A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE SUMMER READING PACK

A Level English Literature Overview

LVI

Comparative and Contextual Study (Examination, 40%)

Women in Literature

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen

Literature Post-1900 (Coursework, 20%)

Time

Atonement by Ian McEwan*

Arcadia by Tom Stoppard*

'Poems of 1912-13' by Thomas Hardy*

UVI

Drama and Poetry Pre-1900 (Examination, 40%)

Section 1 – Shakespeare

Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare

Section 2 – Drama and Poetry Pre-1900

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster*

Selected poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

* Different texts may be selected next year

Summer Reading

- During the summer holiday, you will need to **read *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte**. This forms part of the Women in Literature section of the course.

- You should also **complete ten Set Text Reading Records**. These will give you the opportunity to reflect on your reading and note down your response as you progress through the book.

- There are four sections on the Set Text Reading Record:

    - Section from text – This tells you which chapters to focus on.
    - Summary of contents – Note down the key events of these chapters.
    - Key quotations – Select up to five quotations you think are important.
    - Analysis – Write down your thoughts and ideas about these chapters. This can cover aspects such as characters, settings, themes and genre. You can also identify any techniques the writer is using as well as any questions that you have that you can raise when we review these chapters.

- There are several film and television adaptations of *Jane Eyre* which you can watch, including the 2006 BBC series with Ruth Wilson and Toby Stevens, and the 2011 film with Mia Wasikowska and Michael Fassbender.

- You must also **read the essay on 'Romanticism and *Jane Eyre*'** from the English Review magazine and **complete a Critical Reading Record**.

- There are four sections on the Critical Reading Record:

    - Critical text – This tells you which essay to focus on.
    - Main arguments – Note down the main points made in the essay.
    - Key quotations – Select up to five quotations you think are important.
    - Evaluation – Write down your response to this essay. Does it make any interesting points? Do you agree or disagree with the arguments put forward? Do you have any observations from your own reading of the test? Are there any questions you would like to ask about this article?

- There are **two further essays** on *Jane Eyre* in your pack. As a **challenge task**, you can read and complete a Critical Reading Record for one or both of these essays.

- For **optional wider reading**, you could also read *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier which is a more modern version of the story with some different twists to the plot. Another option would be *Wild Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys which is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* written from a postcolonial perspective.

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 1-4

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 5-9

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 10-14

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 15-19

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 20-22

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 23-24

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 25-26

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 27-29

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 30-34

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Set Text Reading Record

Section from text:
Chapters 35-38

Summary of contents:

Key quotations:

Analysis:

English Department – Critical Reading Record

Critical Text

Romanticism and *Jane Eyre* by Anne Crow

Main arguments

Key quotations

Evaluation

AQA (A) Literature
AQA (B) Language and literature
Edexcel Literature
OCR Literature
WJEC

Romanticism and *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë was the daughter of a parson, well-read in religious matters, but her father also encouraged her to read widely among the Romantics. **Anne Crow** questions *Jane Eyre*'s debt to Romanticism

When people say that Charlotte Brontë was influenced by Romantic writers, they are not merely referring to the fact that *Jane Eyre* is a love story about a poor Cinderella figure who ends up married to the man she adores. The Romantic period refers to a movement in the arts and ways of thinking that pervaded Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Many writers, artists and musicians reacted against the prevailing rationalist ethos that characterised earlier eighteenth-century thought. Instead of prizing reason and logical thinking, the new thinkers insisted that the emotional side of human responses was more important, that the brain should learn from the heart and from natural instinct, that the imagination held purer truths than the rational mind. Nature was all important, and some writers even rejected established religion and worshipped Nature instead. In place of the eighteenth-century fascination with all things classical, writers and painters turned to the Gothic, the foreign, the exotic, and the supernatural.

