Charlotte Brontë’s life was similar to that of her heroine, Jane Eyre. Brontë endured grief, obscurity and personal tragedy, but she responded with great courage. She was born in Yorkshire in the north of England in 1816, the third of the six children of a poor clergyman. Her mother died, and in 1824 she was sent away to school. Her two elder sisters died of illnesses that they contracted at the Cowan Bridge boarding school, upon which Brontë based Lowood in *Jane Eyre*. The surviving children, Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell, were mainly educated at home, where they read widely and invented fantasy worlds of their own. Brontë later worked as a teacher and governess, and in 1842 went to Belgium with her sister Emily to improve their French. They hoped to open their own school but the plan failed. As an alternative way of making a living, she persuaded her sisters that they should each write a novel. Charlotte’s first, *The Professor*, was rejected, but she immediately wrote *Jane Eyre*, which was an instant popular success. Within two years her brother and sisters had all died. Brontë wrote two more novels but enjoyed only a few years of fame. She married the Reverend Arthur Nicholls in 1854 and died in childbirth the next year.

**Summary**

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë was first published in 1847. It is considered Brontë’s best work and has become one of the most famous British novels.

**Chapters 1–5:** Jane Eyre, a young orphan, has been left in the care of her uncle and aunt at Gateshead Hall. After her uncle’s death, his wife, Mrs Reed, and their three children bully and look down on Jane. The novel begins when one of the children, John, injures Jane, who fights back. She is blamed for the fight, and Mrs Reed has two servants lock her in the red room, where Mr Reed had died. During the night, Jane is frightened by a light which she thinks is her uncle’s ghost but Mrs Reed refuses to let Jane out of the room. Then Jane loses consciousness. Thinking Jane is ill, a doctor, Mr Lloyd, is summoned. He questions Jane sympathetically and suggests that Jane go to school. One morning in January, Mrs Reed calls for Jane. With her in the breakfast room is Mr Brocklehurst, a cold and self-righteous clergyman who runs a charity school called Lowood. Brocklehurst accepts Jane as a pupil in his school. However, Jane is angered because Mrs Reed tells the clergyman that Jane is a bad child and a liar. After Brocklehurst departs, Jane tells Mrs Reed that she hates the Reed family and is glad to be leaving. A few days later, Jane is taken on a long journey to the Lowood school.

**Chapters 6–10:** Lowood is a poor school with cold rooms and bad food. Jane makes friends with a sweet, sensitive girl, Helen Burns. Mr Brocklehurst, visiting the school for an inspection, makes Jane stand on a stool before the entire school, telling them that she is a liar. Later that day, the kind headmistress, Miss Temple, lets Jane defend herself. She writes to Mr Lloyd about her. He supports Jane, and Miss Temple announces to the school that Jane is not a liar. In the spring, a fever epidemic breaks out at Lowood. Because of the poor conditions at the school, many girls fall ill. Her friend Helen dies.

**Chapters 11–17:** The fever at Lowood attracts public attention. Mr Brocklehurst is blamed for managing the school badly. A new, better school is built. Jane remains there for eight years and becomes a teacher. When Miss Temple finally leaves Lowood, Jane takes a position as governess to a little French girl, Adèle Varens, in a large country house called Thornfield. The housekeeper, Mrs Fairfax, tells Jane that the absent owner of the house, Mr Edward Rochester, is Adèle’s guardian. A few months later, Jane goes for a walk and helps a man who has fallen from his horse. When she returns to Thornfield, Jane discovers that he is her employer, Mr Rochester, a man twenty years older than she is. Mr Rochester seems to like Jane and frequently talks with her. Jane learns from him that Adèle is the daughter of a French singer with whom Mr Rochester once had a relationship. One night, Jane hears strange laughter coming from the hallway. When she opens the door she sees smoke coming from Mr Rochester’s room. Rushing into his room, she finds Mr Rochester asleep and his bed curtains on fire. Jane pours water on the curtains and saves
Jane Eyre

his life. Mr Rochester blames a servant, Grace Poole, for the fire. The next morning, Jane speaks to Grace Poole. She expects that Poole will admit her guilt but she does not. Poole says that Mr Rochester put out the fire and warns Jane to lock her doors at night. Jane is puzzled as to why Poole is not dismissed, and why Mr Rochester wants Jane to keep the fire a secret. Meanwhile Mr Rochester has left Thornfield. Mrs Fairfax says that he has gone to visit friends. Jane scolds herself for imagining that Mr Rochester had feelings for her.

