

# **THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES**

**Prof. Smita Jha**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee**

**Lecture 21**

**Theme, Form and Style- II**

Hello, students, I'm Professor Smita Jha, to discuss *Jane Eyre*, with its theme, form and style.

Well, *Jane Eyre*, one of the classic novels written by Charlotte Bronte is unique in terms of form, structure, themes as well. So, we need to see the background of the culture and the age against which the novel was produced. Life in 19th century Britain was governed by social class and people typically in the class into which they were born both as an orphan at Gateshead and as a governess at Thornfield, Jane holds a position, i.e. between classes and interacts with people of every level from working class servants to aristocrats. As a protagonist, Jane is the perfect choice for Bronte to explore the effects of class roles on people's lives. Jane is poor, but she is not working class. She is educated and accomplished, but she is not upper class. She is outside of or in between class.

This is a particularly lonely, isolated position. The upper class is contemptuous of poverty and she is not really comfortable with the working class. That's why the background is important to know whenever we discuss the themes of the novel. Jane's social mobility lets Bronte create a vast social landscape in a novel in which she examines the sources and consequences of class boundaries. For instance, class differences cause many problems in the love between Jane and Rochester. Jane must break through class prejudices about her standing and make people recognise and respect her personal qualities. Bronte tries to illustrate how personal virtues are better indicators of character than class. Yet, the novel doesn't entirely endorse breaking every social rule. Jane refuses, for example, to become Rochester's mistress, despite the fact that he was tricked into a loveless marriage. Jane recognizes that how she sees herself arises, at least partly out of how society sees her and is unwilling to make herself a powerless outcast for love.

If we talk of the themes of this novel in terms of forms, structure, gender and operations, or in a way you can say gender operation is very important in *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* was initially published under the pseudonym Currer Bell because Charlotte Bronte wanted to ensure that the reception of her work would not be tainted by perceptions of her own gender. Within the novel, we see Jane takes similar steps to distance herself from the oppressive patriarchal structures of 19th century England. In 19th century England, gender roles strongly influenced people's behaviour and identities, and women endured condescending attitudes about a woman's place, intelligence and voice. Jane has an uphill battle to become independent and recognized for her personal qualities. Well, she faces off with a series of men who do not respect women as their equals. Mr. Brocklehurst, Rochester and St. Joan all attempt to command or master women. Bronte uses marriage in the novel to portray the struggle for power between the sexes. Even though Bertha Mason is insane, she is a provocative symbol of how married women can be repressed and controlled.

Jane fends off marriage proposals that would squash her identity and strives for equality in her relationships. For its depiction of Jane's struggle for gender equality, *Jane Eyre* was considered a radical book in its day. In keeping with the convention of the times, marriage is the happy ending that Bronte supplies for most of her female characters. In addition to Jane, Bessie, Miss Temple, Mary and Diana Rivers and even Georgiana Reed is happily married at the end of the novel. The too passionate Bertha Mason is the exception.

In setting into the role of wife, these women exemplify the Victorian idea of domesticity in which men were allowed to act in the public sphere but women were relegated to overseeing domestic life. Their charge was the family seeing to its physical, emotional and to a degree, spiritual needs. Further, we may also examine the novel from the point of view of religion and spirituality because religion and spirituality are key factors in how characters develop in the novel. Jane matures partly because she learns to follow Christian lessons and resist temptation.