Reason versus feeling

Jane has a highly developed imagination combined with a passionate temperament, but Brontë has made sure she has been taught the value of reason. Rochester reads her character correctly when, in his gypsy disguise, he discerns that

> The forehead declares, 'Reason sits firm and holds the reins, and she will not let the feelings burst away and hurry her to wild chasms'. (p. 233)

When Jane decides to leave Thornfield, duty overcomes her feelings for the man she 'absolutely worshipped' (p. 363). Rochester tries to appeal to her reason, but he misunderstands the word, using it to refer to his own selfish logic:

> 'Jane! will you hear reason?' (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear); 'because, if you won't, I'll try violence.' (p. 349)

Jane's own reason, however, warns her that

> ...if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as — under any pretext — with any justification — through any temptation — to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory. (p. 359)

As he tries to persuade her to stay, she wavers, admitting that

> ...my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as Feeling: and that clamoured wildly. (p. 365)

However, she realises that these feelings are not 'sane', and she must keep 'the law given by God; sanctioned by man'. Jane trusts in God and her own self respect.

By contrast, St John Rivers, a man who declares 'Reason, and not feeling is my guide', offers Jane an occupation that she thinks 'the most glorious man can adopt or God assign' (pp. 432, 466). She realises that, whereas to have yielded to Rochester would have been an 'error of principle', to yield to St John would be 'an error of judgement'. Nevertheless, 'Religion called — Angels beckoned — God commanded — life rolled together like a scroll — death's gates opening, showed eternity beyond.' Jane 'fervently longed to do what was right' and entreated Heaven to show her

Ruth Wilson as Jane Eyre in the 2006 BBC adaptation

the path. Her heart suddenly 'stood still to an inexpressible feeling' (pp. 482–3). When she is forced to make a choice between reason and feeling, like the Romantic writers and poets who influenced Charlotte Brontë, Jane chooses feeling.

Nature

As Jane listens to Rochester's voice, the room is full of moonlight, and she declares that 'it is the work of nature' (p. 483). Romantic writers imbued nature with a personality, ascribing to it human moods and moral impulses. Charlotte Brontë brings the moon into the novel at key points and gives it a central role. The moon guided Jane to Helen Burns' room the night she died. The moon's 'glorious gaze' roused her the night Mason was attacked (p. 238). When Rochester defied God and asked Jane to marry him, 'the moon was not yet set' although the wind roared and swept over them (p. 295). While Jane was waiting to tell Rochester about the ghastly apparition that had torn her veil, she said that the ominously blood-red moon 'seemed to throw on me one bewildered, dreary glance' (p. 319). As Jane dreams just before she leaves Thornfield, it is the moon which metamorphoses into human form and whispers to her, 'My daughter, flee temptation' (p. 367).

To Jane, the moon is a mother figure, consoling, guiding and supporting her, but, like some of the Romantic poets, Jane seems to worship nature itself. She sees the necessity to conceal her feelings for Rochester as 'Blasphemy against nature!' (p. 204). When she flees from Thornfield, she looks first to nature for protection and guidance, declaring, 'I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose'. She finds somewhere sheltered to sleep and some berries to eat, and only then does she say her 'evening prayers', as if by routine rather than need. Not until nightfall does she feel 'the might and strength of God' (pp. 372–3).

It is impossible to overestimate the influence of nature on the lives of all the Brontës. Living in close proximity to the vast, wind-blown moors, they were in touch with nature's every mood. Charlotte reveals her own feelings in Jane's religious awe as she enthuses

> ...we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us and it is in the unclouded night sky, where His worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence. (p. 373)

Her Romantic descriptions of the moors, 'sweet with scents of heath and rush' and their streams 'catching golden gleams from the sun and sapphire tints from the firmament', are no mere literary convention; they reflect Charlotte's own deep love of her natural surroundings. However, she also invokes the delicious horror of the supernatural.

The supernatural

With *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), Horace Walpole initiated a craze for supernatural thrills in Romantic novels. Gothic fiction was designed to intensify the reader's emotional response by introducing the unfamiliar and the inexplicable into a familiar, safe and realistic world. The one event in *Jane Eyre* that is difficult to explain rationally is the moment of telepathy when Jane and Rochester hear each other's voices. Jane tries to explain it, rejecting superstition and comparing the sensation with an electric shock, as if it is an epiphany, the moment when she realises that 'It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play and in force' (p. 484). For Rochester, hearing Jane's voice appears to be his reward for eventually turning to God and beginning to pray. It seems that, although Charlotte Brontë does use a supernatural event, she does so to reinforce her main themes rather than to contribute to the horror.

