

Cash and class: how does wealth affect 'coming of age' in *Jane Eyre*

Oliver Bokmans

N0809979@my.ntu.ac.uk

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Abstract:

*Jane Eyre* was written in August 1847 by Charlotte Bronte. It is classed as a Bildungsroman novel. This means that it focuses on the 'coming of age' of the character Jane Eyre whom the book is named after. Jane Eyre starts off life as an orphan and is incredibly poor; the story follows her life growing up until she eventually gets married to the wealthy Mr Rochester and in turn becomes an adult and 'comes of age'. The purpose of this study is to discuss and discover to what extent Jane Eyre's financial situation and her class affected her coming of age. I will be analysing the text and therefore Jane's life. I will look at her development as a person at each stage of her life i.e. when she is an orphan. I will look from a Marxist perspective to discover which trials and tribulations Jane faced due to her poverty and also which aspects of her growing up were not affected by her finances.

*Jane Eyre* originally called *Jane Eyre: An autobiography* was written by Charlotte Bronte and was published under the pen name Currer Bell on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1847. It is a bildungsroman novel which follows the life of Jane Eyre and depicts her ‘coming of age’. A bildungsroman “is a special kind of novel that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of its main character, from his or her youth to adulthood”<sup>1</sup>. Throughout Jane’s life, she faces many obstacles because of her poverty. In this essay, I will discuss and discover to what extent does Jane Eyre’s financial situation affect her ‘coming of age’.

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte depicts the trials and tribulations of Jane Eyre as she grows up. The story starts with her as an orphan in the nineteenth-century who lived with her aunt and cousins at Gateshead hall. Being an orphan, she is poor, and she is always told: “that to be without class is to be without worth”<sup>2</sup>. The servants of the house tell Jane that she is inferior and worthless. This emphasises how little she honestly had as servants of all people are calling her poor. The maid even goes as far as to say that she is worth “less than a servant for you do nothing for your keep”<sup>3</sup>. It is because of her lack of money that she is being considered worth so little. Charlotte Bronte went to Clergy Daughters school in Lancashire in 1824 where she was harshly punished,<sup>2</sup> arguably influencing this aspect of the novel. The implication of her being abused is that her economic state is negative. It is because she is so destitute and has so little that she has incurred abuse which in turn affects her development. A study was done in 1992 to analyse the *Long-term consequences of childhood physical and psychological maltreatment*. The study showed that “three one way analyses of variance indicated that BDI scores reflected a greater tendency toward depression in subjects reporting both types of abuse”<sup>4</sup>.

We can also see that the abuse led her to become a stronger, braver person. After calling John Reed a “wicked and cruel boy,”<sup>5</sup> Jane gets dragged away to the red room. She states that “I resisted all the way, something new for me”<sup>6</sup> This is shown when she rebels against her aunt. She states “I am glad you are no relation of mine. I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to visit you when I am grown up: and if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick and that you treated me with miserable cruelty”<sup>7</sup>. If she were never subject to abuse in the first place, she would never have had to become stronger to overcome it. Since the maltreatment spawned from her poverty, it is in essence because of her financial situation that she has become more robust.

Jane then gets locked in the “red-room”<sup>8</sup> which is the bedroom where her uncle died. The connotations of the colour red imply danger, anger and death, which, in turn, depicts to the

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<sup>1</sup> Literarydevices Editors. “bildungsroman”, *Literary devices*, (2013) < <https://literarydevices.net/citation/> > [accessed 29<sup>th</sup> December 2019]

<sup>2</sup> ‘Role Of Social Class In Jane Eyre Literature Essay’, *Essays UK*, (2018) <<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/role-of-social-class-in-jane-eyre-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>> [accessed 17 September 2007] (para. 3 of 28).

<sup>3</sup> Bronte Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* (Peterborough: Ont Broadview press, 1999) p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Amy B. Gross, Harold R. Keller, ‘Long-term consequences of childhood physical and psychological maltreatment’, *Aggressive behaviour*, 18.3 (1992)

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte, *Jane Eyre* p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*, p.14.

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*, p.52.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*, p.32.

reader just how serious Jane being trapped in this room is and how much it will affect her. This traumatises her and puts her in a state of hysteria “like a mad cat”<sup>9</sup>. She reflects on this moment on several occasions throughout the novel, and it influences her choices. It could be considered that “[This] little drama [...] which opens Jane Eyre is in itself a paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book”<sup>10</sup>. Primarily the events and reasons which have placed Jane in the red room have stemmed from her lower class and lack of money as a result of her being an orphan, a paradigm for things to come.

