

Jane eyre example #2



Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte was published in 1847. It introduced a new voice to the world- passionate, rebellious and defiant. The male canonical novelists of the nineteenth century neglected the difficulty and challenges faced by the women and the orphan girls of the period. These challenges were no less than those confronted by men rather in many cases they were far more complex for females. The nineteenth century was an age of ambivalence yet it was an age of rigorous moral codes and conducts.

There were many books which were published during this period and it highlighted the codes of conduct that ought to be followed by the people especially by the middle class and upper middle class English citizens. Paradoxically, in this world of rigorous morality, the orphans were most often mistreated. Charles Dickens' male protagonists like David in David Copperfield, Oliver in Oliver Twist or even in a romance novel like Great Expectations we find the evidences of the cruelty performed by the guardians towards their wards.

David is mistreated by his step-father Mr. Murdstone and his step-aunt Miss Murdstone, Pip on the other hand is "brought up by hand" by her ferocious sister Mrs. Joe Gargery. In Oliver Twist we find the grotesque scene where a boy says that he will eat up anyone who sleeps beside him as he is too hungry. All these reveal the disfunctioning of the great-family. The novels by the Bronte sisters Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre constitute important feminist intervention in the by and large popular mainstream discourse of the boy child.

In *Wuthering Heights* Catherine and Heathcliff present a wild passion for each other, which was considered to be improper to express especially on the part of the female. In *Jane Eyre* Jane's transition from "the passivity and genderlessness of childhood into a turbulent puberty" is evident in the beginning of the novel in Gateshead where her adolescence is marked by her sudden and unprecedented revolt against the assault of John Reeds. Jane's rebellion against Mrs. Reed and John represents her feminist consciousness in getting esteem from other people as a decent and respectable person.

The behaviour of Jane is catalogued as sinful by her aunt Reed and she is sent to the Red-room for her violent display of anger and passion. The red-room "was a spare chamber, very seldom slept in", had a bed supported by "massive pillars of mahogany", a secret drawer, wardrobes, jewel-chest and so on, which has strong associations with the adult female body. Moreover the colour red has metaphorical associations with psychological expressions like rage, passion and also with physiological phenomenon of menstruation. This also highlights the gendered nature of the experience of growing of an orphan.

The red-room was a rite of passage where Jane's transformation from girlhood to adulthood takes place. Therefore growth in the repressed Victorian society as a boy and as a girl saw its outpour through the characters. In the mainstream culture the term 'orphans' was equal to male orphans but with *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* the gendered differentiation in the confronting experience of puberty gets registered. From the very few first pages of the novel, we get the idea that Jane is not like her

cousins and her aunts want her to acquire “ a sociable and childlike disposition”.

In her anger and passion Jane is far removed from the conventional model of the Victorian child who must be ‘ seen and not heard’. In the Lowood institution Jane has an encounter with Helen Burns. Helen Burns is the pious, submissive child who resigns to her fate. Even when she is beaten for no practical fault of hers (her hair curls naturally), instead of uttering a single word she takes the cane. Moreover her name Burns signifies her self-sacrificing nature, she is the perfect victim.

Brocklehurst the owner of Lowood Institution proclaims that his mission ‘ is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh’. As an institution Lowood attempts to discipline its inmates/disciples not only by destroying their individuality but also by “ punishing and starving their sexuality”.

Interestingly, the conduct books of the Victorian period circulated that the rebellious, disobedient, angry child will go to hell. When Brocklehurst asks Jane what she must do in order to prevent going to hell, she replies “ I must keep in good health and not die”- mixes childish naivety and seriousness.

This statement from a girl of ten years also gives the reader a foresight of her pragmatic nature. Moreover Helen Burns, the pious girl dies of typhus fever whereas Jane escapes from the scythe of the flu/epidemic. So naturally a question arises if Charlotte was trying to put forward an alternative discourse of the conduct books and manuals. Therefore Lowood institution as depicted by Bronte was harsh and far removed from the dreadful Yorkshire

school, Dotheboys Hall, in Nicholas Nickleby. The main idea behind these harsh measures were if the body was punished the soul could be saved.

In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte challenges these notions and instead offers a deeply sympathetic portrayal of a rebellious child which helped to transform Victorian attitudes to the child. Jane for her being an orphaned child and poor circumstances is forced to live as a dependant under the roof of Mrs. Reed. Mrs. Reed and her children treat her with everything except equality, kindness and affection. In spite of these Jane grows up to be an independent girl. The hardships of Jane reflect that not only Victorian males but also females had to fight and struggled to earn their living.