Chapters 18–22: Mr Rochester returns after some days with a group of ladies and gentlemen. Mr Rochester appears to be attracted to one of them, a beautiful young woman named Blanche Ingram. One day while the guests are still at Thornfield, Mr Rochester is called away on business, and an old gypsy woman arrives and tells everyone's fortunes. When Jane has her fortune told, the gipsy seems to know everything about her. It turns out that the gipsy is Mr Rochester in disguise, trying to discover Jane's true feelings. That night everyone at Thornfield is awakened by screams. One of the guests, Richard Mason, a mysterious Englishman from the West Indies, has been stabbed and bitten in the arm.

Chapters 23–28: A surgeon comes and secretly takes Mr Mason away. Mr Rochester implies that Grace Poole is responsible for the attack. He also hints that he may marry Miss Ingram. Jane receives a message from Gateshead that John Reed has apparently committed suicide and that Mrs Reed, after suffering a stroke, wants to see her. Mrs Reed is dying and she decides to share her inheritance equally with her sisters. She is the one who has been responsible for the strange events at Thornfield. Mr Rochester takes everyone back to Thornfield so that they can see Bertha for themselves, where she attacks Mr Rochester. Jane finds out that Richard Mason knows her uncle, John Eyre, and learnt of the coming marriage because of Jane's letter. Late that night, Jane secretly leaves Thornfield. She travels to the north of England and then she loses her belongings and is forced to sleep outdoors and beg for food. One rainy night, she comes to a house and begs for help. The owner, St John Rivers, a young clergyman, takes pity on her. Jane makes friends with St John's two kind sisters, Diana and Mary, but tells them her surname is Elliott and says little about her past. St John arranges for Jane to teach at a village school for girls.

Chapters 29–34: On the day of the wedding, a lawyer stops the ceremony. He says that Mr Rochester's wife, Bertha, is still alive and thus he cannot marry Jane. The wife, Bertha, is the sister of Richard Mason. Mr Rochester admits it is true. He explains that his wife is a madwoman whom he keeps locked in the attic. Grace Poole looks after her but occasionally Bertha escapes. She is the one who has been responsible for the strange events at Thornfield. Mr Rochester takes everyone back to Thornfield so that they can see Bertha for themselves, where she attacks Mr Rochester. Jane finds out that Richard Mason knows her uncle, John Eyre, and learnt of the coming marriage because of Jane's letter. Late that night, Jane secretly leaves Thornfield. She travels to the north of England and then she loses her belongings and is forced to sleep outdoors and beg for food. One rainy night, she comes to a house and begs for help. The owner, St John Rivers, a young clergyman, takes pity on her. Jane makes friends with St John's two kind sisters, Diana and Mary, but tells them her surname is Elliott and says little about her past. St John arranges for Jane to teach at a village school for girls.

It is Christmastime, and Jane has given up her position at the school. St John has decided to do missionary work in India, and asks Jane to join him in studying the Hindustani language. Jane reluctantly agrees, while trying without success to find out what has happened to Mr Rochester. St John tells Jane that the man who died is in fact her uncle, John Eyre, who had left her twenty thousand pounds. The Rivers family turn out to be Jane's cousins, and she decides to share her inheritance equally with them.

Chapters 35–44: Jane enjoys her work at the village school but dreams of Mr Rochester at night. A letter arrives saying that a rich uncle of the Rivers has died but has left his money to another relative. Soon afterwards, St John tells Jane that the man who died is in fact her uncle, John Eyre, who had left her twenty thousand pounds. The Rivers family turn out to be Jane's cousins, and she decides to share her inheritance equally with them.
Jane Eyre

Ferndean, Jane finds Mr Rochester. Although he is afraid that Jane will not want to marry a blind cripple, he asks her once again to marry him. She accepts immediately. After a few years of marriage, Mr Rochester recovers his sight in one eye, and when their first baby is born he is able to see his son.

