vain: meantime, I was mortally afraid of its trampling fore-feet. The traveller waited and watched for some time, and at last he laughed.

Throughout the novel, Jane seems to be overcoming her fears; she does so here with the horse and it provokes Rochester’s laughter.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

What is endearing about the presentation of Jane in this passage? How is Brontë managing to generate the sensation of the two characters becoming emotionally tied together even at this early stage?
From Chapter XIII

‘Oh, don’t fall back on over-modesty! I have examined Adèle, and find you have taken great pains with her: she is not bright, she has no talents; yet in a short time she has made much improvement.’

‘Sir, you have now given me my “cadeau”; I am obliged to you: it is the meed teachers most covet – praise of their pupils’ progress.’

‘Humph!’ said Mr Rochester, and he took his tea in silence.

‘Come to the fire,’ said the master, when the tray was taken away, and Mrs Fairfax had settled into a corner with her knitting; while Adèle was leading me by the hand round the room, showing me the beautiful books and ornaments on the consoles and chiffonnières. We obeyed, as in duty bound; Adèle wanted to take a seat on my knee, but she was ordered to amuse herself with Pilot.

‘You have been resident in my house three months?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And you came from – ?’

‘From Lowood school, in –shire.’

‘Ah! A charitable concern. How long were you there?’

‘Eight years.’

‘Eight years! You must be tenacious of life. I thought half the time in such a place would have done up any constitution! No wonder you have rather the look of another world. I marvelled where you had got that sort of face. When you came on me in Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse: I am not sure yet. Who are your parents?’

‘I have none.’

‘Nor ever had, I suppose: do you remember them?’

‘No.’

‘I thought not. And so you were waiting for your people when you sat on that stile?’

‘For whom, sir?’

‘For the men in green: it was a proper moonlight evening for them. Did I break through one of your rings, that you spread that damned ice on the causeway?’

I shook my head. ‘The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago,’ said I, speaking as seriously as he had done. ‘And not even in Hay Lane, or the fields about it, could you find a trace of them. I don’t think either summer or harvest, or winter moon, will ever shine on their revels more.’

Mrs Fairfax had dropped her knitting, and, with raised eyebrows, seemed wondering what sort of talk this was. ‘Well,’ resumed Mr Rochester, ‘if you disown parents, you must have some sort of kinsfolk: uncles and aunts?’

‘No; none that I ever saw.’

‘And your home?’

‘I have none.’

‘Where do your brothers and sisters live?’

‘I have no brothers or sisters.’

‘Who recommended you to come here?’

‘I advertised, and Mrs Fairfax answered my advertisement.’

It is worth quoting this first example of the flirtation between Jane and Rochester in full because it exemplifies the authorial techniques that Brontë employs to generate such a powerful connection between them. After all, it is their relationship which ultimately elevates the novel above Gothic melodrama. Brontë presents Rochester as an utterly confident conversationalist who, like a deft swordsman, makes feints and asides that often bewilder his social inferiors; but here Jane rises to his challenges. His initial statements about her teaching are flattering, but then he follows them with the discontented ‘Humph!’ and the barking order, ‘Come to the fire!’ Then he pursues Jane with questions about her past, showing real interest, but peppers his rigorous interrogation with flirtatious comments about her bewitching him. Notice how Jane
relishes the chance to adopt his metaphors, while trying to negate his claim that she is a fairy: 'The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago.'

**DISCUSSION POINT**
How does Brontë generate such a sense of sexual tension between Jane and Rochester?

**From Chapter XIV**

‘You examine me, Miss Eyre,’ said he: ‘do you think me handsome?’
I should, if I had deliberated, have replied to this question by something conventionally vague and polite; but the answer somehow slipped from my tongue before I was aware – ‘No, sir.’
‘Ah! By my word! there is something singular about you,’ said he: ‘you have the air of a little nonnette; quaint, quiet, grave and simple, as you sit with your hands before you, and your eyes generally bent on the carpet (except, by-the-bye, when they are directed piercingly to my face; as just now, for instance); and when one asks you a question, or makes a remark to which you are obliged to reply, you rap out a round rejoinder, which, if not blunt, is at least brusque. What do you mean by it?’

