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CHAPTER ONE 4

Victorian Responses: Power and Popularity;  
Coarseness and Criticism

This chapter covers critical assessments of *Jane Eyre* in the Victorian period. The first section looks at the earliest reviews of the novel, when the identity of the author was unknown, showing that the plot, style, and influence of *Jane Eyre* were, from the first, the subject of politicised debate between admirers and detractors. The chapter then looks at how *Jane Eyre*'s reception changed after mid-century, when Charlotte Brontë's tragic personal history became widely known. It closes with late nineteenth-century assessments that assimilate *Jane Eyre* into their accounts of literary history, often with a mixture of admiration and condescension.

CHAPTER TWO 30

Jane Eyre's 'I': From Humanism to Deconstruction

This chapter, divided into three sections, explores the twentieth-century movement from humanist, through formalist, to deconstructive readings of *Jane Eyre*. It examines changing approaches to Brontë's prose style and to a central critical challenge that *Jane Eyre* poses, the intense subjectivity of its first person narration. The chapter details the increasing attention paid to the formal construction of the text, its imagery and verbal art. It shows how critical trends shifted in the course of the century from regarding Jane's viewpoint as identical with Charlotte Brontë's and her history as a triumph of self-determination, to regarding Jane as a potentially unreliable, unstable, and elusive figure, whose 'self' remains shadowy.

CHAPTER THREE 62

An Iconic Text: Feminist and Psychoanalytic Criticism

This chapter discusses the rich history of feminist readings of *Jane Eyre*. It starts with Virginia Woolf's treatment of Charlotte Brontë in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). It then explores seminal feminist accounts of the novel from the 1960s and 1970s by figures including Adrienne Rich, Helene Moglen, Maurianne Adams, Elaine Showalter, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, outlining the debate between those who consider Jane a heroine of liberation and those who view her as a

compromised character, reflective of women's limited opportunities and divided selfhood. The chapter explores ways in which psychoanalytic criticism and feminist criticism have often informed one another. Finally, it considers how recent feminist critics negotiate potential tensions between feminist reading and other critical approaches to the text and how modern accounts of gender and sexuality in the novel have incorporated work on Victorian masculinities, race, and class.

#### CHAPTER FOUR 90

##### Caste Typing: Marxist and Materialist Criticism

This chapter looks at Marxist and materialist responses to *Jane Eyre*. Beginning with Raymond Williams's account in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970) of *Jane Eyre* as part of a literary movement pitting social passion against the heartlessness of industrial capitalism, it examines Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power: a Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975), with its influential counter-argument that *Jane Eyre*'s plot marries bourgeois with aristocratic values, cementing, rather than challenging, existing power structures. Looking at inheritors of this debate about class, power, and ideology in the novel from Nancy Pell (1977) to Chris R. Vanden Bossche (2005), the chapter explores issues such as *Jane Eyre*'s treatment of France, its handling of working women, and its depiction of advertisement and the marketplace, considering whether the text works to criticize or consolidate the Victorian class system, and asking what has historically been at stake in identifying the politics and allegiances of a text that is alternately characterised as radical and conservative.

#### CHAPTER FIVE 109

##### Bertha's Savage Face: Postcolonial Concerns

This chapter considers the growing number of postcolonial readings of *Jane Eyre*. Beginning with Jean Rhys's provocative 'prequel' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Gayatri Spivak's 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985), which argues that *Jane Eyre*'s triumph is achieved at the expense of the colonised subject (Bertha), it surveys a variety of works that analyse the novel's approach to race, nation, and imperialism. Later sections deal with readings that argue for the influence of the Brontës' Irish heritage on the presentation of colonial issues within the text and one reading, by Erin O'Connor (2003), that challenges Spivak's focus on imperialist ideology in *Jane Eyre*.