Background and themes

*Jane Eyre* is an extraordinary mixture, blending an imaginative vision influenced by the stories Charlotte Brontë had read when she was young with her own deeply-felt personal experience. She had grown up in a remote village reading the magazine stories of the Romantic period, full of haunted castles, ghosts and monsters like *Frankenstein* (published in 1818). From these she got the hero with a mysterious past, the mad woman in the attic and the wedding suddenly broken off, and like her contemporary, Dickens, she relied on coincidence to resolve the plot. But her own life was a determined struggle to retain self-respect as a teacher and governess, and she was effectively the head of her family. In the novel Brontë combines intensity of feeling with the belief that an intelligent young woman whose only drawback is her poverty has as much right to express herself as a wealthy man.

**Personal independence:** A major theme of the novel is Jane's determination to achieve an independent existence without sacrificing her principles. It is beyond her expectation that a man of a higher social class should return her love, but she can only agree to live with him on equal terms. Brontë not only made Jane plain and tiny like herself but she gave her her own qualities of a sharp intelligence, a passionate nature, a clear conception of moral responsibility, and above all, great courage and determination. We admire Jane when she stands up to Mrs Reed as a child, and she is Mr Rochester's equal in conversation.

**The power of love:** Love is another major theme of the novel. Brontë's own passionate nature and her unrequited love for a man established the background for Jane's relationship with Mr Rochester. Jane wants to give and receive love but is forced to leave Mr Rochester's house when his mad wife is discovered. Yet Jane realises she still cares for Mr Rochester and returns to Thornfield to find him blind and crippled. Since his wife has died, Jane is free to marry him and nurse him back to relatively good health. Her love for him remains strong and enduring.

**Social class:** Most of the middle-class characters, from the Reed children to Blanche Ingram, look down on Jane simply because she is poor, and think they have the right to humiliate her for that reason alone. Jane's love for Mr Rochester makes her painfully aware of the boundaries of class; although she is Mr Rochester's intellectual and spiritual equal, she is still socially inferior. They can only marry as equals when Jane conveniently inherits money from her uncle.

Discussion activities

**Before reading**

1. **Discuss:** Ask students to work in small groups. The events in the story they are going to read took place approximately in the years 1825–40. Ask them to discuss what they imagine England was like at that time in order to provide answers to these questions:
   - How was the country organised politically?
   - Was there a great difference between social classes, and what made the difference?
   - What sort of education was open to children?

**Introduction**

2. **Discuss:** Ask students to read the Introduction (pages v–ix) and discuss these questions.
   a. Does Jane Eyre's childhood sound happy or sad?
   b. Does Charlotte Brontë's childhood seem similar to or different from Jane Eyre's?
   c. What was Charlotte's first book?
   d. What did Charlotte and her sisters do in 1847?
   e. What happened afterwards to Charlotte's brother and sisters?
   f. What were Charlotte's last two novels?
   g. Why were some people shocked by *Jane Eyre* when it was first published?
   h. What was life like for women during Charlotte Brontë's lifetime? What was it like for orphans?
   i. Have any films been made of *Jane Eyre*?

3. **Predict:** Look at the Contents (pages iii–iv) and read the chapter titles. *Which chapters are about sad events, do you think? Which ones are about frightening events? Do you think the story will have a happy ending?*

**Chapters 1–5**

4. **Write:** Ask students to choose to write on one of the following topics.
   - What do you think of Mrs Reed? Can you think of any reasons why she treats Jane the way she does?
   - What do you think of John Reed? Why does Jane allow him to treat her the way he does?
   - Compare the ways that Bessie and Abbot treat Jane. Can you think of any reasons why each one treats Jane in this way?
Jane Eyre

5 Discuss: Ask students to work in small groups and discuss the following questions.
   • When she is put in the red room, does Jane act the same as any ten-year-old child might do in the same situation? What would you do if you were in the same situation?
   • How do the other characters react to Jane’s actions in the red room? What do you think about their reactions?

