

BBC BITESIZE – JANE EYRE Episode 7

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast.

Jean: We're here today to help you dive a little deeper into some of the texts in GCSE English literature.

In this series, we've been chatting all about Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. I'm Jean Menzies.

Carl: I'm Carl Anka and this episode we're taking a closer look at the context of Jane Eyre, and the time in which it was written.

Jean: Charlotte Bronte published Jane Eyre in 1847.

Carl: Well, actually, Charlotte Bronte didn't publish Jane Eyre in 1847, Currer Bell did.

Jean: You're right. To publish as a woman in the 19th century was extremely difficult. So she published under the pseudonym Currer Bell.

She deliberately chose an ambiguous name, so that she didn't feel like she was pretending to be a man, but so that she could avoid some of the prejudice that women writers received at the time.

Carl: It was a very different time for women and Charlotte Bronte addressed many of the social issues around class and women at the time when she created the character of Jane Eyre. Jane was an advocate for women at a time where their skills and independence were seen as being of no real value to society. If a woman came from a background without money, like Jane, her only real option was to get married or find employment which must be suitable, like becoming a governess.

Charlotte Bronte is really aware of this position for women in the late Georgian and early Victorian society. That is the time period where this novel was set. Bronte is also aware of the difficulties faced by women who had no choice but to make their own way in the world.

Jean: Even marriage wasn't as simple as meeting someone, falling in love and getting married.

Extract:

"I believe she thought I had forgotten my station, and yours, sir."

"Station! station! -- your station is in my heart, and on the necks of those who would insult you, now or hereafter. -- Go."

Jean: So we heard this extract in episode four when we discussed the theme of social class and Jane Eyre. It's another really important part of the context of this novel. There was a strict social class structure in this period in history and class determined how an individual lived their life, and even who they would marry. Mrs Fairfax, the housekeeper at Thornfield, feels like Jane is going above her station, and not marrying within her own social class and she doesn't like it.

Carl: This is another time where we see how undervalued and vulnerable women were at the time, because men and their families tended to choose a suitable wife on the basis of a woman's dowry, which was a sum of money that the male received from the bride's family through marriage.

Jean: This shows Charlotte Bronte is writing with a full awareness of the position many women were in at the time. There's also a lot of elements within Jane Eyre that echo Charlotte Bronte's own life, which shows how she writes from such a place of understanding.

Extract:

He stood at Miss Temple's side; he was speaking low in her ear: I did not doubt he was making disclosures of my villainy; and I watched her eye with painful anxiety, expecting every moment to see its dark orb turn on me a glance of repugnance and contempt.

So this is when Jane was at Lowood School, which mirrors Charlotte's life as she and her own sisters went to a school, which was run by a headmaster who was as severe as Mr Brocklehurst.

Extract:

"I came to see you, Helen: I heard you were very ill, and I could not sleep till I had spoken to you."

"You came to bid me good-bye, then: you are just in time probably."

"Are you going somewhere, Helen? Are you going home?"

"Yes; to my long home -- my last home."

Carl: Helen Burns' death from tuberculosis or as it was known at the time consumption mirrors the death of two of Charlotte Bronte's sisters to the same disease. Charlotte actually believed that their deaths were due to the poor conditions at the school, which is reflected in Helen's experiences.

Jean: Charlotte was also a governess for a wealthy family, which is why she gave Jane the same job, writing from experience.

Extract:

"He is stone-blind," he said at last. "Yes, he is stone-blind, is Mr Edward."

I had dreaded worse. I had dreaded he was mad. I summoned strength to ask what had caused this calamity.

Jean: And even Mr Rochester's blindness echoes experiences of her own father suffering from temporary blindness after a stroke.

Carl: Miss Bronte definitely drew on personal experiences to write Jane Eyre so it represents the time in which it was written.

Jean: Although she did say that, despite the fact that Jane Eyre looked like her, they had little else in common, but the theme of the novel was felt deeply by her which shows in all we've just discussed.

Carl: It was deeply felt by a lot of people too, because the novel was enormously popular. Not only was Charlotte Bronte writing about this great heroine but novels as a form were growing in massive

popularity at this time. Novels that told stories about ordinary people were fairly new. So Jane Eyre stood out as a story about an ordinary member of society without wealth or social status.

