

# BBC BITESIZE – JANE EYRE Episode 1

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

**Jean:** I'm Jean Menzies, author and ancient historian.

**Carl:** I'm Carl Anka, journalist and author.

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

**Carl:** It's worth noting that there will be spoilers in this as we look into each text as a whole. So if you're not quite finished reading, or you're not quite ready for spoilers, just come back later.

**Jean:** And don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with your revision. Full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists, and other Bitesize podcast series to help with different subjects.

**Jean:** In this series, we're heading to Northern England in the 19th Century to explore Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre.

**Carl:** And in this episode, we're going to look at the plot of Jane Eyre. Jane Eyre is a novel that was written by Charlotte Bronte in 1847. It's a first person narrative. So everything is described as "I" and everything we are told is read from the perspective of Jane Eyre, she's the "I". We hear her story from childhood through to adulthood.

**Jean:** And Jane is seemingly 'the plain girl', at least that's how she's described throughout the book by herself and others, who meets a lot of challenges in life. I guess it makes sense though, to start at the beginning of the story. So let's go.

**Jean:** When we first meet Jane Eyre at the start of the novel, she's living at her aunt, Mrs Reed's house:

## **Extract:**

God will punish her. He might strike her dead in the midst of her tantrums. And then where would she go? Come Bessie, we will leave her. I wouldn't have her heart for anything. Say your prayers, Miss Eyre, when you are by yourself. For if you don't repent, something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney and fetch you away. They went, shutting the door and locking it behind them.

**Jean:** That's Miss Abbott speaking. She's a servant at Mrs Reed's house, Gateshead and as you can hear she's not kind to Jane. None of them are. Jane is not treated well at all there.

**Carl:** Mrs Reed is not a kind woman.

**Carl:** Mrs Reed and her children, who she idolises, are all very cruel to Jane. And this clip we're hearing is Jane being locked in the Red Room as punishment, which is apparently a haunted room in the house.

**Jean:** Jane actually believes herself that she can see ghosts in there, but nobody else cares. She is still thrust in there for punishment with no one allowed to let her out.

**Carl:** Jane stands her ground with Mrs Reed and lets her know that her behaviour isn't fair or justified. We're going to talk a little bit more about that in episode two when we look at Jane's character in more detail, but for now, the plot.

**Jean:** So after her time at Gateshead, which is where she lives with Mrs Reed, Jane then goes to Lowood school.

**Carl:** I really want a happy ending for Jane but that's not going to happen just yet. Lowood School - the supervisor there is a gentleman called Mr Brocklehurst, who has been warned by Mrs Reed that Jane is apparently a bad child. So Mr Brookhurst is just as cruel to Jane, and dishes out loads of punishments towards her.

**Jean:** There is something though, or someone, who makes Jane's time at Lowood a little happier, compared to her time at Mrs Reed's house.

**Extract:**

I was the first who spoke. "Helen, why do you stay with a girl who everybody believes to be a liar?" "Everybody, Jane? Why, there are only 80 People who have heard you called so and the world contains hundreds of millions." "But what have I to do with millions? The 80 I know despise me." "Jane you are mistaken. Probably not one in the school either despises or dislikes you. Many I am sure pity you much."

**Carl:** Right, that extract there, that's the first sort of real introduction of Helen and Jane as a partnership. It can be argued that these two are the first real love story of the book, as Jane finds her first kind and caring friendship with Helen at Lowood school.

**Jean:** It's a real moment of lightness in the book where you have a little bit of hope, right? And we'll learn more about Helen Burns in episode three of this podcast but she is an important part to the plot of the story. Because as you say, she is Jane's first real friend and the first person who shows her consistent kindness.

**Carl:** She's also an important part of Jane's life because, unfortunately, Helen dies of tuberculosis, or as it was known at the time, consumption.

**Carl:** Helen dies of consumption while still at school, and this has a real impact on Jane.

**Jean:** It's a really heart wrenching extract from the book when Helen dies, and we will hear more in episode two but it definitely stays with you in this story. Two little girls who became best friends and are with each other right to the end of one of their lives.

**Carl:** It is such a sad moment in the story, but it's lovely to be told that after 15 years, a gravestone is added to her grave. Helen is not forgotten.

**Jean:** And as for Jane, life continues at Lowood school after Helen's gone. Once she finishes as a pupil there, she becomes a teacher and she's there for a total of eight years before she moves on to her next place.

**Carl:** Which is as a governess at Thornfield Hall. A governess was a woman who was employed in a private household to educate pupils, normally girls, in loads of different subjects at home.

**Extract:**

I looked at my pupil, who did not at first appear to notice me. She was quite a child, perhaps seven or eight years old, slightly built, with a pale, small featured face, and a redundancy of hair folding in curls to her waist. "Good morning, Miss Adela", said Mrs Fairfax. "Come and speak to the lady who is to teach you and to make you a clever woman someday." She approached.

**Carl:** Jane becomes governance at Thornfield Hall to help a little girl called Adele. We just heard her meeting for the first time in that clip you've just heard there.

**Jean:** And we actually see Jane quite happy here. It feels like she's landed in a good place. Finally she meets her new employer, Mr Rochester and they spend some time together and we see Jane Eyre start to fall in love.

**Carl:** We do, but there also seems to be something strange going on and something strange about Thornfield in general, Jane thinks that she hears voices sometimes and also there's a fire that breaks that nearly kills Mr Rochester

**Jean:** and Jane saves him. She manages to wake him up and stop the fire. But there is a bit of a mystery about how that fire started. Mr Rochester blames one of the servants Grace Poole and Jane is very suspicious of her and believes that she started the fire.