6 Role play: Students work in pairs. Ask them to prepare and then act out the following conversation (page 12):
   Student A: You are Mr Lloyd. You have just spoken to Jane. She has told you how much she wants to leave Gateshead. Now you are talking to Mrs Reed. Try to persuade her to let Jane go to school.
   Student B: You are Mrs Reed. Mr Lloyd has just seen Jane. Now he is talking to you. Listen to what he says and decide whether or not you agree with him. Remember that you have called Jane wicked and ungrateful, and you want to keep her at a distance.

7 Artwork: Ask students to draw an illustration of one of the following:
   • John Reed throwing the book at Jane (pp. 3–4)
   • Jane is scared by a beam of light in the red room (p. 7)
   • Mr Brocklehurst talks to Jane and Mrs Reed (pp. 14–15)
   • Jane says goodbye to Bessie before leaving Gateshead (p. 17)

Chapters 6–10

After reading

8 Discuss: Ask students to work in pairs to discuss these questions:
   • What do you think of Helen Burns’s opinions of the teachers in Lowood? Do you agree with her advice to Jane on page 27?
   • Why does Mr Brocklehurst run Lowood the way he does, do you think? Do you think it is realistic? Could he run a school the same way today?
   • In what ways is Miss Temple different from most of the other adult characters in the story so far?

9 Discuss: Ask students to work in small groups. Half the groups are Group As; the other groups are Group Bs. Group A students are a committee investigating the deaths of children at Lowood and the way the institution has been run. Group B students are witnesses called to give evidence to the committee. The students in Group B take the following parts: Jane, Miss Temple, and Mr Brocklehurst. They must tell the truth but Brocklehurst can defend his actions according to his ideas. The Group A students reach a decision about the future of the school after hearing the evidence. After giving the decision, they can compare it with what actually happened (page 37).

10 Write: Get students to retell part of the story changing the point of view.
   In Chapter 8, Mr Brocklehurst visits the school. Say what happened from Miss Temple’s point of view. What did she think when Mr Brocklehurst criticised her for giving the girls a meal of bread and cheese? What did she think when he ordered the girls’ hair to be cut? How did she feel when he made Jane stand on a chair? What was she thinking when Mr Brocklehurst left?

11 Predict: What will happen next?
   Write five questions you would like to know about how the story goes on. Make sure each question is about a different character.

12 Guess: Who’s who?
   Have students play this game:
   a Choose one of the characters in Chapters 1–10 (Jane, Mrs Reed, John Reed, Mr Lloyd, Helen Burns, Miss Temple, Miss Scatcherd, Mr Brocklehurst, Mr Brocklehurst’s wife or sisters etc)
   b Then walk around the class and describe yourself in one sentence. The others must guess who you are.

Chapters 11–17

After reading

13 Discuss: Ask students to work in pairs to discuss these questions. Imagine that Miss Temple does not marry and stays on at Lowood. Would Jane want to stay there as well, or would she still have a desire for change? Would she act on the desire? If so, when do you think she would do so?
   Then have a whole class discussion.

14 Write: Imagine you are Jane Eyre. You are spending your first night at Thornfield. Write a letter to your friend Miss Temple. Tell her about your journey and your impressions of the house and Miss Fairfax.

15 Discuss: Ask students to work in pairs to discuss these questions. What does Miss Fairfax think of Mr Rochester? Are they very close? What impression does Mrs Fairfax’s description of Mr Rochester make on Jane, do you think?
   Then have a whole class discussion.

16 Discuss: Ask students in small groups to discuss the following. Jane first meets Mr Rochester when he falls on the ice. Why do you think she says ‘the roughness of the traveller relaxed me’? Why does Mr Rochester not tell Jane who he is when he first meets her?
   Then have a whole class discussion.

17 Discuss: Ask students in small groups to discuss the following. In a television version of Jane Eyre, the story began with Jane meeting Mr Rochester when he falls from his horse. Are Chapters 1–11 necessary? Does knowing about Jane’s childhood help us to understand her as an adult?

