

Module-4: Victorian Women Writers

Unit-1 □ Charlotte Brontë : *Jane Eyre*

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4.1.0: Introduction

You have already read about fictional prose of the Victorian period in Module 1, Unit 3 and have studied in detail two Victorian novels in Module 3, Units 1 and 2. Please refer to those sections while reading this unit as and where required. This Unit will introduce you to Victorian women novelists in general and Charlotte Brontë's most acclaimed novel, *Jane Eyre* in particular. After reading this Unit you will be able to comprehend the contribution of women novelists of the Victorian era to the development of the English novel. At the same time you will be able to understand the role of the Brontë sisters, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë and Anne Brontë, in adding a new dimension to the English novel. Needless to say, the Unit will also provide you with an exhaustive analysis of the text itself. As a learner, you are advised to attain clarity in comprehending the entire perspective, which will enable you to have a deeper understanding of the novel as a literary genre.

4.1.1 Charlotte Brontë: A Chronological Biography

Charlotte Brontë's novels are all patently autobiographic. It is impossible to understand her work except through the medium of a chronological biography.

- **1816** - Charlotte Brontë was born in Thornton, Yorkshire, England. She was the third of six children (five daughters: Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, and son, Branwell) to Patrick Brontë, an Irish Anglican clergyman, and his wife, Maria Branwell.
- **1821** - Maria Branwell Brontë died of cancer, leaving the children to the care of her sister, Elizabeth Branwell.
- **1824** - Charlotte was sent with three of her sisters, Emily, Maria and Elizabeth, to the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in Lancashire. Its poor conditions, Charlotte maintained, permanently affected her health and physical development and hastened the deaths of her two elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who died of tuberculosis. Soon after Charlotte and Maria were removed from the school.
- **1826** - Mr. Brontë brought home a box of wooden soldiers for the children to play with. Charlotte and Branwell (brother), while playing with the soldiers, conceived of and began to write in great detail about an imaginary world which they called Angria, and Emily and Anne wrote articles and poems about their imaginary country, Gondal. The sagas were elaborate and convoluted and provided them with an obsessive interest in childhood and early adolescence, which prepared them for their literary vocations in adulthood.
- **1831-32** - Charlotte continued her education at Roe Head School in Mirfield where she met her lifelong friends and correspondents, Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor.
- **1833** - Charlotte wrote a novella, *The Green Dwarf*.
- **1835-38** – She worked in Roe Head as a teacher.



Charlotte Brontë

- **1839** - Charlotte took up the first of many positions as governess to various families in Yorkshire, a career she pursued until 1841.
- **1842** - She and Emily travelled to Brussels to enrol at the boarding school run by Constantin Heger (1809 – 1896) and his wife Claire Zoé Parent Heger (1804 – 1890). In return for board and tuition, Charlotte taught English and Emily taught music. Their time at the school was cut short when Elizabeth Branwell, their aunt died.
- **1843** - Charlotte returned alone to Brussels to take up a teaching post at the school. Her second stay was not a happy one; she became lonely, homesick, and deeply attached to Constantin Heger. She finally returned to Haworth in January 1844.
- **1846** - Charlotte, Emily, and Anne published a joint collection of poetry under the assumed names of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Although the book failed to attract interest (only two copies were sold), the sisters decided to continue writing for publication. Charlotte completed *The Professor*, which did not secure a publisher.
- **1847** - Charlotte's *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* was published, still under the Bell pseudonym.
- **1848** - Charlotte and Anne visited their publishers in London, and revealed the true identities of the "Bells". In the same year Branwell Bronte (brother), by now an alcoholic and a drug addict, died, and Emily died shortly thereafter.
- **1849** - Charlotte began to move in literary circles in London, making the acquaintance, for example, of Thackeray. *Shirley* was published and in the same year Anne died.
- **1850** - Charlotte met Mrs. Gaskell.
- **1852** - Charlotte's *Villette* was published.
- **1854** - Charlotte married Rev. A. B. Nicholls, curate of Haworth. Soon Charlotte, expecting a child, caught pneumonia.
- **1855** - After a lengthy and painful illness, Charlotte died.
- **1857** - *The Professor* was posthumously published and in that same year Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* was also published.

