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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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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New Historicism and The Turn Toward History

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.

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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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