Is *Jane Eyre* a gothic novel?

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

NB All quotes and page numbers refer to the 1996 Penguin Classics edition.

Gothic literature is a genre of novel that was popular in the late 18th and 19th century and is ‘characterised by an atmosphere of mystery and horror; and with a pseudo-medieval setting.’ *(Oxford Encyclopaedic Dictionary)*

Some features of gothic literature that Charlotte Brontë uses in *Jane Eyre* include:

1. a large, gloomy house with mysterious, locked rooms, in a remote setting
2. wild, turbulent and unseasonal weather
3. references to the supernatural, superstition and moonlight
4. violent and unexplained events
5. madness, suspicion and deceit
6. dreams and dream-like events.

**Activity 1**

In groups, use the following suggestions to help you find evidence from the text and report back to the class on the question: ‘How far could *Jane Eyre* be considered a gothic novel?’

1. **Thornfield is the house Jane goes to as governess to Adele Varens.**
   - Read Chapter 11 for Jane’s first reaction to the house, e.g. ‘A very chill and vault-like air pervaded the stairs and gallery, suggesting cheerless ideas of space and solitude;’ (p.113)
   - Chapter 17 for the mystery she feels everyone but she knows about, e.g. ‘there was a mystery at Thornfield; and that from participation in that mystery, I was purposely excluded.’ (p.188)
   - Chapter 36, for its transformation when Jane returns e.g. ‘And there was the silence of death about it: the solitude of a lonesome wild.’ (p.472). Is Ferndean any brighter in Chapter 37?

2. **The orchard at Thornfield is the setting for Mr Rochester’s marriage proposal to Jane.**
   - Read Chapter 23 and compare the weather descriptions at the start and end of the chapter. Explain how they mirror Jane’s (and Rochester’s) feelings. What might the split chestnut tree represent?
   - Chapter 37, when Rochester proposes to her a second time, explain why he says ‘I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard.’ (p.493)
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- Chapter 31, when St John Rivers hears Miss Oliver speak, explain why he 'had started at the first of those musical accents, as if a thunderbolt had split a cloud over his head,' (p.405).

What do these references to thunder and lightning suggest about the characters’ emotions and relationships?

Find other examples of weather that creates a sense of foreboding and explain their effects.

**Extension activity:** Explore Brontë’s use of the technique **pathetic fallacy**. What extra understanding does this give you of her use of nature and weather images in the novel?

3. **Moonlight often sets the scene for supernatural or superstitious episodes in the novel.**

- Read Chapter 12 from ‘On the hill-top above me sat the rising moon;' (p.127) to the end of the chapter and make notes on the first meeting between Jane and Rochester. You should find examples of superstition (look up the meaning of a Gytrash) and the effect of moonlight on the scene. Look up the moon’s connotations e.g. links to madness.

- Chapter 13 presents Rochester’s retelling of their first meeting, e.g. ‘I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse:' (p.139). This story is retold again in Chapter 36, as local gossip, by the innkeeper to Jane, saying Rochester was ‘bewitched’ by the governess.

- Chapter 22 presents Jane and Rochester meeting on her return from Gateshead, where language of the supernatural is used about both characters, e.g. ‘Well, he is not a ghost; yet every nerve I have is unstrung:' (p.274) and his comment, ‘If I dared, I’d touch you, to see if you are substance or shadow, you elf!’ (p.275).

- In the middle of Chapter 24, Rochester teases Jane by retelling the story of this meeting to Adele, e.g. ‘It was a fairy, and come from Elf-land, it said; and its errand was to make me happy: I must go with it out of the common world to a lonely place – such as the moon’ (p.300).

Find other examples of the supernatural, superstition, moonlight and references to fairies, especially Rochester referring to Jane.
4. The novel contains both unexplained fires and violent acts at Thornfield.

- Read Chapter 15 from the middle, ‘I hardly know whether I had slept ...’ to the end. What wakes Jane up, what alerts her to the fire in Rochester’s bed and what is his reaction to Jane’s intervention?