4.1.2 Charlotte Brontë as a Novelist

With Charlotte Brontë passion enters the novel. She depicts the strong human passions to which Dickens and Thackeray had shut their eyes. She is the first novelist to take as her subject-matter a woman's daydream of romantic love and turn it into literature.

Her first novel, *The Professor* failed to find a publisher and only appeared in 1857 after her death. It is based on the experiences of her own life, but the story lacks interest, and the characters are not created with the passionate insight that we find in her later portraits.

Apart from *Jane Eyre* (1847), which is her greatest novel, Charlotte Brontë's other novels include *Shirley* (1849), where she goes outside the limits of her genius and brings out a study of the conflict between workers and employers in the West Riding weaving industry in the early years of the nineteenth century, and *Villette* (1853), which again is autobiographical in nature. It is a story of love and bristles with glaring improbabilities.

Charlotte Brontë is different from the women novelists who preceded her because her heroines are in revolt against their circumstances and they are in revolt as women. In them all is the unmistakable impulse towards self-regard. Before her, no woman had written of life from the woman's point of view, as Fielding had done from the man's. She revealed woman as a human being, and she could do this as most of her novels are drawn from her own life. Thus her novels are marked by a note of intimacy and of self-revelation. She lets herself go with frank and eager abandonment directly. In this respect she is even quite different from Dickens and Thackeray. "Dickens is a friendly, easy, and a delightful companion in print; but not intimate. And Thackeray takes special pains to mask his real feelings at times behind a shade of cynicism."³ Thus Charlotte Brontë applied to fiction what had already been applied with such delightful results by men like Charles Lamb and Hazlitt to the essay.

Moreover, Charlotte Brontë belongs to a tiny group of novelists like Lawrence and Dostoevsky in so far as her primary concern is with the depiction of the isolated naked soul responding to the experiences of life with a maximum of intensity. Diana Neill in her book 'A Short History of the English Novel' points out:

Charlotte's imagination was of the romantic kind that brooked no restraint. She

did not attempt to discipline its fiery force. Not that she permitted it to riot in the telling of the story; for the most part there are few impossibilities in her narratives and the passions that inspire them gain strength from the firm control exercised by the author. It is rather in certain symbolic incidents that the unrestrained violence, the immaturity of her imagination, shows itself.... At such moments when the daydream world asserts its hold over her all the paraphernalia of Gothic Romanticism is called into play.

However, from time to time flashes of imaginative brilliance light up her books. Imagination in such moments throws its glittering veil over life.

4.1.3 The Story of *Jane Eyre*

The novel begins with the titular character Jane Eyre, ten years old, living at her maternal uncle's house, named Gateshead Hall, with her maternal uncle, Mr. Reed, his wife, Sarah Reed, and children, Eliza, John, and Georgiana, after Jane's parents died of typhus several years ago. Jane's uncle is the only one in the Reed family to be kind to Jane, but he soon dies, leaving Jane to the care of his wife. Jane's aunt is by nature a harsh and stern woman without any kindness in her heart. Mrs. Reed and her three children are abusive to Jane, physically, emotionally, and also spiritually. Mrs Reed does not like Jane and considers her a burden. The boy John bullies Jane most of the time, and on one occasion he even beats her. Eliza and Georgiana are also contemptuous of Jane. The nursemaid Bessie proves to be Jane's only ally in the household. Jane is thus incredibly unhappy, with only a doll and books in which to find solace. One day, after her cousin John knocks her down Jane attempts to defend herself. For adopting this defiant attitude, Jane is locked in the red room where her uncle died. There she faints from panic after she thinks she has seen his uncle's ghost. She is subsequently attended to by the kindly apothecary, Mr. Lloyd, to whom Jane reveals how unhappy she is living at Gateshead Hall. He recommends to Mrs Reed that Jane should be sent to school, an idea Mrs Reed happily supports. Mrs Reed then enlists the aid of Mr Brocklehurst, director of Lowood Institution, a charity school for girls. Mr Brocklehurst was a very stern kind of man, even more cruel than Mrs Reed. Mrs Reed cautions Mr Brocklehurst that Jane has a "tendency for deceit", which he interprets as "liar". Before Jane leaves, however, she confronts Mrs. Reed and declares that she will never call her "aunt" again, that she and her daughter, Georgiana, are the ones who are deceitful, and that she will tell everyone at Lowood how cruelly Mrs. Reed treated her.

