

# Characters

## homophones

words that sound the same but have different meanings and are spelt differently

### TASK 8

Find quotations in which Brontë has Jane admit that she was savage and ungovernable.

### Pause for Thought



If you have watched one of the film versions, consider how faithfully both Jane and Mr Rochester have been presented.

## Jane Eyre

Jane's name reflects her looks and her character. She is 'plain Jane', with no pretensions and no social status. Her surname has a number of **homophones**. She is her uncle's 'heir'. She is often compared with spirits of the 'air'. She is tempted to 'err' and learns from her experiences. 'Ire' is an approximate homophone that Brontë frequently uses; by Chapter XXXV Jane has learned not to attend to 'the suggestions of pride and ire', but they are still important factors in her personality.

Jane is an orphan whose father was a poor clergyman and whose mother was disowned by her parents when she married. The novel follows her development from a dependent child to a mature woman who has achieved self-knowledge, independence and marriage with her intellectual equal. We follow her life as her self-discipline and integrity are tested, as she learns to balance feeling and judgement, as she achieves independence and equality with the man she loves, and as she finds her own understanding of religion out of the different doctrines.

Jane is a total contrast to both Blanche and Bertha in her youth, petite stature, and intelligence, but Brontë seems to make her similar to Bertha in temperament. As a child, Jane is passionate and highly strung, and there are several references to her being 'mad' or unrestrained. Brontë shows her readers that Jane, like Bertha, is a passionate woman but that, unlike Bertha, she learns to repress her feelings. At Gateshead, Jane learns by experience that losing her temper does not make her feel better, but it is at Lowood that she learns to control her passionate feelings, and she is able to master 'the rising hysteria', when humiliated by Brocklehurst. Jane imbibed much of Miss Temple's habits so, when she goes to Thornfield, she appears quiet and self-disciplined.

Jane's personality is revealed to us through her memory, which enables her to see her life as a whole and make sense of it as she turns it into an 'autobiography'. It is by remembering and retelling her story that she learns to know herself, recognising her strengths and her weaknesses.

She is not well served by Brontë's narrative technique as she is used to voice the author's judgement on other characters. This means that she can appear cold and unfeeling when she writes about children, intellectually snobbish when she writes about Mrs Fairfax, Rosamond

Oliver and the children at her school, too quickly judgemental when she describes Mason and, to a modern reader, full of racial prejudices when she writes about Adèle's 'French defects', the 'ignorant' Indians and the 'enslaved' in Eastern cultures.

## Edward Rochester

Brontë was an avid reader of Lord Byron's poetry and became fascinated by his male heroes. In almost every respect, Rochester is a Byronic hero. He is dark and brooding rather than good-looking, and he is of muscular appearance, rather than tall and elegant like a conventional romantic hero. On his first appearance, he certainly looks the part. He is mounted on a 'tall steed' and accompanied by a 'great dog', both suggesting male virility. However, Brontë immediately breaks the mould and makes him fall from his horse. He loses his dignity and independence and is forced to rely on Jane for help. This signals that Brontë's treatment of her Byronic hero may not be entirely admiring.

Rochester is arrogant, domineering and brusque; a fiery and lawless outsider, he is isolated, bitter and cynical, although he can put on an act of jovial conviviality. Mystery surrounds him, and he is corrupted by secret guilt, yet he burns with remorse. Through Jane, Brontë shows disapproval of his behaviour, but lets him preserve the traces of a noble spirit and the ability to inspire love. Rochester does not treat women with respect. Bertha he married for money, lived with as man and wife until he inherited the estate, and then disposed of her in what he thinks is a humane fashion. Then he travelled but tells Jane that he hates the time he spent in Europe: 'Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading' (p. 359).