- Read Chapter 20 for Jane’s eye-witness account of the aftermath of the attack on Richard Mason. Find examples of how: dialogue is made dramatic, especially through choice of punctuation; moonlight and candlelight help create a visual scene for the reader; violent movement and actions, and gory descriptions are used to create a sense of fear and horror.

- Read Chapter 36 for the description of the fire that destroyed Thornfield, which Jane hears a year later, when she has returned to find Rochester. Whose bed did Bertha set fire to on this occasion?

Extension activity: Look at how, on second reading, there is a continuous build-up of dramatic irony towards Chapter 26 when the truth is revealed, e.g. ‘Here then I was in the third storey, fastened into one of its mystic cells; night around me; a pale and bloody spectacle under my eyes and hands; a murderess hardly separated from me by a single door: yes - that was appalling - the rest I could bear; but I shuddered at the thought of Grace Poole bursting out upon me.’ (Chapter 20, p.236) Find more examples of dramatic irony.

5. The mad woman in the attic is one of the most famous and memorable aspects of the novel.

- The first hint of madness at Thornfield comes at the end of Chapter 11 where Jane first hears the laugh, ‘It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless.’ (p.122) How else is it described here? What does ‘cachinnation’ mean? Who is blamed for the laugh?

- In chapters 15, 16 and 20 there are references to a strange atmosphere, blamed on Grace Poole, and Jane assumes she must be mad, e.g. of the ‘goblin-laughter’ she hears in Chapter 15 she says, ‘Was that Grace Poole? and is she possessed with a devil?’ (p.168); in Chapter 16 she suspects it was Grace who set fire to Rochester’s bed, wondering, ‘what mysterious cause withheld him from accusing her?’(p.178) and assumes in Chapter 20 she hears Grace Poole’s ‘own goblin ha! ha!’ (p.235) from the room where Mason has been attacked.

- Read Chapter 26 closely for evidence about Bertha as she is when Jane sees her, after the marriage ceremony is stopped. Also, note evidence of how Rochester came to meet and marry Bertha, so that he is now ‘bound to a bad, mad, and embruted partner!’ (p.327)
• Read Chapter 27 where Rochester tells Jane his story with Bertha again. He has kept her locked in the attic, attended by Grace Poole. Why did he not send her to his other house, Ferndean? What does this tell us about him?

**Extension activity:** Explore other examples of deception, e.g. the gypsy in chapters 18/19, Jane hiding her identity from the Rivers family, Mrs Reed hiding John Eyre’s letter from Jane.

6. **Bronte introduces Jane’s most intense and vivid dreams before and after her wedding day.**

• Read Chapter 25 for Jane’s account to Rochester (in the orchard, under a moon ‘blood-red and overcast’) on the eve of their wedding, of finding her wedding veil ripped. What ghost story effects does she use to add suspense? What do Jane’s two dreams suggest about the future? How does he react to the story of the veil?

• Near the end of Chapter 27, what aspects of the past does Jane dream about? How does Jane react? Near the start of Chapter 32 who do we find out Jane still dreams about?

• Read the end of Chapter 35, where Jane hears Rochester calling her name. What has she just agreed to do? Compare this to Chapter 37 where, near the beginning, he calls hearing her voice a ‘delusion’ and ‘sweet madness’ (p.482) and near the end where he repeats to her the words she said on hearing him call her. What does it suggest about them?
Activity 2

Practice: Now use the following extracts to practise your analysis skills and build up your understanding of Charlotte Bronte’s use of gothic techniques.

Chapter 12

First person description of Rochester’s approach as Jane walks near Thornfield:

The din was on the causeway: a horse was coming; the windings of the lane yet hid it, but it approached. I was just leaving the stile; yet, as the path was narrow, I sat still to let it go by. In those days I was young, and all sorts of fancies bright and dark tenanted my mind: the memories of nursery stories were there amongst other rubbish; and when they recurred, maturing youth added to them a vigour and vividness beyond what childhood could give. As this horse approached, and as I watched for it to appear through the dusk, I remembered certain of Bessie’s tales, wherein figured a North-of-England spirit called a ‘Gytrash’; which, in the form of horse, mule, or large dog, haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travellers, as this horse was now coming upon me.