**Carl:** Well, Grace has been getting the blame for a lot hasn't she? First time Jane heard a strange laugh in house, Mrs Fairfax, the housekeeper says it was Grace. So after that, Jane understandably assumes that all the strange events are to do with Grace because all the noises that Jane hears always seem to come out from the direction where she first heard laughter and as the story moves on, you don't really hear about the fire and how it was started until a bit later on.

**Jean:** That is such a plot twist. But you're absolutely right. This is Charlotte Bronte foreshadowing or predicting what's to come later on. There are a few other moments like Mr Mason, who's already

staying at the house being attacked by someone who again, Jane thinks is Grace. But the story moves on from the fire and Jane instead sweeps us along with her on her burgeoning love affair with Mr Rochester, which she actually doubts for a while because she thinks he wants to marry Blanche Ingram, who we're told is a beautiful, elegant young woman who's interested in Mr Rochester herself.

**Carl:** But it's Jane that Mr Rochester asks to marry him. And he confesses his love for her as well. And it all seems like it's going so well for Jane. She's going to marry the man that she loves and he loves her back. But then we realise, in this story, happily ever after is not going to be that easy.

**Jean:** We said at the beginning that this is a story of a girl who faces a lot of challenges, and this is another one of those.

**Carl:** Because it turns out Mr Rochester is already married.

**Carl:** This is all revealed by a character called Mr Mason who shows up when Mr Rochester and Jane Eyre are at the altar, no less. Mr Mason we'll get into in a little bit, but what you need to understand is he pops up at the wedding and announces that Mr Rochester cannot marry Jane Eyre, because Mr Rochester is already married. This point, the arrival of Mr Mason is where all the little niggles about Thornfield and the voice they've heard start to make sense.

**Extract:**

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not at first sight tell. It grovelled seemingly on all fours. It snatched and growled like some strange, wild animal. But it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.

**Jean:** What we've just heard is Jane seeing Bertha for the first time, and her behaviour is described as wild. She's running around the house on all fours. They end up having to tie her up to control her. And Mr Rochester is adamant that this woman who is his wife is, as he describes, mad and not even similar to a human being anymore. And instead he still wants to be with Jane. It's a really difficult scene to read.

**Carl:** The extract we just heard describes Bertha as "it" and says that she's grizzled. They're really portraying her as something other than human there. We look at Bertha as a character more in episode four. Let's just step in here and say the Victorian views on mental health are not the same as they are today. We'll get into this a little bit more, but I think it's important to address that right now.

**Jean:** We'll take a look at the context around this in episode six.

**Carl:** Now, Mr Rochester still wants to be with Jane. But that's not really an option for Jane anymore. She won't be with Mr Rochester while they're still married. So Jane then decides to run away. Jane ends up homeless and then she gets really sick. Things aren't good for her until she stumbles upon the Rivers family, that's St John, Mary and Diana Rivers who nurse her back to health

**Jean:** So now we have Jane living with the Rivers, she becomes a teacher again at a local school and she even comes into money as she finds out she's inherited her uncle's wealth and estate.

**Carl:** And then Jane Eyre finds out that the Rivers are actually her family, just none of them knew at the beginning, but it turns out that they are cousins. So she splits the money with them, and carries on with her teaching.

**Jean:** St John Rivers is an interesting character. We'll discuss it more in episode three.

**Jean:** He feels like such a good character at the beginning when he lets Jane into his home. But then he loses his shine a little when we see how cold he is and quite set in his ways and ideas. He wants to Jane to marry him so she can join him as a missionary abroad. But Jean says no because she wants to marry for love. She's such a strong character throughout this book.

**Carl:** Well, Jane nearly says yes at one point. But then she hears Mr Rochester calling to her in a dream and she realises that she cannot do it.

**Extract:**

I had heard it, where or whence forever impossible to know. And it was the voice of a human being a known, loved, well remembered voice. That of Edward Fairfax Rochester. And it spoke in pain and woe, wildly, eerily, urgently.

**Jean:** Now, that's the moment that Jane decides to go back to Thornfield to find Mr Rochester and see what has happened to him because she really believes that she has heard him calling for her.

**Carl:** But in the time that Jane has been away, she finds out that Thornfield has been burnt down. Bertha has died and Mr Rochester is now blind and injured after trying to save Bertha from the fire.

**Jean:** And it doesn't end there because when she meets Mr Rochester again they realise they still love each other and...

**Extract:**

Reader. I married him.

**Jean:** What a line!

**Carl:** That's where it comes from!

**Jean:** Yes, on all of those novelty items that you see are all those references to "Reader, I did something," that comes from Jane Eyre. Now you know.

In the final chapter we hear from Jane about how the next 10 years are happy and content. Mr Rochester regains his sight in one eye. They have a child who he is able to see. The Rivers sisters go on to get married and they still see each other. St John Rivers is sick and is expected to die but Jane thinks that he will be happy, as a deeply Christian man, to be closer to meeting his God.

**Carl:** You don't walk away from the story thinking what about Mary Rivers? I wonder where she ended up because we know Jane and Charlotte Bronte ultimately tell us everything.

**Jean:** And like we said at the beginning Jane Eyre is the story of a girl who meets a lot of challenges in life. And I think we can conclude that that is exactly what it is. That simple sum-up doesn't quite prepare you for her many challenges, but it's a start.

**Carl:** Thanks for listening to episode one of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the plot of Jane Eyre.

**Jean:** In episode two we're going to take a closer look at some of the characters in this book. You can listen now on BBC Sounds.