When she allows Jane to indulge in the language of Gothic horror novels, Brontë often combines supernatural elements with a rational realism that gently mocks the overactive imagination of

her heroine. Jane compares the corridor of the third storey of Thornfield with Bluebeard's castle, evoking Charles Perrault's fairy-tale in which Bluebeard's young wife finds the corpses of his previous wives hanging on the walls of a locked room. Rochester is no murderer, however, and it was not unknown for a woman to be locked up if her husband decided she was mad. '[T]he foul German spectre — the vampire' who tears Jane's veil is, in reality, his unhappy first wife (p. 327).

When Jane hears Rochester's horse approaching before their first encounter, she thinks of the Gytrash, 'a North-of-England spirit' which 'sometimes came upon belated travellers'. The huge dog that materialises out of the gloom appears 'exactly one mask of Bessie's Gytrash — a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head' (p. 132). Brontë, however, undermines Jane's fanciful imaginings with humour. The 'Gytrash' is Pilot, a friendly dog who wags his tail at Jane. The Byronic hero, far from being 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know', falls from his horse and needs Jane's help to remount. When Mr Rochester's bed is set on fire to the accompaniment of a 'demoniac laugh' and 'goblin-laughter', Brontë humorously dispels the Gothic atmosphere as Rochester wakes 'fulminating strange anathemas at finding himself lying in a pool of water' (pp. 173–4).

Gothic hero

In appearance, Rochester is a typical Gothic hero, dark and brooding, with 'granite-hewn features' and 'great, dark eyes' (p. 153). He has a domineering manner and an aggressive contempt for convention. His first wife comes from the West Indies, an exotic place where English reserve and decorum may not be so valued. To escape her, Rochester has travelled widely in Europe and has had a succession of foreign mistresses. In the midst of all this Gothic Romance and foreignness, the central figure of Jane seems to embody English reserve, self-restraint and 'Quaker-like' plainness (p. 117).

By contrast, St John Rivers at first appears to be the young, classically handsome and devout hero who saves the heroine. Eventually, however, we realise that he is more dangerous than Rochester. Instead of making him the safe 'boy-next-door', Brontë has drawn out his piety to a threatening extreme so that Jane declares, 'If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now' (p. 475). In nineteenth-century England, as St John tells her, these words were 'such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine'. Jane's reserve masks a passionate and defiant temperament. She knows that if she marries St John she will lose her precious independence. As his companion

> ...my heart and mind would be free. I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings with which to communicate in moments of loneliness. There would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine to which he never came; and sentiments growing there fresh and sheltered. (p. 470)

Social reform

This emphasis on the importance of the individual is to be found in all Romantic writers. Inspired by the revolution in America, with its declaration of human rights, by the French revolutionary cry of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', and by the abolition of the slave trade, people began to argue for reform in England. Romantic thinkers argued not just for freedom for themselves but also reforms in society. Although Brontë graphically describes the hardships faced by children in charity schools, she does not advocate reform. Once a healthier site had been found for Lowood, and improvements introduced in diet and clothing, Jane describes the school as 'a truly useful and noble institution' (p. 100). It was still dedicated to preparing orphaned girls to be useful and humble, rather than to broadening their horizons, and Brontë does not suggest that it should have been doing more towards improving the lot of women.

Rosamond Oliver is the one character in the book who is a social reformer, bringing education to the village children, not only boys but also girls. She, however, is dismissed by Jane as 'not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive' and 'a sweet girl — rather thoughtless' (pp. 425, 430). It seems ironic to a twenty-first-century reader that Jane, who thinks only of herself, despising the 'heavy-looking gaping rustics' she has to teach, and feeling 'degraded' by taking 'a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence', is so dismissive of the young woman who actively embraces social reform, spending much of her allowance on tackling children's ignorance and sharing some of the teaching herself (pp. 422, 414). When married, Jane apparently does nothing for anyone other than her immediate family, applauding herself for finding a more indulgent school for Adèle.

Nevertheless, Jane's final words (three paragraphs, in fact) are devoted to St John Rivers, and it is possible to detect a note of regret in the admiration she reveals on reading his last letter:

> No fear of death will darken St John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded, his heart will be undaunted, his hope will be sure, his faith steadfast. (p. 521)

She compares him with 'the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon' in Part II of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Although Brontë's reading of Romantic poets and novelists strongly influenced her style, she remains, still, the daughter of a parson.

