

Key idea

A woman's standpoint

From the day of its appearance, *Jane Eyre* has been credited with having added something new to the tradition of the English novel. The new quality is the voice of a woman who speaks with perfect frankness about herself. The novel described passionate love from a woman's standpoint in a way that shocked many readers. Women were expected to be presented with something of the unreality of romance; above all the heroine should be beautiful and rich. Jane Eyre is moderately plain, and this made her very real; moreover, she falls in love with a man both rich and married to a mad wife.

asks Jane to stay with him, but she leaves Thornfield and goes to live with her cousins at Moor House. There she meets St John Rivers, a religious man who plans to become a missionary and proposes to her. Jane refuses and one night she hears Rochester's voice calling her. She returns to Thornfield Hall, but the house has been destroyed by a fire caused by Bertha, who then threw herself downstairs and died. Mr Rochester lost his sight and a hand in the attempt to save his wife from the fire. He now lives in Ferndean, where Jane visits him and agrees to marry him. He finally recovers his sight when their first child is born.

SETTINGS

Set in the early decades of the 19th century, the novel is structured around **five separate locations** probably in northern England. Each of these settings provides both indoor and outdoor spaces – the woods and marshes, Thornfield's garden and the moors – for Jane to move through. So Jane can always move fluidly between nature and civilisation and develop her inclination to cross boundaries. Every house or place represents a stage in her life and has a **symbolical name**. Gateshead is where Jane spends her unhappiest moments but also reaches her ethical awakening with her imprisonment in the red room. The name 'Gateshead' stands for 'gateway'; 'Lowood' means 'low wood' because the school was built in a low valley beside a wood, but also because it coincides with a 'low' time in Jane's life. Thornfield is an allegorical name: a 'field of thorns', the place of mystery and temptation. Moor House is 'out on the moors', in the wilderness, the place where Jane tries to give a sense to her life again. Ferndean, or 'fern hill', is the new Eden, where Jane finds mature love.

Gateshead: the Reeds' home, the place of Jane's childhood.

Thornfield: Mr Rochester's house, the place of independence and young love.

Ferndean: Mr Rochester's rural mansion, the place for a new start.

Lowood School: the place of Jane's education.

Moor House: the Rivers' house on the moor, the place of temporary banishment.

CHARACTERS

Each section of the novel represents a new phase in Jane's experience and development. The protagonist's character is developed very clearly: she is intense, imaginative, passionate, rebellious, independent, yet always looking for warmth and affection. Jane undergoes many **struggles** such as the conflicts between spirit and flesh, duty and desire (→ T35), denial and fulfilment. The novel also establishes the theme of the outsider, **the free spirit fighting for recognition and self-respect** in the face of rejection by a class-ridden and money-oriented society.

In **Rochester** the old lustful villain is seen in a new perspective: he has the quality of a 'Byronic hero', but the stereotyped seducer becomes a kind of lost nobleman of passion who is attracted to Jane's soul and personality rather than to her physical appearance.

THEMES

Jane Eyre is a *Bildungsroman*, a **novel of growing up**, so the theme of childhood and education plays an important role. Jane wants to be loved, not merely in a romantic sense, but as a human being deserving affection and worth of value. As she grows up, Jane gains autonomy and economic independence and refuses a proposal of marriage twice so as not to sacrifice her moral integrity. Marriage is presented as a relationship between equals, not as a social compromise.

The most important theme is perhaps the analysis of the social position of a governess in Victorian society. Jane is refined and has educated manners; however, she is treated like a servant. Charlotte clearly **criticises the strict Victorian social class system** and gender relationships. If Jane had been a man, she might have attempted to improve her position. Being a woman in her social class, the only chance she had was working as a governess.

The traditional 'Gothic' convention is also used, from childhood terrors to all those mysterious and threatening sights and sounds that reveal the presence of some malevolent force and that anticipate the tragedy at Thornfield. But Charlotte's **symbolic use of the Gothic** demands a more complicated response than the simple momentary intensity of feeling looked for by the early Gothic novelists.