
Jane Eyre. CD-ROM. Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1999.

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In the Fall 2000 issue of *The Rocky Mountain Review*, Matthew Colley reviewed *The Great Gatsby* CD-ROM by the Films for the Humanities and Sciences, noting the “mandatory fussin’ and fightin’ that must accompany the installment of any new software.” After attempting to install the CD-ROM of *Jane Eyre*, also by the Films for the Humanities and Sciences, I would like to take his statement a step further: this software seems particularly difficult to install and unduly complicated to run. The installation procedure offered my first sign that the software, though nicely packaged and professionally designed, lacks some of the kinds of user-friendly details that could transform it from a moderately useful companion to the novel into a truly functional and effective learning and teaching tool.

The software itself covers a number of potentially helpful materials for both the student and the teacher of *Jane Eyre*, including the full searchable and annotated text of the novel, an analysis of 23 of the novel’s characters, contemporary and modern criticism of the work, background on Charlotte Brontë, historical and literary highlights of the Victorian era, research sources, and teaching strategies. These kinds of materials can be found elsewhere, though a student or teacher of the novel might appreciate the fact that they are compiled on one disc.

Some of these materials offer clear and important information. In particular, the contemporary and modern criticism of the novel is arguably the most beneficial section on the disc. The concise entries on contemporary criticism offer valuable perspectives on the novel from journals of the period. Essays of modern criticism address such topics as the role of the governess, feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel, and character analyses of Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers. Another section contains biographical information about Brontë and historical data and includes background on Brontë’s childhood, creative development, and publications, as well as timelines of historical events and literature of the period. A sampling of the historical data includes British monarchs and prime ministers, foreign rulers, the Crimean War, suffrage and political movements, labor and wages, industrialization, the railway, economic growth, and the middle-class Victorian family. Yet another section contains some practical examples of formal writing assignments, creative writing projects, exam questions, and classroom exercises. In addition, the disc contains a bibliography of numerous books and a few articles as recent as 1994. An accompanying filmography includes basic information on film productions of the novel, including cast lists and directors.

What tends to mar the value of even these materials, though, is their manner of presentation. The section on character analyses, for example, offers meaningful information in long-winded sentences that have the potential to confuse students. Here's a sample: "Her [Jane Eyre's] happiness, in contrast to the views held by Helen Burns and St John Rivers, may also be found on earth, notwithstanding a strongly maintained set of Christian ethical values, which enable her to forgive her aunt despite the hostility that Mrs. Reed aims at her niece throughout her life-time, and shrouds herself with at her death." What makes sentences like these so troublesome is the fact that most text appears in text boxes that contain, on average, four to six words per line. Sentences like the one above easily can span nine or ten lines of text, making that text very difficult to read. Reading one or more chapters of the novel online or skimming through historical data can be a laborious task, especially when maneuvering through that text with the sluggish scroll bars. Instead of reading text on the screen, the best route may be to print any desired information. Do, however, note that accidentally clicking on the Print button will print the full text of the selected section without launching a prompt box that confirms the print request.

Throughout, the disc contains minor formatting, typographical, and grammatical errors, as well as a few misdirected hyperlinks and buttons. Further, the program, once it is running, cannot be iconified; as such, it impedes the kinds of multitasking capabilities (e.g., using word-processing software and running the program at the same time) that many users have come to expect. In addition, capabilities intended to enhance user friendliness, such as a text Search capability and notes on the text, seem somewhat awkwardly designed and arduous to use. Other features, such as six brief video extracts from a film version of the novel, may help first-time readers engage with the text and thus might prove more valuable for the student of *Jane Eyre* than for the teacher. In the end, the disc contains many bells and whistles—fancy fonts, graphics, film footage, a tutorial with audio sound bites, and brief video clips of expert analysis of the novel—and not enough attention to the kinds of details that students and teachers of literature might appreciate. ❁