References

Brontë, C. (2006) *Jane Eyre*, S. Davies (ed.), Penguin Classics.

Anne Crow is an examiner for a major examining board and has taught A-level English for many years. Her new *Philip Allan Literature Guides for A-Level* on *Jane Eyre* and *The Great Gatsby* are now available: www.philipallan.co.uk.

Archive articles

Relevant articles in past issues of THE ENGLISH REVIEW are listed below. Ask your teacher if your school subscribes to *The English Review Online Archive*.

Crow, A. (2008) 'A picture is worth a thousand words', Vol. 19, No. 1
Haslam, S. (2002) 'Family, sex and violence in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*', Vol. 13, No. 1
Millhouse, J. (2010) 'The secret war of feeling', Vol. 20, No. 3
Palser Havely, C. (2005) 'The Eyre affair', Vol. 16, No. 1
Palser Havely, C. (2006) 'Troubles with men', Vol. 17, No. 2
Wood, M. (2006) 'Jane Eyre in the red-room', Vol. 16, No. 3

English Department – Critical Reading Record

Critical Text

Beauty Alone with the Beast: Jane Eyre and the 'Gypsy' by Stephen Lowden

Main arguments

Key quotations

Evaluation

Beauty alone with the Beast

Jane Eyre and the 'gypsy'

Stephen Lowden examines the meeting of Jane Eyre and the 'gypsy' in Charlotte Brontë's novel

Close to the mid-point of the novel, in Volume 2, Chapter 4, Jane Eyre confronts Mr Rochester at his most morally beastly. There are passages in her narrative, for instance at his first appearance, where her hero is fiercer and more animalistic, but none where his passionate scrutiny of her is more distressingly intimate and invasive. In the fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, only Belle can see past her master's ugliness, and in *Jane Eyre*, too, Jane is the only inhabitant of Thornfield to penetrate the 'gypsy's' disguise. Of course, the narrator makes a point of her being plain Jane, small and insignificant in her grey dress, but the reader knows that Rochester sees beauty in her truth.

Likewise, a woman — even an ugly old gypsy — is not a monster. But any disguise is a deformation of appearance; more importantly, the purpose of this disguise, the invasion of Jane's privacy, is morally monstrous. Rochester can claim that he is only acting, but the moral beastliness is real enough, as Jane makes clear. She is firm in her judgement that he has behaved very badly in contriving this secret meeting, and in using it to attempt a close analysis of her feelings. Nevertheless, she will keep his secret.

Reason and passion

The scene is of great importance to several of the novel's themes. At the social level, a taboo has been broken: Victorian morality did not allow unchaperoned meetings between unmarried men and respectable women. At the personal level, the conflict between reason and passion is made explicit, and Jane is shown that she is not alone in struggling to manage overpowering feelings. Symbolically, Rochester's increasing dependence on Jane is stressed, while at the level of Gothic mystery-adventure, this highly theatrical scene of disguise leads straight on to that of the near-murder of Mr Mason, and Jane's complicity in the hushing-up of the crime.

From the first, Jane has relished the fierce, beastlike side of Mr Rochester. Her description of her original meeting with him, before she knows who he is, lays emphasis on his animal strength even when injured, and puts him in the context of mysterious stories: his horse is named Mesrour from the *Arabian Nights*, and his dog appears in the guise of the supernatural Gytrash. As narrator, Jane is rather proud of her sang-froid in coping with horse, man *and* dog; as an inexperienced teenage governess, she has to call on all her powers of good sense and self-command when faced with what at first seems a scene of pure Gothic horror.

She knows that Rochester is ugly by conventional standards; just before the announcement of the gypsy fortune-teller she compares him with the newly-arrived Mason, who is seen by others as a 'beautiful man' with a 'pretty little mouth' and a 'sweet-tempered forehead'. In Jane's opinion, however, Mason lacks 'firmness' and 'command', appearing like a goose or a sheep in comparison with Rochester's falcon-like fierceness or keen-eyed sheepdog's roughness.