The protagonists of the novel are famously plain (unlike the movie versions!). Rochester’s perceptions of Jane are interesting because, in contrast to all others, they are not negative but full of a sense of attraction. Interestingly, the reader is uncertain about whether Rochester is right: we have perceived Jane as almost the opposite of a fairy. For the reader, she is earthy, passionate, committed.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
What is the effect of making the main protagonists plain, perhaps even ugly? How do you see them in your eyes?

**From Chapter XV**

He then said that she was the daughter of a French opera-dancer, Céline Varens, towards whom he had once cherished what he called a ‘grande passion.’

Here, Rochester’s Byronic qualities are evident: it is clear that he was the lover of a French opera-dancer. Jane’s lack of moral judgement upon him is worth noting. While Brontë is happy to disclose that Rochester was something of a ‘rake’ before the cataclysmic revelation of his bigamy, she also reveals Jane’s response as being tolerant; thus she paves the way for the suspense of the chapters in which Jane must decide whether or not to be Rochester’s mistress. The neutral language in which she describes Rochester’s behaviour with Céline Varens gives the reader the sense that Jane might be ‘open minded’ enough to accept the status of a mistress. Thus suspense is generated by the shifting attitudes of Jane’s moral conscience.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
What were the attitudes towards mistresses in Brontë’s day?
'What is it? And who did it?' he asked. I briefly related to him what had transpired: the strange laugh I had heard in the gallery: the step ascending to the third storey; the smoke, – the smell of fire which had conducted me to his room; in what state I had found matters there, and how I had deluged him with all the water I could lay hands on.

It is Jane’s hearing of the laughter which saves Rochester. Laughter plays a very important role in the novel, to generate a sense of both menace and love: Rochester is always laughing at Jane. Many critics have also commented upon the elemental aspects of the novel: Brontë’s use of fire, water, air and earth. Here, it is Jane’s hearing of the laughter in the air which leads her to the fire; she stops it with water and thus prevents Rochester being buried in the earth. Jane’s surname ‘Eyre’ also invokes the element of ‘air’, being its homophone. It serves to provide the narrative with a mythical, elemental undercurrent which gives additional emotional significance to the events.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
Why and how does Brontë make use of the four elements in the rest of the novel?

‘Why, you have saved my life! – Snatched me from a horrible and excruciating death! And you walk past me as if we were mutual strangers! At least shake hands.’

Just as important as the rescue itself is this aftermath, which is really the trigger for Jane to begin feeling love for Rochester. It is a surprising and affecting scene: we are not quite sure what Rochester will ask of her – we are not quite sure about him at all – but we are gratified by his gratitude towards her.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
How does Brontë use the incident of this rescue to generate more suspense and anticipation, both here and in the rest of the novel?

**From Chapter XVI**

Miss Ingram, who had now seated herself with proud grace at the piano, spreading out her snowy robes in queenly amplitude, commenced a brilliant prelude; talking meantime. She appeared to be on her high horse tonight; both her words and her air seemed intended to excite not only the admiration, but the amazement of her auditors: she was evidently bent on striking them as something very dashing and very daring indeed.

The introduction of Blanche Ingram enables Brontë to draw a marked contrast between Jane and a lady of society. It is the only time when real social satire is utilised: the portrait of Blanche is satirical, mocking her pretensions and her vapid life.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
Does the introduction of the Blanche Ingram subplot slow down the novel, stopping us from getting to the real action, the real mystery? Or is it a vital part of the story?
From Chapter XX

Mr Rochester held the candle over him; I recognised in his pale and seemingly lifeless face – the stranger, Mason: I saw too that his linen on one side, and one arm, was almost soaked in blood.

‘Hold the candle,’ said Mr Rochester, and I took it: he fetched a basin of water from the washstand: ‘Hold that,’ said he. I obeyed. He took the sponge, dipped it in, and moistened the corpse-like face; he asked for my smelling-bottle, and applied it to the nostrils. Mr Mason shortly unclosed his eyes; he groaned. Mr Rochester opened the shirt of the wounded man, whose arm and shoulder were bandaged: he sponged away blood, trickling fast down.

‘Is there immediate danger?’ murmured Mr Mason.

