

Book review of Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre is a long book, 650 pages. It is challenging to read. It employs a large vocabulary, something that was done quite a bit in books of its era, 1841.

It is obviously still widely read. Goodreads, only twenty years old, has over two million ratings. There are about thirty versions on Amazon, the most-read having over twenty thousand reviews and likes.

It's challenging in that quite a bit of the text is in French and some in German. Though the context sort of makes it possible to figure out the foreign-language dialogue, to fully appreciate the book one would be better off with a knowledge of these languages. Charlotte Brontë apparently expected that her readership would have such an education.

Who would Brontë have been writing for? Presumably not the British aristocracy. They had the leisure to read, but they were never numerous enough to support works like she produced. It had to have been the emergent educated middle-class.

It is long for a novel. The plot complicated and thoroughly unlikely. The number of improbable circumstances, relationships and coincidences is beyond belief. Yet, as its continued popularity attests, it is a gripping story.

Classes in early Victorian England

It appears that the portrayal of life in England at the time is fairly accurate. The rich protagonists led lives of leisure and luxury in large manor houses. The educated middle class worked as tradesmen, schoolmasters, clergymen and doctors. Beneath them was the broad class of farmers and yeomen. Though [Tocqueville](#) writes that beggars had become numerous in this era, and the heroine Jane is accused of such, none appear in the book. Though Brontë attempts to capture the manner of speaking of the country folk, middle and upper-class characters are all remarkably, unbelievably articulate in unaccented English. The dialogue, particularly between people with a romantic interest in one another, is incredibly prolix, stilted and convoluted.

Social conventions

There were no conventions governing how unmarried men and women should behave. How courtship should be pursued, how courtship, engagements and marriages could be contracted and ended. The reasons that Jane Eyre, the heroine, gives for being unwilling to marry either of the two gentlemen who ask for her hand, seems to be rather far-fetched.

Vestiges of primogeniture guide the narrative, perhaps in overdrawn portrayals. Each of the two suitors finds himself constrained by the lack of an inheritance.

Much of the storyline has to do with selecting marriage partners. One of the protagonists, Mr. Rochester, was forced into a disadvantageous marriage by his strong-willed father in consideration of money. His wife turned out to be a lunatic. Mr. Rochester's real love is Jane Eyre, whom he hired as a governess. Jane's other suitor, St. John Reed, was likewise an employer who took a liking to her. There was no intermediation, no introduction in either case.

Their conversations address the question of whether one should marry for love or status. Love dominates in this narrative. A [reading of history](#) indicates that the notion marrying for love had emerged primarily in Europe, and only in about the twelfth century. Jane Austen showed that [considerations of family and finances](#) had still dominated only decades before. Jane refuses Mr. Reed because he was marrying primarily to acquire an appropriate wife, not out of love. He had rejected a woman who did love him and to whom he was drawn, but whom he deemed his intellectual inferior.

Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester for his intellect and other virtues, and he with her for the same things. The other couples, the minor characters in the book, seem to pretty much have happy marriages of choice.

Death and inheritance

Deaths are frequently used to advance the plot. Deaths, wills, inheritances, and so on are our plot devices that are used on several places in the story. As with other novels of this period, it helps to have an appreciation of the value of money.

In this novel there is discussion of a person with a net worth of a £1,000 being fairly prosperous, £5,000 enough on to set a person up comfortably for life, and £20,000 a fortune. In that era one troy ounce of gold cost 4.25 pounds sterling. Given that an ounce of gold costs about \$4,250 today, it appears that the above-mentioned thousand pounds would amount to a million dollars. Government inflation figures would yield a much lower figure, about \$200,000.

Innovation in style

Wikipedia says Jane Eyre is the first psychological novel, one in which the protagonists express their innermost thoughts. The protagonists analyze each other's character and express their assessments of their own character. All are of a Church of England background. Jane Eyre's second suitor, St. John Reed, is bent on the desire to Christianize the Hindus. Her assessment was that his love of his God surpassed whatever love he could offer her. The marriage would have been cold. Her first suitor, Mr. Rochester, was less strong in his Christianity but stronger in his affection for her.

There is a strong sense of what contemporary Christianity expected throughout the book. Prayer is common, and apostasy absent. The characters are open about the moral dilemmas that they face in making appropriate partnerships and acting appropriately in each other's company.

Education

Education is a major theme. Jane Eyre is an orphan who has the good fortune to be sponsored to attend a rather spartan but adequate private school, where she gets a good education. Its importance in distinguishing her from the commoners is significant. Jane speaks French and learns German.

Historical Period

The timeframe of this novel, 1840, is the height of the British East India Company. It is the time of the opium wars with China. Though transportation in the book is all by a horse-drawn carriage, it was the time in which railroads and steel-hulled vessels were coming into use. There is little mention of entrepreneurs, save for one rich fellow in the countryside who made his money via a needle factory.

There is little mention of the sources of income. Little dealing with tenants, rentals, sharecroppers or that sort of thing. The rich have money. There is no hint of how about one thousand pounds might be invested to produce enough income to support a family.

Overall assessment

The book is gripping, bringing tears to the reader's eyes despite its improbability. The reader is drawn into the romance. The words of the lovers seem to be more refined, more

high-flown, and the actual emotion being expressed. This book does feature kissing, which *Pride and Prejudice* that not. It also features extramarital sex and bastardy. Mr. Rochester was tainted by having had three mistresses, one of whom bore a daughter, not by him but supported by his charity.

To conclude this review, on a reader who is not a reader with concern for his time would be well advised to pick shorter novels of the same era did to get the sense of the period. The artistry in plot construction and dialogue does not make this book on stand out to any exceptional degree, and its length is a disincentive to reading it.