Yet Jane is insistent that Rochester goes much too far in his gypsy disguise: though she will forgive his behaviour, she will not allow it to overcome her sense of her own dignity and

Jane Eyre and the Gipsy (1847)

AQA (A) Literature: 'Victorian literature'

AQA (B) Language and literature: 'Themes in language and literature'

Edexcel Literature: 'Explorations in prose and poetry'

OCR Literature: 'Prose and poetry 1800–1945'

WJEC: 'Prose study and creative writing'

worth — what he calls her 'pride and reserve'. His probing of her feelings and character is altogether too like spying. The thoughts and motives revealed in her face and expression are, he declares, 'favourable' or 'propitious' — except for her resolutely independent brow. He means, of course, that she is capable of passion (for him) but is restrained by good sense: 'reason' and 'conscience'. This is a true analysis — Jane does not deny a word of it either at the time or in her ten-years-later role of narrator — but it is far too intimate. It attempts to strip off not only the necessary guardedness of the respectable governess, but the ordinary privacy of the individual. Jane is quite clear, though her rebuke is mild enough: 'I shall try to forgive you; but it was not right.'

The Beast contrite?

Rochester is allowed to play the Beast only up to a point: paradoxically, he has given Jane the moral advantage in the scene, since he must ask forgiveness — which is only granted conditionally. And of course he has revealed, though only half-acknowledged, his passion for Jane and his need for her love and support. This she takes the first opportunity to offer *un*conditionally: her response to his distress at hearing the name of Mason is to say, 'I'd give my life to serve you'. As in their first meeting — explicitly remembered here — her commitment is first symbolised in physical support: he leans on her. The scene ends with an understanding, an alliance which grows from the acknowledgement of his weakness and her strength. This not only looks forward towards the horrors of the blood-splashed attic in a few hours' time, but prefigures the climactic meeting at Ferndean, when finally all pretence is laid aside.

Settings: the library and the dining-room

Jane's swift incursions into the dining-room, where the 'fine people' are amusing themselves in triviality and giggling, draw attention to the importance of the scene by making a social contrast. Blanche Ingram and the other girls have already had their rather disconcerting interviews with the 'gypsy'; now they must pretend to have no curiosity about Miss Eyre's experience. When Jane fills a glass of wine and marches off with it, Blanche can only watch 'frowningly'. Is the insignificant governess 'taking a liberty'? The contrast between the light-hearted chatter of the fashionable visitors and the portentous conversation in the library is strongly emphasised by Jane's passage to and fro. The fashionable world lacks real substance: it has arrived at Thornfield with all the showy splendour of an *Arabian Nights* procession, and Rochester, speaking as the gypsy, has told Jane that she watches 'the fine people' as if they were 'shapes in a magic-lantern...mere shadows'. Despite his costume and his play-acting, he is claiming that their interview belongs to a real world, where real passions produce real consequences.

In this scene, Rochester calls Jane a 'ministrant spirit'; in others, she is a fairy, an elf, a dream. Most of these labels are complimentary, though when he calls her an *ignis fatuus*, a will-o'-the-wisp, he implies that she could lead him to self-destruction — as very nearly happens. What is emphasised is his rather self-indulgent assertion that he is the one powerless in the presence of magic; Jane, for all her claims to prosaic ordinariness, is a force to be reckoned with. Miss Eyre's name is relevant here: her slight physical frame, so disparagingly brushed aside by the fashionably large Blanche, suits her role as an airy spirit, flitting helpfully and almost invisibly about Thornfield, and later flying to Rochester's rescue when she hears his call. It casts her as Ariel to Rochester's Prospero: she is his agent but also his near-prisoner, obliged by enchantment to do his bidding in an isolated environment where he has all the power. Like Shakespeare's magician, Rochester only re-enters the everyday world at the very end of the story. Until then, the 'frowning irregularities' of his brow, his beastlike alienated fierceness, is his most characteristic style.

Fiction or fairy tale?

Q. D. Leavis termed *Jane Eyre* a fairy tale in order to stress its difference from the 'realist' strand of nineteenth-century fiction (introduction to Penguin edition, 1966). Obviously it has elements of *Cinderella*, especially in the early chapters and in the discovery that Jane has been an heiress all along. Yet the 'gypsy' scene suggests that *Beauty and the Beast* is by far the strongest parallel. Jane, like Belle, is not dismayed or deceived by a threatening exterior. Though she is puzzled by the gypsy-apparition, she is undaunted by it, just as she is not put off by Rochester's sarcasm and harshness, which she has learned to enjoy as 'keen condiments'. In the fairy tale, Belle is granted a magic insight, a dream in which she sees and loves a prince whom she supposes is another captive of the Beast. In the same way, Jane sees the good behind her Beast's rough exterior, but at this middle stage of her narrative has yet to discover the rest of the truth. Thornfield does have a captive, a factual monster, not a dream; the house hides a 'crime incarnate'.