Brontë piles her narrative brilliantly. Having introduced the ghastly laugh and described the fire around Rochester’s bed, she now ups the tension with a violent attack on the poor Mr Mason, a mysterious person himself. Notice again how Rochester has to rely on Jane to assist him in helping Mason. For once, Rochester is helping someone, but not a woman: a man.

**Discussion Point**

Why is Brontë’s description of the wounded Mason so effective? What verbs and adjectives does she use to make it so alarming? What is effective about her use of dialogue?

From Chapter XXI

‘Why did I never hear of this?’ I asked.

‘Because I disliked you too fixedly and thoroughly ever to lend a hand in lifting you to prosperity. I could not forget your conduct to me, Jane – the fury with which you once

turned on me; the tone in which you declared you abhorred me the worst of anybody in the world; the unchildlike look and voice with which you affirmed that the very thought of me made you sick, and asserted that I had treated you with miserable cruelty.

The way in which the death scene of Mrs Reed interrupts the dramatic goings on at Thornfield Hall is almost frustrating, but Brontë wishes us to see that Jane has matured: she does not rebuke the old, embittered woman in the same way that she did as a child.

**Discussion Point**

To what extent does the modern reader feel Jane has matured? Clearly Brontë wants to show that Jane has acquired the important Victorian quality of stoicism, but today this is a less fashionable quality and perhaps we sympathise more with the rebellious child who speaks her mind rather than represses it?

From Chapter XXIII

‘I tell you I must go!’ I retorted, roused to something like passion. ‘Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? – A machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; – it is my
spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are!

‘As we are!’ repeated Mr Rochester – ‘so,’ he added, enclosing me in his arms. Gathering me to his breast, pressing his lips on my lips: ‘so, Jane!’

‘Yes, so, sir,’ I rejoined: ‘and yet not so; for you are a married man – or as good as a married man, and wed to one inferior to you – to one with whom you have no sympathy – whom I do not believe you truly love; for I have seen and heard you sneer at her. I would scorn such a union: therefore I am better than you – let me go!’

‘Where, Jane? To Ireland?’

‘Yes – to Ireland. I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now.’

‘Jane, be still; don’t struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.’

‘I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.’

Another effort set me at liberty, and I stood erect before him.

‘And your will shall decide your destiny,’ he said: ‘I offer you my hand, my heart, and a share of all my possessions.’

‘You play a farce, which I merely laugh at.’

‘I ask you to pass through life at my side – to be my second self, and best earthly companion.’

‘For that fate you have already made your choice, and must abide by it.’

‘Jane, be still a few moments: you are over-excited: I will be still too.’

A waft of wind came sweeping down the laurel-walk, and trembled through the boughs of the chestnut: it wandered away – away – to an indefinite distance – it died. The nightingale’s song was then the only voice of the hour: in listening to it, I again wept. Mr Rochester

sat quiet, looking at me gently and seriously. Some time passed before he spoke; he at last said, ‘Come to my side, Jane, and let us explain and understand one another.’

‘I will never again come to your side: I am torn away now, and cannot return.’

‘But, Jane, I summon you as my wife: it is only I intend to marry.’

I was silent. I thought he mocked me.

‘Come, Jane – come hither.’

‘Your bride stands between us.’

He rose, and with a stride reached me.

‘My bride is here,’ he said, again drawing me to him, ‘because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?’

Still I did not answer, and still I writhed myself from his grasp: for I was still incredulous.

‘Do you doubt me, Jane?’

‘Entirely.’

‘You have no faith in me?’

‘Not a whit.’

‘Am I a liar in your eyes?’ he asked passionately. ‘Little sceptic, you shall be convinced. What love have I for Miss Ingram? None: and that you know. What love has she for me? None: as I have taken pains to prove: I caused a rumour to reach her that my fortune was not a third of what was supposed, and after that I presented myself to see the result; it was coldness both from her and her mother. I would not – I could not – marry Miss Ingram. You – you strange, you almost unearthly thing! – I love as my own flesh. You – poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are – I entreat to accept me as a husband.’

‘What, me!’ I ejaculated, beginning in his earnestness – and especially in his incivility – to credit his sincerity: ‘me who have not a friend in the world but you – if you are my friend: not a shilling but what you have given me?’

