

## CORRESPONDENCES OF PASSION IN JANE EYRE

**Chung Chin-Yi**  
Research scholar  
National University of Singapore,  
Singapore

### Abstract

The romance between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester is thus a transcendent one which goes beyond mere class or looks to being a mutual attraction of character and intellect, which accounts for its intensity and steadfastness as it is able to withstand a long period of separation by time and space to their eventual union where Jane Eyre declares “Reader, I married him.” A bold affirmation that genuine love and passion is something which transcends mere class and looks, *Jane Eyre* is a revolutionary text in the declaration of the female as being an equal counterpart of the male. This comes as Jane Eyre declares her eventual equal standing with Mr Rochester in their marriage. Indeed, Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester are spiritually attune and akin as Jane Eyre calls herself “his likeness”.

**Keywords:** Gender, Class, Autobiography, Bronte, Jane Eyre, Marxism, Feminism

### Introduction

One of the earliest criticisms of Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* was that it was fundamentally anti-Christian in its composition (Elizabeth Rigby, *The Quarterly Review*, 1848) because it allowed Jane, of impoverished and deprived circumstances, to rise socially and financially and thus defy God’s providence for the classes. This is of course, a very rigid reading of God’s providence as social mobility has existed throughout the ages and in some quarters is the very essence of Christian character, to rise socially and ascend social hierarchy through Christian hard work. However, the accusation reveals much about Victorian society and the moral order of its day- that classes were rigidly delineated and not to be transgressed, and indeed this state of affairs was lauded as Christian. It also reveals much of the plight of women- if born poor they unlike men would likely remain poor unless they were to marry into gentility because opportunities for employment and social advancement remained limited. Jane Eyre’s income as a governess is negligible, and were it not for the fairy tale circumstances in which a rich relative leaves her to inherit a fortune, Jane would have been left to a life of obscurity and poverty

### **Jane Eyre As Popular Novel**

*Jane Eyre* is a widely popular novel, and perhaps besides being a fantasy romance between a rich employer and an underprivileged woman it also addresses the issues of social and divine justice. Jane Eyre experiences a deprived childhood and is shabbily treated by Aunt Reed, who later experiences retribution for her cruelty towards Jane as she dies miserably and abandoned by her children who squander her wealth and come to no good end. Perhaps the attraction of the novel comes from the fact that Jane Eyre climbs the ranks of class through her own education and effort and is thus a self-made woman rather than someone privileged who makes use of social connections to climb socially, like Blanche Ingram, who is depicted unflatteringly as a class snob who is pretentious, haughty and odious. With bold grit and determination, Jane Eyre raises herself through education to emerge from poverty and attracts the attention of her master at Thornfield Mr Rochester, which enables her to rise socially through marriage.

### **The Connection of Romance**

Though attempts at a first marriage are thwarted by the presence of Bertha Mason, Mr Rochester's insane wife, a second attempt at marriage succeeds since the first marriage is annulled by the occurrence of the death of Bertha Mason. Indeed Charlotte Bronte herself declares of the novel "Convention is not morality". This can be seen from the unflattering depictions of Mrs Reed who is depicted as a cruel tyrant, Mr Brocklehurst who is depicted as an unjust Christian hypocrite, and St John, who seeks to imprison Jane in a loveless marriage to further his missionary ambitions. The key to Jane's rejection of St John is that he does not view her as an individual with a right to her own opinions and emotions, merely as a tool to further his missionary ambitions and as such entails a marriage devoid of love and passion, the kind of fiery passion and ardour Jane experiences with Mr Rochester. This passion connects them with such a strong cemented bond that Jane Eyre psychically hears Mr Rochester's calls for her at the exact moment he does physically call for her even though they are separated by a great distance.

### **Divine Justice**

Indeed we witness in the novel the enacting of divine justice as Mrs Reed experiences retribution for her cruelty toward Jane and comes to a bitter end and Jane eventually inherits a fortune that enables her to stand up to Mr Rochester as an equal, not an employee or inferior. Perhaps Bronte's comment here is that character is not a function of class, as Jane, though initially impoverished is morally superior to Mrs Reed who ill-treats her because of her poverty and orphaned state. Jane Eyre climbs socially through her own efforts at education and her excellence professionally as a governess which gains the attention of her brooding employer Mr Rochester, who after a string of a failed marriage and decadent affairs with mistresses, recognizes in Jane an intellectual equal though she is socially inferior to him. It is Jane Eyre's resilience in character and rigour in intellect which attracts Mr Rochester to Jane, she stands above the string of hollow women he has experienced in the forms of his depraved wife and subsequent mistresses as well as the potential emptiness and shallowness of Blanche Ingram who is vapid and thinks wealth is all the measure of a person's worth.