As he ends his gypsy impersonation, Rochester would very much like to be kissed as the Beast is kissed, but Jane will not allow herself to be constructed by that part of the fairy tale: she will not play the game of breaking the 'enchantment'. Though Rochester is not an ogre, and not quite a Bluebeard, she refuses the physical closeness offered by his demand that she unknot his cloak-string. Her devotion to his interests is made clear in this scene and the next, but the story cannot be resolved until Rochester has suffered at the hands of what Prospero would call a 'thing of darkness', the madness which lurks in his attic.

Stephen Lowden taught English for many years at St Paul's School, London.

Online archive

Relevant articles in past issues of The English Review are listed below. Ask your teacher if your school subscribes to The English Review Online Archive. The following is a selection of articles on *Jane Eyre*.

Crow, A. (2008) 'A picture is worth a thousand words: Jane Eyre's paintings', Vol. 19, No. 1

Crow, A. (2010) 'Romanticism and *Jane Eyre*', Vol. 21, No. 1

Havely, C. P. (2006) 'Troubles with men', Vol. 17, No. 2

Wood, M. (2006) 'Jane Eyre in the red-room', Vol. 16, No. 3

English Department – Critical Reading Record

Critical Text
The Journey by Laurence Coupe

Main arguments

Key quotations

Evaluation

The journey

People have always been fascinated by the similarities between different stories. From *The Pilgrim's Progress* to *Star Wars*, **Laurence Coupe** explores the idea that there is one central story which keeps being retold

THE RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE

On board the Death Star, a battle station of the evil Empire, Luke Skywalker is attempting to rescue Princess Leia from the clutches of Darth Vader. Pursued by imperial troops, he and his companions plunge into a garbage compactor, where they find themselves floundering in a foul swamp inhabited by monstrous creatures. Suddenly, Luke is dragged down into the depths. For what seems like an eternity he disappears, while his companions look on helplessly, fearing that he might have died. Then, just as suddenly, he reappears: he is alive and well, and is ready to resume the struggle against evil.

Does this sound familiar? Even if you have not seen the original *Star Wars* film (1977), you will probably have watched other cinematic scenes like this. It is so familiar that we might want to identify it as a motif, or recurrent symbol. We might call it the 'supreme ordeal', or perhaps even the 'victory over death'. It is the kind of scene we come across not only in film but also in literary narrative. For example, Book I of Spenser's verse romance *The Fairie Queene* (1590), tells the story of the Red Cross Knight and his quest to save a kingdom from an evil dragon. In the penultimate episode, the knight does battle with the dragon, and at one point he seems to have been overcome. The force of the monster's fiery breath causes him to stumble and almost sink in the mire nearby a large tree. However, this is the Tree of Life, and as he rests in its roots he is restored to health by the stream of balm which flows from it. Thereafter, he has the strength to defeat the dragon and redeem the land.

Was George Lucas, the director of the film, imitating Edmund Spenser? This need not be the case if we accept the idea that 'the hero's journey' is a universal narrative structure, with incidents and images which keep reappearing. Thus, what looks like a matter of specific influence turns out to have a deeper and wider perspective: a collective, unconscious expectation which a shrewd film director will not disappoint.

The monomyth

In 1949, a relatively unknown lecturer, Joseph Campbell, wrote a book which is still hugely influential. The thesis of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is that there is one central story which has haunted the human imagination, even though

it has many versions — and there is only one hero, even though he has 'a thousand faces'. Campbell calls this story the 'monomyth'. It makes itself known in a variety of ways from age to age and from place to place. Its roots lie in the most archaic human experiences.