At Lowood Institution, a school for poor or orphaned girls, Jane soon finds that life is harsh, but she attempts to fit in, and befriends an older girl, Helen Burns, who makes no protest against the ill-treatment meted out to her by Miss Scatcherd. This is because Helen is a deeply religious girl and has full faith in divine justice. Jane finds the superintendent of the school, Miss Maria Temple, quite kind-hearted. During a school inspection by Mr Brocklehurst, Jane accidentally breaks her slate, thereby drawing attention to herself. He then makes her stand on a stool, brands her a liar and shames her before the entire assembly. Jane feels deeply distressed, but is later comforted by her friend, Helen. Miss Temple, the caring superintendent writes to Mr. Lloyd, the apothecary, for some definite information about Jane. The apothecary replies that Jane does not suffer from any serious faults of character. Jane is then publicly cleared of Mr. Brocklehurst's accusations. The eighty pupils at Lowood are subjected to cold rooms, poor meals, and thin clothing. Many students fall ill with the outbreak of typhus. Jane's friend Helen dies of consumption in her arms. When Mr. Brocklehurst's maltreatment of the students is discovered, several benefactors erect a new building and install a sympathetic management committee to moderate the harsh rule of Mr Brocklehurst. Conditions at the school then improve dramatically.

After six years as a student and two as a teacher, Jane decides to leave Lowood. She wants a change in her life and advertises her services as a governess and receives one reply, from Alice Fairfax, housekeeper at Thornfield Hall, which is situated not far from the large manufacturing town of Millcote. She takes the position, teaching Adele Varens, a young French girl.

Meanwhile before leaving Lowood, Jane receives a visit from Bessie, the nurse of the Reed family and comes to know how the Reed family has been getting on. John has proved to be a big disappointment to his mother because of his dissolute ways. Jane also learns that a relative of Jane's by the name of John Eyre had come to see Jane at Gateshead Hall but had felt disappointed to learn that Jane no longer lives there.

At Thornfield Hall Jane finds herself quite comfortable. However odd things start to happen at the house. On certain occasions, she hears a mysterious laugh and cannot ascertain with certainty who laughed.

While Jane is walking one night to a nearby town, a horseman passes her. The horse slips on ice and throws the rider. Despite his surliness, she helps him to get back onto his horse. Later, back at Thornfield, she learns that this man is Edward Rochester, master of the house. Adele is his ward, left in his care when her mother

abandoned her. At Jane's first meeting with him within Thornfield, he teases her, accusing her of bewitching his horse to make him fall, as well as talking strangely in other ways, but Jane is able to give as good as she gets. Mr. Rochester and Jane soon come to enjoy each other's company and spend many evenings together. On one occasion, Jane saves Rochester from a mysterious fire in the latter's room.

Jane receives a message that her aunt, Mrs Reed who is dying, is calling for her. She returns to Gateshead. Mrs. Reed confesses to Jane that she had wronged her, and gives Jane a letter from Jane's paternal uncle, Mr. John Eyre, in which he asks for her to live with him and be his heir. Mrs. Reed admits to telling her uncle that Jane had died of fever at Lowood. Soon after, Jane's aunt dies, and she returns to Thornfield.

After returning to Thornfield, Jane sinks into despondency when Rochester brings home a beautiful but vicious woman named Blanche Ingram. Jane expects Rochester to propose to Blanche. But Rochester instead proposes to Jane. Jane is at first sceptical of his sincerity, but eventually believes him and gladly agrees to marry him. She then writes to her Uncle John, telling him of her happy news. As she prepares for her wedding, Jane's forebodings mount when a strange, savage-looking woman sneaks into her room one night and rips her wedding veil in two. As with the previous mysterious events, Mr. Rochester attributes the incident to that strange woman, Grace Poole, one of his servants. The wedding day arrives, and as Jane and Mr. Rochester prepare to exchange their vows, the voice of Mr. Mason, a lawyer cries out that Rochester already has a wife, named Bertha. Mr. Mason testifies that Bertha, whom Rochester married when he was a young man in Jamaica, is still alive. Rochester does not deny Mason's claims, but he explains that Bertha has gone mad. The marriage ceremony is broken off, and Mr. Rochester takes the wedding party back to Thornfield, where they witness the insane Bertha Mason scurrying around on all fours and growling like an animal. Rochester keeps Bertha hidden on the third story of Thornfield and pays Grace Poole to keep his wife under control. Bertha was the real cause of the mysterious fire earlier in the story. Mr. Rochester asks Jane to go with him to the south of France, and live with him as husband and wife, even though they cannot be married. Refusing to go against her principles, and despite her love for him, Jane leaves Thornfield.