### **Jane Eyre's Transcendence of Class**

Indeed Jane stands in a superior position to Mr Rochester when she rejects his offer to make her his mistress. While in love with him, she is not beneath morality and the laws of God to refuse him and involve herself with bigamy with a married man. Indeed she declares that she alone

cares for herself as she always has from childhood, she refuses to be taken advantage of and brought to ruin in the eyes of religion and her God just to please the decadent Mr Rochester. Yet their romance is a passionate one as she is sexually and intellectually attracted to Mr Rochester, a Byronic figure and a romantic who like her knows passion and ardour for what it is and experiences a strong attraction to her because of her character and intellect, not for mere looks as it is made clear that Jane Eyre is a plain looking woman, unattractive by most standards, a quality which applied to Mr Rochester as well, who with his shaggy locks and high forehead is unappealing physically to most. Their romance survives because of its intensity, Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester are mutually attracted in a love which transcends class and mere appearance, mere superficialities in their eyes, as a mutual passion and regard as well as respect for each other, though Mr Rochester does not heed the morality of his proposed union with Jane initially and is duly punished by the divine in being blinded and maimed, which Jane tends to as his partner and aide eventually.

The romance between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester is thus a transcendent one which goes beyond mere class or looks to being a mutual attraction of character and intellect, which accounts for its intensity and steadfastness as it is able to withstand a long period of separation by time and space to their eventual union where Jane Eyre declares “Reader, I married him.” A bold affirmation that genuine love and passion is something which transcends mere class and looks, *Jane Eyre* is a revolutionary text in the declaration of the female as being an equal counterpart of the male. This comes as Jane Eyre declares her eventual equal standing with Mr Rochester in their marriage. Indeed, Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester are spiritually attune and akin as Jane Eyre calls herself “his likeness”.

Jane Eyre is then a text that is unusual for its time because it enables the protagonist to transcend her class and climb socially by virtue of her merit. Indeed the text had been declared anti-Christian on the grounds that Jane Eyre, of impoverished and deprived circumstances originally, manages to climb the social ranks upwards towards gentility by virtue of her merit. In many ways this discloses the rigid delineation of class and fortune during the Victorian period. It discloses the extent of class oppression and hierarchy that held during that time.

What then makes the work unusual is that social status can be transcended through merit and fortunes reversed through the demonstration of character. Indeed it may be argued that it is divine providence that enables Jane Eyre to climb social rank because it is the allure of her character and intellect which draws Mr Rochester to her in place of the haughty Blanche Ingram. It is also God’s favour through endowing her with an inheritance that enables her to match Mr Rochester’s fortune so she is able to stand before him as an equal at the end.

Indeed the main statement of the novel is that character is not a function of class. It is shown that Jane Eyre, while being born impoverished, is not lacking in character or integrity because she comes from a low social standing initially. Her fortitude in battling the injustices of Aunt Reed shows strength and resilience of character and it is shown that class is a factor that can be transcended rather than determined from one’s origin.

Indeed that the text is declared immoral and unchristian on the grounds that class can be transcended reveals the depth of rigid and fossilized attitudes towards class delineation in the Victorian Age. It remains highly ironic that Christianity is only a religion of the rich upon this view as Jesus’ ministry was always towards the poor and destitute in society. We see this in Jesus’ account of Lazarus, the poor man who died and rose to heaven while a rich man, upon dying, found himself in hell because he had enjoyed comfort and privilege during his lifetime. In

the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus also directly insinuated that the poor are more blessed in spirit than the rich as he says that the poor in spirit are blessed.

