

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 20

Jane Eyre: Theme, Form and Style- I

Hello student, I am Professor Smita Jha and I am here to discuss *Jane Eyre*. And I say again and again that this is one of the most classical novels written by Charlotte Bronte and we all know that how important Bronte's sisters are. While discussing *Jane Eyre*, we need to discuss the background and some of the elements which make the narrative very meaningful, significant, you know, symbolically.

Well, if we talk of themes and other aspects of the novel, we should also know about 'Family.' Family plays an important role in the narrative of *Jane Eyre*. The main quest in *Jane Eyre* is Jane's search for family, for a sense of belonging and love. However, this search is constantly tempered by Jane's need for independence. She begins the novel as an unloved orphan who is almost obsessed with finding love as a way to establish her own identity and achieve happiness. Although, she does not receive any parental love from Mrs. Reed, Jane finds surrogate maternal figures throughout the rest of the novel. Bessie, Miss Temple and even Miss Fairfax care for Jane and give her the love and guidance that she needs. She returns the favour by caring for Adela and the students at her school.

Still, Jane does not feel as though she has found her true family until she falls in love with Mr. Rochester at Thornfield. He becomes more of a kindred spirit to her than any of her biological relatives could be. However, she is unable to accept Mr. Rochester's first marriage proposal because she realises that that their marriage, based on unequal social standing, would compromise her autonomy as her social status was very, very important during the Victorian age. Jane similarly denies St. John's marriage proposal as it would be one of duty, not of passion. Only when she gains financial and emotional autonomy after having received her inheritance and the familial love of her cousin, can Jane accept Rochester's offer. The blinded Rochester is more dependent on her at least until he regains his sight. Within her marriage to Rochester, Jane finally feels completely liberated, bringing her dual quest for family and independence to a satisfying conclusion.

Then comes 'Religion' in the narrative which we can say is the very, very important aspects of the whole discussion. Jane receives three different models of Christianity throughout the novel, all of which she rejects either partly or completely before finding her own way. Mr. Brocklehurst's evangelicalism is full of hypocrisy. He espouses on the benefits of privation and humility while he indulges in a life of luxury and emotionally abuses the students at Lowood. Also, at Lowood, Helen Burns' Christianity of absolute forgiveness and tolerance is too meek for Jane's test. Helen constantly suffers her punishment silently and eventually dies. St. John, on the other hand, practices a Christianity of utter piousness, righteousness and principle to the exclusion of any passion. Jane resents his marriage proposal as much for his detached brand of spirituality as for its certain intrusion on her independence.

However, Jane frequently looks to God in her own way throughout the book, particularly after she learns of Mr. Rochester's previous marriage and before St. John takes her in to Moore House. She also learns to adapt Helen's doctrine of forgiveness without becoming complete passive and returns to Mr. Rochester when she feels that she is ready to accept him again. The culmination of the book is Jane's mystical experience with Mr. Rochester that brings them together through a spirituality of profound love.

Well, this is also very important to know about 'Social position' as I said that the society and the social position standard was very important during the Victorian period, especially in England. Bronte uses the novel to express her critique of Victorian class differences. Jane is consistently a poor individual within a wealthy environment, particularly with the Reeds and at Thornfield. Her poverty creates numerous obstacles for her and her pursuit of happiness, including personal insecurity and the denial of opportunities. The beautiful Miss Ingram's higher social standing, for instance, makes her main competitor for Mr. Rochester's love, even though Jane is far superior in terms of intellect and character. Moreover, Jane's refusal to marry Mr. Rochester because of their difference in social status demonstrate her morality and belief in the importance of personal independence, especially in comparison to Ms. Ingram's gold-digging inclinations. Although, Jane asserts that her poverty does not make her an inferior person, her eventual ascent out of poverty does help her overcome her personal obstacles.