However, like Byron's heroes, he accepts responsibility for his actions. He takes responsibility for Adèle when her mother abandons her, even though she is not his daughter, and he brings his wife to Thornfield rather than incarcerating her in an asylum. Like Byron's heroes he has travelled restlessly to escape the past, but Brontë invites us to condemn his affairs when Jane rebukes him. In his conversations with Jane, he asserts his right to get pleasure out of life and declares: 'I know what my aim is, what my motives are; and at this moment I pass a law, unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians, that both are right' (p. 161).

Brontë explores the ideas of individualism and self-determination represented by Byron's heroes but through her heroine she condemns them. Instead of perpetuating the philosophy of the Byronic hero,

### Context

The seventeenth-century Earl of Rochester was a brave soldier, a brilliant satirist and a libertine who despised society's attitude to sex. Brontë was probably thinking of him when she chose the name for her hero. Rochester is also the name of a city, so the character is linked by his name with the landed gentry.

### Pause for Thought



Is the fact that he says he hates the time he spent in Europe evidence that he is now ashamed of the way he treated these women?

### Context

Daniel 6:15 reads: 'Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, "Remember, O king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."'



Brontë rewards her hero only after he gives up his determination to create his own future. By the end he has learned to take responsibility for his own actions and to live within the confines of God's laws.

### Context

Brontë's father studied at St John's College, Cambridge, which had strong evangelical connections.

## St John Rivers

St John, like his namesake, becomes a disciple, devoting his life to God's work. His surname suggests the river in which the early disciples were baptised, which strengthens the contrast between St John and Rochester.

We are told that St John is like 'the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaughts of Apollyon' (p. 521). In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan tells us that Apollyon was 'a foul fiend'. Like Rochester, St John battles against 'foul fiends', but his are different. As a man, he faces the demons of worldly ambition; as a missionary, his fiends are ignorance, war, bondage, superstition and fear.

A year before he meets Jane, St John was 'intensely miserable' because he thought he had made a mistake in his choice of career. Like Rochester, St John is also associated with fire but, whereas Rochester burns with sexual desire, St John burns with a desire for glory and power. However, once his father lost everything, he redirected his passion into the service of God. He claims to have suppressed sexual desire, but he admits to Jane that he loves Rosamond wildly. He dismisses his feelings as 'a mere fever of the flesh', claiming to be 'a cold, hard man' (p. 432), because he thinks he has effectively repressed his natural feelings. On the surface he appears cold and so is often associated with images of snow and ice, or of stone.

His hope is that being a missionary will satisfy his ambition; he labours not for love of his fellow man but for the 'incorruptible crown' that awaits him in heaven. He has determined to subjugate everything to this one ambition, refusing to relinquish his plans for love, for his sisters or for his duties in the parish. His repetition of the first person possessive determiner signals his egotism when he says: 'Relinquish! What! my vocation? My great work? My foundation laid on earth for a mansion in heaven? My hopes of being numbered in the band who have merged all ambitions in the glorious one of bettering their race' (p. 431).

He observes Jane closely, testing her character, with a view to marrying her to assist him in his ministry. He is hurt by the scorn she pours on his proposal the first time he asks her; the second time he is visibly pained, and yet he perseveres and gently tries a third time to persuade her. Perhaps Jane is misjudging him; perhaps he feels for her more than he admits.

### Pause for Thought



If you have watched one of the film versions, discuss how faithfully St John has been presented.

Whereas Rochester appeals to Jane's need to love and be loved, St John appeals to that side of her nature that aspires to something great and which wants to sacrifice itself to the service of God. The fact that Jane ends her autobiography with a eulogy of St John shows how important ambition is to her, but this occupation is only 'the one best calculated to fill the void left by upturn affections and demolished hopes' (p. 466). Whereas St John offers duty, sacrifice and a place in heaven, Rochester offers love and a home, both of which the orphan has craved throughout the book. She is only superficially similar to St John, whereas of Rochester she says that she is 'bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh' (p. 519).

## Other characters

### Diana and Mary Rivers

Diana, Roman goddess of chastity, and Mary, mother of Jesus, are names that suggest purity. Jane's cousins are women whom Jane admires and with whom she feels in perfect sympathy.

