Critical responses to *Jane Eyre* over time

Included here are six responses to Charlotte Bronte’s novel, *Jane Eyre*. They were written between 1847, when the novel was published under the pseudonym Currer Bell, and 1990.

1. Read the six critical responses to *Jane Eyre* and make a note of what the critic seems to be most interested in. What insights do you gain into the novel from reading each piece of criticism? What do you learn about the critic writing?

2. Click on the button ‘Focus’ to see annotations pointing out some of the things the critic is interested in.

A set of critical position cards is included at the end of this article. These outline in a simplified form, some of the interests of critics who read texts from a particular critical position, for example Feminism or Marxism. You can also download and print out this set of Critical Position Cards.

3. Read through the critical position cards and make sure you understand the gist of what each one means.

4. Re-read the critical responses to *Jane Eyre* and decide which of the critical positions each critic is drawing on or is sympathetic towards – whether he/she knows it or not!

5. Click on the button ‘Position’ to see annotations identifying some of the ways in which these critical readers of *Jane Eyre* draw on the critical positions.

6. In what ways have responses to *Jane Eyre* changed and in what ways have they stayed the same since the novel was published 150 years ago?

**Reading Wide Sargasso Sea**

In his article in *emagazine* 15, Richard Griffiths explores *Jane Eyre* in the context of Jean Rhys’s re-writing of it, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. You can read a selection of critical readings of this novel and extracts from Jean Rhys’s diary in which she explores the connection between the two novels by downloading *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, included in emagplus. There are also suggestions for how you might approach a comparison of the two novels for a coursework assignment.
Critical readings of *Jane Eyre*

1. A story which contains nothing beyond itself is a very narrow representation of human life. *Jane Eyre* is this, if we admit it to be true; but its truth is not probable in the principal incidents, and still less in the manner in which the characters influence the incidents so as to produce conduct. There is a low tone of behaviour (rather than of morality) in the book; and, what is worse than all, neither the heroine nor hero attracts sympathy. The reader cannot see anything loveable in Mr Rochester, nor why he should be so deeply in love with Jane Eyre; so that we have intense emotion without cause. The book however, displays considerable skill in the plan, and great power, but rather shown in the writing than in the matter; and this vigour sustains a species of interest to the last.

   Although minute and somewhat sordid, the first act of the fiction is the most truthful; especially the scenes at the philanthropic school.

   *The Spectator* (6th November 1847)

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2. Still we say again this is a very remarkable book. We are painfully alive to the moral, religious, and literary deficiencies of the picture and such passages of beauty and power as have quoted cannot redeem it, but it is impossible not to be spellbound with the freedom of the touch. It would be mere hackneyed courtesy to call it ‘fine writing’. It bears no impress of being written at all, but is poured out rather in the heat and hurry of an instinct, which flows ungovernably on to its object, indifferent by what means it reaches it, and unconscious too. As regards the author’s chief object, however, it is a failure – that, namely, of making a plain, odd woman, destitute of all the conventional features of feminine attraction, interesting in our site. We deny that he had succeeded in that. *Jane Eyre*, in spite of some grand things about her, is totally uncongenial to our feelings from beginning to end. We acknowledge her firmness – we respect her determination – we feel for her struggles; but for all that, and setting aside higher considerations, the impression she leaves on out mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman – one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire as a relation, and who we should scrupulously avoid as a governess.

   Elizabeth Eastlake, *The Quarterly Review*, December 1848
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3. Her heroines do not try to disentangle the chaos of their consciousness, they do not analyse their emotions or motives. Indeed they do not analyse anything. They only feel strongly about everything. And the sole purpose of their torrential outpourings is to express their feelings. Jane Eyre, Villette, The Professor, the best parts of Shirley, are not exercises of the mind, but cries of the heart; not a deliberate self-diagnosis, but an involuntary self-revelation.

Further, they are all revelations of the same self. It might be thought that since they are about different people her books had different imaginative ranges. But they have not; and inevitably. You can learn about the external life of many different sorts of people by observation: but no amount of observation can teach you about the inner life of anyone but yourself. All subjective novelists write about themselves. Nor was Charlotte Bronte an exception. Fundamentally, her principal characters are all the same person; and that is Charlotte Bronte. Her range is confined, not only to a direct expression of Charlotte Bronte’s emotions and impressions. In this, her final limitation, we come to indeed to the distinguishing fact of her character as a novelist. The world she creates is the world of her own inner life; she is her own subject.

She does not pause to consider probability either. Charlotte Bronte’s incapacity to make a book coherent as a whole is only equalled by her incapacity to construct a plausible machinery of action for its component parts. Her plots are not dull; they are at once conventional, confusing and unlikely.