Jane travels as far from Thornfield as she can using the little money she had previously saved. But she became exhausted and hungry and, at last, three siblings who live in a manor alternatively called Marsh End and Moor House take her in. Their names are Mary, Diana, and St. John Rivers. Jane quickly becomes friends with them. St. John also finds her a teaching position at a charity school in Morton.

The sisters leave for governess jobs and St. John becomes somewhat closer to Jane. He surprises her one day by declaring that her uncle, John Eyre, has died and left her a large fortune: 20,000 pounds. When Jane asks how he received this news, he shocks her further by declaring that her uncle was also his uncle: Jane and the Riverses are cousins. Jane immediately decides to share her inheritance equally with her three newfound relatives.

Thinking she will make a suitable missionary's wife, St. John asks Jane to marry him and to go with him to India, not out of love, but out of duty. Jane initially accepts going to India, but rejects the marriage proposal, suggesting they travel as brother and sister. St. John pressures her to reconsider, and she nearly gives in. However, she realizes that she cannot abandon forever the man she truly loves. One night she hears Rochester's voice calling her name over the moors. Jane then returns to Thornfield to find only blackened ruins. She learns that Mr. Rochester's wife set the house on fire and committed suicide by jumping from the roof. In his rescue attempts, Mr. Rochester lost a hand and his eyesight. Jane reunites with him, but he fears that she will be repulsed by his condition. When Jane assures him of her love and tells him that she will never leave him, Mr. Rochester again proposes and they are married. He eventually recovers enough sight to see their first-born son.

Some Key Facts

- *Jane Eyre* was published on 16th October, 1847 by Smith, Elder & Co. of London, England. Charlotte Brontë published the book under the pen name "Currer Bell." The first American edition was published the following year by Harper & Brothers of New York. (Remember, George Eliot too was a pseudonym. The author's actual name was Mary Ann Evans).
- Charlotte dedicated *Jane Eyre's* second edition to W. M. Thackeray, who highly lauded the novel.

4.1.4 Analysis of *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre is primarily a bildungsroman, which is a German term signifying "novel of formation" or "novel of education" (note, this has been explained in Module 3, unit 1 in detail). The subject of the novel is the development of the protagonist's mind and character through varied experiences from childhood to

maturity, and the recognition of his or her identity and role in the world. *Jane Eyre* recounts the emotions and experiences of its title character, including her growth to adulthood, and her love for Mr. Rochester, the master of Thornfield Hall.

The novel is written in the first-person. It is set somewhere in the north of England, during the reign of George III (1760–1820), and goes through the following stages: Jane Eyre at Gateshead Hall; Jane Eyre at Lowood School; Jane Eyre at Thornfield Hall; Jane Eyre as a destitute wandering in search of food and shelter; Jane Eyre at Moor House; Jane Eyre's search for Mr. Rochester, and her arrival at Thornfield Hall only to find the place in ruins; and the finale with Jane Eyre's reunion with, and marriage to, her beloved Rochester. The novel thus recounts the experiences Jane encounters at various stages of her life, which seem to have little or no connection between them. David Cecil tries to illustrate this point by saying that the first quarter of the novel is about Jane's life as a child, the next half is devoted to her relationship with Mr. Rochester, and the rest of the book, except the final chapters, deals with Jane's relationship with St. John Rivers. The novel is, therefore, charged with having a loose structure. But, we must remember that the novel centres round one person, namely the narrator herself. It is this autobiographical mode of the novel that gives unity to the plot of *Jane Eyre*.

