

## Victorian Britain

*Jane Eyre* was written during the Victorian era, named for the queen who ruled the United Kingdom from 1837 to 1901. It was a time of economic growth through the Industrial Revolution, expansion of the British empire, and increasing democratization. During this period British society had sharp divisions between the classes. At the top were the aristocrats, the wealthiest class. They had ties to royalty and didn't need to work because their income came from land and wealth passed down through the generations. Their children were mostly educated at home by tutors or governesses. University education was open only to males; females were expected to marry. Noble parents often arranged marriages for their children to bring increased wealth, land, or prestige to the family. The presence of a new class of wealthy entrepreneurs, enriched by the Industrial Revolution, posed something of a challenge to the aristocrats. That class nevertheless remained at the top of the social ladder. Some wealthy industrialists hoped to gain status by marrying a child into a noble family. Some nobles, their estates grown less lucrative, seized the opportunity to improve their financial position through such a match.

Strict rules of behavior governed interactions between the lower classes and the aristocrats. The servants who did the work of keeping the aristocrats' manor houses and large estates in order were expected to show great deference to their employers. They were to do their work quietly and without drawing attention to themselves. Most servants had little or no education; they received very low pay and had few opportunities to better themselves. Governesses, who had some education and were entrusted with caring for the children, were treated somewhat better but nevertheless had an in-between status, both part of the family and not part of the family. Farmers, blacksmiths, and other working people were also considered lower class. The middle class included merchants, bankers, doctors, teachers, and members of the clergy.