More parables include the parable of the rich man who accumulated and hoarded much wealth for himself, only to find that God was going to take his life away from him that night and deemed him a fool as he had only accumulated riches for himself without paying heed to the needy and those in need of his help in God's kingdom. Hence it is a tremendous irony that during the Victorian age, Christianity was deemed a religion of the rich as they were deemed blessed by God's providence. Christ's ministry was always towards the poor, outcast and marginalized of society and hence Jane Eyre's overcoming of her impoverished circumstances through fortitude is in my consideration as Christian an outcome as any other as God does not look favourably upon the rich oppressing the poor as the divine retribution that Aunt Reed suffers shows and the story of Lazarus and the poor man shows.

The novel thus can be read as a critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century England in there was a high level of social pretension and class snobbery. Bronte can be read as being feminist and Marxist before her time because she sees beyond class distinctions and gender discrimination because Jane Eyre proves herself to be Rochester's intellectual equal and not inferior to him on any account because of her class or gender. It is then shown that while gender and class barriers had initially placed Rochester in a place of privilege towards Jane, he finds himself falling for her because of her candour, honesty and intellect. Bronte then can be read as a feminist ahead of her times as she does not view women as intellectually or morally subordinate to men though this is indeed the circumstance women find themselves in during 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Bronte is then a bold precursor of what was eventually to become the feminist movement, which did not view females as sex objects solely for the purposes of marriage or morally and intellectually inferior to males though law and religion as well as society had inscribed them as such.

Bronte's text is then radical in foreshadowing Marxism and feminism as well as defying what was viewed as Christian during the Victorian age, to delineate classes rigidly as well as determine that these classes were constructed by God's providence and were to remain rigidly ossified from birth till death. In this sense, the social mobility of Jane Eyre is to be deemed quite revolutionary since it was insinuated that it remained a matter of Christian morality when it came to which class one belonged to.

What the novel explicitly demonstrates is that God's providence and blessing extends to the rich and poor alike. While the rich rule over the poor in this life it is demonstrated that God can deliver one from poverty and class oppression, as the circumstances of Jane Eyre's rise to riches show while Aunt Reed is brought low because of her shabby treatment of Jane Eyre.

Divine providence is then shown to extend to all regardless of circumstance, whether rich or poor. Indeed it is arguably Jane Eyre's demonstration of character and resilience which enables her to earn God's favour and experience a reversal in fortunes while Aunt Reed, while born rich, experiences divine retribution for oppressing the poor.

I would not venture to say that Bronte is anti-capitalist though she foreshadows Marxism because it is Jane Eyre's fortune to be eventually blessed with an inheritance. What Bronte does however work against is any Christian notion that one's fortunes were a function of one's character, and ironically it is on these grounds that the text is labelled immoral and unchristian. Indeed, character is not a function of class and God's riches and mercy are shown to extend to both the rich and the poor, as Jane Eyre's rise in fortune demonstrates.

Bronte believed art was most convincing when based on personal experience; in Jane Eyre she transformed the experience into a novel with universal appeal. Commercially it was an

instant success, and initially received favourable reviews. Critic G. H. Lewes wrote that it was "an utterance from the depths of a struggling, suffering, much-enduring spirit", declaring it to be "suspiria de profundis!" (sighs from the depths). The book's style was innovative, combining naturalism with gothic melodrama, and broke new ground in being written from an intensely first-person female perspective. Speculation about the identity of Currer Bell and whether the author was male or female heightened with the publication of Emily's *Wuthering Heights* by "Ellis Bell" and Anne's *Agnes Grey* by "Acton Bell". Accompanying the speculation was a change in the critical reaction to Charlotte's work and accusations were made that the writing was "coarse", a judgment more readily made once it was suspected that "Currer Bell" was a woman. However sales of *Jane Eyre* continued to be strong, and may have increased as a result of the novel developing a reputation as an 'improper' book.

Charlotte Brontë's success in *Jane Eyre* then demonstrates that there was a demand for fiction in which gender and class boundaries were transcended as these proved to be oppressive categories for Victorian women. The supposed 'immorality' of the novel is then its purported weapon as Brontë deems class an insignificant aspect of a person when it comes to overcoming one's fortune of gender subordination, as *Jane Eyre*'s rise in fortune demonstrates.

**Works cited:**

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Classics, London, 1992.

Bloom, Harold. *Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*. New York : Chelsea House Publishers, 2007

Rigby, Elizabeth. *The Quarterly Review*. 1848.