In his book, Campbell expresses interest in the rite of passage of the earliest, hunter-gathering cultures. In its broadest sense, this involved a young male being initiated into the mysteries of the tribe by being made to undertake a challenging task in isolation, which would signify his transition from boyhood to manhood. In a more specialised sense, it involved the 'shaman' or 'holy man' of the community going off into the forest in order to experience a sacred vision, whose benefits he would convey to the community as a whole. In both cases, the pattern it bequeathed to storytelling was threefold: departure, struggle, return — or, to use Campell's terms, 'call to adventure', crossing of the 'threshold of adventure', 'return with elixir' or 'bringing back the boon'.

Luke learns to trust the Force

The Hero with a Thousand Faces inspired George Lucas to write and direct *Star Wars*. He set out to make a film that did not so much imitate particular versions of the monomyth as follow the fundamental pattern as strictly as possible. We can see how deliberately this exercise was undertaken if we apply some of the subdivisions of the scheme set out by Campbell to the film itself. For example, within the 'call to adventure', we are told, there are usually the following secondary stages: first, we have the hero in his 'ordinary world'; secondly, the call itself; thirdly, his initial 'refusal of the call'; fourthly, after his 'meeting with the mentor', his commitment to undertake the journey. In *Star Wars* we see Luke Skywalker, bored with life on the farm where he lives with his uncle and aunt. Then he finds Princess Leia's message, stored in the droid R2-D2 and addressed to Obi-Wan Kenobi, who was once a celebrated Jedi Knight within the old Republic. Not immediately prepared to do very much about this, Luke nevertheless seeks out Obi-Wan who, having persuaded him to take up the challenge of helping the princess and supporting the rebellion against the Empire, instructs him in the ways of the Force.

We could go on, mapping every main incident in the film to an episode already described, situated and explained by Campbell. We have already noted the crucial moment of the 'supreme ordeal' (the garbage compactor), which usually comes after the crossing of the threshold. We might also note the important presence of allies along the way: here they are Han Solo, and the droids C-3PO and R2-D2. Let us take just one more example. Late on in the journey, we have the moment Campbell calls 'resurrection' — the religious language indicates that the heroic quest is not for material gain. Just as Spenser's Red Cross Knight can only restore a ravaged land to life by virtue of being spiritually renewed himself, so Luke Skywalker can only overcome the evil Empire by trusting to a higher power. Launching his final assault on the Death Star, he is inspired by the spirit of Obi-Wan Kenobi to let go of his old self and to trust the Force. Luke's earlier, specifically *physical* near-death experience has anticipated the final moment of victory, when he knows the 'boon' to be *inner* as well as outer. Evidently, earlier audiences cheered at the moment when Luke succeeds in destroying the Death Star — according to Campbell's theory, they were unconsciously responding to the archaic power of the completed 'rite of passage'.

'Eternal Life!'

For another celebrated 'rite of passage', let us turn again to a literary source. Part I of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progess* (1679) is regarded by many as one of the earliest English novels, but it is perhaps better appreciated in our context as a traditional prose romance, taking the form of a quest. It illustrates Campbell's pattern perfectly, but with an interesting variation. The hero, Christian, is dissatisfied with the sinful world in which he lives and, reading his Bible, decides to leave it for ever and find the Celestial City, or heavenly kingdom. As he sets off he cries, 'Life! Life! Eternal life!'. Here, then, there is no 'refusal of the call' as such; but what we do have is an attempt by several false friends (Mr Worldly Wiseman, Pliable) to dissuade the hero from his quest. This variation is especially effective in a Christian story which emphasises the need to hold on to one's faith.

The rest of the tale conforms more clearly to the pattern. We have a mentor in the shape of Evangelist, who shows Christian how to

understand God's message and how to avoid the temptations of sin and error on the way. Moreover, as might be expected, Christian has allies, such as Faithful, and he has enemies, such as Giant Despair. Again, he must make his way through many dreadful places, such as the Slough of Despond, a deep bog in which he nearly drowns, and a demonic market place called Vanity Fair, in which he and his ally are put on trial by followers of the Devil, who execute Faithful. Finally, he and his new companion, Hopeful, swim across the River of Death and reach their heavenly destination.