‘You, Jane, I must have you for my own – entirely my
own. Will you be mine? Say yes, quickly.'
'Mr Rochester, let me look at your face: turn to the moonlight.'
'Why?'
'Because I want to read your countenance – turn!' 'There! You will find it scarcely more legible than a crumpled, scratched page. Read on: only make haste, for I suffer.'

His face was very much agitated and very much flushed, and there were strong workings in the features, and strange gleams in the eyes

'Oh, Jane, you torture me!' he exclaimed. 'With that searching and yet faithful and generous look, you torture me!'

'How can I do that? If you are true, and your offer real, my only feelings to you must be gratitude and devotion – they cannot torture.'

'Gratitude!' he ejaculated; and added wildly – 'Jane accept me quickly. Say, Edward – give me my name – Edward – I will marry you.'

'Are you in earnest? Do you truly love me? Do you sincerely wish me to be your wife?'
'I do; and if an oath is necessary to satisfy you, I swear it.'

'Then, sir, I will marry you.'
'Edward – my little wife!'
'Dear Edward!'

'Come to me – come to me entirely now,' said he; and added, in his deepest tone, speaking in my ear as his cheek was laid on mine, 'Make my happiness – I will make yours.'

'God pardon me!' he subjoined ere long; 'and man meddle not with me: I have her, and will hold her.'

'There is no one to meddle, sir. I have no kindred to interfere.'

Huge suspense surrounds the marriage proposal because it has been so drawn out: the interruptions of Blanche Ingram, the attack on Mason, and the visit to Mrs Reed in Gateshead have all meant that it has been delayed. When it comes, it is Jane’s passionate declaration of love that prompts it, because she is so distraught at the thought of Rochester marrying Blanche. Then, when he first proposes, she believes she is being mocked. Unusually for the time, he offers her a share of his property, indicating that, while this will be no union of financial equals, he wishes to give her some independence.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

Look at Jane’s final acceptance of Rochester. How effective is it? Is the sudden introduction of his first name affecting or rather ridiculous? What does it signify?

**From Chapter XXV**

'Not at first. But presently she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass.'

'And how were they?'

'Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!'

'Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.'

'This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?'

'You may.'

'Of the foul German spectre – the Vampyre.'
'Ah! – What did it do?'
'Sir, it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them.'
'Afterwards?'
'It drew aside the window-curtain and looked out; perhaps it saw dawn approaching, for, taking the candle, it retreated to the door. Just at my bedside, the figure stopped: the fiery eye glared upon me – she thrust up her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. I was aware her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness; for the second time in my life – only the second time – I became insensible from terror.'
'Who was with you when you revived?'
'No one, sir, but the broad day. I rose, bathed my head and face in water, drank a long draught; felt that though enfeebled I was not ill, and determined that to none but you would I impart this vision.'
'Now, sir, tell me who and what that woman was?'
'The creature of an over-stimulated brain; that is certain. I must be careful of you, my treasure: nerves like yours were not made for rough handling.'

The omens for the marriage are not auspicious. Nature itself seems to rage at the thought of the unnatural union of the pair: there is a terrible storm and a chestnut tree is split ‘down the centre’, its ‘vitality destroyed’. As Jill Matus points out in her essay ‘Jane Eyre and The Tenant Of Wildfell Hall’ in The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës: ‘nature, landscape and weather carry strong symbolic significance’. She and many other critics have noted that the split chestnut tree is a symbol for the fundamental immorality of the marriage. Thus the natural and the moral are inextricably entwined in the novel. Perhaps most horrifyingly, it is Jane’s encounter with Bertha and the destruction of the bridal veil which gives the strongest hint that all is not well.
the minimal emotion evinced by Jane at this point. Rochester's lack of remorse, his passionate confession, and the way he shows Bertha to the rest of the world all suggest that Brontë wants to present someone who is almost relieved to confess, but is not sorry that he tried to marry Jane. He is clearly contemptuous of the edicts of the Church, seeing them only as a means to marry Jane. This implicit atheism was shocking for the time, but also understandable within the context of Romantic poets, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, who married but were atheists.

**DISCUSSION POINT**

To what extent do you think Brontë presents Rochester as a villain who has been unmasked at the wedding?

A fierce cry seemed to give the lie to her favourable report: the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet.