Later on in the novel, Jane becomes a governess for Mr Rochester. Despite their class difference, the two end up falling in love with each other in turn, showing that Jane’s class has not negatively affected her coming of age. Despite their respective classes being miles apart, the two still fall in love with each other. In the present time, this would not have been too shocking to see, but at the time, many would have heavily looked down on the two. Even still Mr Rochester chooses to “defy”<sup>11</sup> “man’s opinion”<sup>12</sup> due to how completely he loves her “tender and true”<sup>13</sup>. In doing this, we can see that her class has not affected her coming of age. Even though their “love”<sup>14</sup> is looked down upon because of the difference in class, love has transcended this barrier and prevailed. Love and marriage are contributing to growing up as it signifies starting your new life and new family and becoming an adult.

When you read from a Marxist perspective, you see several clashes of class and that quite interestingly it always appears to be the lower class that ends up coming out on top. For example, as mentioned earlier, Jane’s aunt was the “oppressor”<sup>15</sup>, and Jane was the “oppressed”<sup>16</sup> yet by the end of the novel it is Jane who has married the wealthy Mr Rochester and who has inherited John Eyre’s fortune. Additionally, we see this through the relationship between Mr Rochester and Jane. Mr Rochester represents the bourgeoisie and Jane, the working class, yet it is Jane who has the power as she rejects his offer of marriage and leaves him. This was especially significant as “Victorian women were considered to be one who dedicated her life solely to the home, her family and most importantly her husband. She obeyed both her heavenly master as well as her heavenly and understood her place in the sexual hierarchy”<sup>17</sup>.

Another example is when Mr Rochester's house burns down, and he is blinded. It is because of Mr Rochester’s materialistic values that his house burnt down. He saw Bertha as a possession, and it was because of her that his house subsequently burnt down. His blindness

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte. Jane Eyre, p.14.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert Sandra, Gubar Susan, *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) p.341.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte. Jane Eyre, p.390.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte. Jane Eyre, p.390.

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte. Jane Eyre, p.397.

<sup>14</sup> Charlotte. Jane Eyre, p.397.

<sup>15</sup> R.J. Brown, 'The Oppressor and the Oppressed: Marxist and Other Critical Paradigms of Obligation', *Political Encounters*, (2019)

<sup>16</sup> R.J. Brown, 'The Oppressor and the Oppressed: Marxist and Other Critical Paradigms of Obligation', *Political Encounters*, (2019)

<sup>17</sup> 'Role Of Social Class In Jane Eyre Literature Essay', *Essays UK*, (2018)

<<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/role-of-social-class-in-jane-eyre-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>> [accessed 17 September 2007] (para. 2 of 28).

is quite symbolic, too. His materialism quite literally blinded him, and it is only when he turns to Jane, someone who has never been materialistic or had many possessions and does not value them that he starts to regain his sight. It could be perceived that Charlotte Bronte is trying to say that valuing having high status, money and class will affect your life negatively and will end up making you more unhappy in the end. It is Jane Eyre, the girl who started with nothing but grew stronger as a person, who ends up breaking societal norms by marrying Mr Rochester, becomes wealthy and gets her 'happily ever after' so to speak. This can be mirrored to Jane's coming of age as a whole and more so could be seen as an answer to the question of to what extent does wealth affect your coming of age? It is almost as if to say that being poor or a less well off person will not in fact negatively affect your coming of age and if anything will improve it. Although your life may not be as easy as someone's who is very wealthy and has everything, you will become a stronger person by overcoming your obstacles in life, and at the end, you will be happier than those who strive for materialistic things. Charlotte Bronte's father, Patrick Bronte, was a clergyman and she was educated at a clergyman's school in Lancashire as mentioned previously. This religious upbringing may have been what inspired her to press the notion that living a non-materialistic life is better and more rewarding than the opposite as is taught in the bible.

In my opinion, Charlotte Bronte is trying to tell the reader through this novel that your financial situation will not negatively affect your coming of age. That is not to say it will make it easier, but the hardships you face will, in the end, make you a better person. She depicts materialistic values as being detrimental and something that will betray you in the end, whilst imploring that strengthening your character will ultimately lead to you being happier in life.

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