It is worth mentioning that, though Bunyan's religious allegory focuses on Christian, who seems to have deserted his wife and family in his quest for salvation, Part II of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1684) recounts the successful attempt of Christiana and her children to follow in his footsteps. The devotion of a whole narrative to Christian's wife reminds us that, when we are looking for literary variations on the monomyth, we need not expect the protagonist to be male. Indeed, as the novel developed as a literary form, it increasingly related the inner aspect of the hero's journey to the desire of women to establish an identity in what seemed to be a man's world. They wanted, as it were, to tell their own story. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is illuminating here: while deeply rooted in traditional, male-centred narrative, it is strongly informed by a sense of female needs and rights.

A woman's quest

Jane Eyre is perhaps a more complicated example than *The Pilgrim's Progress*, particularly as it is set in the 'real world' and it seems to lack a mythic dimension. However, bearing in mind the thesis of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, we should expect it (like all stories) to draw much of its power from the 'monomyth', no matter how realistic this first-person account of Jane's life might seem to be.

For instance, the novel is narrated in the form of a journey, and it is worthwhile considering the the main stages of Jane's travels, as suggested by the symbolic names of her dwelling places. The orphaned Jane has to pass through the 'gate's head' (Gateshead Hall, home of her uncle) in order to undertake her adventure. In the course of her struggle, she feels herself overwhelmed by the darkness of a 'low wood' (Lowood Orphans Asylum). Indeed, her misery must further deepen, as she encounters hostility in a 'field of thorns' (Thornfield Hall, owned by Mr Rochester, where Jane is employed as a governess. However the 'field of thorns' becomes in time a 'dean of ferns' (Ferndean, the house where Jane and Rochester finally live as man and wife), a pleasant vale full of beautiful plants. Thus, she has travelled a path as symbolically important as Christian's. She has made her way through the waste land of despair to her own kind of paradise.

Now, looking back we can see that there was an initial 'call to adventure' (the ghostly apparition in the red room), a 'refusal of the call' (Jane's self-doubts and awareness of her own plain appearance), a mentor (Mr Reed, possibly, or Miss Temple), various allies (Helen, Mary, Diana), enemies (Mrs Reed, Mr Brocklehurst, Mrs Rochester), a 'resurrection' (Jane's death to her old doubts and her sense of identity in love) and a 'return with the elixir' (Rochester's restoration of sight through the healing power of Jane's love).

More than a formula?

I have set out to show that different stories may share a common structure, whether we come across them in classic literature or popular film. But in a sense, that is only the beginning of the discussion. For, once we have detected a hidden pattern, we still have to decide how we evaluate the various versions that we come across. For example, though *The Pilgrim's Progress* seems to have been written to justify a distinctly individualistic version of Christianity, what lingers in the mind is the rich depiction of a social world. This is seen to be full of divisions and injustices, as represented by the patronising Worldly Wiseman and by the cruel judge and jury of Vanity Fair. But it is also a place where the poor and oppressed continually find opportunities to help one another, as seen in the relationship of Christian with Faithful and with Hopeful. This latter interest takes us beyond the simple formulaic expectation that the 'monomyth' will include allies as well as enemies: it is an extremely moving element in the experience of reading the text. Again, *Jane Eyre* is a radical adaptation of the traditional quest romance. Brontë not only substitutes a female hero for a male, but also uses her story to explore the struggle a woman has to engage in if she is to affirm and assert her rights in a society organised for the benefit of men. Indeed, perhaps the 'boon' which Jane brings back is, ultimately, the example she sets to her female readers of the possibility of finding respect and responsibility.

What, then, of George Lucas's films? Are they restricted to the bare bones of a formula? I think it would be unfair to conclude so. One point of interest is that the first of the films does not reveal that the evil Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father; this information is held back until the third film, *Return of the Jedi* (1983). The early trilogy thereby gains in tension and psychological subtlety; moreover, it encourages us to reflect on the relationship between good and evil, between the light and dark sides of the Force. The recently released prequel, *The Phantom Menace* (1999), delves further into such matters by tracing the early years of Luke's father, Anakin, as he undergoes his own rite of passage. On the other hand, I would not want to encourage the notion that a film deserves celebration simply because it keeps reworking one variation of what has become a formula. One should, perhaps, pause to regret Lucas's increasing interest in special effects at the expense of extending narrative possibilities, and the increasing ability of Hollywood to turn everything, including the 'monomyth', into a commerical enterprise. But that, as they say, is another story.

Laurence Coupe is Senior Lecturer in English at Manchester Metropolitan University and author of *Myth* (Routledge, 1997).