‘Ah! Sir, she sees yer!’ exclaimed Grace: ‘yer’d better not stay.’

‘Only a few moments, Grace: you must allow me a few moments.’

‘Take care then, sir! – for God’s sake, take care!’

The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face, those bloated features. Mrs Poole advanced.

‘Keep out of the way,’ said Mr Rochester, thrusting her aside: ‘she has no knife now, I suppose, and I’m on my guard.’

‘One never knows what she ’as, sir: she is so cunning; it is not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft.’

‘We’d better leave her,’ whispered Mason.

‘Go to the devil!’ was his brother-in-law’s recommendation.

‘Ware!’ cried Grace.

The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest – more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle. At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair. The operation was performed amidst the fiercest yells and the most convulsive plunges. Mr Rochester then turned to the spectators: he looked at them with a smile both acrid and desolate.

‘That is my wife,’ said he. ‘Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know – such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours!’

Many modern critics have noted Brontë’s portrayal of Bertha as an animal – as someone who is not human but a ‘hyena’, only worthy of the pronoun ‘it’, a maniac with shaggy hair. However, there is a virulent, aggressive sensuality in the description which suggests the sexual allure that Rochester responded to in marrying her; she is ‘corpulent’ and strong and tall like Rochester, his physical equal. Notice, too, that he refrains from hitting her but ‘wrestles’, and that this is redolent of the sexual act. Indeed, Rochester comments sarcastically that it is the only conjugal embrace he gets. The description of her as ‘purple’ and ‘bloated’ suggests her alien nature, her otherness.
DISCUSSION POINT
To what extent do you think the description of Bertha is essentially racist? From the descriptions of Rochester and Bertha together, what do you think their relationship was and is like?

From Chapter XXVII
‘You know I am a scoundrel, Jane?’ ere long he inquired wistfully – wondering, I suppose, at my continued silence and tameness, the result rather of weakness than of will.
‘Yes, sir.’

We learn about Jane’s moral judgement of Rochester through dialogue rather than the expression of her thoughts. He himself provides the word ‘scoundrel’, which is interesting. A ‘scoundrel’ was a man driven by his passions – his sexual passions in particular; he used his intellect as a means to pursue sexual satisfaction.

DISCUSSION POINT
Do you think Rochester is presented as a scoundrel or as a victim of his own passions? Or is he portrayed as both simultaneously?

I live. You shall go to a place I have in the south of France: a whitewalled villa on the shores of the Mediterranean. There you shall live a happy, and guarded, and most innocent life. Never fear that I wish to lure you into error – to make you my mistress. Why did you shake your head? Jane, you must be reasonable, or in truth I shall again become frantic.’
His voice and hand quivered: his large nostrils dilated; his eyes blazed: still I dared to speak.
‘Sir, your wife is living: that is a fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical – is false.’

Jane is quick to perceive that Rochester’s arguments in favour of keeping her are false in their logic. She sees that his offer would involve her living in sin. Here, reading the novel within the context of Helen Burns’s religious beliefs makes sense: Jane, for all her hatred of religious fundamentalism and hypocrisy, is profoundly religious. The marriage vow is inviolate and cannot be broken. This is probably true of Charlotte Brontë herself, who, while in Belgium, struggled with her own passions for a married man but decided that she could not become his mistress. Implicit here perhaps is an attack upon the rigid institution of marriage, although it is not something to which Brontë explicitly draws the reader’s attention. The impossibility of divorce seems harsh to the modern reader.

DISCUSSION POINT
Would this be a believable moral dilemma for a modern novel? If not, why not? In what way have attitudes towards marriage have changed since the Victorian era?
'I advise you to live sinless, and I wish you to die tranquil.'
Then you snatch love and innocence from me? You fling me back on lust for a passion — vice for an occupation?'
'Mr Rochester, I no more assign this fate to you than I grasp at it for myself. We were born to strive and endure — you as well as I: do so. You will forget me before I forget you.'
'You make me a liar by such language: you sully my honour. I declared I could not change: you tell me to my face I shall change soon. And what a distortion in your judgment, what a perversity in your ideas, is proved by your conduct! Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach? For you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me?'

Rochester here begins to articulate what cannot be fully expressed: that the marriage laws forbidding divorce were unreasonable, even if made by God. The idea has become more powerful with time.

