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## INTRODUCTION

### The Affordances of Form

If a literary critic today set out to do a formalist reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, she would know just where to begin: with literary techniques both large and small, including the marriage plot, first-person narration, description, free indirect speech, suspense, metaphor, and syntax. Thanks to rich recent work on the history of the book, she might also consider the novel's material shape—its size, binding, volume breaks, margins, and typeface. But unlike formalists of a couple of generations before, she would be unlikely to rest content with an analysis of these forms alone. Traditional formalist analysis—close reading—meant interpreting all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching artistic whole. A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work's production, and she would work to connect the novel's forms to its social world. She would seek to show how literary techniques reinforced or undermined specific institutions and political relationships, such as imperial power, global capital, or racism. Along the way, our critic would most likely keep her formalism and her historicism analytically separate, drawing from close reading methods to understand the literary forms, while using historical research methods to analyze sociopolitical experience. These would seem to her to belong to separate realms and to call for different methods.

But would our critic be right to distinguish between the *formal* and the *social*? Consider the early scenes in *Jane Eyre*, where Brontë first introduces Lowood School. In the morning, a bell rings loudly to wake the girls. When it rings a second time, "all formed in file, two and two, and in that order descended the stairs." On hearing a verbal command, the children move into "four semicircles, before four chairs, placed at the four tables; all held books in their hands." When the bell rings yet again, three teachers enter and begin an hour of Bible reading before the girls march in to breakfast.















































