

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 19

Jane Eyre: Background (Author & Context)

Hello students!

Today I'm going to discuss *Jane Eyre*, one of the most important, famous novels in the corpus of English novels. Well to know about Jane Eyre along with the author is really important to know the very gist of the novel. If we interpret the novel entitled *Jane Eyre* thematically, it has various dimensions. So let us know about the novel *Jane Eyre*. As we all know that this novel was written by Charlotte Bronte in 1847, the novel follows the story of Jane, a seemingly plain and simple girl as she battles through her life's struggle. There are elements in *Jane Eyre* that echo Charlotte Bronte's own life. This is a very important point that if you want to know about the novel in question, one should know about author's life as well.

She and her sisters, that is Charlotte Bronte and her sisters, went to a school run by a headmaster, as severe as Mr. Brocklehurst. The novel begins with Jane living at her aunt's, Mrs. Reed. Mrs. Reed and her children are very cruel towards Jane. One night, Mrs. Reed locks Jane into the red room, a supposedly haunted room in the family home. Jane has many obstacles in her life. That is why, I mean, to know about her is really very touching and poignant. Her cruel and abusive aunt Reed, the grim conditions at Lowood School, her love for Rochester and Rochester's marriage to Bertha. This all made the story very, very pathetic. However, Jane overcomes these obstacles, hurdles, through her determination, sharp wit and courage. The novel ends with Jane marrying to Rochester with children of their own.

Mrs. Reed sends Jane to Lowood School, where the headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst is also cruel towards Jane. Conditions are very poor at the school and Jane's best friend, Helen Burns, dies of consumption. Jane later becomes a teacher at Lowood. Jane applies for a governess position at Thornfield Hall and gets the post. She becomes governess for Adelaide. Jane begins to fall in love with her employer, Mr. Rochester. A fire breaks out

at Thornfield, nearly killing Rochester as he sleeps. Jane saves him. Rochester claims, it was Grace Poole, a servant who started the fire. However, Jane doesn't think he was. So, we can see that series of incidents, accidents occurred in the life of Jane, and facing all these huddles and accidents, you know, Jane's life was a bundle of curiosity as well as pain and misery. Well, Jane is shocked when Rochester confesses his love and desire to marry her. She thought he wanted to marry Blanche Ingram.

On the day of their wedding, a man turns up at the church to declare that Rochester cannot marry as he is already married. Rochester reveals all about his marriage, claiming his wife Bertha is mad and he still wants to be with Jane. Jane cannot be with Rochester when he is still married so she runs away becoming homeless and then sick. The Rivers family take her in and nurse her back to health. Jane inherits her uncle's wealth and estate. She finds out that the family that took her in are actually her cousins. St. John Rivers asks Jane to join him in his missionary work abroad and be his wife. She nearly accepts, but when she hears Rochester calling her in a dream, she decides she cannot marry someone she doesn't love. She returns to Thornfield. When she arrives, she discovers, it has burned down and Rochester is now living at Ferndean, his usual retreat, and is blind. Jane rushes to him and they marry. The novel concludes with Jane and Rochester married with children. Rochester also regains his sight in one eye.

So, the novel opens with Jane reading alone in the breakfast room, hoping she can find peace away from the Reed's family. However, this doesn't last as Master John Reed arrives, wanting to torment Jane. He taunts Jane by calling her a rat, claiming she is poor, ungrateful and as she depends on her mother's wealth is a beggar. Jane retaliates and the fight breaks out. Mrs. Reed arrives with her servants to stop the fight and orders Jane to be taken and locked in the red room.

Now the very concept of red room is very important throughout the story and also in the mental state of Jane Eyre. The red room is a haunted room in the household, and it is here that Jane believes she meets her uncle's ghost. She is terrified by this and bangs on the door wanting to be let out but no one comes for her. Jane suffers a fever and it nearly kills her.

We should also know about 'Lowood School' because when we talk of Jane's story, this school matters a lot. Why this matters a lot? Well, Mrs. Reed does not want Jane in her household anymore, so sends her to a school run by cruel Mr. Brocklehurst. She tells him that Jane must be punished and Brocklehurst relishes any opportunity to punish Jane in front of her peers. Conditions at the school are not very good. Illness is rife and there isn't

enough food or water for the girls. Jane makes her first friend, for the first time in her life and understands the value of friendship and love. That is why this school is very important in her life. Tragically, Helen burns, Jane's best friend dies of consumption. Jane is there with her until her death, refusing to leave her side.

Soon after, the school is taken over by some kind and sympathetic gentleman, thus improving the conditions. Jane later becomes a teacher there. Jane decides to leave Lowood School and applies for a governance position. She gets the position and moves to Thornfield Hall where she looks after and teaches Adelaide a lively French girl. After a few months, Jen meets Rochester, the owner of the estate and her boss. She finds him aloof and rude yet intelligent and sharp. She begins to fall in love with Edward Rochester, fantasizing what life would be like with him.

Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper of Thornfield, announces that Rochester is expecting guests. The household is extremely excited and anxious as they haven't had guests to for years. Preparations get underway to prepare for the party's arrival. A party of guests arrive, including the beautiful Blanche Ingram, who it is rumoured Rochester's will marry. Jane becomes heartbroken at this news and awaits the marriage proposal, supposing that Rochester loves Blanche. Rather than proposing to Blanche, Rochester confesses his love for Jane and asks her to marry him. Jane is shocked and does not believe him at first, but eventually accepts. They prepare for their marriage, Rochester insisting that he wants to marry quickly and quietly.

On the day of their wedding, Mr. Mason arrives at the church and declares that Rochester cannot marry as he is already married to his sister, Bertha Masson. Rochester confirms their story by taking Jane to the attic to see his wife who is mentally unstable and prone to violence. Rochester exclaims that despite his marriage, he still wants to be with Jane and they could still live together. Jane locks herself in the room away from everyone so she can think and decide what to do. Jane decides that she cannot be with Rochester. As he is already married, she stays true to her principles and decides to run away, becoming homeless in the process. She forages for food in village and journeys away from Thornfield Hall, hoping Rochester will never find her. When she is hungry, delirious and close to death, the Rivers family take her in and nurse her back to health. When she gets better, Jane becomes a school mistress at the village.

St. John Rivers, the brother in the Rivers family, arrives at Jane's school to announce that her uncle has died, leaving his wealth and estate to her. John also reveals that Jane's uncle

is also his, making them cousins. Jane is overwhelmed and rejoices that she has family, splitting the inheritance between them. St. John decides to undertake missionary work in India. He asks Jane to accompany him and she agrees. However, St. John suggests that they should be married. For their journey, Jane reluctantly accepts. However, when she hears Rochester calling her name in the night, she decides that she cannot marry someone she doesn't love. Upon hearing Rochester's voice, Jane returns to Thornfield.

When she arrives, she discovers; it was burnt down. Jane suspects the worst that everyone in the household has died, including Rochester. She soon hears the truth that Bertha burned the hall down and Rochester, in his attempt to save her, became blind and lost his hand. Jane makes the journey to Ferndean to see Rochester. As he has lost his sight, he believes he is imagining Jane's voice. He is overwhelmed that she is there breaking down and confessing his love for her. The novel concludes with Jane and Rochester married. With children, Edward manages to regain sight in one eye to see his first-born child.

The romantic relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester, her employer, adds a layer of intrigue and passion to the narrative. The novel is renowned for its exploration of complex themes, including social class, uncertainty and the search for identity. As I said that *Jane Eyre* written by Charlotte Bronte, published in 1847, is a classic novel that follows the life and experiences of its eponymous protagonist, Jane Eyre. The narrative unfolds in the early 19th century and traces Jane's journey from her orphaned childhood to her struggles as a governess and ultimately her quest for independence, love and self-respect. The novel is set against the backdrop of Victorian England, a society marked by strict social hierarchies and even stricter gender roles. Jane Eyre, characterized by her resilience and moral integrity, becomes a symbol of female empowerment in a time when women's options were often limited.

Charlotte Bronte was born in Yorkshire, England on April 21, 1816 to Maria Banwell and Patrick Bronte. Because Charlotte Bronte's mother died when Charlotte was five years old, Charlotte's aunt, a devout Methodist, helped her brother-in-law raise his children. In 1824, Charlotte and three of her sisters, Maria, Elizabeth and family, were sent to Cowan Bridge, a school for clergymen's daughters. When an outbreak of tuberculosis killed Maria and Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily were brought home several years later. Charlotte returned to school, this time in Rowhead, England. She became a teacher at the school in 1835 but decided after several years to become a private governess instead. She was hired to live with and tutor the children of the wealthy Sidgwick family in 1839 but the job was a misery to her and she soon left it.

Once Charlotte recognized that her dream of starting her own school was not immediately realizable, however, she returned to working as a governess, this time for a different family. Finding herself equally disappointed with governess work, the second time around Charlotte recruited her sister to join her in more serious preparation for the establishment of her school. Although the Bronte's school was unsuccessful, their literary projects flourished. At a young age, the children created a fictional world they named Angria and their many stories, poems and plays were early predictions of shared writing talent that eventually led Emily, Anne and Charlotte to career as novelists.

As adults, Charlotte suggested that she and Emily collaborate on a book of poems. The three sisters, published under male pseudonyms, Charlotte was Currer Bell, while Emily and Anne wrote as Alice and Action Bell, respectively. When the poetry volume received little public notice, the sisters decided to work on separate novels but retained the same surnames. Anne and Emily produced their masterpiece in 1847, but Charlotte's first book, *The Professor*, never found a willing publisher during her lifetime. Charlotte wrote *Jane Eyre* later that year.