Then comes 'Gender inequality', which is another important aspect of the narrative of *Jane Eyre*. Alongside Bronte's critique of Victorian class hierarchy, is a subtler condemnation of the gender inequalities during the time period. The novel begins with Jane's imprisonment in the Red Room at Gateshead and later in the book, Bertha's imprisonment in the attic at Thornfield is revealed. The connection implies that Jane's imprisonment is

symbolic of her lower social class while Bertha's containment is symbolic of Victorian marriage: all women, if they marry under unequal circumstances as Bertha did, will eventually be confined and oppressed by their husbands in some manner. Significantly, Jane is consciously aware of the problems associated with unequal marriages. Thus, even though she loves Mr. Rochester, she refuses to marry him until she has her own fortune and can enter into the marriage contract as his equal.

While it is difficult to separate Jane's economic and gender obstacles, it is clear that her position as a woman also prevents her from venturing out into the world as many of the male characters do. Mr. Rochester, her uncle St. John, for instance. Indeed, her desire for worldly experience makes her last name ironic as 'Eyre', derives from an old French word meaning to travel. If we look into the life of Jane Eyre, well, we find her unsettled most of the time. A tragic journey from one point to another in search of respite and peace. If Jane were a man, Bronte suggests, she would not be forced to submit to so much economic hardship. She could actively attempt to make her fortune. As it is, however, Jane must work as a governess, the only legitimate position open for a woman of her station and simply wait for her uncle to leave her his fortune.

Well, further 'Fire and Ice', very important aspect of the whole story. So, we should know about it. What was the motive? The motives of fire and ice permeate the novel from start to finish. Fire is presented as positive, creative and loving, while ice is seen as destructive, negative and hateful. So, these two, fire and ice, presented is based on binary opposition. Bronte highlights this dichotomy by associating these distinct elements with particular characters, the cruel or detached characters, such as Mrs. Reed and St. John are associated with ice. While the warmer characters such as Jane, Miss Temple and Mr. Rochester are linked with fire. Interestingly, fire serves as a positive force even when it is destructive, as when Jane burns Helen's humiliating, slaughtered crown and when Bertha sets fire to Mr. Rochester's bed curtains and then to Thornfield Manor. The first of Bertha's fires brings Jane and Mr. Rochester into a more intimate relationship, while the second destroys Thornfield and leads to Bertha's death, thus liberating Rochester from his shackled past. Although the fire also blinds Rochester, this incident helps Jane see that he is now independent on her and erases any misgivings she may have about inequality in their marriage. Although Bronte does not suggest that the characters associated with ice are wholly malignant or unsympathetic, she emphasized the importance of fiery love as the key to personal happiness.

So, while discussing Jane Eyre's journey and her story, some elements like 'Gothic elements' play a pivotal role. Bronte uses many elements of Gothic literary tradition to create a sense of suspense and drama in the novel. First of all, she employs Gothic techniques in order to set the stage for the narrative. And this is very special to Bronte's sister i.e. Gothic environment. The majority of the events in the novel take place within a gloomy mansion that is filled manor with secret chambers and a mysterious demonic laugh belonging to the mad woman in the attic.

Bronte also evokes a sense of the supernatural, incorporating the terrifying ghost of Mr. Reed in the red Room and creating a sort of telepathic connection between Jane and Mr. Rochester. More importantly, Bronte uses the gothic stereotype of the Byronic hero to formulate the primary conflict of the text- Brooding and Tortured. While simultaneously passionate and charismatic, Mr. Rochester is the focal point of passionate romance in the novel and ultimately directs Jane's behaviour beginning at her time at Thornfield.

At the same time, his dark past and unhappy marriage to Bertha Mason set the stage for the dramatic conclusion of the novel. When we talk of the environment and background, well, I must say that atmosphere and environment play almost like a character in the novel of Bronte's sister and specifically in Charlotte Bronte's novel.