The novel is full of melodramatic events, which occur most during Jane's stay at Thornfield Hall. For example, setting fire to Rochester's bed-curtains, Rochester's guests hearing a woman's screams and shrieks at the middle of a night, the mystery surrounding the existence of Bertha – all these melodramatic events remind us of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. But, despite the recurrence of such melodramatic events, *Jane Eyre* is the first modern novel, the first to envelop the life of a plain, ordinary woman with romance. The voice of a free insurgent woman, free to feel and to speak as she feels, is heard for the first time in modern English literature.

4.1.5 Characterisation in *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre : Jane Eyre, the protagonist of the novel, is an unconventional heroine who succeeds in maintaining her identity and autonomy despite being forced to contend with oppression, inequality and hardship. At various phases of her life she encounters adversity, but she remains defiantly virtuous, morally courageous and fiercely independent. Through her Bronte counters Victorian stereotypes about

women. She confronts man on equal terms. 'Women are supposed to be very calm generally', she explains in the twelfth chapter, 'but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer.'

Some men attempt to establish some form of power and control over her. But Jane asserts herself in a male-dominated society. She despises Mr. Bucklehurst, who uses religion to further his own ends. Although she is ardently passionate towards Mr. Rochester and agrees to marry him, she follows the dictates of her refined conscience. Her quest is to find a partner worthy of her intelligence, her judgemental wit, and her determined selfhood, one who will respect her integrity and her determination. Mr Rochester signally fails to do so in the first courtship. He tries to enter into a bigamous marriage with Jane. When that fails, he tries to persuade Jane to be his mistress. Jane not only refuses to marry Rochester, but also leaves Thornfield. It is only when she is sure that the marriage is one between equals that Jane marries Rochester at the end of the novel. Jane maintains her independence in her relationship with St. John Rivers as well. The latter presses Jane to accept him, but she is equally firm in her strangely insistent 'I will be your curate, if you like, but never your wife'. Thus Jane is "no man's woman". She maintains her impassioned self-respect and moral conviction throughout her life. For her free will and the due exercise of a God-given conscience are the secrets behind human happiness.

Edward Rochester : Jane's employer and the master of Thornfield, Mr. Rochester is a Byronic hero. He is a wealthy, passionate man with a dark secret that provides much of the novel's suspense. Rochester is unconventional, ready to set aside polite manners, propriety, and consideration of social class in order to interact with Jane frankly and directly. He is rash and impetuous and his problems are partly the result of his own recklessness. He has led a life of vice, and many of his actions in the course of the novel are less than commendable. He is certainly aware that in the eyes of both religious and civil authorities, his marriage to Jane before Bertha's death would be bigamous. But he is a sympathetic figure because he has suffered for so long as a result of his early marriage to Bertha. He is tormented by his awareness of his past sins and misdeeds. At the same time, he makes genuine efforts to atone for his behaviour. For example, although he does not believe that he is Adele's natural father, he adopts her as his ward and sees that she is well cared for. This adoption may well be an act of atonement for the sins he has committed. He expresses his self-

disgust at having tried to console himself by having three different mistresses during his travels in Europe and begs Jane to forgive him for these past transgressions. However, Mr. Rochester can only atone completely – and be forgiven completely – after Jane has refused to be his mistress and left him. The destruction of Thornfield by fire finally removes the stain of his past sins; the loss of his left hand and of his eyesight is the price he must pay to atone completely for his sins. Only after this purgation can he be redeemed by Jane's love.

St. John Rivers: Along with his sisters, Mary and Diana, St. John serves as Jane's benefactor after she runs away from Thornfield, giving her food and shelter. He serves as a foil to Edward Rochester. Whereas Rochester is passionate, St. John is austere and ambitious. He is cold and reserved. He is thoroughly practical and suppresses all his human passions and emotions. Jane often describes Rochester's eyes as flashing and flaming, whereas she constantly associates St. John with rock, ice, and snow. Jane realises that marriage with Rochester represents the abandonment of principle for the consummation of passion, but marriage to St. John would mean sacrificing passion for principle. He invites Jane to come to India with him as a missionary, thereby giving her the chance to make a more meaningful contribution to society than she would as a housewife. At the same time, Jane understands that life with St. John would mean life devoid of true love, in which Jane's need for spiritual solace would be filled only by retreat into the recesses of her own soul. She can maintain her independence, but it would be accompanied by loneliness. Joining St. John would require Jane to neglect her own legitimate needs for love and emotional support. Her consideration of St. John's proposal leads Jane to understand that, paradoxically, a large part of one's personal freedom is found in a relationship of mutual emotional dependence.