Helen Burns introduces Jane to the New Testament, which becomes a moral guidepost for Jane throughout her life. As a child at Gateshead, Jane has only a vague sense of religion. She is familiar with the Bible, but when her cousin bullies her, she responds impulsively without thinking of the consequences. At Lowood, she is exposed to Mr. Brocklehurst's harsh version of religious morality that emphasizes sin and punishment. Contrasted with, that is the gentle, very spiritual Christianity of Helen Burns. Helen Burns teaches Jane that belief in a higher power can help her endure indignities without lashing out. Helen's interpretation of Christianity appeals to Jane, but it's a little too spiritual, for someone as

rooted in the natural world as Jane. At Thornfield and later at Moorhouse, Jane seems to have developed a relationship to religion that is comfortable for her and supports her through trying times as Jane develops her relationship with God. Mr. Rochester, must also reform his pride, learn to pray, and become humble. Bronte depicts different forms of religion. Helen trusts in salvation, Eliza Reed becomes a French Catholic nun, and St. John preaches a gloomy Calvinist faith. The novel attempts to steer a middle course. Through the examples of other characters in the novel, such as Eliza and Georgiana, Rochester and St. John, or Bertha, who has no control over her emotions at all, *Jane Eyre* shows that it is best to avoid either extreme, so passion makes a person silly, frivolous or even dangerous, while repression makes a person cold. Over the course of the novel, Jane learns how to create a balance between her feelings and her judgment and to create a life of love that is also a life of serious purpose.

Bronte uses many themes of Gothic elements to add drama and suspense to *Jane Eyre*. But the novel is not just a ghost story because she also reveals the reasons behind supernatural events. For instance, Mr. Reed's ghost in the Red Room is a figment of Jane's stressed-out mind, while Bertha is the demon in Thornfield. In *Jane Eyre*, the effects of the supernatural matter more than the causes. The supernatural element allows Bronte to explore her character's psyches, especially Jane's inner fears. The climatic supernatural moment in the novel occurs when Jane and Rochester have a telephonic connection. In the text, Jane makes it clear that the connection was not supernatural to her. Instead, she considers that moment a mysterious spiritual connection. Jane's experience of growing up the novel's major theme makes it in part a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story, but her passionate nature, which leads to her rebellion against the gendered norms and social conventions of the period, are reflected in the Gothic and Supernatural aspects of the novel. The form of the Gothic allows a process of defamiliarization to take place, which destabilises ordinary everyday life and therefore puts the reader in a position where they are able to question what is normally taken for granted.

*Jane Eyre* also deals extensively with conflicting themes of 'Independence and service'. Jane was an unloved orphan for much of her life and in order to leave Lowood, must find employment. Her gender, however, prevents her from experiencing total independence. Still, her employment at Thornsfield affords her social mobility. As a governess, since she has access to the aristocracy, her evolution as a character is greatly influenced by religion, the supernatural elements such as hearing things, premonitions, ghosts and alike, and her navigation of the extremes of passionate feeling versus cold judgment. If we talk in terms

of independence for which Jane Eyre was striving hard, we find that throughout the novel, Jane seeks to develop her own identity, and to become an independent woman during a time when women were expected to rely on men. Often at a young age, Jane was forced to become independent early on and accepting the position at Thornfield was an important step forward in achieving further independence as an adult. As an educated woman, her best options are to become a teacher or a governess. Other professions are not open to her because of her gender. Had St. John not found Jane a teaching position, she would have had to find more menial, less intellectual work, perhaps as a servant like Bessie or as housekeeper like Mrs. Fairfax. While on a shopping spree with Rochester during their engagement, Jane begins to realize that with marriage comes a certain loss of independence. In the end, Jane's unexpected inheritance allows her to maintain her independence when she finally does marry Rochester.

Just as *Jane Eyre* can be described as Jane's quest to balance her contradictory natural instinct towards independence and submission, it can also be described as her quest to find a balance between passionate feelings on the one hand and judgment or repression of those feelings on the other. Love and passion, yet another important element in the novel. In a novel with a central romantic plot, it should come as no surprise that love and passion are primary themes of the text. Jane lives a passionate life and this theme is connected to the theme of independence because her passion leads her to eschew certain societal standards or customs. In pursuit of her own independence, the value Jane places on passion can also be seen with the differences between her two suitors.