The book, a critic of Victorian assumptions about gender and social class, became one of the most successful novels of its era, both critically and commercially. Autobiographical elements are recognisable. Throughout Jane Eyre's experience at Lowood School, where her dearest friend dies of tuberculosis, recalls the death of Charlotte's sister at Cowan's Bridge. The hypocritical religious fervor of the headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, is based in part on that of the reverend Carus Wilson, the evangelical minister who ran Cowan Bridge. Charlotte took revenge upon the school that treated her so poorly by using it as the basis for the fictional load.

Jane's friend Helen Burns' tragic death from tuberculosis recalls the death of two of the Charlotte sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who succumbed to the same disease during their time at Cowan's Bridge. Additionally, John Reed's decline into alcoholism and dissolution is most likely modelled upon the life of Charlotte Bronte's brother Branwell, who slid into opium and alcohol addiction in the years preceding his death. Finally, like Charlotte, Jane becomes a governess, a neutral vantage point from which to observe and describe the oppressive social ideas and practices of 19th century Victorian society. The plot of *Jane Eyre* follows the form of a bildungsroman which is a novel that tells the story of a child's maturation and focuses on the emotions and experiences that accompany and incite his or her growth to adulthood.

In *Jane Eyre*, there are five distinct stages of development, each linked to a particular place. Jane's childhood at Gateshead, her education at Lowood School, her time as Adèle's governess at Thornfield, her time with the Rivers family at Morton and Marsh End, also called Moor House, and her reunion with and marriage to Rochester at Ferndean. From these experiences, Jane becomes the mature woman who narrates the novel retrospectively. But the bildungsroman plot of *Jane Eyre* and the book's element of social criticism are filtered through a third literary tradition, that of the Gothic horror story. Like the bildungsroman, the Gothic genre originated in Germany. It became popular in England in the late 18th century and it generally described supernatural experiences, remote landscape and mystical occurrences, all of which are intended to create an atmosphere of suspense and fear, Jane's encounter with ghosts' dark secrets, sinister plots, add a potent and lingering sense of fantasy and mystery to the novel.

After the success of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte revealed her identity to her publisher and went on to write several other novels, most notably *Shirley* in 1849. In the years that followed, she became a respected member of London's literary set. But the deaths of siblings, Emily and Branwell in 1848 and Anne in 1849, left her feeling dejected and emotionally isolated. In 1854, she wed the Reverend Arthur Nicholas, despite the fact that she did not love him. She died of pneumonia, while pregnant the following year.

Jane Eyre was published in 1847, a moment of historical transition in which Britain was turning its attention away from its West Indian colonies towards the colony that would become the jewel in Victoria's crown India. The primary reason for declining British involvement in the Antilles was the unprofitability of sugar and tobacco plantation in the wake of the abolition of slavery in 1833. Like many novels of the Victorian period, Charlotte's novel was published under a male pseudonym as was common of women writers of her day. It records her knowledge of the abuses of the poor in the guise of charity and her anger at the hypocritical religious practices of the men directing the institutions responsible for their care and education.

The school upon which the fictional Lowood School, was based abounded in England during Bronte's lifetime, as did the cruelly dependent situations of the young women and girls who taught and resided in them. Some of the critics focus about the ideological aspect of this text. Vanden Bossche in his article, *Ideology, Agency, Class and the Novel*, writes "*Jane Eyre* is a pivotal text for histories of the novel because it raises particularly vexed questions about the ways novels support ideology." In his understanding, some reading

emphasizes how the texts produce ideology, others, how it serves as critic and still others discovering some combination of the two.

Another critic talks about the romantic aspect of the text. Alison Searle writes, “the seductive power of the romantic narrative that Jane Eyre relays, namely the relationship of the heroine to Rochester and her gradual empowerment as a writing subject has enticed critics to read it as either a secular celebration of erotic attachment or the achievement of one female's search for independence.”

In this way, the novel is observed from several angles by different critics and reviewers in terms of women's suffering, autobiography, dream, frustration and ideological aspects of the text. However, criticisms are unavailable to address adequately of contrapuntal issues of the novel.

Therefore, the argument is that this research will solidly feminist encounter with high Victorian exposing the nexus between masculinity and colonialism. Further, this feminist critic of high Victorian British society is threaded with colonial rule also and the attempt will be directed towards the exposition of masculine expresses on British women, paralleling the excesses on the natives by colonizing whites. Strict rules of behaviour governed interaction between the lower classes and the aristocrat. The servant who did the work of keeping the aristocrat's manor houses, and large estates in order, were expected to show great difference to their employer. 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. Here I wrap up the discussion.

Thank You!