

Winner

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Jane Eyre:
A Rejection of Class Prejudice

In 19th century England, class stratification was a predominant societal force. The novel Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, describes the experiences of the orphan Jane as she grows from a ten year-old girl into a young woman. As she matures Jane encounters several people who subscribe to the notion that the people who make up the lower class of society are wicked people who are deserving of their plight. However, in Jane's experience, these judgments are false. Throughout her development, Jane is forced to make her own decisions regarding caste. In the novel, the author uses Jane's interactions with other characters to expose several predispositions that were prevalent during the 19th century, and to show the difficulties that arose as a result of low social standing.

Members of the lower class were often dehumanized because of their social position. Jane's cousin, John Reed in particular serves to illustrate this attitude. After Jane's parents died, she was sent to live with her Aunt and Uncle Reed and their children. The Reed family does not show any affection to Jane. Instead, they use her social standing as a reason to treat her poorly. In the first chapter, a typical encounter with John Reed is described. John beats Jane, and as justification of his actions states, "You are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do" (15). John, like many others of his era believes that because Jane is an orphan, she is not worthy to live in the same house as the Reeds, and any abuse given to her is still better than she deserves. Because Jane is a 'dependent,' John sees no fault in constantly beating Jane. Earlier in the chapter when John is initially unsuccessful in finding Jane he calls to his sisters, "Joan is not here: tell Mama she is run out into the rain—bad animal" (13). John's

statement to his sisters during demonstrates the subhuman position that Jane held in the Reed house. Because Jane is an orphan, John refers to Jane not as though she was a person, but instead as though she was a misbehaving pet.

Although Jane is mistreated, and misjudged in the Reed house because of her social class, she also displays prejudice against those of lower class. When asked if she would like to leave the Reeds, and live with poor people that would treat her with kindness, Jane firmly replies no. Although she is not happy living with the Reeds, Jane imagines a life of poverty to be an even worse fate.

Poverty looks grim to grown people; still more so to children: they have not much idea of industrious, working, respectable poverty; they think of the word only as connected with ragged clothes, scanty food, fireless grates, rude manners and debasing vices; poverty for me was synonymous with degradation (31).

Even though Jane has no wealth of her own, she does not live in poverty because the Reeds who continually chastise her for her social position, at least give her those things which she needs for living. Because she has grown up in an aristocratic household, Jane has picked up some of the prejudices against her own class. Furthermore, Jane's assumptions concerning poverty show that, she associates it with the qualities that she despises most; ignorance, and unkindness.

Eventually Jane is sent from the home of the Reeds into a boarding school. Before Jane departs for school, she meets the caretaker, Mr. Brocklehurst. His conversation with Jane at the Reed home and their encounter later on at Lowood School illustrates how religious hypocrisy contributed to prejudice against the lower class. In Jane's first encounter with Mr. Brocklehurst he preaches, "Humility is a Christian grace, and one peculiarly appropriate to the pupils of Lowood. I therefore, direct that especial care shall be bestowed on its cultivation among them" (43). Mr. Brocklehurst shows his conformation to the idea that it is the duty of the poor to be

held to special moral standards. Although he is supposed to be a Christian himself, Mr.

Brocklehurst makes no mention of the duties of his class towards humility. When Jane meets Mr. Brocklehurst for the second time, his hypocrisy is even more evident. This time, Jane has been at Lowood School for quite some time, and Mr. Brocklehurst is visiting the institution with his family. During his visit, Mr. Brocklehurst is appalled by the naturally curly hair of one student because it is vain. He then proceeds into a tirade against any kind of vanity in Lowood School. Mr. Brocklehurst even goes as far as ordering that each of his students shear their hair because "My mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety--not with braided hair or costly apparel"(77). This event is reminiscent of the first time Jane and Mr. Brocklehurst met; he again proves that he applies certain Christian principles to only the lower class. In the middle of his sermon on humility Mr. Brocklehurst's wife and daughters enter the room. Upon their entrance, Jane notes that "They ought to have heard his lecture on dress, for they were splendidly attired in velvet, silk and furs"(78). From the contrast between the standards that Mr. Brocklehurst sets for his wife and daughters, and the standards he sets for his pupils, the author is clearly showing the prejudice against the lower class, and the type of religious hypocrisy that is prevalent in the time period.