Mr. Brocklehurst: The cruel, hypocritical master of Lowood School, Mr. Brocklehurst is a religious traditionalist. He embodies an evangelical form of religion that seeks to strip others of their excessive pride or of their ability to take pleasure in worldly things. He advocates a harsh, plain, and disciplined lifestyle for his pupils, but not, hypocritically, for himself and his own family. He even indulges in stealing from the school to support his luxurious lifestyle. After a typhus epidemic sweeps Lowood, Brocklehurst's dishonest practices are brought to light and he is publicly discredited.

Helen Burns: She is Jane's friend at Lowood School. She represents a mode of Christianity that emphasises on tolerance and acceptance. She ascetically trusts her own faith and turns the other cheek to Lowood's harsh policies. In this respect she

is a foil to Bucklehurst, who uses religion to gain power and dominate over others. She also serves as a foil to Jane. While Jane's efforts involve self-assertion, Helen's self-negation. Helen manifests a certain strength and intellectual maturity. Her submissive and ascetic nature highlights Jane's more headstrong character. Like Jane, Helen is an orphan who longs for a home, but Helen believes that she will find this home in Heaven rather than Northern England. And while Helen is aware of the injustices meted out to the girls at Lowood, she believes that God will reward the good and punish the evil. Jane, on the other hand, is unable to have such blind faith. Her quest is for love and happiness in *this* world. Nevertheless, she counts on God for support and guidance in her search.

Bertha Mason: She is a complex presence in *Jane Eyre*. She impedes Jane's happiness, but she also catalyses the growth of Jane's self-understanding. The mystery surrounding Bertha establishes suspense and terror to the plot and the atmosphere. Further, Bertha serves as a remnant and reminder of Rochester's youthful libertinism. Some critics have considered her as a symbol of the way Britain feared and psychologically "locked away" the other cultures it encountered at the height of its imperialism. Others have seen her as a symbolic representation of the "trapped" Victorian wife, who is expected never to travel or work outside the house and becomes ever more frenzied as she finds no outlet for her frustration and anxiety. Within the story, then, Bertha's insanity could serve as a warning to Jane of what complete surrender to Rochester could bring about. One could also see Bertha as a manifestation of Jane's subconscious feelings—specifically, of her rage against oppressive social and gender norms. Jane declares her love for Rochester, but she also secretly fears marriage to him and feels the need to rage against the imprisonment it could become for her. Jane never manifests this fear or anger, but Bertha does. Thus Bertha tears up the bridal veil, and it is Bertha's existence that indeed stops the wedding from going forth. And, when Thornfield comes to represent a state of servitude and submission for Jane, Bertha burns it to the ground. Throughout the novel, Jane describes her inner spirit as fiery, her inner landscape as a "ridge of lighted heath" (Chapter 4). Bertha seems to be the outward manifestation of Jane's interior fire. Bertha expresses the feelings that Jane must keep in check.

Bertha Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Learners, it would be interesting for you to know that *Jane Eyre* the novel has been the inspiration for Jean Rhys's Post Colonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). It has been written and read as a prequel to the storyline and plot

of *Jane Eyre*, a narrative where Jane is replaced by Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife who is marginalized and remains invisible in the Victorian Novel. It would be interesting for you to read *Jane Eyre* closely first and then go to Rhys's novel to understand how it poses a challenge to the Victorian original and its depiction of colonised outsiders such as Rochester's wife Bertha who was a Jamaican Creole. The 'madwoman in the attic' who sets fire to the house in *Jane Eyre*, in Rhys emerges as a figure of empathy as a young woman married to an English coloniser, misunderstood and imprisoned in the attic. Your task would be to read both novels and understand the Post colonial critique or Neo-Victorian retelling that has made the novels popular in their own times.

4.1.6 Autobiographical Elements in *Jane Eyre*

The imaginative world of all the Brontës is inward-looking and subjective. Gilbert Phelps in 'A Survey of English Literature' points out:

The intensity of the family relationships fostered by their (Brontës') isolated, almost claustrophobic, life in the Haworth rectory, reached out after them wherever they went, affecting their brief excursions into the outside world and endowing them with the same hypnotic quality.