Her books – and this is true of no other English novelist of comparable merit – are, but for the continued presence of certain figures, incoherent. Nor is this because they are like Pickwick, a succession of adventures only connected by a hero. No, each is a drama: but not one drama. Charlotte Brontë will embark on a dramatic action and then, when it is half finished, without warning abandon it for another, equally dramatic, but without bearing on what has come before or will follow after. The first quarter of Jane Eyre is about Jane’s life as a child; the next half devoted to her relation with Rochester: in the last quarter of the book, St John Rivers appears, and the rest of the book, except for the final chapters is concerned with her relation to him.

Lord David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists (1934)
4. It is perhaps the index of Charlotte’s achievement, however, that she needs to be read in adolescence; come to her work after that and a considerable act of imagination is called for before she can be read with sympathy.

Fundamental to all her novels is the pupil-master relationship, which is her rationalization, based on her own limited experience of life outside Haworth, of one of the commonest sexual dreams of women: the desire to be mastered, but to be mastered by a man so lofty in his scorn for women as to make the very fact of being mastered a powerful adjunct to the woman’s self-esteem. It is a fantasy with obvious affinities with the Cinderella story: the man stoops down, as it were, from a great height. But it goes a step beyond the Cinderella story in sophistication. The woman triumphs not merely because she compels the proud man to stoop. Phyllis Bentley has argued that *Jane Eyre* is much more than ‘a mere “escape” romance’ because Jane does not ‘enjoy a complete, unreal triumph’; she is left with a half-blind husband. It would indeed be absurd to condemn *Jane Eyre* as a novel of escape, yet that Rochester should be half-blind and almost helpless at the end is the sign of the uncompromising nature of Charlotte Bronte’s fantasy: the proud man is struck in his pride by Nemesis. When he is helpless it is the woman’s turn to stoop; Rochester’s mutilation is the symbol of Jane’s triumph in the battle of the sexes.


Focus
Hide

Position
Hide

Reading 5
5. *Jane Eyre* is first-person is a quite radical way where *Wuthering Heights* is multipersonal: an effect of experience before it is ever a method. The connecting power of Charlotte Bronte’s fiction is in just this first-person capacity to compose an intimate relationship with the reader: from the easy friendly beginning – ‘I was glad of it, I never liked long walks’ – to the final and secret sharing – ‘I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart’: things the reader knows but the others – the other characters, the outside world – do not.

‘Reader, I married him.’ But that address to the reader, that capital public address, is a late pulling away as the story fades into retrospect, into the given account. While the experience lasts, the ‘I’ of the novel and the subjective position – of the reader are on a much closer bearing. What matters throughout is this private confidence, this mode of confession: the account given as if in a private letter, in private talk; the account given to a journal, a private journal, and then the act of writing includes, as it were involuntarily, yet it is very deliberate and conscious art – the awareness of the friend, the close one, the unknown but in this way intimate reader: the reader as the writer, while the urgent voice lasts.

Given the action of *Jane Eyre*, which is in every sense dramatic, there is a pull, all the same, between action and consciousness.

6. In 1847, a young woman of genius, vexed at publishers’ rejections of *The Professor*, the first novel she had completed, on the grounds that it ‘lacked colour’ and was too short, sat down to give the reading public exactly what she had been told they wanted – something ‘wild, wonderful and thrilling’, in three volumes. Rarely, if ever, has such a strategy proved so successful. The young woman’s name was Charlotte Brontë and the novel she produced, *Jane Eyre*, is still, after a century and a half, ‘wild, wonderful and thrilling’. It remains the most durable of melodramas, angry, sexy, a little crazy, a perennial bestseller – one of the oddest novels ever written, a delirious romance replete with elements of pure fairytale, given its extraordinary edge by the emotional intelligence of the writer and the exceptional sophistication of her heart.

Charlotte Brontë lived during one of the greatest periods of social change in English history. In all her novels, she is attempting to describe a way of living that had never existed before and had come into being with the unprecedented social and economic upheavals of England in the early industrial revolution. *Jane Eyre* herself is the prototype Brontë heroine – a woman on her own for whose behaviour there are no guidelines. This woman is not only capable of earning her own living but also must and needs to do so; for her, therefore, love is a means of existential definition, an exploration of the potentials of her self, rather than the means of induction into the contingent existence of the married woman, as it had been for the previous heroines of the bourgeois novel.

I don’t think for one moment that Charlotte Brontë knew she was doing this, precisely. When she wrote *Jane Eyre*, she thought she was writing a love story; but in order for Charlotte Brontë, with her precise history to write a love story, she had, first of all, to perform an analysis of erotic attraction upon a young woman who is not rich nor beautiful but, all the same, due to her background and education, free to choose what she does with her life.