Jean: Now this is a time where the “penny dreadfuls” were flourishing. These were cheap serialised comics that tended to feature crime, adventure or detectives. So you can see how a novel about a real ordinary woman in that era found such a great audience who hadn't seen that before. There's a huge audience for reality TV now, because we love seeing people like us on the telly. Well, this was reflecting real people for one of the first times in a book.

Extract:

I lived with that woman upstairs four years, and before that time she had tried me indeed: her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank: they were so strong, only cruelty could check them, and I would not use cruelty. What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities!

Jean: This is Mr Rochester describing Bertha as having a pygmy intellect, which is something we would not say now. He's saying she's not particularly smart. “Giant propensities,” is a word that describes a tendency to act a certain way. And we know that that's not a good way to Mr Rochester.

Bertha's character is really interesting to look at in terms of the context of when this novel was written. When we spoke about the character of Bertha Mason in episode three, we mentioned how the portrayal of mental illness was a real sign of the times. Bertha is portrayed as “the other” to Jane and she's described as a character to fear. As we just heard, Mr Rochester speaks about her in a really demeaning way. As the reader, we're told she's mentally ill and there is no sympathy or explanation for this. It's just used to add to her “otherness.”

Carl: Now, what does Jane Eyre tell us about how Victorians viewed mental health? Charlotte Bronte's descriptions drew upon wording she found in the family's medical encyclopaedia, called the Modern Domestic Medicine. The Bronte copy still survives. The British Library describes it as being well thumbed, and clearly frequently consulted and has annotations throughout. So Charlotte Bronte went through this book a lot.

How is Bertha described in the novel? Well, if you complete Jane Eyre, you will find terms like “eyes protruding and wild.” Things like “incessant talking, singing, shouting.” There's something there where Bronte says, Bertha has “rapid and successive change of features.” These are all descriptions given to Bertha. All of these descriptions feature in that same medical book, too.

Jean: And this is why I said Bertha's character's really interesting to look at in the context of the time it was written. Yes, it is an outdated view. But Charlotte Bronte could have been writing her character based on what she thought to be an accurate depiction of someone with mental health problems at the time, based on her medical encyclopaedia. Alternatively, she could have written about mental health in this way to draw attention to mental health struggles. We'll never truly know.

Extract:

"When I left college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me. My father said nothing about her money; but he told me Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram: tall, dark, and majestic."

Jean: Bertha is described as being of Creole descent, so she was the daughter of a white European settler living in the West Indies.

As we just heard, Mr Rochester was shipped to Jamaica to marry Bertha in a wedding arranged by his father, who, having left his estate to Rochester's older brother, arranged for Mr Rochester to marry a wealthy woman, Bertha. Charlotte Bronte leaves the precise nature of Bertha as "ethnicity ambiguous," but we hear that her parents wanted Bertha to marry Rochester, because he was "of good race." And there's also references to her "dark hair and discoloured, black face," which bring up questions about her racial identity.

Carl: The fact that Bertha Mason is a character who comes from the Caribbean really evokes the history of slavery, colonialism and slave exploitation. From 1607, England began developing colonies in the Americas and began to use enslaved labour within them.

Jean: Jane Eyre was written and published shortly after the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, so this would have all been very recent to Charlotte and something she would have been aware of.

Carl: Bertha was sent far away from a home and made to live in a different country with a man who didn't treat her that well and had been chosen for him because Bertha was wealthy. Was Bertha actually just reacting to her circumstances?

Is Charlotte Bronte using Mr Rochester's reactions and descriptions of Bertha to address those big issues of the time?

Jean: We'll never be certain. Bertha is an incredibly interesting character with so many factors that we can interpret in different ways. And that is why looking at the context of when the novel was written is so important. We can look back at things with our received wisdom of the time, but this was written over 175 years ago in an entirely different world. It's hard to know how the audience would have reacted.

Carl: That's why we study context.

Thanks for listening to episode seven of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the context of Jane Eyre. You can test what you've learned about Jane Eyre from this and all the other episodes in our final episode of the podcast - our recap quiz. You can listen to this and the rest of the episodes on BBC Sounds.