We should also know about 'External beauty versus Internal beauty.' Throughout the novel, Bronte plays with the dichotomy between external beauty and internal beauty. Both Bertha Mason and Blanche Ingram are described as stunningly beautiful. But in each case, the external beauty obscures as internal ugliness. Bertha's beauty and sensuality blinded Mr. Rochester to her hereditary madness and it was only after their marriage that he gradually recognized her true nature. Blanche's beauty hides her haughtiness and pride as well as her desire to marry Mr. Rochester only for his money. Yet, in Blanche's case, Mr. Rochester seems to have learned not to judge by appearances and he eventually rejects her despite her beauty.

Only Jane, who lacks the external beauty of typical Victorian heroines, has the inner beauty that appeals to Mr. Rochester. Her intelligence, wit and calm morality express a far greater personal beauty than that of any other character in the novel and Bronte clearly intends to highlight the importance of personal development and growth rather than superficial appearances. Once Mr. Rochester loses his hand and eyesight, they are also on equal footing in terms of appearance. Both must look beyond superficial qualities in order to love each other.

We should also look into the situation that may call 'A troubled childhood, An undaunted spirit.' We all know that how difficult Jane Eyre's life was. When we first meet young Jane Eyre, the eponymous heroine of Charlotte Bronte's classic 19th century novel, she is experiencing a rare moment of private pleasure. She is curled up on a velvet window seat at Gateshead, the house owned by her aunt Reed, who took Jane in when she was orphaned. She has drawn the thick curtain around her, concealing herself from her aunt and cousins, who make little effort to hide the fact that they consider Jane, a burden. And she is reading a book, Bewick's *Book of Birds*, which she has found in the library. This moment of reprieve and happiness is short-lived. John, Jane's eldest cousin, rips back the curtain and discovers her. He scolds her for taking a book from their library, calls her an ungrateful beggar, and when Jane doesn't respond to his taunts, throws the volume at her head. Now, Jane fights back. Aunt Reed discovers Jane and John in the middle of this scrap and lays the blame entirely on Jane. She will be locked overnight in the red room, a stately but rarely used bedroom. Jane's uncle died in this room and there is some speculation that it is haunted.

In her state of great distress, Jane believes she encounters her uncle's ghost and pleads to be let out. Her pleas are ignored. She is discovered the next morning suffering from a fever that nearly kills her. Once Jane has recovered from her illness and her ordeal in the red room, Aunt Reed sends her to a boarding school for orphaned girls called Lowood. The school is a miserable place. There is rarely enough food and drink for the pupils, students. Illnesses widespread and the cruel teachers, led by monstrous headmaster Mr. Brocklehurst take delight in meting out abusive punishment to their students. Jane is singled out for punishment. Once, Brocklehurst orders her to stand on a stool in front of her class while he tells them that she is a liar who is not to be trusted. She is left to stand on the stool all day.

But there is a bright spot at Lowood. Jane forms an intense friendship with her kind and beautiful classmate, Helen Burns. The pair bond over their love of literature and Helen, who is universally good and understanding, even in the most trying circumstances, models compassion and forgiveness to her more impulsive, emotional friend. Tragically, Helen comes down with a fatal case of consumption, leaving Jane lying next to her in her sickbed, clutching her hands. As she is dying, Helen says, "I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve. There is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day". In the wake of Helen's death, Jane struggled to emulate Helen's

goodness and understanding. While she never becomes as angelic as Helen, her friend's values guide her through their story.

After Helen's death, the school is taken over by kindlier trustees. Jane begins to thrive and even takes up a post teaching at the school after she graduates. But then she receives a letter offering her the position as governess at Thornfield Manor. Jane knows nothing about Thornfield or its inhabitants and the letter written by Thornfield's housekeeper, Mrs. Fairfax, contains few details. Nevertheless, Jane accepts the offer.