### The Reed family

Brontë makes structural parallels between the Rivers and Reed families. Both are related to Jane; the father is dead, there is one son and two daughters. Both family names begin with 'R' and are associated with water. However, whereas reeds are weak and bend easily in the current, rivers flow strongly, bringing life to the land and its people.

Because the Reeds are shown filtered through Jane's resentment, they are totally unsympathetic characters, and do not emerge as rounded characters. However, Jane does begin to pity Mrs Reed as she lies dying. Mrs Reed was jealous of her husband's love for his sister, Jane's mother, and so she resents having to look after her orphaned niece. Mrs Reed also feels guilty because she did not bring Jane up as if she were her own child, as her husband had made her promise on his deathbed. Jane's outburst spelled this out to her and, when Mrs Reed lies to her brother-in-law, John Eyre, it is done out of revenge for Jane's childish attack. Her breaking of her deathbed promise to her husband and her lie to his brother torment her final hours, so she is unable to accept Jane's offer of reconciliation.

Jane's cousins take their lead from their mother, and they not only exclude her, but John actually bullies her. Choosing the same name for the sons emphasises the contrast: whereas John Reed is weak and amoral, St John is strong and fiercely moral.

#### Pause for Thought



In appearance Rochester and St John are a total contrast, but can you find any similarities between them?

...the Reeds are shown filtered through Jane's resentment...

...whereas John Reed is weak and amoral, St John is strong and fiercely moral



## Miss Temple

Miss Temple is Jane's first role model and, like a temple, she provides a sanctuary for the orphan child. Miss Temple is an elegant, beautiful, cultured woman, compassionate and fair-minded. She listens to Jane's version of the events at Gateshead, verifies it, and clears her name before the whole school. It is from Miss Temple that Jane gains her passion for self-improvement. She also learns self-control from Miss Temple, who has an equally passionate sense of injustice and hatred of hypocrisy. She knows, however, when resistance could be worse than useless and her face turns to marble as Brocklehurst rebukes her for her kindness to the girls. While Miss Temple is at Lowood, Jane regards it as home, but, once she is married, it becomes imprisoning and she desires liberty.

### Context

Helen was based on Charlotte's oldest sister, Maria, who contracted tuberculosis at school and died. Charlotte described Maria as having a 'prematurely developed and remarkable intellect, as well as...mildness, wisdom and fortitude'.

**didactic** with the intention of teaching the reader and instilling moral values

**plosive** a stop consonant released quickly (p, b, t, d, k, g)

## Helen Burns

Helen Burns's name links her with the fire imagery of the novel. She burns with religious fervour, and she also burns with indignation; her dirty fingernails and untidy drawers suggest she is a rebel at heart. However, instead of struggling against injustice, she looks forward to death as a release from this life. On her tombstone is inscribed the word 'Resurgam', declaring that she will rise again, like a flame from the ashes.

Like St John, Helen has sublimated her passion into religious ecstasy but, whereas St John is ambitious for glory, Helen's religion is one of self-denial. She epitomises Christ's teaching of loving your neighbours and turning the other cheek, as she endures Miss Scatcherd's bullying without complaint, even admitting culpability. However, this can be read as a form of passive resistance that actually goads her persecutor to be more cruel and puts herself in the role of martyr.

When Jane first meets her, Helen is reading Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, a **didactic** romance in which Samuel Johnson, the writer and lexicographer, philosophises about the vanity of this world. He argues that surrender and self-control will enable us to bear with the difficulties of life. Helen is dying of tuberculosis and embraces the idea of death as a release from the harshness and injustice of life on earth. She offers a contrasting form of belief to the harsh creed of Brocklehurst, being convinced that salvation is open to all. She is an inspirational character with a lifelong influence on Jane.

## Mr Brocklehurst

The **plosive** consonants in 'Brocklehurst' sound prickly and hard. Brock is a common name for a badger, which is fierce and tenacious.

