

BBC BITESIZE – JANE EYRE Episode 2

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.

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

Carl: I'm Carl Anka, and this episode we're taking a close look at the characters within Jane Eyre. In Jane Eyre, we have main, secondary and minor characters. The main character is Jane due to this book being a first person bildungsroman.

Jean: Bildungsroman is a type of novel that follows a main protagonist or leading character through their struggles from childhood to adulthood. They learn from their experiences, which usually leads them to succeed in life and have a happy ending. So a more modern day example might be Anita and Me.

Carl: Yes, anything that you might describe as a coming of age story, or anything where the character might go through puberty, can roughly be described as a bildungsroman. So let's start by looking at Jane.

Extract:

I am glad you are no relation of mine. I will never call you Aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up. And if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.

Jean: There are so many incredible quotes from Jane Eyre, that just make me want to punch the air. I love her. This one where she's speaking to her aunt, Mrs Reed who has treated her terribly. She's still a young girl, but she's so strong willed and passionate, and she will stand up for what's right, no matter how that affects her. We've mentioned this previously, and we'll take a look at Bertha as a character in Episode Four.

Carl: I think that sums it up really well. When we first meet Jane, she is a young orphan who is living with her aunt, Miss Reed. She speaks out about both her aunt and her cousin's cruelty towards her. And that's what ends up with her being completely alienated in the house. Eventually over time, we find out that Miss Reed didn't really want Jane, she only reluctantly agreed to take care of her when Mrs Reed husband, Jane's uncle, made her promise on his deathbed to take care of Jane. Mrs Reed has always been uneasy about this agreement. Even though she looks after Jane, she treats Jane awfully. And the thing you've just heard there is Jane telling Mrs Reid exactly what she thinks of her just before Jane leaves.

Jean: She's got a really strong sense of justice and she's not afraid to say it. She's about to move to Lowood School here, and though seeing all this surely means she's cutting off this family, she chooses to say it out loud and let Mrs Reed know that her behaviour has not been acceptable.

Extract:

My dear children, pursue the black marble clergyman with pathos. This is a sad, a melancholy occasion. For it becomes my duty to warn you that this girl who might be one of God's own lambs, is a little castaway. Not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on your guard against her. You must shun her example, if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports. And shut her out from your converse.

Jean: That you heard there, It was Mr Brocklehurst.

Carl: Mr Brocklehurst a supervisor at the school and he enjoys making all of the girls there fearful because Mrs Reed told Mr Brocklehurst previously that Jane is bad child. So Mr Brocklehurst goes out of his way to pick on her with punishments and taunts, just like you heard there.

Jean: So living with punishments and being poorly treated by adults continues at Lowood school. But she doesn't remain as isolated as she did at Mrs Reed's house because she finds someone she admires in her teacher, Maria Temple, and true friendship and real love in the form of her best friend Helen Burns.

Carl: They really do have a lovely friendship and Helen is Jane's only friend at Lowood. She also deals with a lot of punishment and humiliation from teachers. Helen deals with things in different way, as she doesn't stand up for herself in the same way that Jane does.

Jean: We will talk more about Helen in episode three. We definitely see during her time at Lowood, Jane's ability as a good judge of character. She warms instantly to Miss Temple and Helen Burns whilst loathing Mr Brocklehurst. Helen's is a really special friendship and when Helen dies, Jane is left absolutely heartbroken and lost.

Extract:

I was not reprimanded for leaving my bed. People had something else to think about. No explanation was afforded then to my many questions. But a day or two afterwards, I learned that Miss Temple, on returning to her own room at dawn had found me laid in the little crib, my face against Helen Burns' shoulder, my arms around her neck. I was asleep, and Helen was dead.

Carl: One thing Charlotte Bronte is going to do, she's going to make you feel all of the feelings when you are reading her books. As the reader, you feel so happy when Jane has found this friendship with Helen and you really care for Helen as well. And then when Helen is taken away, it's utterly devastating.

