

British Masterpiece

from *Jane Eyre*

Novel by Charlotte Brontë



Charlotte Brontë
1816–1855



READING 5A Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction. **5B** Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters.

BACKGROUND Jane Eyre, the narrator of Charlotte Brontë's novel of the same name, declares, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will." This would be a strong statement coming from anyone, but it is extraordinary coming from her: Eyre is an orphan without means who must fend for herself in an unfriendly world. Her only relative, a heartless aunt, exiles her to a harsh boarding school for girls. Despite this and the many other cruelties that life in Victorian England held in store for a plain, penniless, and friendless young woman, Eyre develops an unwavering sense of self. She becomes a governess to a young girl, Adele, on a secluded country estate. Adele's guardian is the charismatic, but tortured, Mr. Rochester, and he and Eyre develop a deep attraction. The novel's basic plot—a poor young woman finds romance with her wealthy employer—crosses Gothic romance with the realistic struggles of a Victorian woman who insists on her right to self-determination whatever her circumstances. Since its publication in 1847, *Jane Eyre* has enjoyed enormous success with both literary critics and the general reading public. Along with her sister Emily, who penned the classic *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë remains one of the most influential and best-known female writers of any literary period.

LITERARY ANALYSIS Dialogue is more than a mere conversation between two or more characters—it can reveal the complexities of the relationship between them. Jane Eyre is from the lower classes: poor, orphaned, and female. Mr. Rochester is a wealthy, upper-class man who holds her financial fate in his hands. In the following excerpt, Eyre and Rochester may come from very different social classes, but their dialogue begins to erase the class boundaries between them. Eyre is startled to find herself in a conversation with her employer that bends social rules as Rochester encourages Jane to communicate her honest thoughts.

WRITE Eyre becomes concerned when she thinks she has inappropriately crossed a social boundary in her conversation with Mr. Rochester. Which elements in their dialogue are examples of the social boundaries that exist between Eyre and Mr. Rochester? Which words reinforce the social boundaries? Which words break them down? How does Eyre try to re-establish the social boundaries between herself and Mr. Rochester? How does Mr. Rochester try to erase those boundaries? Cite specific passages from the excerpt to support your response.



Mr. Rochester, as he sat in his damask-covered chair, looked different to what I had seen him look before; not quite so stern—much less gloomy. There was a smile on his lips, and his eyes sparkled, whether with wine or not, I am not sure; but I think it very probable. He was, in short, in his after-dinner mood; more expanded and genial, and also more self-indulgent than the frigid and rigid temper of the morning: still he looked preciously grim, cushioning his massive head against the swelling back of his chair, and receiving the light of the fire on his granite-hewn features, and in his great,
10 dark eyes; for he had great, dark eyes, and very fine eyes, too—not without a certain change in their depths sometimes, which, if it was not softness, reminded you, at least, of that feeling.

He had been looking two minutes at the fire, and I had been looking the same length of time at him, when, turning suddenly, he caught my gaze fashioned on his physiognomy.

“You examine me, Miss Eyre,” said he: “do you think me handsome?”

I should, if I had deliberated, have replied to this question by something conventionally vague and polite; but the answer somehow slipped from my tongue before I was aware:—“No, sir.”

20 “Ah! By my word! there is something singular about you,” said he: “you have the air of a little nonnette; quaint, quiet, grave, and simple, as you sit with your hands before you, and your eyes generally bent on the carpet (except, by-the-by, when they are directed piercingly to my face; as just now, for instance); and when one asks you a question, or makes a remark to which you are obliged to reply, you rap out a round rejoinder, which, if not blunt, is at least brusque. What do you mean by it?”

“Sir, I was too plain: I beg your pardon. I ought to have replied that it was not easy to give an impromptu answer to a question about appearances; that tastes differ; that beauty is of little consequence, or something of that sort.”

30 “You ought to have replied no such thing. Beauty of little consequence, indeed! And so, under pretence of softening the previous outrage, of stroking and soothing me into placidity, you stick a sly penknife under my ear! Go on: what fault do you find with me, pray? I suppose I have all my limbs and all my features like any other man?”

“Mr. Rochester, allow me to disown my first answer: I intended no pointed repartee: it was only a blunder.”