The conditions for middle class women were far more complex than men. The middle class women could either get themselves married to wealthy men or could appoint themselves as governesses. For the lower class women they could either be “ factory hands” [Hard Times, Charles Dickens] or prostitutes. The aristocratic ladies were not allowed to do any work, they might starve to death but they will not do any work as employment under someone was considered to be a disgrace to the family. The governesses were trapped in an indeterminate social hierarchy.

The governess is a servant trapped within a rigid social function which demands industriousness and self-sacrifice but she is also an ‘ upper’ servant and so furnished with ‘ imaginative awareness and cultivated sensibility’ which are precisely her stock-in-trade as a teacher. Therefore the governess lives in an ambiguous world where she is neither one of the members of the family nor a part of the servant class. The erudite middle

class and upper class ladies could afford to become writers. But becoming writers were also not free from adversity.

The Bronte sisters and George Eliot were some instances of female novelists. But these female writers took up male pseudonyms so that their writings were not eliminated just on the basis of their genders. Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and Anne Bronte took up the androgynous pseudonyms of Curer Bell, Elis Bell and Acton Bell respectively. Mary Ann Evans took the male pseudonym of George Eliot. Mary Ann Evans selected very carefully her pseudonym as she wanted her books to be analyzed on the basis of their merit as the alternative would be to condemn her book even before reading.

Incidentally Jane Austen did not take any pseudonym but published her works anonymously and hence earned the tag of 'masculine writing'. These female novelists presented the lives of Victorian women through their protagonists or heroines. In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* the mothers of the heroines are hankering after giving their daughters in marriage. Even Lydia's elopement with Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* is gladly accepted by Mrs. Bennett. In *Jane Eyre* as well, Jane's fulfilment comes in the form of marriage with Mr. Rochester. In the narrative of *Mill on the Floss*, the question of marriage is dealt with subtlety.

Maggie's mother can neither afford nor thinks of her marriage let alone having her wedded rich. Interestingly, Jane is not much affected by the societal pressures whereas Maggie's life is doomed when she tries to follow societal norms and at the end gives her life prematurely. Initially a rebellious child like Jane, Maggie later gives into the societal norms and conventions of

morality and immorality. Maggie's world is her brother Tom whereas Jane finds her world in her suitor and husband Mr. Rochester. Moreover Jane is passionate in expressing her feelings whereas Maggie conceals her feelings and suffers most silently.

Therefore, Maggie Tulliver presents the normative Victorian female who must be docile and submissive. Maggie despite of being the 'angel in the house' faces severe ill-treatment from the society and ostracized by her own brother Tom Tulliver. In contrast Jane is the 'New Woman', educated, passionate, and rebellious extrovert Victorian female. "Do you think", she demands of Rochester, "I am an automaton? - a machine without feelings?" She is almost the female counterpart of Victorian heroes like Oliver Twist or Philip Pirrip of Great Expectations.

In Jane Eyre apart from Jane herself we find Mr. Rochester's ward Adele whose origin or birth is uncertain, that is, her fatherhood is uncertain and her mother is dead. Jane almost acts as a surrogate mother to her. Mr. Rochester takes her financial liability but hardly has any other connections with the girl except for bringing her gifts when he returns to Thornfield Hall after long intervals. People in Victorian age had the idea that people are not born equally, people in high rank despise people in low rank and men are superior to women.

Consequently, women like Jane are treated unequally in every field. When Jane realizes the unfair situation, she rebels constantly for the basic right of equality. Jane, as she is a member of the lowest class, is always looked down upon by those potentates with money and power. For people like her, they

have no dignity; the rich can treat them at random and need not bother to give them any esteem. But Jane Eyre never surrenders to those snobbish people who despise the poor and the weak parochially and ruthlessly.

In her whole life, she plunges herself into struggling for esteem which in her mind is deserved by any human being rather than a privilege for the wealthy people. She puts all her strength to get the respect and admiration from people around and in every relationship, Jane rises from inferiority to superiority, and finally gains full independence through continuous struggle. To conclude, Jane Eyre is not just a Victorian novel and Jane is not just an individual rather the novel brings to limelight the hard-core reality of the Victorian world and subsequently Jane represents the life and struggle of any middle-class, educated Victorian woman.

The only caveat is all girls may not have and in most cases do not have a fairy tale ending that we find in the narrative of Jane Eyre with the reconciliation between Jane and Rochester. Moreover Jane's persistent efforts and struggles to overcome the double marginalisation that she faces due to her class identity and gender, reflects Jane's resolution as a self-confident Victorian woman. Therefore, Charlotte Bronte uses Jane Eyre as a conduct book to describe basic virtues that women should have and to criticize the marriage of convenience, declaring that only qualities of mind prove what a woman is really worth.