Brocklehurst is presented through the eyes of a ten-year-old child, and so he appears a caricature of a pompous, self-righteous hypocrite. We are invited to see him as a black pillar, cold, hard and unbending, with features like those of the cruel wolf in *Little Red Riding-hood*. We are invited to laugh at his insistence that the girls should be shorn of curls and wear plain, unflattering clothes, while his own family are overdressed and wear artificial curls. However, there is something sinister about the way he inspects the girls' underwear on the washing line and tries to suppress their emerging womanhood with inadequate food and insubstantial childish uniforms.

Brocklehurst's behaviour reveals that this supposedly charitable institution is there not for the benefit of the girls, but to perpetuate the injustice in society and fit them for the humble roles assigned to them. He acts as a contrast both to Helen, whose faith totally contradicts his, and to St John, who preaches the same doctrine, but who lives by what he preaches.

## Bertha Mason

Bertha is never developed as a character. We learn her history through Rochester's biased narrative, and we see her only after she has been 'embruted' by ten years of solitary confinement in a windowless room with no mental stimulation. Her presence is not essential to the plot, only the fact that Rochester is married, so her role in the novel is largely symbolic. She has been variously interpreted as representative of the British Empire's attitude to other cultures, as symbolic of the Victorian wife, trapped in the home, or as a manifestation of Jane's subconscious feelings of rage against injustice and fear of her sexual desires, which she has learned to suppress. Bertha acts as a warning of the consequences of a woman allowing passion to rule her behaviour.

Bertha's most important function is to be the Gothic horror element and to raise the suspense through her preternatural laugh, her blood-sucking vampiric behaviour and her goblin appearance. When Bertha is finally revealed, she is introduced by Rochester as 'bad, mad and embruted' (p. 337), and described by Jane as an 'animal' and a 'hyena' (p. 338). Although Bertha appears to be just like a caged animal, Brontë hints at the unhappy woman who is not allowed a voice. In the first mention of Bertha's 'tragic' laugh, Jane uses the adjective 'preternatural' to suggest something Gothic and beyond the range of nature, but she also recognises the tragedy of the person laughing.

Bertha escapes from her gaoler three times. The first time she sets Mr Rochester's bed alight; and the next time we hear of Bertha, she has attacked her brother, who was complicit in arranging this traumatic

### Context

Charles Dickens threatened to have his wife committed to an asylum when she raised objections to his affair with a young actress.

### TASK 9

Write Bertha's account of the time she escaped and visited Jane's bedroom. Try to echo specific aspects of Brontë's form, structure and language as far as possible. You should also write a brief commentary explaining how you have tried to reflect the original novel.





### Pause for Thought



How far does Brontë intend us to believe that Bertha has been turned into a brute by her mental illness and how far by the brutalising treatment she has suffered? Is it madness or despair to set fire to your gaoler's room (what had happened the evening before?), then to seek out your rival's room and set fire to that, then to climb to the roof and throw yourself to your death?

### Pause for Thought



Why do you think Brontë has made Blanche similar to Bertha?

marriage and does nothing to protect her from her husband. Her words reveal thought behind her action: 'She said she'd drain my heart.' The second time Bertha escapes, she rips Jane's wedding veil, but she does not try to harm Jane. Two months after Jane left, Bertha escaped from her prison for the last time. She set fire to Grace Poole's room next to her own; and then to the bed in the room that had been Jane's. She then climbed to the roof and, as Rochester approached, 'she yelled, and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement'.

## Blanche Ingram

Blanche is French for white, with connotations of coldness and lack of feeling. Rochester compares Blanche to Bertha before he married her, suggesting that Bertha also was beautiful, arrogant, cruel to her social inferiors and self-willed. He feels no qualms about falsely arousing Blanche's expectations to make Jane jealous, saying, 'Her feelings are concentrated in one — pride; and that needs humbling' (p. 303), revealing his misogyny in declaring that women should be humble.