These opening scenarios are an unflinching portrayal of a deprived, loveless childhood. Aunt Reed and her children never accept Jane into their comfortable middle-class family, and they subject her to constant taunts about her unfortunate circumstances. At Lowood Jane and her fellow pupils are the victims of harrowing cruelty, both physical and emotional. It seems likely that the scene at Lowood were partly inspired by Charlotte Bronte's own experiences at Cowan Bridge, a school for daughters of the clergy that she attended along with her sisters. Conditions at Cowan Bridge were spartan, pupils washed in freezing water and ate burnt porridge. Helen Burns may be inspired by Charlotte, older sister Maria, who died like Helen of consumption, which she contracted at Cowan Bridge. She was just 11 when she died.

Two defining features of Jane's character are established early on this story. Jane is consistently told by those around her that she is plain and unremarkable, yet she is also passionate and impulsive. She struggles to control her emotions, even in situations where it would be more prudent to conceal them. She can't help responding angrily to the taunts of her cousins or fuming at the cruelty of some of Lowood's teachers. Her aunt Reed describes her as a picture of passion and Mr. Brocklehurst says she is vicious.

Jane Eyre is an advocate for her sex at a time when women's talent, skills and independence were far from being valued. Charlotte Bronte was well aware of women's subservient position in Victorian society and of the difficulties that were faced by a woman who wanted or had to make her way in the world. At this point, it was not respectable for a middle-class woman to learn her own living. She was expected to make a career out of marriage or at least to confine her public interest to doing unpaid charitable work.

If a young middle-class woman had to support herself and wanted to maintain her class position and reputation, she really only had one option i.e. to work as a governess. The governess was therefore in an anomalous social position because she was neither a servant due to her class nor a proper young lady. Bronte was especially sensitive to the difficulties

faced by this young woman because she herself had worked as a teacher and as a governess and hoped to make a career out of writing. This lends a special poignancy to Jane's story as in many respects it was based on Charlotte Bronte's own experience. Bronte also read widely on the subject of women's position, thanks to the large number of articles and books that were being published.

On this issue in the 1840s, it would not be useful to overemphasize the significance of the author's biography here. Bronte herself said that though *Jane Eyre* looked like her, they had nothing else in common. But the theme of the novel was deeply felt by Bronte and this should be borne in mind. Other than this, Bronte draws relatively sketchily on the history of the time at which the novel is set, around the turn of the 18th to 19th century. This was a period of considerable social unrest. There was widespread concern that the British labourer would go the way of the French in the revolution of 1789. When Jane comments adversely on her pupil's French disposition, she is therefore expressing the sceptical views of her time, this being the period of the French Wars ending in 1815. In similar vein, there are also various allusions to the French Revolution in, for example, volume III, chapter 7, famous equality and fraternization speaks obliquely of the slogan liberty, equality, fraternity. Beyond this, there are very few historical references. The novel does draw extensively on the imperial context.

The literary importance attached to the author's work is due to the fact that they are all autobiographical. They all reflect the rareness and narrow outlook of her life. The character of Jane Eyre in the novel is *Jane Eyre* is modelled on her own experiences. An essential part of the story is the belief that dreams are more or less mystical prophecies of things to come. This belief was held by many people, particularly those of Celtic descent and those living in country district and may therefore have been inherited from Charlotte Bronte's parents. In the closing chapters, she raises the veil on her subconscious passionate nature. G.K. Chesterton sums her up in these words, "Charlotte Bronte embodies a contrast which is at least a curiosity of literature. She might be compared to a Baptist chapel built on a volcano."

The two sides of Charlotte Bronte's nature are seen in her life. On the one hand, she was a realist, supervising her father's household, directing her sisters and preparing to teach in his school. On the other hand, she was a romanticist, seeking to escape from the dull routine of reality in a make-believe dream world and we find Jane Eyre working against this particular background just to earn her bread. So, Christianity, religion, colonialism, feminism all make the novel very, very meaningful, taking the narrative to the height.

Here I wrap up the discussion, the very thematic interpretation and also the background and the context of *Jane Eyre*.

Thank you very much.