18 Write: In Chapter 15, Mr Rochester and Jane have a long conversation (pp. 50–53). Ask students to imagine they are Mr Rochester and write a diary entry after that conversation. Say what you think about Jane after having the conversation.
Jane Eyre

19 **Pair work:** Ask students in pairs to discuss these questions.
   - What might have happened if Jane had not awakened on the night of the fire?
   - Do you think Grace Poole started the fire?
   - Do you think that Mr Rochester is in love with Miss Ingram?

**Chapters 18–22**

**After reading**

20 **Discuss:** Ask students to work in pairs to discuss these questions. Jane says, 'He is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine.' Who is she talking about? Why does she say this? Do you think it is true? Then have a whole class discussion.

21 **Discuss:** Ask students in small groups to discuss these questions. Why does Mr Rochester pretend to be a gipsy woman? How does Jane react to what the gipsy woman says? Do you think this part of the story is realistic?

22 **Predict and pair work:** Ask students to work in pairs. They should take it in turns to ask and answer these questions.
   - What happened to Richard Mason, do you think?
   - Why does Mr Rochester ask Jane not to talk to Richard Mason, do you think?
   - What will Jane do in the next part?
   - What will Mr Rochester do?

**Chapters 23–28**

**After reading**

23 **Write and pair work:** Ask students to imagine that they are Mr Rochester. He wants to get married and must choose between Jane and Blanche Ingram. They should make a list of the good and bad points of each woman from Mr Rochester’s point of view. Then they can compare their lists with a partner. What decision does Mr Rochester reach and why?

24 **Discuss:** Ask students in small groups to discuss the following questions.
   - What are the Reed children, Eliza, Georgiana and John, like as adults? Why have they turned out this way? How does Jane respond to them?
   - Mrs Reed does not give Jane the letter from John Eyre until she is dying. Why? Do you think she should be forgiven? What do you think of Jane’s response?
   - When Mr Rochester describes his plan to be married, Jane assumes he is talking about marrying Blanche Ingram. Why doesn’t he correct her? At one point she says ‘Do you think that, because I am poor and plain, I am soulless and heartless?’ What does she mean by that?

**Chapters 29–34**

**After reading**

25 **Write and pair work:** Have students compare St John Rivers and Mr Rochester in terms of:
   - each one’s physical appearance
   - each one’s personality
   - each one’s beliefs
   - the way Jane feels about each one
   - the way each one feels about Jane

26 **Discuss:** Ask students to work in small groups to discuss these questions.
   - Jane introduces herself as ‘Jane Elliott’ to the Rivers family. Why does she do this? How does this compare to other examples of deceit in the story?
   - Diana and Mary Rivers do not feel sad when they hear of the death of their Uncle John. Why not? How does their reaction compare to the reactions of people to other deaths in the story?
   - In some film versions of Jane Eyre, the parts of the story dealing with St John Rivers are reduced or missing. Would the novel be better without them, do you think?

**Chapters 35–44**

**After reading**

27 **Pair work:** Write these words on the board.
   - education – love – madness – romance – social class –
   - society – marriage – friendship

Ask students to check any words they don’t know in their dictionaries. Then ask the students to work in pairs or small groups and arrange the words in order of most to least important in the story. Then have a class discussion asking students to explain their decisions.

28 **Discuss:** Ask students to work in small groups to discuss these questions.
   - Some readers think it was unnecessary for Brontë to make Mr Rochester blind and crippled. Do you agree? Why do you think she did it?
   - Are Jane and Mr Rochester equals when they marry, or is one more powerful than the other? Has this situation changed at the time ten years later that Jane describes at the end of the novel?

29 **Write and pair work:** Students work in pairs. Brontë makes use of coincidence (surprising relationships between people or events) in Jane Eyre. Make a list of all the examples you can find. Does this make the story seem less realistic?

30 **Discuss:** Ask students to work in small groups to discuss these questions:
   - Which parts of the story of Mr Rochester and his wife seem unreal? Which parts seem realistic?
   - In what ways does Jane’s attitude to life and the way she reacts towards Mr Rochester seem old-fashioned? In what ways does it seem modern?
   - How would the story be different if it took place today?

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.