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by Mallory Sharp Baskett

In 1847 Smith, Elder & Company published *Jane Eyre*, the coming of age tale of a young woman who finds her own sense of personal identity and love in the end. Instant attention and mostly favorable reviews made the novel popular from the beginning. The curiosity surrounding the secretive author, Currer Bell, and his "brothers" Ellis and Acton, who published *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* the same year, was rampant. Eventually, misunderstandings surrounding the mysterious authorship of *Jane Eyre* prompted Charlotte Brontë to lift her pseudonym and reveal herself as the author. Many English speaking high schools and universities require their students to study *Jane Eyre* because of its literary significance. The book was popular in its own time and has gained fresh views through the series of literary analyses it has undergone in the years since it was published. To fully understand the impact of *Jane Eyre*, it must first be understood in its own time. While the impact is primarily related to literary themes, the work's authorship and historical context highlight its importance in the canon of British literature. While today *Jane Eyre* is often viewed in light of its pre-feminist elements, Brontë's straightforward prose and strong characters aptly demonstrated contemporary English society at the time of its publication.

Charlotte Brontë completed the *Jane Eyre* manuscript in 1847, and by October of the same year it was available for purchase. Queen Victoria had become the new English monarch ten years prior in 1837, and so began the Victorian Era. Victoria's rise to the throne marked the end of an age, and the beginning of a new one. King George III, who reigned for a lengthy fifty-nine years, passed away after suffering from bouts of insanity in the latter part of his life. The war with the American colonies, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars characterized George III's reign. Mental and physical illness tainted the latter years of his rule and allowed his sons to intrude in his affairs. This interference created a great distrust surrounding the monarchy in the years leading to Queen Victoria's ascent to the throne. Because of these concerns, Victoria's early years as queen were difficult. The previous century's revolutions in France and England were fresh on the minds of the English. As a result, the concept of equality, at least among males, became increasingly popular. Middle class voters

often switched parties because they feared political unrest. In May of 1838, only eleven months after Victoria claimed the throne, a group of working-class leaders gave birth to the Chartist Movement. Their publication of the People's Charter was a petition for universal male suffrage, the removal of the property requirement for Parliament's members, and annual meetings of Parliament. The significance of the Chartist Movement as one of the first working-class social reform movements in England was more important than the particulars the Chartists wished to exact.[1] Seemingly all of the political changes taking place related to the rigid order of the social classes.

During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution brought change to the English social structure. The traditional social order had placed nobles—aristocracy and gentry—at the top and everyone else at the bottom. But during the 1850s, a new middle class developed from members of the lower class who became involved in manufacturing and commerce. Every class had a wide variety of social standings: the lower classes ranged from skilled workingmen to those so poor they lived in poorhouses. At the top of the lower classes, the working class comprised the majority of the English population. Brontë's depiction of Jane Eyre as a domestic servant places Eyre in this emerging lower class group.[2]

Women were second to men in every social class. Women were unable to vote and did not share equal legal status with men. Family values and proper behavior became important, particularly in the aristocracy, following Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert in 1840 and their subsequent family. These values gave rise to the Victorian belief that the proper female who was a "sexually naïve, idle, self-indulgent female devoted to home and family."[3] The ideal Victorian woman was little more than a pretty object, completely void of passion and feeling and wholly subservient to her husband and other male figures. The poorest of women often worked in factories or other more detestable situations, but if a woman wanted to be "proper" and still have a job, her only options were to be a teacher or a governess. It was very rare, almost unthinkable, for a woman to achieve success as a writer as Charlotte Brontë did.[4] This was why before revealing their true identities, the Brontë sisters chose pseudonyms for themselves. Feminine existence during Charlotte

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[1] Winston S. Churchill, *The Great Democracies: A History of the English People Volume IV* (1958; repr. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2005), 46.

[2] Raychel Haugrud Reiff, *Charlotte Brontë* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2006), 45-6.

[3] Reiff, 47.

[4] Reiff, 48-9.

Brontë's time was marked by these strict observances and vocational difficulties.