Chapter 20

Eye witness account of watching over the injured man Mason, alone in the attic:

I must keep to my post, however. I must watch this ghastly countenance - these blue, still lips forbidden to unclose - these eyes now shut, now opening, now wandering through the room, now fixing on me, and ever glazed with the dulness of horror. I must dip my hand again and again in the basin of blood and water, and wipe away the trickling gore. I must see the light of the unsnuffed candle wane on my employment; the shadows darken on the wrought, antique tapestry round me, and grow black under the hangings of the vast old bed, and quiver strangely over the doors of a great cabinet opposite - whose front, divided into twelve panels, bore, in grim design, the heads of the twelve apostles, each enclosed in its separate panel as in a frame; whilst above them at the top rose an ebon crucifix and a dying Christ.

Chapter 20

Dialogue between Jane and Rochester in the orchard, after Mason has left:

‘And it has made you look pale - were you afraid when I left you alone with Mason?’
‘I was afraid of someone coming out of the inner room.’
‘But I had fastened the door - I had the key in my pocket: I should have been a careless shepherd if I had left a lamb - my pet lamb - so near a wolf’s den, unguarded: you were safe.’
‘Will Grace Poole live here still, sir?’

‘Oh, yes! Don’t trouble your head about her - put the thing out of your thoughts.’

‘Yet it seems to me your life is hardly secure while she stays.’

‘Never fear - I will take care of myself.’

‘Is the danger you apprehended last night gone by now, sir?’

‘I cannot vouch for that till Mason is out of England: nor even then. To live, for me, Jane, is to stand on a crater-crust which may crack and spew fire any day.’

Chapter 25

*Interior monologue of Jane’s thoughts, the night before the wedding:*

_Mrs Rochester! She did not exist: she would not be born till to-morrow, some time after eight o’clock a.m.; and I would wait to be assured she had come into the word alive, before I assigned to her all that property. It was enough that in yonder closet, opposite my dressing-table, garments said to be hers had already displaced my black stuff Lowood frock and straw bonnet: for not to me appertained that suit of wedding raiment; the pearl-coloured robe, the vapoury veil pendant from the usurped portmanteau. I shut the closet to conceal the strange, wraith-like apparel it contained; which, at this evening hour - nine o’clock - gave out certainly a most ghostly shimmer through the shadow of my apartment. ‘I will leave you by yourself, white dream,’ I said. ‘I am feverish: I hear the wind blowing: I will go out of doors and feel it.’_

Chapter 25

*Dialogue between Jane and Rochester regarding the veil ripped by Bertha:*

‘Fearful and ghastly to me - oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face - it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!’

‘Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.’

‘This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eye-brows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?’

‘You may.’

‘Of the foul German spectre - the Vampyre.’

‘Ah! - What did it do?’

‘Sir, it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them.’
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Chapter 36

*Extended direct speech - the innkeeper’s account of the final fire at Thornfield:*

‘She had a woman to take care of her called Mrs Poole - an able woman in her line, and very trustworthy, but for one fault - a fault common to a deal of them nurses and matrons - *she kept a private bottle of gin by her*, and now and then took a drop over much. It is excusable, for she had a hard life of it: but still it was dangerous; for when Mrs Poole was fast asleep, after the gin and water, the mad lady, who was as cunning as a witch, would take the keys out of her pocket, let herself out of her chamber, and go roaming about the house, doing any wild mischief that came into her head. They say she had nearly burnt her husband in his bed once: but I don’t know about that.’

Activity 3

**Essay:** Choose one of the above extracts - or use a different one of your own choice - and write an answer to the question, ‘How far could *Jane Eyre* be considered a gothic novel?’

- Write about the features present in your chosen extract.
- Write about how Brontë uses a range of features in the novel as a whole.