

Jane eyre and power struggle essay sample

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Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte shows the hierarchical class system prevalent in England in the 19th century. The strict class system during the 19th century required everyone to continue the circumscribed class positions. Through the character of Jane, Bronte tries to question this system. For instance, the novel raises the issue of whether a governess should be considered upper class due to her superior education or lower class due to her servant-like status in the family. Her journey through the established class structure results in her judgments based on the class stereotype. Part of her judgment arises because she cannot properly fit into the class system of England. This paper will try to analyze how Jane's judgments are based class assumptions as she struggles with class and power until she finally marries Rochester.

Jane's judgments are mostly based on class assumptions since she moves through the established class structure of English society and builds relationships on scorn of autocracy and paternalism. Jane herself has an ambiguous class status, and this is evident from the start of the novel. The readers are told that she is a poor orphan who lives with her relatives, the Reeds family. She feels alienated from her relatives, as her cousin John tells her that she was a dependant and should beg instead of living with "gentleman's children". Jane, from the start of the novel appears in a no-man's land because she is neither an upper class nor a servant class. When she calls John a "murderer," "slave-driver," and "Roman emperor," it shows that she recognizes these qualities inherent in the ruling class. When Jane leaves her relatives, she goes to Thornfield as a governess. The character of Jane portrays the plight of the Victorian governess in the 1840s. During the

1840s, a governess' job was only to alleviate woman's dependency. Bronte's novel shows that while there was very less economic and social provision for unmarried women, there was hardly any propriety in paid employment for a woman.

When Jane arrives at Thornfield, she feels relieved to learn that Mrs. Fairfax was not her employer, but simply a housekeeper, implying that they both were dependents and can interact as equals. Jane becomes financially independent at Thornfield and is seen as implicitly questioning the class structure. Her attitude at Thornfield depicts that she combines deference with independence. She has too much self-respect to lavish her love for an indifferent Rochester, who is described as not being of "her order". She tells herself, "He is not of your order; keep to your caste" (Jane Eyre, 416). She shows an independent spirit which has a double-edged perspective. By refusing to be treated as a servant she implies a class judgment on those below her as well as a radical attitude to those above her. Jane is furious with the way she is treated by Reeds, yet she also shares some of society's class assumptions about the poor. This can be seen through Jane's reaction against the children of Morton school. Jane tells herself, "I must not forget that these coarsely-clad little peasants are of flesh and blood as good as the scions of gentlest genealogy" (Jane Eyre, 930). Her response to unmannerly "coarsely clad peasants" is that they can be as good as the children of the nobility.

Jane's relationship with Rochester also reveals class issues. Their relationship is marked by ambiguities of equality, servitude and independence. She refers to Rochester as 'master' and believes that she is dependent on him.

However, Rochester conceives their marriage in terms of spiritual equality. “My bride is here”, he said, again drawing me to him, “because my equal is here, and my likeness, Jane, will you marry me?” (Jane Eyre, 657). The above line shows that Jane is submissive to social hierarchy, but she shares Rochester’s view that spiritual equality counts for more: she has no hesitation in labelling Blanche Ingram as inferior to herself. Jane craves for independence in marriage: “It would be a relief, I thought, “if I had ever so small and independency” (Jane Eyre, 695). This implies that independence is an intermediate position between complete independence and excessive docility. By marrying Jane, Rochester redefines the class status of Jane as he considers her as his spiritual "equal".

The double edged attitude of Jane is explicitly evident from Jane’s attitude at Morton and her role as a schoolmistress. Jane’s doctrine of spiritual equality stems from her own experience, but she has to battle with the social discriminations bred into the society. However, she herself feels degraded by her role of a schoolmistress. She claims, “I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence” (Jane Eyre, 931). At the same time, Jane is quick to respond to Hannah, the servant of Rivers, that she might be a beggar, but at least she is a high-class one. Jane tries to show Hannah how superior she is to her because she feels that Hannah needed to be taught social equality. Her perception about India also shows that her ideas are dominated by class status and her wish for independence. Jane is quick to tell St John Rivers that he wants an income of her own. She believes that in India she would be homeless, jobless and subjugated. She rejects Rivers because of his masculinity. She believes that in India, she would have

to be “ at his side always, and always restrained and always checked” (Jane Eyre, 1095). For Jane, India then represented a deadly combination of proximity to Rivers and alienation from home. However, she tells Rivers that she may accompany him to India if she is allowed to “ give the missionary my (Jane) energies” (Jane Eyre, 1055). She finally refuses to accompany Rivers to India because she is afraid of death. She claims, “ God did not give me my life to throw away” (Jane Eyre, 1075)

Works Cited

Bronte Charlotte. Jane Eyre. Plain Label Books. ISBN 13: 9781603038553

Eagleton, Terry. “ Jane Eyre’s Power Struggles”, Norton Edition. Pages 491-96