

CHARACTERS

JANE EYRE, an orphan
MRS. REED, mistress of Gateshead Hall
BESSIE LEAVEN, a nurse
MISS TEMPLE, a teacher at Lowood
HELEN BURNS, a student at Lowood
EDWARD ROCHESTER, owner of Thornfield

ADÈLE VARENS, ward of Mr. Rochester
BERTHA MASON, Mr. Rochester's first wife
ST. JOHN RIVERS, a young clergyman (first name pronounced "SIN-jun")
MARY, and **DIANA RIVERS**, his sisters

PLOT

Jane Eyre is an orphan. Both her father and mother had died when Jane was a baby, and the little girl passes into the care of Mrs. Reed of Gateshead Hall. Mrs. Reed's husband, now dead, had been the brother of Jane Eyre's mother, and on his deathbed he had directed Mrs. Reed to look after the orphan as she would her own three children. At Gateshead Hall Jane knows ten years of neglect and abuse. One day a cousin knocks her to the floor. When she fights back, Mrs. Reed punishes her by sending her to the gloomy room where Mr. Reed had died. There Jane loses consciousness. Furthermore, the experience causes a dangerous illness from which she is nursed slowly back to health by sympathetic Bessie Leaven, the Gateshead Hall nurse.

Feeling that she can no longer keep her unwanted charge in the house, Mrs. Reed makes arrangements for Jane's admission to Lowood School. Early one morning, without farewells, Jane leaves Gateshead Hall and rides fifty miles by stage to Lowood, her humble possessions in a trunk beside her.

At Lowood, Jane is a diligent student, well-liked by her superiors, especially by Miss Temple, the mistress, who refuses to accept without proof Mrs. Reed's low estimate of Jane's character. During the period of Jane's schooldays at Lowood an epidemic of fever causes many deaths among the girls. It results, too, in an investigation which causes improvements at the institution. At the end of her studies Jane is retained as a teacher. When Jane grows weary of her life at Lowood, she advertises for a position as governess, ultimately engaged by Mrs. Fairfax, housekeeper at Thornfield, near Millcote.

At Thornfield the new governess has only one pupil, Adèle Varens, a ward of Jane's employer, Mr. Edward Rochester. From Mrs. Fairfax, Jane learns that Mr. Rochester travels much and seldom comes to Thornfield. Jane is pleased with the beautiful old house and gardens, the book-filled library, and her own comfortable room.

Jane meets Mr. Rochester for the first time while she is out walking, going to his aid after his horse throws him. She finds her employer a somber, moody man, quick to change in his manner toward her, brusque in his speech. He commends her work with Adèle, however, and confides that the girl is the daughter of a French dancer who has deceived him and deserted her daughter.

Mysterious happenings occur at Thornfield. One night Jane, alarmed by a noise, finds Rochester's door open and his bed on fire. When she attempts to arouse the household, he commands her to keep quiet about the whole affair. She also learns that Thornfield has a strange tenant, a woman who laughs like a maniac and stays in rooms on the third floor of the house. Jane believes this woman is Grace Poole, a seamstress employed by Mr. Rochester.

Mr. Rochester attends numerous parties at which he is obviously paying court to Blanche Ingram, daughter of Lady Ingram. One day the inhabitants of Thornfield are informed that Mr. Rochester is bringing a party of house guests home with him. In the party is the fashionable Miss Ingram. During the house party Mr. Rochester calls Jane to the drawing-room, where the guests treat her with the disdain which they think her humble position deserves. To herself, Jane has already confessed her interest in her employer, but it seems to her that he is interested only in Blanche Ingram. One evening while Mr. Rochester is away from home the guests play charades. At the conclusion of the game a gypsy fortune-teller appears to read the palms of the lady guests. Jane, during her interview with the gypsy, discovers that the so-called fortune-teller is Mr. Rochester in disguise.

