

Jane Eyre

Book Talk

Please, consider the following questions in your discussion of the novel. They are based on critical studies, so feel free to disagree with some interpretations of the text that you might find too farfetched.

You do not need to take notes. At the end of our book talk, however, there will be a reflection in which you will write down significant comments, comparisons, or interpretations that might be helpful for your exam.

Gender Criticism

Gateshead

1. Consider Jane's favorite spot in the Reeds' residence: the window seat. How does it reflect Jane's position among her step family?
2. How is the red-room a symbol of Jane's entrapment? Consider the presence of a mirror in the room; consider whose room that used to be.
3. Critics say that at different times in the novel, Jane chooses to escape through flight or escape through starvation, but in the red-room scene she chooses escape through madness. If that is true, is this the only character who chooses this type of escape? How do you connect the two characters?
4. Create an analogy between Jane and Cinderella. Who would be the members of the Reed family (Mrs. Reed, John Reed, Eliza and Georgiana, and Bessie)? Who could the Prince Charming be at this stage of Jane's life?
5. Comment on Jane's assertion after her argument with Mrs. Reed: "Something spoke out of me."

Lowood

6. Critics have associated Mr. Brocklehurst with the wolf in the "Little Red Riding Hood," taking Jane to a wood (Lowood). Feminists often defined men as beasts during Victorian times- does Mr. Brocklehurst fall under this category?
7. Discuss the significance of Miss Temple's name.
8. Is Miss Temple forced into repressing? If yes, what does she repress?
9. Find examples in the text to support the idea that Miss Temple nourishes body and soul together.
10. Comment on the statement, "Miss Temple is the beautiful set of marble columns designed to balance the bad pillar, Mr. Brocklehurst."
11. Discuss the significance of Helen Burns's name.
12. What details in the text can you use to support the idea that Helen burns with anger?
13. What is the most important lesson that Jane learns from her two mothers at Lowood, Miss Temple and Helen?

Thornfield

14. Provide details from the text to support the following statement, “Thornfield is biblically the place where Jane is to be crowned with thorns, she is to be cast out into a desolate field, and most important, she is to confront the demon of rage who has haunted her since her afternoon in the red-room.”
15. If the house at Thornfield is to be compared with Jane’s life, what does Jane’s room represent? What does the third story represent?
16. Critics say that Jane’s pacing “backwards and forwards” is an indication of the irrational, intensified by Bertha’s laughter which accompanies the experience. If that is the case, what is the rational that keeps Jane balanced?
17. Adèle Varens, Blanche Ingram, and Grace Poole are important negative role models for Jane, all suggesting problems she must overcome before she can reach the independent maturity that is the goal of her pilgrimage. Do you agree or disagree?
18. Adèle’s longing for fashionable gowns rather than for freedom and her singing and dancing for her supper are an indication of a society where the daughter of a “fallen woman” is a model female in a world of prostitutes. Do you agree or disagree?
19. Blanche Ingram has a respectable place in society, just like Georgiana and Eliza Reed, yet the charade in which Rochester engages her teaches Jane a lesson. What is that lesson?
20. Interpret the significance of Grace Poole’s name.
21. Find one similarity between Bertha, Jane, and Grace Poole.
22. Consider the following statements: “Women in Jane’s world, acting as agents of men, may be the keepers of other women. Both keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains.” Choose one/more character(s) to reflect this idea. Explain its significance.
23. Consider Rochester’s response to Jane’s drawings. Do you consider them a factor in his falling in love with Jane? Explain.
24. The encounters between Rochester and Jane suggest that Rochester is solacing himself with her unshakable independence in a world of self-marketing Célines and Blanches. Do you agree or disagree?
25. Argue over Rochester’s superiority/inferiority/equality to Jane by taking into account the following events:
 - Before their betrothal
 - a. Rochester has a “guilty” sexual knowledge
 - b. Rochester’s attempt to impersonate a female gypsy is a semiconscious attempt to reduce the sexual advantage his masculinity gives him (by putting on a woman’s clothes, he puts on a woman’s weakness)
 - c. The Prince is the one who will initiate Cinderella into the mysteries of the flesh.
 - After their betrothal
 - d. Having secured Jane’s love, Rochester begins to treat her as an inferior, a plaything, a virginal possession.
 - e. Jane refuses to be “dressed like a doll”
 - f. Rochester has married Bertha Mason for status, sex, money, everything but love and equality.
26. Who could the “wailing child” of Jane’s dreams be? Recall Bessie’s song at Gateshead and Rochester treatment of Jane herself when you prepare your answer.