We are told that Blanche's 'mind was poor' (p. 215) and Bertha's cast of mind was 'common, low, narrow' (p. 353). Both women set out to seduce Rochester. Jane observes that Blanche coins her smiles lavishly, flashes her glances unremittingly, and manufactures elaborate airs; Rochester describes how Bertha 'flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments' (p. 352).

## Mrs Fairfax

When her clergyman husband died, Mrs Fairfax accepted a position as housekeeper to a distant relative. She is kind and warm-hearted and she acts as a substitute mother to Jane, warning her to be on her guard when Rochester proposes. Brontë uses her as a plot device to provide limited information about Thornfield, its owner, and his guests.

## Grace Poole

Grace is the woman hired from the Grimsby Retreat by Rochester to guard and take care of his first wife. Grimsby Retreat is based on the Quaker York Retreat in which the mentally ill were cared for with humanity. Grace does not mix with the other servants and she takes her responsibility seriously, although occasionally Bertha escapes. Jane is told that Grace is responsible for the strange noises and sinister happenings, but Grace watches out for her, warning her to bolt her door.

### Taking it Further



Read an imaginative account of Grace Poole's story on [www.bbc.co.uk/drama/janeeyre/grace\\_poole\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/janeeyre/grace_poole_1.shtml)

## Rosamond Oliver

The name Rosamond comes from the Latin 'Rosa Mundi', meaning 'Rose of the World', and is appropriate to someone who is not only beautiful, but also a good person. 'Oliver' suggests an olive branch, which is a biblical symbol of peace and, in classical mythology, sacred to Venus, goddess of love. Jane is intellectually snobbish towards Rosamond, declaring her 'not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive' (p. 425), so readers must judge for themselves whether in this Jane is a reliable narrator. Rosamond is not merely charming, she is a true philanthropist. She has persuaded her father to finance schools for the children of the poor and she has furnished the schoolmistress's cottage and paid for the education of a servant.

Unlike the other rich characters in the novel, Rosamond is not snobbish. She flirts with St John but is sensitive and thoughtful, rebuking herself when she remembers that he will be sad because his sisters have had to leave. It seems that she does not really love St John, however, because, when he makes clear his intention to go to India, she marries the grandson and heir to Sir Frederick Granby. Since her grandfather was a journeyman needlemaker, Brontë is using her to represent the rapid rise of the families of working class entrepreneurs in the Industrial Revolution.

## Servants

Brontë has a keen ear for the dialogue of servants, which helps her to depict them economically but realistically. They have an important function in keeping the sometimes extraordinary events of the novel rooted in the ordinary world. Mary and John, at Ferndean, talk in a broad Yorkshire dialect; they are stolid and loyal, pragmatic and 'phlegmatic'. Hannah also speaks broad Yorkshire, but she loves to talk and is fiercely protective of the Rivers family.

Brontë uses no dialect features for the servants at Gateshead, presumably to differentiate servants in big houses from those lower in the hierarchy. Miss Abbott, the lady's maid, reflects her mistress's prejudices and preferences, but Bessie does try to stand up for Jane. She is the one person Jane clings to when she leaves Gateshead. Bessie is a warm, good-hearted girl, although quick to scold and, before she leaves, Jane learns to appreciate her essential kindness and not to be afraid of her.

Bessie's ballads and folk-lore stay with Jane throughout the novel and are a significant influence on her imagination. Bessie visits Jane at Lowood and tells her about her uncle's visit, thus preparing us for the time when her aunt summons her. When she revisits Gateshead, Bessie's warm welcome provides a sharp contrast to the coldness of the Reed family.

...Brontë is using Rosamond Oliver to represent the rapid rise of the families of working class entrepreneurs in the Industrial Revolution

### Context

Sir Walter Scott wrote historical novels set in Scotland and made it acceptable to use local dialects in novels.