Romanticism began in the 18th century, when artists, poets, writers, and theologians grew weary of the increasingly industrial age that characterized the years following the Enlightenment. Science brought medical and transportation advancements, but it also attacked religious notions such as the traditional age of the earth and destroyed serene and natural landscapes in favor of mines and factories. Romanticism was a reactionary movement against Industrialism and science. As a part of Romanticism, Gothic elements became increasingly popular in literature, as well as in architecture and art. The Gothic style was a more specific field of Romantic literature that fixated on the past before the Enlightenment, particularly the medieval period. In literature, feelings and sensibility were valued above reason and detachment. Common elements included spiritual subjects, passionate romance, horror, violent weather, and dark mysterious settings.[5] While the movement had already reached its peak by the time Queen Victoria took the throne, Romanticism was still highly influential and writers of the period, like Brontë, employed romantic elements in their writings.[6]

Charlotte Brontë was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1816 to the Reverend Patrick Brontë and his wife Maria. Charlotte Brontë was the third of six children, and the oldest of the four children who survived to adulthood. When Charlotte was five years old, her mother died, leaving Reverend Brontë to raise six small children on his own. In 1820, Reverend Patrick Brontë received a new curate in the rural village of Haworth. This move to the moorland setting of Haworth was extremely seminal in the shaping of Brontë's childhood. The Reverend encouraged his children to spend time outdoors exploring the natural world and applying it to their studies in natural history. These experiences instilled a strong connection to nature and personal independence in Charlotte, which are evident in her novels.[7]

The Reverend Brontë also encouraged his children to read; he loved poetry and the classics. Charlotte Brontë happily indulged herself in such readings and took great care to study the works. Throughout her life Charlotte was able to read whatever she liked, which was uncommon in most Victorian era homes. This undoubtedly contributed to Charlotte's knowledge. In

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[5] David Stevens, *The Gothic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9-10, 22-24.

[6] Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), 6.

[7] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."

September 1824, Charlotte and her younger sister Emily left home to study at the Cowan Bridge Clergy Daughters' School in Lancashire, following in the footsteps of their two older sisters Maria and Elizabeth. Due to meager sustenance and strict routines, in 1825 many of the students became very ill, among them were Maria and Elizabeth Brontë. Upon the eldest daughters' sickness, Reverend Brontë brought all of his daughters home. Both Maria and Elizabeth passed away as a result of the tuberculosis they contracted at school. Charlotte openly hated the Cowan Bridge School, and she used her own experiences here as inspiration for Lowood School in *Jane Eyre.* For the next five years the Reverend Brontë and his wife's sister educated Charlotte, Emily, and the two younger siblings, Branwell and Anne, at home. They received a good education and were thoroughly educated in literature.[8] Charlotte and her younger siblings began writing during their home education years. Their stories were influenced by the Romantic poetry of Byron and classic tales like *The Arabian Nights.* When Charlotte and her brother, Branwell, were older they created an imaginary world called Angria and used this locale as the setting for the fictional stories they wrote together based on their interest in politics and romance.[9] Brontë continued to write in this vein throughout her adult life.

Charlotte went away to school at Roe Head when she was 14 in 1830. She was the leading pupil in the school, and she worked hard to learn new things so that she could teach her younger sisters. Unlike her first experience away at school, Charlotte's experience at Roe Head was a pleasant one, and the other students admired her for her knowledge. In July of 1835, Charlotte returned to the school to work as a teacher. She chose this line of work so that the family could afford to send her younger sisters to the school. Charlotte disliked teaching at Roe Head because of her lack of personal freedom and independence, but she was so dedicated to her sisters' education that she remained a teacher there for three years. Charlotte greatly desired to become a paid writer and wrote to Robert Southey, England's poet laureate, for advice. To Charlotte's dismay, Southey responded, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: and it ought not to be."[10] Charlotte was disheartened by this response, but valued the advice and

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[8] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 839.

[9] Reiff, 20-25.

[10] Margaret Smith, ed., *Charlotte Brontë: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10, note 2. This collection of letters contains Brontë's writings to Southey, but does not include Southey's response. The footnote cited includes the editor's reflections on Southey's response.

discontinued writing for a few years. However, the years that Charlotte abstained from writing proved extremely influential to her future works.

In 1839, Charlotte refused two marriage proposals: one from the Reverend James Bryce, with whom she was not well enough acquainted to accept, and the other from the Reverend Henry Nussey, who was the brother of a good friend. Charlotte refused Nussey because she did not love him, an act which was extremely brave, considering the difficulties a woman had in securing her own way of making a living. Charlotte recognized this bravery when she wrote to her friend Margaret Wooler in 1846 saying, "There is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quietly perseveringly." [11] These experiences inspired the similar events in *Jane Eyre* where Jane refuses to marry St. John only because she does not love him. After voluntarily choosing to remain single, Brontë began the life of a single working woman again, this time as a governess. After a miserable two years in this field of work, however, she was eager for a new adventure.