The idea of self-privation and endurance is embodied almost completely by Helen Burns, a girl that Jane meets at school. While Mr. Brocklehurst is knowledgeable of the word of God, he does not practice the policy he preaches. By contrast, Helen sets strict standards for herself, and does her best to live by them. In the classroom, Helen is constantly chastised by one teacher; Miss Scatcherd. However Helen does not resent this constant punishment. Instead, Helen embraces it. She acknowledges her faults, and deems them deserving of the punishment she is

forced to bear. Helen's virtue even extends into willingly accepting her chastisements that are unwarranted. Helen's fortitude in accepting these penalties is amazing to Jane who believes that "When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard-so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again"(70). However Helen rebukes that practice as "savage" and instead holds herself to the tenement "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you." (70). Helen Burns is the first person Jane meets who applies herself to the qualities she preaches. Helen Burns provides Jane and the reader an example of what true Christian love is.

Another example of class prejudice in Jane's life occurs when she is employed as a governess in the house of Edward Rochester. Mr. Rochester entertains a large group of people who make it quite clear that the role of governess is a despised one. When the subject of governesses is breached, one of Mr. Rochester's guests, Blanche Ingram, declares "Mary and I have had, I should think, a dozen at least in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi—were they not, mamma"(209). Blanche Ingram's characterization of governesses demonstrates more unfair judgment of those in the lower class. By her continued discourse on the topic, it becomes evident that it was not the governess who was at fault in the relationship but Blanche. She recalls several tricks she and her brother played on their governess in order to bait her. Because Blanche and her sisters were rich, they were permitted to act horribly towards their governess. Because of her class status, the governess is blamed for the Blanche's faults. From Blanche's example, it is apparent that caste always prevails over virtue. Blanche's acts of mischief were tolerated because she was of the upper class. The blame for her actions fell on her tutor, who did not have wealth to defend herself with.

Eventually, Jane and her employer, Mr. Rochester fall in love and become engaged.

Unfortunately the romance between Jane and Mr. Rochester is complicated by their differences in caste. In preparation for the wedding Rochester attempts to buy a multitude of dresses and jewels for Jane. Instead of pleasing Jane, the gifts make Jane anxious and she responds to his gift attempts with, "Oh, sir! Never mind jewels! I don't like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange; I would rather not have them" (303). Even though Jane is engaged to Mr. Rochester, they are still from different social backgrounds. Jane has worked for everything she has received thus far, and she is uncomfortable with receiving things she has not earned. Jane's uneasiness in the matter results in this demand; "I shall continue to act as Adele's governess; by that, I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides...and you shall give me nothing, but your regard" (315). Jane does not wish to be dependent on Mr. Rochester. She has always earned everything she received, and she is uncomfortable with receiving gifts that she cannot reciprocate.

Jane is forced to leave Mr. Rochester, and when she does so, she wanders about and nearly starves until she is rescued by the River's family. Following several days' recovery, Jane seeks a conversation with Hannah who had initially turned Jane away from the River's door. Although Jane forgives, Hannah for shutting her out in the storm, Jane maintains resentment for her and validates this bitterness by pronouncing, "But I do think hardly of you, and I'll tell you why as because you just now made it a species of reproach that I had no 'brass' and no house" (397). Hannah believes that someone without money or a place to live must be a beggar. This judgment irritates Jane who has never had any kind of wealth, but has been able to work and support herself. Furthermore, Jane understands that poverty does not signify bad character. Far from it, for Jane continues in her lecture with; "Some of the best people that ever lived have been

as destitute as I am, and if you are a Christian, you ought not to consider poverty crime” (397). Jane is referring to Helen Burns, who was almost the perfect embodiment of Christian virtue. Helen proved to Jane that caste plays no role in determining a person’s morality. Jane hopes to instill that same knowledge in Hannah.

In the beginning of Jane Eyre, the protagonist Jane is a downtrodden girl who does not understand why she is continually punished for qualities she does not possess. As the novel progresses Jane perceives various people in their belief that wealth indicates goodness and those in poverty also have bad morality. Jane also witnesses people who defy this preconception, and prove that virtue exists regardless of class. The people she encounters help to mold Jane into an independent woman who values character over all else.