

Jane Eyre Reading Group Guide

Includes questions comparing the novel to the upcoming movie.



About this guide

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Charlotte Brontë's beloved classic novel *Jane Eyre*. We hope that they will give you a number of interesting angles from which to consider this novel that is simultaneously mysterious, poetic, and romantic. For your reference, page numbers included below refer to the Vintage Books Movie tie-in edition of *Jane Eyre*.

For discussion

1. How does the stormy weather in the opening scene reflect Jane's state of mind? What do we learn about Jane's position in the household? Why is the scene of her punishment in the red room so emotional (Chapter II)? How does the narration secure the reader's sympathy for Jane?
2. At the Lowood School, Jane's most beloved friend is Helen Burns, who with great dignity endures frequent punishment and humiliation by Miss Scatcherd. Jane admires Helen, but realizes that she cannot emulate her (Chapters VII–IX). Why not? What aspect of Jane's character doesn't allow her to be as saintly as Helen?
3. When Jane takes in the view from the roof of Rochester's house, she dreams of freedom and travel. Is it significant that this is the place where she first hears a strange and frightening laughter (1:135, 139)? Many readers and critics have sought to understand the connection between Jane and Bertha Mason. Are they similar in their anger toward their perceived and actual imprisonments? Are they similar in other ways?

4. In three famous paragraphs beginning “Anybody may blame me who likes . . .” *Jane Eyre* contains a passionate argument for women’s need for learning, satisfying work, and more freedom than the domestic sphere allowed during the Victorian time period. Read and discuss this passage as it relates to Jane’s character and her life story (1:138–39). Would you consider *Jane Eyre* a satisfying story from a feminist perspective?
5. Jane is taking a walk when she meets Mr. Rochester (1:140–47). What is noteworthy about this first meeting? What is the atmosphere? What is the power dynamic? How does he treat her when they meet back at the house? What is Rochester attracted to in Jane? What is she attracted to in him?
6. Why does Rochester deceive Jane by openly courting Blanche Ingram? Is he too manipulative and self-indulgent to deserve the honest Jane Eyre as his wife?
7. At a critical moment in the novel, Jane proclaims herself Rochester’s equal: “It is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both of us had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal—as we are!” Rochester responds, “As we are!” (2:17–18). Why is Jane so passionately outspoken? Is her self-valuation exceptional and true? Is she more noble and impressive here than Rochester is? Why is this long scene (Chapter XXIII) so important for the novel as a whole?
8. Reread Rochester’s tale of his marriage to Bertha Mason in Jamaica, noting particularly the terms he uses. How does he characterize his wife? Does his description of his ill luck in marrying Bertha—“a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw, was associated with mine, and called by the law and by society a part of me” (2:88)—provoke sympathy? Who is responsible for the monstrous person Bertha has become—heredity, her own vice and depravity, fate, or perhaps Rochester himself?
9. Jane refuses to go live with Rochester in the south of France as his mistress, choosing instead to lose him forever. Do her reasons have to do with her Christian morality, or with the lack of equality and respect she foresees in such an arrangement? He is older than she, and a member of the landed aristocracy, while she is young, penniless, and has no friends or family in the world. Discuss the complicated chapter in which he tries to explain himself for attempting to lure her into a bigamous marriage, and the scene in which she takes leave of him (Chapter XXVII).
10. After Jane lives for some time at Moor House, St. John Rivers discovers her real name and that she is his cousin. She is, in fact, the missing heir of their uncle, who in leaving his fortune to Jane Eyre, has disinherited St. John, Mary, and Diana (2:185–98). At one stroke, Jane becomes a wealthy woman and acquires three beloved cousins (with whom she shares her fortune). How do you respond to such a bold departure in tone from the beginning of the novel?

11. Is the theme of Christian salvation in *Jane Eyre* at odds with Jane's desire for emancipation and self-realization? Is she submissive or rebellious? How do Jane's efforts toward self-fulfillment relate to her desire to be good? Why does she end her narrative with St. John Rivers's prayer, instead of with the conclusion of her own tale?
12. Jane is about to yield to St. John's urging that she marry him and go to India, when she hears a disembodied cry (2:240). How does Jane react to this strange phenomenon, and how is it later explained (2:276–77)? What do you think of Brontë's decision to use this plot device?
13. Jane's life takes the form of a quest or journey, and with each phase of her life she finds herself in a new place. What would you say the ultimate goal of her quest is? When she ends her story, married to Mr. Rochester, is she finally at rest in her true home?
14. How do you interpret the tone of Jane's famous statement, "Reader, I married him" (2:279)? Some readers have long been troubled by what happens to Rochester after Jane leaves Thornfield, and even more so by the fact that his maiming and blinding—his severe diminishment of power and virility and pride—seem to be the harsh conditions necessary for their reunion and marriage. What sort of ending does Brontë offer: a logically and romantically satisfying one, or an obscurely disturbing and punitive one?

Comparing the Novel and the Movie/Screenplay:



1. Had you read the novel before seeing the film? If so, how did knowing the story beforehand affect your experience of the film?
2. The Vintage Books movie tie-in edition of *Jane Eyre* includes Moira Buffini's screenplay for the new film. After reading the original novel and the screenplay (or having seen the film), can you see why Buffini made the choices she did? How did she adjust the plot to suit a film adaptation? What changes did you find most effective?

3. How do the physical settings (houses, landscapes, etc.) in the film compare with what you had imagined in reading the novel? How would you describe the visual atmosphere that the film brings to the novel?
4. Have you seen other filmed adaptations of *Jane Eyre*? What is different in director Cary Fukunaga's version? Fukunaga has said he loved the 1944 *Jane Eyre* directed by Robert Stevenson, but "the Orson Welles–Joan Fontaine version was of an era. You wouldn't make a film like that anymore. I'm a stickler for raw authenticity, so I've spent a lot of time rereading the book and trying to feel out what Charlotte Brontë was feeling when she was writing it. That sort of spookiness that plagues the entire story . . . there's been something like twenty-four adaptations, and it's very rare that you see those sorts of darker sides." If you've seen the Stevenson's *Jane Eyre*, discuss the ways Fukunaga has been influenced by it, and the ways he has created a totally new vision of the novel as well. [To read the entire interview with Fukunaga by Kyle Buckman, please go to movieline.com: "Director Cary Fukunaga on the 'Darker Sides' of His Upcoming *Jane Eyre*" (March 10, 2010).]
5. Compare the character of Rochester in the novel and the film. How does the film present Rochester?



6. What did you think of the actors' performances in the film? How did they reshape your impressions of the characters they portray?

See the upcoming movie, JANE EYRE with your group, family and friends. For advanced tickets or group sales call 855-4JANEEYRE.

For more information on the upcoming film, visit: www.janeeyrethemovie.com

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