While the guests are still at Thornfield, a stranger named Mason arrives to see Mr. Rochester on business. That night Mason is mysteriously wounded by the strange inhabitant of the third floor. The injured man is taken away secretly before daylight. One day Robert Leaven comes from Gateshead to tell Jane that Mrs. Reed, now on her deathbed, has asked to see her former ward. Jane returns to her aunt's home. The dying woman gives Jane a letter, dated three years before, from John Eyre in Madeira, who asks that his niece be sent to him for adoption. Mrs. Reed confesses that she had let him believe that Jane had died in the epidemic at Lowood. The sin of keeping from Jane

news which would have meant relatives, adoption, and an inheritance has become a heavy burden on the conscience of the dying woman.

Jane goes back to Thornfield, which she now looks upon as her home. One night in the garden Edward Rochester embraces her and proposes marriage. Jane accepts and makes plans for a quiet ceremony in the village church. She writes also to her uncle in Madeira, explaining Mrs. Reed's deception and telling him she is to marry.

Shortly before the date set for the wedding Jane has a harrowing experience. She awakens to find a strange, repulsive-looking woman in her room. The intruder tries on Jane's wedding veil and then rips it to shreds. Mr. Rochester tries to persuade Jane that the whole incident was only her imagination, but in the morning she finds the torn veil in her room. At the church, as the vows are being said, a stranger speaks up declaring the existence of an impediment to the marriage. He presents an affirmation, signed by the Mr. Mason who had been wounded during his visit to Thornfield. The document states that Edward Fairfax Rochester had married Bertha Mason, Mr. Mason's sister, in Spanish Town, Jamaica, fifteen years before. Mr. Rochester admits this fact; then he conducts the party to the third-story chamber at Thornfield. There they find the attendant Grace Poole and her charge, Bertha Rochester, a raving maniac. Mrs. Rochester was the woman Jane had seen in her room.

Jane feels that she must leave Thornfield at once. She leaves quietly early the next morning, using all her small store of money for the coach fare. Two days later she is set down on the moors of a north midland shire. Starving, she actually begs for food. Finally she is befriended by the Reverend St. John Rivers and his sisters, Mary and Diana, who take Jane in and nurse her back to health. Assuming the name of Jane Elliot, she refuses to divulge anything of her history. Reverend Rivers eventually finds a place for her as mistress in a girl's school.

Shortly afterward St. John Rivers receives from his family solicitor word that John Eyre has died in Madeira, leaving Jane Eyre a fortune of twenty thousand pounds. Because Jane had disappeared under mysterious circumstances, the lawyer is trying to locate her through the next of kin, St. John Rivers. Jane's identity is now revealed through her connection with Lowood School, and she learns, to her surprise, that St. John and his sisters are really her own cousins. She then insists on sharing her inheritance with them.

When St. John decides to go to India as a missionary, he asks Jane to go with him as his wife-- not because he loves her (as he frankly admits), but because he admires her and wants her services as his assistant. Jane feels indebted to him for his kindness and aid, but she hesitates to accept his proposal.

One night, while St. John is awaiting her decision, she dreams that Mr. Rochester is calling her name. The next day she returns to Thornfield by coach. Arriving there, she finds the mansion gutted-- a burned and blackened ruin. Neighbors tell her that the fire had broken out one stormy night, set by the madwoman, who died while Mr. Rochester was trying to rescue her from the roof of the blazing house.

Mr. Rochester, blinded during the fire, is living at Ferndean, a lonely farm some miles away. Jane Eyre goes to him at once, and there they are married. For both, their story has an even happier ending. After two years Mr. Rochester regains the sight of one eye, so that he is able to see his first child when it is put in his arms.

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

Love versus Autonomy

- characters search for love and acceptance
- must balance this with being true to oneself
- must not lose one self to others

Spiritual Duty

- characters have desires
- must balance this against duty to God, duty to morality
- either extreme is flawed

Appearances

- appearances and reality are not the same
- one should be judged by one's heart

Economic and Social Class

- strict social hierarchies are oppressive
- excessive wealth can lead to selfishness
- social class divides and harms individuals

Gender

- women are not the playthings or property of men
- though not the equal of men, women deserve a voice
- women suffer because of gender society's gender norms