Love in *Jane Eyre's* understanding is pure, divine and it cannot be measured by a status, power or property and so on. Having experienced a helpless childhood and a miserable adolescence, she expects more than a consolable true love. She suffers a lot in her pursuit of true love. Meanwhile, she obtains it through her long and hard pursuit. Her love is based on equality and independence that has nothing to do with status, power or property. She is not tempted by money and does not want to be mistress of Rochester for money. Her love is loyal and steadfast. Jane Eyre aspires after true love and she overcomes the obstacles in the process of pursuing true love. At last, she succeeds and leads a happy life with her lover.

Jane has some self-control from the beginning of the book and often despised and mistreated at Gateshead by her cousins and by Mrs. Reed, she grew up aware of the need to move and speak carefully to avoid punishment. While the book opens with a revolting against this ill-treatment, Bessie Lee points out it was the first time, Jane had ever behaved

in such a way. This is a self-control born of survival instinct. What she must learn is self-control as a moral imperative. Helen Burns teaches self-discipline as the way to avoid punishment and to avoid bringing shame on loved ones. Jane, loved by no one, must develop this control for different reasons. She wants self-control so she can have self-respect. She valued self-control for three reasons. First, self-control is a path to moral behaviour. Second, it is a way to demonstrate the supremacy of reason over passion. While Jane is clearly a passionate character, she values reason, good judgment over feeling. Third, self-control relates to social position and gender. Jane dwells status as an outcast from society and a woman makes her vulnerable. By controlling her passion, she protects herself from taking action that will expose her to risk. In perhaps her most powerful expression of self-control, Jane foregoes her passionate love for Rochester to maintain her moral code and protect herself from the social disgrace that would fall on a mistress. The decision is a wrenching one, but she has to stay true to her belief.

One of the central themes of *Jane Eyre* is Self-respect. Jane's journey towards self-discovery and self-worth is a powerful narrative of a woman striving for agency in a society that often seeks to suppress her. It showcases how Jane refuses to compromise her principles and integrity, ultimately finding her own path to happiness.

Bronte's choice of a first-person female narrator allows a reader to experience firsthand, what it was like to be a female in Britain in the early to the mid-19th century. Even though Jane is educated, her opportunities are limited, as she finds out when she tries to find work near the town of Morton after feeling Thornfield. By supporting herself through teaching, Jane has, to an extent, more independence than even an upper-class married woman. She may not have much money, but she doesn't need to rely on her husband to supply her with food, clothing and shelter.

The dichotomic relationship between the external and the internal beauty looms large in the background, along with religion and social status. Bertha Mason is surprisingly beautiful outwardly, but she is mentally ill. At first, Mr. Rochester falls for Jane because of her beauty. Blanche Ingram, whose beauty covers her arrogance as well as a greed for Mr. Rochester's wealth, Jane remains as an example of internal and external beauty. As a governess and later as a teacher in a village school, Jane interacts with people of all classes. This gives Bronte the opportunity to shine a light on the inherent hypocrisy and injustice of the class system. Even after becoming engaged to Rochester, Jane is troubled by the differences in their social standing. Mrs. Fairfax warns her to be careful because it is unusual for gentlemen of Rochester's standing to marry their governess. Later in the novel,

Jane shines that light on herself as she struggles with her own class prejudice when she begins teaching the village children in Morton, she tells herself, "I must not forget that these ghostly clad peasants are of flesh and blood and as good as the scion (children) of the gentlest genealogy nobles".

Well, throughout *Jane Eyre*, the character of Jane displays remarkable resilience and inner strength in the face of adversity. The kind of conversation and the dialogue given by Jane Eyre encapsulates her unyielding spirit and her willingness to break free from situation that don't honour her true self or provide her with the respect and freedom, she deserves. Jane's words are an act of defiance against those who have tried to suppress her and keep her in a subservient or dependent role. She is no longer willing to be constrained by societal norms or by the expectations of others. Her declaration is an assertion of her own worth and agency. When she leaves Lowood to find new experiences, she describes herself as seeking a new servitude. In her relationship with men, she has the inclination towards making first Rochester and then St. John her master. Over the course of the novel, Jane strives to find a balance between service and mastery. Jane blends her freedom with her commitment to love, virtue and self-respect.