Charlotte's personal experiences at the dreadful Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan's Bridge fix the earlier parts of *Jane Eyre* vividly in the imagination. In the novel the death of Jane's dearest friend recalls the death of Charlotte's sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, at Cowan Bridge. The hypocritical religious fervour of the headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, is based in part on that of the Reverend Carus Wilson, the Evangelical minister who ran Cowan Bridge. Moreover, John Reed's decline into alcoholism and dissolution is most likely modelled upon the life of Charlotte Brontë's brother Branwell, who slid into opium and alcohol addictions in the years preceding his death. Charlotte's experiences as a governess in Brussels are also transposed in *Jane Eyre*.

Activity for the Learner

Autobiographical elements are recognizable throughout *Jane Eyre*. Read the text and try to find out from section 1.2 Charlotte Brontë: A Short Biography, of this unit, the points of similarity between Charlotte's personal life and that of Jane's.

4.1.7 Gothic Elements in *Jane Eyre*

Gothic novels dealing with horrors and ghosts clanking chains, and underground chambers echoing with groans and sighs poured in towards the end of the eighteenth century. The tradition began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, which substituted for the domesticities of Richardson with the glamour of the past and the thrill of the mysterious and the supernatural. Walpole's novel proved to be influential. It inspired a few others, like Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, William Beckford, M. G. Lewis and C. R. Maturin. The plot of *Jane Eyre* includes most of the elements of Gothic novels. Lowood, Moor House, and Thornfield are all remote locations, and Thornfield, like Gateshead, is also an ancient manor house. Both Rochester and Jane possess complicated family histories. Rochester's first wife, Bertha, is the dark secret at the novel's core. The mystery surrounding her is the main source of the novel's suspense. Other Gothic occurrences include: Jane's encounter with the ghost of her late Uncle Reed in the red-room; the moment of supernatural communication between Jane and Rochester when she hears his voice calling her across the misty heath from miles and miles away; and Jane's mistaking of Rochester's dog, Pilot, for a "Gytrash," a spirit of North England that manifests itself as a horse or dog. Although Brontë's use of Gothic elements heightens her reader's interest and adds to the emotional and philosophical tensions of the book, most of the seemingly supernatural occurrences are actually explained as the story progresses. It seems that many of the Gothic elements serve to anticipate and elevate the importance of the plot's turning points.

4.1.8 Summing Up

We should by now have an idea of the novel, its main characters, and note the relevance of the novel in its own time and our own. Now note the following points about the novel:

- In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë makes use of her childhood memories and other personal experiences.
- The novel is written in autobiographical mode and depicts the life and experiences of the heroine from her childhood, when she was ten years old, till she attains adulthood.
- It is the first modern novel to have enveloped the life of a plain, ordinary

woman with romance. Here Charlotte concentrates on the portrayal of human passion. The novel deals with a highly exciting and romantic story, told with sober realism.

- The novel is well-structured, balancing two contrasting love relationships against each other; the one, with Rochester, a relationship which is deeply passionate but morally wrong until bereavement transforms the situation; the other, with St John Rivers, a relationship which is deeply justifiable on all moral and religious grounds, but devoid of passion. The tension endured by the heroine in countering these two 'temptations' is finely examined and movingly conveyed.
- In the novel, Charlotte Brontë makes use of melodramatic elements, which reminds us of Gothic novels.

4.1.9. Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. Discuss *Jane Eyre* as revolutionary novel.
2. Discuss *Jane Eyre* as a love story.
3. In what ways might *Jane Eyre* be considered a feminist novel?

● **Medium Length Questions-12 marks**

1. Discuss some of the melodramatic events that took place in Thornfield Hall.
2. Compare and contrast Rochester with St. John.
3. Discuss the treatment meted out to Jane by the Reeds family.

● **Short Questions-6 marks**

1. Name some significant women novelists of the Victorian Age.
2. Who looked after Bertha Mason?
3. Where did St. John Rivers want Jane to accompany him as his wife?

4.1.10. Suggested Reading

Mirian Allott (ed.) *Jane Eyre & Villette: A Selection of Critical Essays*

T. W. Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality*

Wendy Craik, *The Brontë Novels*

Diana Neill, *A Short History of the English Novel*

Wilbur L. Cross, *The Development of English Novel*