Jean: And there's still so much more to come in this story. Because another part of Jane's character that we hear a lot about in this story is that Jane is always someone who's described as being plain. And she certainly doesn't see herself as a beauty.

Carl: She's pretty ordinary. I don't think you really expect a love story for Jane, because of this, which is a fairly ridiculous idea. I understand what Charlotte Bronte was trying to challenge.

Jean: There is an expectation in romance, that we have the most beautiful of beautiful characters falling in love, which is a terribly outdated idea of how women and love stories should be, because we all deserve love. But Charlotte really drives home that Jane is plain and still gives her the love story that she deserves. Thankfully, I do think attitudes have changed since this book was written and we can see everybody falling in love now. And Charlotte Bronte was really leading the way here.

Carl: Yes, because after eight years at Lowood as a student and then a teacher, Jane becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall. This is where she meets and eventually falls in love with Mr Rochester.

Jean: Mr Rochester falls in love with her, and they plan to get married. Oh, it's all looking sunny, isn't it? But those plans are thwarted right at the last moment at the altar when we find out that Mr Rochester already has a wife.

Carl: Mr Rochester eventually shows his wife, Bertha to Jane. And then we find out that unfortunately, Bertha is mentally unwell. We're told that she's been locked in the attic for her own safety and the safety of everyone else. She's being looked after by Grace Paul, who also works in the home. It's at this point that we see more key character traits of Jane. And they are her integrity, her principles and selflessness because even though she's deeply in love, she cannot sacrifice her principles to live with a man that she cannot marry.

Jean: And so she leaves sacrificing, seemingly, her chance of happiness.

Extract:

The house cleared, I shut myself in, fastened the bolt that none might intrude, and proceeded not to weep not to mourn. I was yet too calm for that, but mechanically to take off the wedding dress, and replace it by the stuffed gown I had worn yesterday, as I thought, for the last time.

Jean: So that extract you just heard is just after Jane finds out that Mr Rochester is already married, and she leaves. She's always had that strong sense of right and wrong that we've known since the beginning of the book. And she keeps that as she decides she can't be with a man who already has a wife.

Carl: Which is great for her and her morals, but not so great for practicality. She ends up homeless without work or food. She is really sick. But luckily she finds refuge at the Rivers' home with St John, Diana and Mary who she eventually finds out are her cousins.

Jean: It turns out the people that took her in are actually her family. They helped Jane at her lowest so when she finds out she's been left a 20,000 pound inheritance (that would be over 3 million pounds in today's money) she splits it with her three cousins. She's kind and fair and she cares for other people's happiness.

Carl: She never forgets Mr Rochester during this time even when cousin St John asks her to marry him and join him as a missionary, Jane eventually refuses.

Extract:

I saw nothing. But I heard a voice somewhere cry, "Jane, Jane." nothing more. Oh, god. What is it? I gasped.

Carl: That is the part where Jane is thinking about possibly marrying St John. But she hears Mr Rochester and we see how trusting she is of her own instincts.

Carl: Jane believes that when she hears Mr Rochester calling out to her in a dream that there is something actually happening in real life. So she trusts her instincts enough to travel all the way back to him and find out what's happened.

Jean: And it turns out her instincts are right because she finds that while she was gone, Bertha has started another fire and is now dead. Mr Rochester, meanwhile, has been left blind and injured in the fire.

Carl: Then in the end, they finally get married. Jane gets the ending she's always wanted.

Jean: Reader, she married him!

Extract:

I have now been married 10 years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on Earth. I hold myself supremely blessed. Blessed beyond what language can express. Because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

Jean: So we leave Jane happy, content, independent and everything she's been working towards throughout the book. She really reflects Charlotte Bronte at this point in her life which was different for many women at the time, but we'll discuss that more in Episode Six.

Carl: She's happy with Mr Rochester the man she loves and I think that's quite a nice place to leave things in this episode.

Jean: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about Jane Eyre.

In episode three, we'll take a closer look at Mr Rochester and St John Rivers.

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