



# Teaching Three Great Books

with Dr. Flora Armetta

## Lesson 7: Jane Eyre – Part 2

### Outline:

The problem of being a woman

- Ask your students to show or describe or discuss ways that the novel picks out what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl.
- Who is going to be the master of the house? What will happen to you if you become an old maid? Wealth and independence won't be there otherwise.
- Jane is constantly feeling that she has to fight against her circumstances. This was of serious concern for many readers. They considered her fierce desire for independence to be socially dangerous.

One famous document that starts a whole history of criticism is Virginia Wolfe's narrative in "A Room of One's Own" about what it meant to be a woman novelist through history.

- Virginia Wolfe is less than 100 years after Bronte, but they are worlds apart in what has happened for women.
- Wolfe considers how Bronte's own frustrations and difficulties have spoiled the qualities of the writing in attempting to create a female character.
  - With older students you can look at this an idea of how you respond to work like Jane Eyre.

A useful way to categorize some of the thing that Bronte does with structure in the novel is the term foil, which is an implicit or explicit comparison by the author between one character and another by placing them in similar positions within the story.

- Shakespeare
  - All three characters are sons of roughly the same age who must eventually avenge their fathers' deaths.
  - The different reactions lead to an understanding of Hamlet's character.
- If you introduce this concept to your students, then you can ask them, "How does Bronte use foils to help tell the story of who the characters are in Jane Eyre?"
  - Mr. Rochester and St. John
    - Each man is the one by whom Jane is rescued and protected.
    - Each man desires her in marriage.
    - To each she must prove her independence.
    - Each are called by her "equals".
  - Bertha Mason and Blanch Ingram



- Both are foils for Jane. Each are possible wives for Mr. Rochester.
- Bertha is from Jamaica. Blanch is French. Jane is in between these two characters. She is between the two of them on the social scale.
- Ask your students to write about foils.
- A character study:
  - Step 1: Choose two characters from your current reading in Jane Eyre. Your characters may be major or minor.
  - Step 2: Write a short paper in which you compare or contrast the characters on one point. For example if the point you are interested in is a general theme, such as “religious views” stick to that subject as you discuss similarities and differences between the characters using examples and quotations from the text.
  - Step 3: Offer some possible points of comparison.
  - **Be sure to use your point of comparison as a way of drawing a conclusion about what Bronte is saying. What do you think we can learn about Bronte’s beliefs and values from this comparison?**

It is helpful to ask students to find quotations that are useful and helpful.

- One way to help students to do this is to talk about themes in the book.
- Talk about the idea of vision in Jane Eyre. Who can see what and how does that give them power or agency in the story?
- At the end of the novel we see Mr. Rochester lose power where his own blindness comes forward. Jane becomes his eyes.
- Show students a structure with the continued theme.
- Example test question: Explain how the following passage illuminates the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester (Jane’s fabulous speech to Mr. Rochester).
  - “Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you, I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal, - as we are!”