Charlotte and her two sisters longed to start their own school at Haworth, but first needed to improve their own credentials. In pursuit of this, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne left England to study in Brussels, Belgium at Madame Claire Zoë Heger's School in 1842. The death of the girls' Aunt Branwell called them home that fall, but Charlotte returned to Brussels alone to teach English and continue her lessons with the Hegers. Charlotte fell in love with Monsieur Heger, but he was married, so their union could never be legitimate. His encouragement of her writing and thinking was unlike any man she had encountered, but the relationship was terminated when Madame Heger became uncomfortable with Charlotte and Monsieur Heger's friendship. As a result, Charlotte left Belgium for home with a heavy heart. Her friendship with Monsieur Heger, however, had given her the tools to become a better writer, as well as inspiration for many of her writings.[12]

After leaving Belgium, Charlotte returned to Haworth where she lived for the remainder of her life. She wrote all of her novels and all of her poems from her home here. Charlotte's first published work was *Poems*, which she wrote together with her sisters. The publication of this book in May of 1846 marked the

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[11] Brontë to Margaret Wooler, Haworth, 30 January 1846, in *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."

[12] Reiff, 29; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."

birth of Charlotte's pseudonym: Currer Bell. The sisters decided to use these "genderless" names because they believed their audience would be biased if they knew the authors were women.[13] *Poems* was not a success, but it gave Charlotte the courage to continue writing and the valuable knowledge that novel writing would be more financially successful. Charlotte completed her first novel, *The Professor*, in July of 1846. Publisher after publisher rejected this first manuscript, and it was ultimately published posthumously in 1857. Charlotte Brontë's greatest success lay with her next work, *Jane Eyre*, which Smith, Elder and Company published in October of 1847.

Jane Eyre is Charlotte Brontë's most significant and best-known work. The original title of publication was *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, edited by Currer Bell. Portraying the novel as an autobiography lent Brontë the freedom of having Jane Eyre narrate in first person to uniquely and directly address the reader. The novel is the story of the titular Jane Eyre's coming of age and it is all the more authentic because it reflects events in Brontë's own life, such as her education and work as both a teacher and governess. The novel reflects its historical period through its portrayal of the social hierarchy of the time, gender inequality, and the use of gothic imagery.

The story begins when Jane is ten years old and living under the care of her aunt, the cold-hearted Mrs. Reed. Mrs. Reed is the widow of Jane's Uncle Reed who took custody of Jane after her parents' death, but he died shortly after receiving Jane into his home. Mrs. Reed selfishly feels burdened at the prospect of raising Jane alongside her own three children, despite the wealth her husband left to her. Jane's childhood experiences in the Reed home are demonstrative of the order of the social hierarchy of the day. Even from her infancy Jane's aunt discriminates against her because of Jane's status as an orphan and Jane's father's low standing in society. Jane suffers from neglect and even abuse at the hands of Mrs. Reed and her children, Jane's cousins. In their final conflict, Mrs. Reed locks Jane in the Red Room, the room where Mr. Reed died, and Jane suffers some sort of fit because she is so frightened. Jane's experience in the Red Room is indicative of the gothic, with Jane's sensing the presence of her deceased uncle. This final conflict was so troublesome to both Jane and Mrs. Reed that Mrs. Reed allows Jane to leave her life with the Reed family and attend Lowood School.

At Lowood School Jane truly begins to understand the meaning of friendship and loving relationships. At first the

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[13] Reiff, 30; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."

prejudices of Mrs. Reed follow Jane to the school and Jane, along with the pupils, suffer from malnourishment at the hand of the mean-spirited school treasurer. Eventually, the loving school superintendent, Miss Temple, corrects these issues. Through Jane's friendships and careful education, Jane grows from a lonely child to a learned, independent woman during her time at Lowood. Jane serves as a teacher at Lowood for two years after completing her own education, but she hungers for different scenery and advertises herself in the newspaper as a governess. Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper of Thornfield Hall, quickly accepts Jane's advertisement and offers her the position of governess for the estate's ward, Adèle. Jane's fateful decision to accept the position at Thornfield forever changes the course of Jane's life.