The clarity and strength of Charlotte Brontë’s perception of her heroine’s struggle for love is extraordinary. Yet of all the great novels in the world, *Jane Eyre* veers the closest towards trash. Elizabeth Rigby, writing in the Quarterly review, 1848, makes the exact point that the novel combines ‘such genuine power with such horrid taste’. She went on, a touch petulantly, ‘the popularity of *Jane Eyre* is a proof how deeply the love of the illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature.’ In order to do something new, in order to describe a way of being that had no existing language to describe it, Charlotte Bronte reverted, to a large extent to pre-bourgeois forms. *Jane Eyre* is the classic formulation of the romance narrative, with its mysteries of parentage, lost relatives miraculously recovered, stolen letters, betrayal, deceit – and it fuses elements of two ancient fairytales, *Bluebeard*, specifically referred to in the text when Thornfield Hall is compared to Bluebeard’s castle, and *Beauty and the Beast*,

Reading 6
plus a titillating hint of *Cinderella*. The archaic sub-literary forms of romance and fairytale are so close to dreaming they lend themselves readily to psychoanalytic interpretation. Episodes such as that in which Rochester’s mad wife rips apart the veil he has bought Jane to wear at his second, bigamous wedding have the delirium of dream language. As a result *Jane Eyre* is a peculiarly unsettling blend of penetrating psychological realism, of violent, intuitive feminism, of a surprisingly firm sociological grasp, and of the utterly non-realistic apparatus of psycho-sexual fantasy – irresistible passion, madness, violent death, dream, telepathic communication.

Critical Position Cards

GREAT AUTHORS
I prefer to read literature written by great artists whose work has stood the test of time. Even a minor work by a great author has value. What is important is to read the text closely, without being distracted by questions about the writer’s life, or too much concern with the conditions in which the work was produced. The writer’s art is what the reader should be able to see clearly.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

MORAL
For me, literature is nothing unless it teaches its readers something, and helps them to become better people. All good literature is basically moral and uplifting. It is important to consider the themes in the text, to understand its moral purpose.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

STRUCTURALISM/POST-STRUCTURALISM
I am not interested so much in when a text was written, or who it was written by, or even what it is about. I believe that we use language, not simply to describe the world, but to construct it. Therefore, in literature, I am most interested in how the text is constructed: its form, its overall structure and the patterns of language in it, especially pairs of opposites. Texts from popular culture, societies, belief systems are all structures which can be explored and analysed like a literary text. Some critics who, like me, were interested in patterns and structures became more interested in the gaps, silences and absences in texts. They became known as post-structuralists.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

GENRE THEORY
I believe that all literature can be classified into various types, or forms e.g. tragedy, comedy, romance, thriller, epic, lyric etc. I look for ways in which the text relates to the conventions of its genre. You can only really make sense of a text when you recognise the tradition to which it belongs.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …
I believe that the text needs to have a reader before it can mean anything. I work on constructing meanings from the text, filling in the gaps, making connections and predictions, and seeing how far these expectations of it are confirmed or disappointed. I think that the ‘mistakes’ a reader makes when predicting what will happen in a text are an important part of the meaning.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

PSYCHOANALYTIC
Because of my interest in the unconscious, I pay most attention to what is glossed over or ‘repressed’. I want to look beyond the obvious surface meaning to what the text is ‘really’ about. I also look for representations of psychological states or phases in literature, and am more interested in the emotional conflicts between the characters or groups in a text than in its wider context.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

FEMINIST
I believe that ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ are ideas constructed by our culture, and it is important to be aware of this when reading texts from periods and cultures different from our own. I prefer to read literature written by women, which explores women’s experience of the world. I am interested in how women are represented in texts written by men, and how these texts display the power relations between the sexes.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

RACE/POST-COLONIAL
The literature I prefer to read is often outside the white Anglo-Saxon tradition. I began by being interested in texts which explore the black struggle against injustice and oppression. I am aware of the negative portrayals of black people, and their absence generally, in white literature. I have become more interested in challenging the claims made by traditional critics that great literature has timeless and universal significance. I am aware when Eurocentric attitudes are taken for granted, and I look in the text for cultural, regional, social and national differences in outlook and experiences. I am interested in the way colonial countries and people are represented in texts by Western writers. I also explore the ways in which post-colonial writers write about their own identity and experiences.
This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …
I read literature to understand the class struggle at various times and in various places, and to explore the causes of conflict between the privileged and the working class. I think it is important to relate a text to the social context of its author and the historical contexts in which it was written and is read. This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …

CULTURAL MATERIALIST/NEW HISTORICIST
I read historical and other relevant texts, alongside the literary ones, in order to see more clearly the context in which the literature was produced, and to recover its history. I am interested in pre-twentieth century texts, often those written in the Renaissance, for example Shakespeare. I look at the ways these texts have been packaged and consumed in the present day. However, I also analyse the text closely, in order to question previous ways in which the text has been read. The word ‘cultural’ in my label means that I consider all forms of culture, popular as well as high culture, to be relevant; ‘materialist’ means that I believe that it is impossible for any form of culture to be independent of economic and political systems. This text interests me because …
I dislike this text because …