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This chapter looks at readings of *Jane Eyre* since 1980 that display the influence of the New Historicism and the critical turn toward situating *Jane Eyre* within nineteenth-century social, cultural, and political contexts, reading it alongside forms of contemporary representation, from missionary tracts to treatises on madness, that would once have been considered separate from literary

endeavour. It devotes sections to considering 'Jane Eyre: Phrenology, Psychology, and Economics', to the politics of visibility and reading the body in the novel, and the place of evangelical thought and education in Jane Eyre's narrative. It then examines works that place *Jane Eyre* within the history of the novel as a form and, deploying John Sutherland's entertaining piece of detective dating of the novel's action, *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* (1997), asks whether there are limits to the use of historical evidence to interpret the novel.

CHAPTER SEVEN 143

*Jane Eyre* Adapted

This chapter discusses some of the different forms (including stage play, fiction, and film) into which *Jane Eyre* has been adapted over the years. It charts the modern trend toward analysing these many versions and reworkings of *Jane Eyre* and examines some of the critical issues that they raise, asking whether *Jane Eyre* now exists as much as a set of cultural connotations as it does as a nineteenth-century novel.

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## Introduction

Everybody reads *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë's story of a rebellious orphan who survives a harsh school, becomes a governess in a mysterious mansion and falls in love with the owner, only to discover a secret that forces her to escape and forge a new life before returning to him, has gripped a remarkably diverse audience from its publication in 1847 to the present day. Queen Victoria (1819–1901; reigned 1837–1901) read it, recording in her journal that it 'is really a wonderful book very peculiar in parts, but [...] such a fine tone in it, such fine religious feeling, such beautiful writing. The description of the mysterious maniac's nightly appearances awfully thrilling'.<sup>1</sup> The young American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–86) pronounced it 'electric'.<sup>2</sup> The all-male crew of HMS *Discovery* on the polar expedition of 1901–4 led by Captain Robert Falcon Scott (1868–1912) borrowed it repeatedly from the ship's library. The literary historian Prince Dmitri Mirsky (1890–1939), fighting in the Russian Civil War in 1918, remembered coming across *Jane Eyre* in an Armenian town during the white army's retreat and experiencing 'the intense thrill of the first reading'.<sup>3</sup> In 1947, a speaker to the Brontë Society recalled that *Jane Eyre* had recently been serialised on the radio and had attracted more than 6,000,000 listeners for eleven successive weeks: in the sombre post-war climate 'the tale shone through these grey days, when we seem almost afraid of emotion, like [...] a live coal'.<sup>4</sup> More recently, in 2004, listeners to the BBC Radio programme 'Woman's Hour' voted *Jane Eyre* second in an all-time list of books that had changed their lives.

Critical opinion of *Jane Eyre*, however, has varied as wildly as sales have remained steady. While some of its first reviewers thought the novel unrivalled among modern productions for 'its power of thought and expression'<sup>5</sup> and praised its passion, which, 'rises at times to a height of tragic intensity which is almost sublime',<sup>6</sup> others pronounced it 'coarse', 'an Anti-Christian composition' which displayed 'the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home'.<sup>7</sup> One American reviewer objected loudly to Rochester's 'profanity, brutality, and slang' and the animal energies of Jane and Rochester's 'courtship after the manner of kangaroos'.<sup>8</sup> Heated debate continued in the twentieth century. Lord David Cecil (1902–86), a critic and biographer who would become Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford in 1949, regretted in 1934 that *Jane Eyre*, while galvanised by Brontë's

'volcanic' imagination, was formless, humourless, and exaggerated. In 1948 F.R. Leavis (1895–1978), then the most influential literary critic in England, dismissed Charlotte Brontë as a minor talent. Formalist critics in the 1960s rebelled against such scholarly sneers, asserting that *Jane Eyre* was impeccably well crafted and an organic whole structured through compelling patterns of symbol and image. Later in the twentieth century, poststructuralists would prefer to see *Jane Eyre* as an unresolved and indeterminate text, challenging and even 'plotting against' the reader with plural interpretive possibilities. Feminists have hailed *Jane Eyre* as a novel about the travails of womanhood; Marxists have weighed its class allegiances; postcolonial critics have interrogated the place of empire and the question of slavery in the text. After almost two centuries of critical readings, basic questions about *Jane Eyre* still stimulate violent disagreement. Is it a radical novel or a conservative one, a realist novel or a tissue of wild improbabilities, a distinctively female novel or a novel that disrupts assumptions about gender? Critical opinion even remains undecided about *Jane Eyre's* literary merit: the novelist Angela Carter (1940–92) has suggested, with affection, that 'of all the great novels in the world, *Jane Eyre* veers the closest towards trash'.<sup>9</sup>