Through Jane's arrival at Thornfield, Brontë strongly emphasizes gothic elements. At this point Brontë utilizes the weather to convey a sense of foreboding and to add to the rich emotional tone of the work. Brontë depicts Thornfield Hall as a semi-haunted setting, full of shadow and mystery, with strange noises and dark secrets. As Jane grows accustomed to her home, she becomes better acquainted with her new master. Strange events happen from the very beginning of Jane's arrival at Thornfield, but these events strengthen Jane and Mr. Rochester's attachment to one another. Jane Eyre proves herself to be a dependable friend to Mr. Rochester when one eerie night she discovers him asleep in his bed engulfed in flames. After this incident, Jane and Mr. Rochester spend more time together, becoming better acquainted. Mr. Rochester treats Jane as an equal, going so far as to tell her that he wishes her to freely speak her mind, despite her inferiority of class, her gender and her youth. Through her interactions with Mr. Rochester, Jane becomes more independent and confident.

Because Mr. Rochester is a wealthy man, the company he receives are other wealthy visitors who stay in his home for an extended period. During the stay of his guests, the rigidity of the English social hierarchy is a constant theme. Mr. Rochester invites Jane to his dinner parties, but his guests ignore her or treat her in a servile manner. The cruelest of Mr. Rochester's guests is Miss Ingram: a haughty, beautiful woman. Jane notices that Mr. Rochester has a particular regard for Miss Ingramm and the other guests also suspect an imminent marriage proposal. Though she does not recognize it as such at first, Jane experiences the pangs of jealousy when she observes Mr. Rochester's interactions with Miss Ingram. Jane realizes that she is in love with Mr. Rochester when she becomes aware of her jealousy. The thought of being torn away from Mr. Rochester when he marries another woman is painful to Jane, but she does

not yet know how to handle her emotions.

Jane's former benefactress, Mrs. Reed, becomes ill and requests to see Jane Eyre. Jane plays the role of dutiful niece and leaves Thornfield Hall to visit the dying woman she despised in her youth. Jane expects she has been called to her aunt's bedside to be asked for forgiveness for the dreadful way she was treated as a child. But when this does not happen, Jane realizes that she does not need apologies. She can accept the past and move on. While her discussion with her aunt is not a successful one, Jane's interactions with her cousins are more successful, furthering the notion that respect and admiration can cross the boundaries of class.

Shortly after Jane's return to Thornfield Hall, she expects to learn of Mr. Rochester's engagement to Miss Ingram. Instead, Mr. Rochester declares unconditional love for Jane Eyre. While at first distrustful of this, Jane eventually happily, openly and fearlessly reciprocates Mr. Rochester's feelings and the two decide to get married within the month. In addition to being in love with Mr. Rochester, Jane looks forward to the union with her future husband, because his finances will allow her to travel with him and his generous spirit will allow her expressions of independence and freedom of opinion.

Unfortunately, Jane's happy life is not to be. In the middle of the wedding, a stranger arrives to report the news that Mr. Rochester already has a wife and therefore cannot legally be married to Jane. Mr. Rochester confirms this news to be true. In fact, Mr. Rochester's insane wife Bertha Mason who had caused all of the strange noises Jane had been hearing, and even started the fire in Mr. Rochester's bed. Mr. Rochester is deeply apologetic and desires to flee to another country with Jane where he will treat her as his wife, but Jane does not want to attach herself to a man to whom she would merely be a mistress. While Jane does forgive Mr. Rochester for his deceit, she knows if she does not want to be his mistress she must leave Thornfield Hall.

After several days of traveling, a sickly Jane arrives at Marsh End. It is here that Jane is taken care of by the Rivers family who help her regain her strength until she can find some form of employment. While teaching at a school for girls in the town where Rivers family lives, Jane receives a letter explaining than an uncle she has never known has passed away and left all of his fortune to her. From this letter Jane also learns the Rivers are her cousins. Jane graciously divides the inheritance between her cousins and herself and continues living with them at Marsh End. St. John Rivers, Jane's male cousin, does not love Jane but finds her hardworking and determined spirit suitable for the mission work he desires to do and so proposes to Jane. St. John

is Mr. Rochester's perfect foil; he is more handsome and more restrained, but Jane feels pressure to please the judgmental St. John. Aside from this major concern, Jane does not love St. John and even though she cannot marry Mr. Rochester, she does not desire to marry another man. Jane's new wealth also gives her the confidence to be able to refuse the proposal because her survival does not depend on the marriage.

Not long after Jane's refusal to marry St. John Rivers, Jane has a supernatural experience in which she thinks she can hear Mr. Rochester cry out to her in the night. Jane determines that the time is right for her to visit Mr. Rochester and see how he has fared after their year apart. She travels to Thornfield Hall to find that only a burnt ruin remains. After discovering that Bertha Mason perished in the fire and that Mr. Rochester is now blinded from the fire and living at his country estate, Jane is more determined to visit than ever.