From Chapter XXIX

'Mr St. John — sitting as still as one of the dusty pictures on the walls, keeping his eyes fixed on the page he perused, and his lips mutely sealed — was easy enough to examine. Had he been a statue instead of a man, he could not have been easier. He was young — perhaps from twenty-eight to thirty — tall, slender; his face riveted the eye; it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline: quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin.

Jane's fleeing from Thornfield and her eventual surfacing at Moor House, the home of St John Rivers, marks the end of the 'crisis' section of the book. Now begins a long build-up to the climax: her rediscovery of Rochester and her marriage to him. It is Brontë's thematic control which sustains the interest here. At the back of the reader's mind is the question about what will happen to Rochester and Jane, but this is secondary to our interest in how Jane will now fare, having rejected a tempting but sinful offer of living with her loved one. The laws of God have triumphed over her own passions. Now Brontë explores these themes further in her presentation of St John Rivers: he is portrayed as the complete antithesis of Rochester. The imagery employed is striking: he is like a Greek statue, with a straight nose. Younger than Rochester, St John Rivers is someone whose reason always overrules his passion: his love for Rosamund Oliver is overruled by his belief that she is unsuitable, that she arouses too much passion in him, and that Jane is a much better and more suitable candidate... precisely because he does not love her.

From Chapter XXXIV

'St. John!' I exclaimed, when I had got so far in my meditation.
'Well?' he answered icily.
'I repeat I freely consent to go with you as your fellow-missionary, but not as your wife; I cannot marry you and become a part of you.'
'A part of me you must become,' he answered steadily; 'otherwise the whole bargain is void. How can I, a man not yet thirty, take out with me to India a girl of nineteen, unless she be married to me? How can we be for ever together — sometimes in solitudes, sometimes amidst savage tribes — and unwed?'

In order to sustain the narrative, Brontë deploys a number of techniques: she uses her own experiences of running a
school to help describe Jane’s labours as a school mistress; she develops the friendly characters of the Rivers sisters as close and welcome allies; and, in typical Victorian fictional fashion, she introduces a number of unlikely coincidences to spice things up. It transpires that the Rivers children are actually Jane’s long lost cousins, and that Jane has inherited some considerable property from a deceased relative. Interestingly, none of these plot developments are strictly necessary in order to sustain the reader’s interest. The fascinating dynamic between the controlling Mr Rivers and Jane creates much of the suspense, culminating as it does here with Jane’s second rejection of a man. Brontë is at pains to present Jane as passionate, associating her with imagery connected with ‘fire’, while Rivers is most often connected with ‘cold’ and ‘ice’. This is effective in reminding the reader that Jane’s rejection of the passionate Rochester was all the more difficult because they have essentially the same natures.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
Is the long, drawn-out section that precedes Jane’s reunion with Rochester necessary or is it merely a diversion?

**From Chapter XXXVI**

‘Then Mr Rochester was at home when the fire broke out?’
‘Yes, indeed was he; and ’e went up to the attics when all was burning above and below, and got the servants out of their beds and helped them down ’imself, and went back to get ’is mad wife out of ’er cell. And then they called out to ’im that she was on the roof, where she was standing, wavin’ her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could ’ear ’er a mile off. I saw ’er

and heard ’er with me own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed, Mr Rochester ascend through the skylight on to the roof; we heard him call ‘Bertha!’ We saw ‘im approach ’er; and then, ma’am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement.’

‘Dead?’

‘Dead! Ay, dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered.’

‘Good God!’

It is fascinating to see how the energy returns to Brontë’s writing when describing the ghastly events at Thornfield. It is a welcome relief after the muted domestic drama at Moor House. Once Jane hears in her head Rochester’s voice calling her back to him, we realise that we have returned to the realm of the Gothic – to a different world, where passion and madness prevail. As with many key parts of the novel, the death of Bertha is conveyed in dialogue – Rochester’s butler explains it after Jane has walked around the shattered, burnt-out husk of Thornfield. We learn that Rochester, as a result of trying (unsucessfully) to save Bertha from dying, is now a blind cripple. There is something profoundly symbolic and moral about his fate: he is punished by God for his sins. And now he is free to be loved again.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
To what extent do you think Brontë presents Rochester as a character who deserves his fate?
From Chapter XXXVII

‘You cannot now wonder,’ continued my master, ‘that when you rose upon me so unexpectedly last night, I had difficulty in believing you any other than a mere voice and vision, something that would melt to silence and annihilation, as the midnight whisper and mountain echo had melted before. Now, I thank God! I know it to be otherwise. Yes, I thank God!’