This guide traces the history of critical responses to *Jane Eyre* from its first publication to the present day, offering an account of the key figures, ideas, and movements that have shaped analysis of this extraordinary book. It aims both to summarise significant texts and ideas in an accessible fashion, providing a thorough introduction to the field, and to offer a bibliographic base from which readers will feel inspired to launch their own critical reading and writing.

Chapter One presents the early history of *Jane Eyre's* reception from the first newspaper reviews to the end of the nineteenth century. It uncovers the controversy between those who hymned the praises of the novel and those who found it immoral, irreligious, and politically subversive. It then describes how responses to *Jane Eyre* changed once the author's gender and life history became common knowledge and how *Jane Eyre* was gradually assimilated into the literary canon – a mixed blessing. Chapter Two looks at a particular issue that has beset interpretations of *Jane Eyre* – the intense subjectivity of Jane's narrative voice. It traces the differing views of *Jane Eyre's* narrative method, tone, and style that were current in the early, mid, and late twentieth century, showing how critical trends from formalism to deconstruction have produced wholly different interpretations of Jane: as a mouthpiece for Charlotte Brontë; a figure in an elemental allegory; an unreliable, even vengeful narrator; or an unknowable construct, a vanishing point in the text. Chapter Three discusses the rich history of feminist responses to *Jane Eyre*, explaining how the novel came to be regarded as a 'cult text' of feminism, with 'The Madwoman in

the Attic' – a reading of Bertha as Jane's angry double by Sandra M. Gilbert (born 1936) and Susan Gubar (born 1944) – becoming a shorthand for female repression under systems of patriarchal power. It airs disagreements between feminists about whether *Jane Eyre's* ending delivers the heroine to self-fulfilment, or not, and modern feminist responses to the critical accusation that traditional celebratory feminist readings ignore the politics of class and race in the text. Chapter Four examines Marxist and materialist interpretations, highlighting the history of conflict between readings of *Jane Eyre* as a novel that consolidates the relationship between the middle classes and the gentry and readings that see it as a novel of radical protest that allies itself with workers, rebels, and the oppressed. Chapter Five introduces post-colonial criticism, which argues for the submerged but crucial role of discourses of race and Empire in *Jane Eyre*, while Chapter Six treats the 'turn towards history' in *Jane Eyre* in the wake of New Historicism. This chapter explores readings that are particularly attentive to the social and cultural context of which *Jane Eyre* is part, emphasising the text's embeddedness in contemporary debate about topics including the new science of psychology, the ideology of evangelical education, and the role of the female artist. Chapter Seven looks at recent analysis of Jane Eyre's 'afterlives' – its history of re-production and adaptation in multiple media.

Hundreds of books and articles have been written about *Jane Eyre* and this guide is necessarily not exhaustive. Rather, it selects, summarises, and contextualises the most significant and illustrative readings produced by each era and critical methodology, highlighting trends in *Jane Eyre's* reception and interpretation and significant issues and areas of debate. One of the qualities that ensures *Jane Eyre's* perennial appeal is its passion. Jane speaks directly to the reader: 'Many will blame me, no doubt', she provocatively announces, and, later, 'Reader, I forgave him on the spot'. Lucasta Miller feels that 'Jane must be the most irresistible first-person heroine in literature'.<sup>10</sup> To Doreen Roberts, however, she is 'a fiercely Protestant, chauvinistic, and self-righteous heroine', whose discourse is marked by distortion.<sup>11</sup> Jane's voice, with its fiery ardour and cool antagonism, moves critics to equally heated praise and icy detraction, often bringing out their best lines. This book samples and discusses the many dialogues that *Jane Eyre* has inspired over the years. I hope that the reader will find listening to and joining in these critical conversations as surprising, entertaining, and illuminating as I have done.

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