Upon Jane's arrival to the country estate, Mr. Rochester happily receives her at his home and the two quickly reconcile. In spite of his insecurity about his physical defects, he tells Jane how much he has missed her and how he has not stopped loving her. Jane freely accepts Mr. Rochester's proposal and eagerly returns his love. Her independent experiences and her personal decision to return to Mr. Rochester place their impending marriage on much more equal footing. Jane will have to be Mr. Rochester's eyes and helpmate because of his handicapped state, therefore rendering him dependent on Jane. Brontë concludes the story of Jane Eyre with a discussion of Jane's happy marriage to Mr. Rochester and the satisfaction that the equality of their union has brought to both of them.[14]

Jane Eyre was incredibly popular from the moment it was published. Although it was published in October of 1847, it quickly became one of the best selling novels of that year.[15] Even Queen Victoria read Jane Eyre and enjoyed the novel enough to mention it in her diary.[16] George Henry Lewes, a notable literary critic, highly praised *Jane Eyre* and its mysterious author: "Reality—deep, significant reality, is the characteristic of this book. It is an autobiography—not perhaps in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience. This gives the book its charm." [17] While early reviews were mostly positive, the negative critiques are a fine example of how well the

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[14] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1847).

[15] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."

[16] Margot Peters, *Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1975), 213, 247; Reiff, 85.

[17] George Henry Lewes, "Recent Novels: English and French," *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1847.

book reflected its time. Some of the changes that societal reformers hoped for were some of the very things with which Brontë's harshest critics took issue. One commonly cited review from the *Quarterly Review* in December of 1848 had strong negative opinions toward *Jane Eyre*. The critic, who strangely like Brontë was a woman writing under a male pseudonym, attributed the novel's popularity to the fascination with forbidden "illegitimate romance."[18] This review of the novel also criticized the main character for being too uncouth. [19] When compared to the ideal Victorian lady, the view held by some of Jane Eyre as a coarse heroine is comprehensible.

The Victorian lady was expected to be virtually emotionless, unless her emotions related to domestic life. Jane Eyre was full of passion and even spoke plainly to Mr. Rochester more times than not. Present day feminists have heralded *Jane Eyre* as one of the earliest pieces of proto-feminist literature. While the term "feminist" is anachronistic—no feminist movements or even women's suffrage movements began until years later—Brontë's depiction of Jane Eyre's relationship with Mr. Rochester was a powerful example for feminist literature in the years to come. In a passionate conversation before Mr. Rochester proposed to Jane she said, "It is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!"[20] This statement was more an assertion of spiritual equality, but it has been used in support of the proto-feminist argument. Jane's frank declarations of her feelings to Mr. Rochester would have been offensive to some Victorian readers, but to most readers, Jane Eyre was a strong heroine surrounded by gothic elements. Jane Eyre was different from other flimsy gothic heroines of the same time period—even Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is completely devoid of strong female characters. The character of Jane Eyre was unique in her time for being both passionate *and* sensible. Although, Jane did not hesitate to speak passionately to Mr. Rochester and to others, she also does not give herself completely over to these passions. When Mr. Rochester wanted to leave for Europe with Jane as his mistress, she refused to indulge in such sexually scandalous behavior, as a proper Victorian lady should. Brontë's novel struck the perfect balance with enough passion to tell a bold love story and enough restraint to appease Victorian

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[18] *Nineteenth Century Literature Criticism*, s.v. *"Jane Eyre."* This critic was Elizabeth Rigby, later Lady Eastlake and despite her disgust with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, she became a noteworthy female writer in her own right as a pioneer of female journalism.

[19] Reiff, 49; add the review that says this

[20] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 268.

values.