At the end, Jane is both guide and servant to Rochester. Bronte uses metaphors of bird and nest to convey Jane's feeling. The 'bird' symbolizes her desire for freedom and self-determination, while the nest represents the societal constraint, gender roles and expectation that attempts to ensnare her. This novel also takes the form of a romance, though by dwelling sympathetically on the prospective death of one of Jane's suitors in the closing lines, the ending is not as conventional as a marriage to Rochester might at first make it seem. And there are also aspects of a quest narrative too, which goes some way to explaining the fairy tale coincidences, though the quest is not conventionally achieved. The novel therefore uses, but also adapts established forms, so that in the end it is not quite an autobiography, nor a gothic novel, nor a romantic quest narrative, nor a romance, nor a fairy tale, though in a way it is all of these. When analysing a structure of any novel or this novel, we should be thinking about how Bronte has ordered her text and put it together. There are two aspects we should be thinking about here.

Text level- This is how the text is constructed as a whole, thinking about the opening, middle, ending of *Jane Eyre*. Within this, one can look at how character or a theme progresses and develops in the novel.

Sentence level- This is the second aspect and this is how the text is constructed at a sentence level, that is sentence types, length and the ordering of event. Well, text level, *Jane Eyre* is a novel, a form that was common in the Victorian period. It includes 38 chapters in total.

However, the novel is also structured by the places where Jane lives and by how each location relates to her development into adulthood. The place names are symbolic and illustrate something about Jane's life at that place. For example, her happiness and her struggle. Gateshead hall is the name of her aunt Reed's home. Her childhood is spent at Gateshead and ends with the Red Room episode after which her aunt finds her a place at Lowood School. The name is symbolic as it is her gateway into another life, into the journey of her adulthood. 'Lowood School' is where Jane is sent by her aunt. Here she boards and leaves at the school, later becoming a school mistress. Jane's best friend Helen Burns dies here and she is consistently bullied by others. It is a low point in Jane's life. This is echoed in the name Lowood. Similarly, 'Thornfield' where Jane became a governess for Adele under the instruction of Edward Rochester. Moor House, which is the name of the Rivers. It is here that Jane finds a home where other doors have been shut and she comes to realise she has family. 'Ferndean Manor' is Rochester's manor and later becomes Jane's home with their children. We can also analyse it at a sentence level like thinking about how an author has created a sentence and to what purpose.

Well, some quotations are there in chapter and in this chapter, Jane decides that she would leave Thornfield as she cannot leave with Rochester as his mistress. I Quote, "I am no relative, but the universal mother nature. I will seek her breast and ask repose" unquote. So, repetition of 'I' highlights, the personal pronouns, the first person and emphasizes how keen Jane is to leave Thornfield. She speaks of becoming more attuned with Mother nature. The capital 'N' in Nature highlights how important nature is to Jane, emphasizing how wild she has become and the freedom she has. The use of colon links the two statements together, emphasizing how Jane has nobody, but the wilderness and how she wishes to be that way.

So certain important questions are there when you define a structure, like how has Bronte used language? Why has Bronte done this? What are the intended effects on the reader? And that all comes under symbolism because Bronte uses language to symbolize how the Red Room is said to be haunted, deadly. Similarly, if we talk of descriptive language, again, we have to discuss under the caption; How has Bronte used language? Why she has done this? And what are the intended effects on the reader? So, you can go through it, the

examples. Similarly, pathetic fallacy. In the same caption, we can analyze the structure of the novel. Imagery plays a pivotal role in the whole discussion.

With this, I wrap up the discussion.

Thank you very much.

Let us meet in the next lecture.