27. On the bridal day, Jane sees in the mirror “a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger.” In the red-room mirror, all “seemed colder and darker in that visionary hollow.” Argue in favor of a double identity for Jane while considering the following personalities: Jane Eyre, the orphan Jane, the image of Jane, Jane Rochester, the adult Jane, the body of Jane. Which one is split from which in the mirror reflection?
28. Consider the following parallelism of events occurring at the same time:

Experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part	Bertha’s appearance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jane’s feelings of “hunger, rebellion, and rage” on the battlements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bertha’s “eccentric murmurs”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jane’s responses to Rochester’s sexual confidences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bertha’s attempt to incinerate the master in his bed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jane’s resentment of Rochester’s manipulative gypsy masquerade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bertha’s terrible shriek and attack on Richard Mason
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jane’s anxieties about her marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Image of Bertha in a “white and straight dress,” “whether gown, sheet, or shroud I cannot tell.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jane’s repressed desire to destroy Thornfield as the symbol of Rochester’s mastery and her own servitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bertha burns down the house and destroys herself in the process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jane’s disguised hostility to Rochester + her prediction that “you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand”(Chapter 26) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bertha’s melodramatic death causes Rochester to lose both eye and hand.

Based on these “coincidences,” who is Bertha? If Bertha is the one who physically rips off Jane’s veil, who is the one who does so psychologically? Explain.

The Moor House

29. Connect Jane’s pilgrimage to the Moor House to Bessie’s song at Gateshead. What does this connection suggest about all women in a patriarchal society?
30. Consider the significance of the names Diana and Mary. In what ways do they reflect the strength that Jane has been searching?
31. The gospel according to Saint John (“In the beginning was the word”)is one of masculine abstraction; Saint John the Baptist had contempt of the female. How are these characteristics relevant in St. John?
32. Consider the following parallelism:

Rochester offers Jane	St. John offers Jane
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life of pleasure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life of principle
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Path of roses with concealed thorns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Path of thorns with no concealed roses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marriage of passion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marriage of spirituality
Rochester is the fire of Jane’s nature	St. John is the ice

Why does Jane waver between the two men? Why does she eventually choose Rochester?

33. Consider the following parallelism:

St. John	Brocklehurst
Practices what he preaches (rejects the worldly beauty of Rosamond Oliver)	Is a hypocrite
Is a pillar of patriarchy, a “cold, cumbrous column”	Is a “black pillar”
Wants to imprison the “resolute wild free thing” that is Jane’s soul in the ultimate cell, the “iron shroud” of principle	Removes Jane from the imprisonment of Gateshead only to immure her in a dank valley of starvation

Whom do you consider more of a “villain”? Explain.

34. The house at Thornfield, old and decaying, is set deep in a dark forest. What does this physical isolation say about the way society treats the marriage between a governess and her master?

Psychoanalytical Criticism

35. Rochester and Jane’s relationship is literally one between master and servant, but metaphorically one between father and daughter. Jane desires this figurative father because his authority thrills her and she enjoys her masochistic submission to his power. Argue in favor/against this approach.

36. Read the attached summary of Freud’s essay, “A Child is Being Beaten.” What are the three events in Jane’s life that reflect the Freudian three stages of a daughter’s sexual attraction to her own father. Who are the “fathers” that match each of these stages?

39. Consider the red-room psychological significance for Jane as you discuss these details:

mm. Bessie and Miss Abbot threaten to tie Jane down with garters - a “preparation for bonds”

nn. The room is filled with symbolic female spaces - secret drawers, wardrobes, jewel-caskets

oo. Aunt Reed resents the love her husband bestowed on Jane

pp. Jane, as an oedipal daughter, has eclipsed her surrogate mother (Mrs. Reed) in the affections of her uncle

40. According to Freud, bondage as a daughter is punished by women who stand in for a chastising father and who avenge their rage at the father’s desire. Who would be a representative of this category in Jane’s case?