He put me off his knee, rose, and reverently lifting his hat from his brow, and bending his sightless eyes to the earth, he stood in mute devotion. Only the last words of the worship were audible.

‘I thank my Maker, that in the midst of judgment, he has remembered mercy. I humbly entreat my Redeemer to give me strength to lead henceforth a purer life than I have done hitherto.’

Then he stretched his hand out to be led. I took that dear hand, held it a moment to my lips, then let it pass round my shoulder: being so much lower of stature than he, I served both for his prop and guide. We entered the wood, and wended homeward.

At the end of the novel, Rochester is presented as someone who has discovered the enlightened ways of God but whose passionate nature remains intact. In this way, Brontë subtly brings her moral purposes to a close: the passionate have had their natures tempered and punished by fire, both literal and metaphorical.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
What significance does fire have in the novel? How is it connected with passion?

From Chapter XXXVIII—Conclusion

Reader, I married him. A quiet wedding we had: he and I, the parson and clerk, were alone present. When we got back from church, I went into the kitchen of the manor-house, where Mary was cooking the dinner and John cleaning the knives, and I said, ‘Mary, I have been married to Mr Rochester this morning.’

The famous conclusion of the novel is notable for its sentence structure, which contains an incipient feminism. Brontë did not write ‘he married me’ but ‘I married him’, indicating that it is now Jane who is in charge of her own destiny. It has taken her to be in possession of her own fortune, for her fiancé to be blinded and crippled, but, at the very end of the novel, she now has genuine power over Rochester.

**DISCUSSION POINT**
To what extent do you think this is a feminist ending to the novel?
Glossary

**Authorial** An adjective meaning ‘belonging to the author or writer’

**Autobiography** A personal account of the author’s own life, with the events usually relayed in the order in which they happened

**Bluebeard** A terrifying figure in a fairytale who locked up and killed his wives

**Byronic** Like Lord Byron; i.e. romantic, passionate, immoral, sexually promiscuous in some contexts

**Contexts** The worlds from which a text is created and emerges; the social, biographical and literary background to a text

**Dynamic** (n) Movement

**Elliptical** Concise, perhaps surprising

**Genre** Type of text, e.g. horror, sci-fi, Gothic

**Gothic** An adjective describing narratives which are full of supernatural happenings and extreme emotions, involving damsels in distress in haunted castles

**Fundamentalism** The idea that religious texts should be taken literally and obeyed absolutely, e.g. Christian fundamentalists insist that the story of Adam and Eve actually did happen.

**Hero/heroine** The main character (male/female) in a narrative, who exhibits truly fine qualities

**Homophone** A word which sounds the same as another
but is spelt differently, e.g. ‘there, their, they’re’

**Imagery** All the poetic devices in a text, in particular the visual images created for the reader’s mind to feed on and the comparisons that make a reader think and reflect upon an issue

**Melodrama** A story with extreme emotional events and characters, e.g. suicides, threats, blackmail, mad wives, lustful husbands

**Novel** A made-up, extended story

**Protagonist** The main character

**Radical** Extreme (politically or otherwise)

**Realism** In literature, a movement which aimed to simulate ‘reality’ in fiction

**Satire** – A work which mocks or ridicules (usually humorously) an individual or a prevailing trend (adj. satirical)

**Sensibility/Sensibilities** A characteristic of people who think deeply and responsively about issues

**Subversive** Troublesome, rebellious, seeking to overthrow a current system

**Symbolic** Representative of a particular issue or message, e.g. Bertha Mason’s cutting of the bridal dress is symbolic of Rochester’s betrayal of her

**Theme** An important idea in a text

**Tone** An atmosphere conveyed in the writing

**Victorian** Belonging to the UK’s Victorian era (i.e. the reign of Queen Victoria, 1837–1901)

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**Study Guide Author:**

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