

# BBC BITESIZE – JANE EYRE Episode 4

**Carl:** Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. This series is designed to help you tackle your GCSE in English literature and give you the key things you need to ace your exam.

**Jean:** You can find an audio book of Jane Eyre read by Catherine Press on BBC Sounds to listen to the whole story.

**Carl:** I'm Carl Anka.

**Jean:** And I'm Jean Menzies. And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at even more of the characters within Jane Eyre. In episode two and three we looked at Jane Eyre, Mr Rochester and St John Rivers. Today it's all about Helen Burns, Mrs Reed and Bertha Mason.

**Carl:** There's a lot of important characters in this book Jane Eyre is quite hefty. So if you find it easier to make notes as you go along, grab a pen and paper before we look at the three characters within this podcast episode. We'll start the lovely Helen Burns.

## **Extract:**

"It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you. And besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil."

**Jean:** How do you even some her up, she's Jane's only friend at Lowood School. She has such an influence on her life. Jane is instantly drawn to her and she's the first person to ever be consistently kind to Jane. She is a good person. She takes her faith very seriously. She's an honest and loyal friend.

**Carl:** Helen is also, like Jane, continually victimised by the teachers and readily punished. However Helen's strong religious beliefs make her handle those punishments in a different way to Jane.

**Jean:** We've come to know Jane's fiery attitude and ability to stand up for herself and what's right. Helen is completely accepting of her punishment. The Bible has taught her to turn the other cheek, and she should accept whatever failings she's been told she has, apologise for them and take her punishment.

**Carl:** This just confuses Jane, who wants Helen to stand up for herself. Helen and Jane really love each other. They're a great pair of friends throughout the whole book. We know that Helen is unwell. In fact, we know this even before they meet as Jane says, "The sound of a cough close behind me made me turn my head." Heartbreakingly, Helen goes on to die while still at the school.

**Jean:** And even in these tragic circumstances, she manages to maintain her accepting and peaceful way. She is content at the idea of death and going to heaven. She's mature beyond her years when she instructs Jane not to be sad, because she'll be in a better place.

**Carl:** I'm not sure I can ever forgive Charlotte Bronte for taking Helen like that in a story with so many awful people for Jane to contend with. Helen was our first experience of true goodness and love for Jane, and she's just taken away. Really suddenly.

**Jean:** Yeah, I'm completely with you on that one. Whilst we're on the subject of awful people and characters though, we still need to talk about Mrs Reed.

**Carl:** Oh yes, we do.

**Jean:** Jane's aunt and an antagonist for a large portion of the Book, which means the villain or the person who goes against the protagonist or main character. Mrs Reed is the person who looks after Jane at Gateshead and she doesn't do it very nicely.

**Extract:**

Then Mrs Reed subjoined – “Take her away to the red-room and lock her in there.” Four hands were immediately laid upon me, and I was borne upstairs.

**Jean:** The red room is where Jane gets locked away and isn't allowed out when she's punished. Mrs Reed is a cruel woman who doesn't seem to interact much with Jane except to punish her.

**Carl:** Mrs Reed makes it very obvious from the start that she doesn't like Jane. She does, however, adore and idolise her three other children: John, Georgiana and Elisa. They can do no wrong in Mrs Reed's eyes. Even when John is violent towards Jane, it's Jane who needs to be punished.

**Jean:** At the beginning of the story we don't really ever understand why Mrs Reed dislikes her so strongly. She's a bit of a fairy tale villain. We do get an inkling that it's something to do with her husband or Jane's uncle, Mr Reed. And in this extract, we hear Jane say that herself.

**Extract:**

“What would Uncle Reed say to you, if he were alive?” Was my scarcely voluntary demand. I say scarcely voluntary, for it seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance.

**Carl:** What we heard just there happens quite early in the story. It's Jane questioning Mrs Reed, on what the late Mr Reed would have thought of the punishments she gives out to Jane.

**Jean:** And Mrs Reed does react to her saying that. Bronte tells us that she becomes troubled with a look of fear. And we know there's something more to this, which only makes a lot more sense later on in the story when Jane visits Mrs Reed on her deathbed and we find out that Mrs Reed has been driven by jealousy of Jane.

**Extract:**

I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it — a sickly, whining, pining thing! It would wail in its cradle all night long — not screaming heartily like any other child, but whimpering and moaning. Reed pitied it; and he used to nurse it and notice it as if it had been his own: more, indeed, than he ever noticed his own at that age.

**Carl:** That's what Mrs Reed said to Jane on her deathbed, isn't it?

**Jean:** Yes, she's describing why she hated Jane so much. And we learned that her husband, Jane's uncle, had loved her dearly. Perhaps even more than he loved his own children, which had made Mrs Reed incredibly jealous.

**Carl:** So that's why Mrs Reed treated Jane so badly. She was completely jealous of her, and had been since the day Jane had been born.

**Jean:** Jane tells us that Mrs Reed still hates her even on her deathbed. She never changes.

**Carl:** Time for the final character of this podcast episode. Bertha Mason, a character that we don't even know exists for quite a large chunk of this story.

**Extract:**

This was a demonic laugh—low, suppressed, and deep—uttered as it seemed, at the very key-hole of my chamber door.

**Jean:** So even before we find out Bertha exists, she's portrayed as a threatening presence. She is responsible for the fire that Jane saves Mr Rochester from. She's the source of the demonic laugh we've just heard Jane refer to. She attacks Mr Mason and tears Jane's veil before the wedding.

**Carl:** But we don't know who the person is behind all these things as they happen. So it's a real eye-opener when it is eventually revealed that it's Bertha during the first attempted wedding of Jane and Mr Rochester.

**Jean:** So Bertha's character is one that's really difficult to talk about because the way she's portrayed in the book is pretty awful. It's representative of the time and how people viewed mental illness, but it makes for very uncomfortable reading.

**Carl:** There's been a lot of discussion about how Charlotte Bronte makes Bertha “the other”. Bertha is often framed as the obstacle in the way of Mr Rochester and Jane's marriage, and she's described in ways that are quite dehumanising and separate from the rest of the characters.

**Jean:** There's not much sympathy shown towards her for her mental illness. Bertha is described as being of Creole descent. So she was a daughter of a white European settler living in the West Indies.

Mr Rochester was shipped to Jamaica to marry Bertha in a wedding arranged by his father, because Bertha was a wealthy woman.

**Carl:** It's all very complex. We'll take a look at this more in episode seven of the podcast. I will say by making Bertha come from the Caribbean, this really evokes the whole history of slavery, colonialism and slave exploitation. The first colonies of the British Empire were founded in North America and the West Indies. So a Caribbean character who was treated as "the other" opens up much deeper conversations about ethnicity at this time.

**Jean:** Another thing in this story, and with Bertha's character is that she doesn't have her own voice and I really wanted to hear her voice, because we only get to hear Rochester's version of events and what's described as her madness. But we all know that he isn't always the most truthful.

**Carl:** I've been told there's actually a book called *Wild Sargasso Sea* by the author Jean Reese, which has been written as a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and focuses on Bertha's story.

**Carl:** *Jane Eyre* is the story of a plain girl who meets a lot of challenges and you really see those challenges personified when you can see some of these secondary characters. Mrs Reed, St John Rivers, Bertha Mason, Helen Burns who was nothing but kind and died young. We said that Jane goes through a lot of challenges. That might have been an understatement.

**Jean:** Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize English literature podcast about some of the characters in *Jane Eyre*.

**Carl:** In Episode Five. We're going to be taking a closer look at the themes of *Jane Eyre*.

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