41. Consider the following events:

- a. Jane sends a letter to her Uncle John in Madeira, but she chooses not to copy it in her autobiography (the novel itself)
- b. Jane's response to Uncle John's letter accepts his offer of being adopted by him and demands a response in return.
- c. The response comes in the presence of Mason and Briggs who stop the wedding.

Do you conclude that Jane's letter expresses her surreptitious desire of a repressed wish to flee the scene of her marriage? If the answer is yes, who causes Uncle's John's death on a metaphorical level?

42. A psychoanalytical perspective reads Rochester's blinding as a symbolic castration. Freud's metaphor of sight is that the "substitute relation between the eye and the male organ exists in dreams and myths and fantasies." The gaze shows male desire. As Oedipus was blinded, so must Rochester pay for his incestuous desire for the girl-governess by losing his sight. His symbolic castration represents the daughter's surreptitious punishment of the domineering master-father. Do you agree or disagree?

43. Find scenes in which Jane acts as a spectator.

Marxist Criticism

Gateshead

44. Consider John Reed's superior size resulting not only from nature, but also from (over)nurture. As John is "habitually" well-fed, so is Jane "habitually obedient to John. How do you generalize this to the society Jane has been born in?
45. How are Jane's parents socially ambiguous?
46. Jane would rather spend time with Bessie, but Bessie has other pleasures; she abandons Jane for "the lively regions of the kitchen and the housekeeper's room." Jane becomes an eavesdropper, excluded from intimate conversations between the nurse and other servants. How does this connect with her place in society?
47. The older Jane mentions that, as a child, she was not "heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste." This points to Jane's goal, which is to reconceive Bessie's place - the place of the working women - as a "heroic," morally righteous, and potentially revolutionary one. For Jane, the point is not to stay submissively at the bottom rather than seeking the top of the social ladder, but to shake the ladder itself by identifying oneself in extrinsic ways. Find any events in the text in which Jane shakes the ladder of social levels.
48. Find examples to support the following statement: Jane's feat is to remake the Reeds' rejection of her, their denigration of her sullen poverty, into her own rejection of them and their managerial values.

Lowood

- 49. Brocklehurst requires the girls to “direct their faces to the wall” while he scrutinizes their “reverse” at length before ordering their top-knots cut off. This scene enacts both Brocklehurst’s sadistic fantasies and, ironically, a moral rhetoric in which the immodesty of the working women is seen to legitimate his right to disciple and punish them. Do you think this rhetoric still applies to poor women today?
- 50. Miss Temple, marble-silent, teaches Jane strict self-repression as well as complicity in the oppression of others. Does Jane eventually concur in the maintenance of class hierarchies? Explain.
- 51. Although seen as a gain, Miss Temple’s fate is that of the middle-class woman, abruptly removed from her former usefulness to enter a diminished space and function in a reduced capacity- that of a wife. Do you think Miss Temple’s leaving of Lowood is a step up in the social hierarchy?

Thornfield

- 52. Jane acts again as an eavesdropper; yet, this time, what is glamorous and desirable is not the servants’ kitchen, but coincides with wealth. How has society changed Jane in this respect?
- 53. Compare Jane’s and Adèle’s place in society by considering the following:

Jane	Adele
Short-lived mating of mother and father	Illegitimate
Starved and shivered at Lowood	Was destitute before Rochester plucked her from the “slime and mud of Paris”
Capitulation to Lowood’s educational process	Capitulation to Jane’s education

Do you think Jane will have a good influence on Adèle’s future?

The Moor House

- 54. Even if Jane’s job as a schoolmistress gains her respectability on a social level, Jane still feels degraded by her new position: “I doubted I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence.” Why does she feel this way?
- 55. Jane’s first act after her wedding is to hand the servant, John, a five-pound note, saying “Mr. Rochester told me to give you and Mary this.” Jane demonstrates that she has the power to bestow, whereas John and Mary can only thankfully receive; Jane has access to capital, whereas they have only their own labor. Yet, who is it that originates this donation? Who is the main recipient of the money? How is male privilege repeated at the working class level?

Thank you for participating in a college-level criticism and for enriching the analysis of Jane Eyre with your contribution to its interpretations!