Charlotte Brontë also elaborated on another Victorian issue in her story: the insane woman. Bertha Mason's character not only added to the gothic imagery in *Jane Eyre*, but also addressed the Victorian question of how the mentally unstable were diagnosed and how they should be treated. A prevalent belief in the 19th century was that the onset of mental instability began with the female reproductive system. Therefore, the common belief was that the mother typically passed mental illness to the child.[21] Brontë's description of Bertha Mason was consistent with this popular theory. She described Mason as "the true daughter of an infamous mother."[22] Mason's mental illness was also attributed to her poor moral conduct and her sexual deviancy. This characterization is related to the Victorian theory that unchecked immoral proclivities could affect a person's mental capacity. Also noteworthy is Brontë's subtle commentary on mental institutions, which some Victorian people believed to be cruel. At the time Brontë was writing Jane Eyre there were about 30 percent more women than men in asylums. This number does not include the number of insane persons who were cared for in the home, like Bertha Mason was. Mr. Rochester's decision to care for Bertha Mason at Thornfield rather than place her in an institution was both out of respect to the woman who had lived as his wife for four years and as a kindness to keep her from the often negligent institutions. The unintended consequence of Brontë's depiction of Bertha Mason was that it influenced psychiatric thinking at the time regarding patients cared for inside the home. Elaine Showalter sees evidence of Bertha Mason in John Connolly's book *Treatment of the Insane Without Mechanical Restraints*, written in 1856, when he discussed the need to keep insane persons in institutions and not in the home, where they might be a danger to their caretakers.[23]

Jane Eyre most reflected the time in which it was written by capturing the Romantic and Gothic spirit. Jane's ghostly encounters in the Red Room, the unearthly laughter of Bertha Mason, and the phenomena of hearing Mr. Rochester's voice from impossibly far away are examples that easily fit in with the supernatural element of the quintessential Gothic tale. The whole novel is shrouded in mystery, from shadowy Thornfield to Mr. Rochester's past life. The passionate love between Jane and Mr.

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[21] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 67.

[22] Brontë, 324.

[23] Showalter, 68. The reference to Connolly's book of 1856 discusses a passage in which Connolly alludes to the keeping of insane persons in hidden rooms in the home and their attraction to fire, both indicative of Bertha Mason.

Rochester is indicative of the novel's Romantic and Gothic influence, as well.[24] Charlotte Brontë's greatest success in terms of the genre was her ability to blend gothic elements into a realistic story without making it nonsensical.[25] These Gothic motifs inspired hundreds of novels for years to come. One of the most successful novels to count Jane Eyre as an influence is Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca*.

In addition to Brontë's advancement of the gothic subgenre, her writing style was also extremely unique. Brontë mastered the unusual method of the narrator's direct address to the reader. One of the most famous quotes from *Jane Eyre* is demonstrative of this: "Reader, I married him."[26] The first person style communicated directly to the readers and involved them in the drama. This made a reader have to consider his or her feelings about the oppression Jane suffered because of her inferior birth as well as Brontë's critiques on marriage, family, education, and society as a whole. This is, no doubt, what has caused some readers to view the novel warily and see it as "dangerously revolutionary."[27] While *Jane Eyre* did not evoke a life-changing outcome in English society—Brontë never intended this—it did fit in properly with issues of its time. The Chartist Movement resurged in 1848, the year after *Jane Eyre* was published.[28] Although it is ridiculous to assert that Brontë's popular novel reintroduced the movement, it is noteworthy that her work accurately portrayed some of the issues of English society at the same time reform movements were beginning. Brontë's middleclass readers especially connected with Jane Eyre's struggle.

After writing *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's life changed dramatically. She achieved incredible fame and garnered generally positive recognition, but her family life turned upside down when her three younger siblings died in quick succession. Despite extreme loneliness, Brontë continued to write and published two more novels before her death: *Shirley* in 1849 and *Villette* in 1853. Despite a devoted following, neither work acquired the popularity or critical approval of *Jane Eyre*. In 1854 Brontë married Arthur Bell Nicholls and the two were extremely happy together during the short duration of their union. Brontë became pregnant soon after the marriage and was physically weakened by her unusually severe bouts of morning sickness.

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[24] Reiff, 84.

[25] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."

[26] Brontë, 517.

[27] Diane Long Hoeveler and Lisa Jadwin, *Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 61.

[28] Churchill, 55.

She died on March 31, 1855, after suffering from a cold.[29] Though her life was short, Charlotte Brontë's legacy reached far into the future.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has inspired scores of women writers in the years since its publication. Brontë's knowledge of her own time period left a clear portrait of English society in the Victorian era that readers today can glean from her works. Her influence in making the gothic subplot more accessible is profound even to this day. *Jane Eyre* was so successful in its own time and in the years following that filmmakers and playwrights have adapted the story dozens of times. It is a rare novel that can tell an effective story in its own time and still address avant-garde issues such as social criticism and feminism. Whether her words are by spoken by a Hollywood actor or her influence is sensed in a 21st century novel, Charlotte Brontë's legacy is ever continuing.

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[29] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Charlotte Brontë."