***Jane Eyre***

***Chapter 1***

***Summary and Analysis.***

Short Summary:

The novel opens on a dreary November afternoon at Gateshead, the home of the wealthy Reed family. A young girl named Jane Eyre sits in the drawing room reading Bewick’s History of British Birds. Jane’s aunt, Mrs. Reed, has forbidden her niece to play with her cousins Eliza, Georgiana, and the bullying John. John chides Jane for being a lowly orphan who is only permitted to live with the Reeds because of his mother’s charity. John then hurls a book at the young girl, pushing her to the end of her patience. Jane finally erupts, and the two cousins fight. Mrs. Reed holds Jane responsible for the scuffle and sends her to the “red-room”—the frightening chamber in which her Uncle Reed died—as punishment.

Summary in detail:

It is a cold, wet November afternoon when the novel opens at Gateshead, the home of Jane Eyre's relatives, the Reeds. Jane and the Reed children, Eliza, John, and Georgiana sit in the drawing room. Jane's aunt is angry with her, purposely excluding her from the rest of the family, so Jane sits alone in a window seat, reading Bewick's History of British Birds.

As she quietly reads, her cousin John torments her, reminding her of her precarious position within the household. As orphaned niece of Mrs. Reed, she should not be allowed to live with gentlemen's children. John throws a book at Jane and she calls him a "murderer" and "slave-driver." The two children fight, and Jane is blamed for the quarrel. As punishment, she is banished to the red-room.

Analysis and theme of chapter in detail:

This opening chapter sets up two of the primary themes in the novel: class conflict and gender difference. As a poor orphan living with relatives, Jane feels alienated from the rest of the Reed family, and they certainly do nothing to make her feel more comfortable. John Reed says to Jane: "You have no business to take our books; you are a dependant, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentleman's children like us . . . ." John claims the rights of the gentleman, implying that Jane's family was from a lower class. She appears to exist in a no-man's land between the upper and servant classes. By calling John a "murderer," "slave-driver" and "Roman emperor," Jane emphasizes the corruption that is inherent in the ruling classes. Her class difference translates into physical difference, and Jane believes that she is physically inferior to the Reed children.

Jane's argument with John also points to the potential gender conflicts within the text. Not only is Jane at a disadvantage because of her class status, but her position as female leaves her vulnerable to the rules of a patriarchal tyrant. John is an over-indulged only son, described by Jane as "unwholesome" and "thick," someone who habitually gorges himself. Contrasting with Jane's thin, modest appearance, John Reed is a picture of excess: his gluttony feeds his violent emotions, such as constant bullying and punishing of Jane. One of Jane's goals throughout the book will be to create an individual place for herself, free of the tyrannies of her aunt's class superiority and her cousin's gender dominance. By fighting back when John and his mother torment her, Jane refuses the passivity that was expected for a woman in her class position.

Jane's situation as she sits reading Bewick's History of Birds provides significant imagery. The red curtains that enclose Jane in her isolated window seat connect with the imagery of the red-room to which Jane is banished at the end of the chapter. The color red is symbolic. Connoting fire and passion, red offers vitality, but also the potential to burn everything that comes in its way to ash. The symbolic energy of the red curtains contrast with the dreary November day that Jane watches outside her window: "a pale blank of mist and cloud." Throughout the book, passion and fire will contrast with paleness and ice. Jane's choice of books is also significant in this scene. Like a bird, she would like the freedom of flying away from the alienation she feels at the Reed's house. The situation of the sea fowl that inhabit "solitary rocks and promontories," is similar to Jane's: Like them, she lives in isolation. The extreme climate of the birds' homes in the Arctic, "that reservoir of frost and snow," the "death-white realms," again creates a contrast with the fire that explodes later in the chapter during John and Jane's violent encounter.

Books provide Jane with an escape from her unhappy domestic situation. For Jane, each picture in Bewick's tale offers a story that sparks her keen imagination. But Jane also says that the book reminds her of the tales that Bessie, one of the Reeds' servants, sometimes tells on winter evenings. Books feed Jane's imagination, offering her a vast world beyond the claustrophobia of Gateshead; they fill her with visions of how rich life could be, rather than how stagnant it actually is. Not a complacent little girl, Jane longs for love and adventure.

Summary part by part

On a dreary afternoon in Gateshead Hall, the ten-year-old Jane Eyre, who has been forbidden by her Aunt from playing with her three cousins, finds a curtained window seat where she can read. Jane pages through a copy of the *History of British Birds*. Its many pictures inspire her to imagine mysterious stories and arctic scenes.

Jane's bullying cousin John Reed barges in and insults her, calling her a penniless orphan and beggar and a servant in his house. When he knocks her down with the book, Jane fights back for the first time in her life. The two children scuffle.

Stunned, John goes crying to Mrs. Reed: his mother and Jane's aunt. Mrs. Reed, despite Jane's protests, accuses Jane of starting the fight. As punishment, Mrs. Reed orders Jane to be locked in the red-room. The red-room is a lavishly furnished and rarely used bedroom where, nine years previous, Mrs. Reed's husband (Jane's uncle) had died.

Analysis part by part:

Jane sitting and reading by herself, not allowed to play with her cousins, establishes her odd and lonely position at Gateshead Hall. Yet her willingness to find a book to read, rather than just moping, establishes her independence.

Because Jane is an orphan, the wealthy Reeds treat her as a dependent—someone who relies on their support. They treat her more like a servant than a family member.

Jane's punishment is ironic—at the moment Jane asserts her independence, her freedom is taken away. The Reeds are tyrants and hypocrites, refusing to recognize Jane's virtues and their own vices.

Important Quotations:

"You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, an d not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense. Now I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine; all this house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows"

Explanation of Quotation:

Many different issues are presented in this one rant by Jane's older cousin. Not only does he remind her that she's a penniless orphan, but he provides details about how much of a burden she is on the family's finances. Plus, she's not even worthy of the family's expense, therefore, she should be a beggar and a social outcast, which foreshadows what she faces throughout the novel anyway. Finally, he implicitly tells her she is ugly by ordering her to stay away from any glass that might reflect her image. Prejudice, injustice, and social discrimination all culminate into one abusive attack after another and this is just one example. We learn that Jane is an orphan with no real family or love in her life.

Chapter 1 is a typical description of Jane’s typical day in the Reid household. This reveals her isolated position. John’s bullying and Mrs. Reed’s justifications indicate that the reeds view wealth as the sole measure of a person’s worth. Because Jane is poor, they consider her unworthy to live with them. Her fury against John’s unjust treatment exhibits her strong sense of self. Jane copes with this isolation and ill-treatment by finding solace in reading and learning but it very clear in her fury that she feels the need to defend herself.