

BBC BITESIZE – JANE EYRE Episode 5

Jean: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. I'm Jean Menzies.

Carl: And I'm Carl Anka, and in this episode we're taking a closer look at the themes within Jane Eyre. Today we're going to take a look at three of them in particular. Theme one is love and hate, theme two is social class, theme three is personal discovery.

Extract:

Resting my head on Helen's shoulder, I put my arms around her waist. She drew me to her, and we reposed in silence.

Jean: We're looking at love and hate. And this extract is definitely one that shows us love.

Carl: One thing I enjoy about Jane Eyre is that Charlotte Bronte weaves love throughout the story. We see how characters respond. It's not just Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester, a great love story. In this novel we see different kinds of love in different relationships like the one we've just heard here between Jane and Helen Burns.

Jean: And we've mentioned this in previous episodes, but this relationship is truly a love story of these two girls who find a real solid friendship in their school. For Jane Eyre, it's the first relationship like this that we see for her having lived with the Reeds, who are so cruel. Her relationship with Helen however is built on kindness and caring and it shows why Jane feels true heartbreak at Helen's death.

Carl: Later on, we'll see Jane fall in love with Mr Rochester and him with her. Throughout the novel, there are different moments where we learn the true value of love, and Jane responds to it. It develops her as a person.

Extract:

"Look here; to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest--"

Carl: This is Jane speaking to Helen Burns and saying herself how desperately she seeks and craves love and affection because she hasn't had it in her childhood from Mrs Reed.

Jean: And meanwhile, her story with Mr Rochester is actually a very simple familiar plotline. Two people meet and fall in love, things go wrong. Then they're reunited after hardship and live happily ever after. But surely Bronte teaches us so much more with it. Jane builds independence and maturity in her time away from Rochester. He sees the error of his ways and is a much better person by the time they unite. It's how they both respond to love and the loss of it which is incredibly interesting to read, I think.

Carl: Alongside this tale of love, Charlotte Bronte also shows us the binary opposite of love, meaning the complete opposite emotion, which is hate, and what hate can do to a person as well. Examples of hate in Jane Eyre are not few and far between. You can find them pretty much everywhere.

Extract:

Turning at the door, my judge said - "Let her stand half-an-hour longer on that stool, and let no one speak to her during the remainder of the day." There was I, then, mounted aloft; I, who had said I could not bear the shame of standing on my natural feet in the middle of the room, was now exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy.

Jean: So this is Jane at Lowood school being humiliated in front of her class as a punishment. Actually, a lot of the moments of hate that I remember in this novel are centred around Jane's childhood, which makes it particularly sad.

We have her aunt Mrs Reed and her family who are both emotionally and physically abusive towards Jane. Then she moves to Lowood. And as we've just heard in that clip, Mr Brocklehurst also carries on the cruelty towards Jane. It's only through Helen that Jane, a girl who's so used to hate, starts to understand what love really is.

Carl: In addition to that, Bertha, Mr Rochester's wife is also someone who shows the emotion of hate in this play. On one occasion Bertha escapes from the attic. But Jane has yet to know she is. Bertha stamps on and rips Jane's veil signalling her dislike towards Jane. Or that could be interpreted as Bertha's dislike of what Jane has, rather than her personally. Bertha feels like a constant threat, even though we're not really aware that she's there.

Jean: Bertha receives her own amount of hate too. She's not given any respect, and she's treated really poorly by the other characters, particularly Mr Rochester, who quite openly dislikes or even hates her. Bertha is definitely part of the representation of the theme of hate in a number of ways.

Carl: Now, let's take a look at our next theme. And that is social class.

Extract:

On that same occasion I learned, for the first time, from Miss Abbot's communications to Bessie, that my father had been a poor clergyman; that my mother had married him against the wishes of her friends, who considered the match beneath her; that my grandfather Reed was so irritated at her disobedience, he cut her off without a shilling; that after my mother and father had been married a year, the latter caught the typhus fever while visiting among the poor of a large manufacturing town where his curacy was situated, and where that disease was then prevalent: that my mother took the infection from him, and both died within a month of each other.

Jean: So another recurring theme in Jane Eyre is the theme of social class. As we see that class dictates what a character can or cannot do, or how they are perceived by others.

Carl: Bronte sets this out for us very early on in the novel as Jane speaks about her parents' marriage and their death. She tells us here about the strict social class structure of the Victorian period, and how class determines how an individual should live their life and even who they should marry. When Jane's parents went out against the social classes, they were disowned by their family and friends.

Jean: This early influence was clearly powerful for Jane. She holds this idea of marrying for love as a guiding ideal throughout the story, which is rare for the time.

Carl: She wants the love that her parents had.

Jean: Meanwhile, it was a very restrictive time for women in society, and this idea of strict social class structure and marriage really represents the patriarchal nature of the Victorian era. Women and particularly lower class women were in a much more vulnerable position than men, as their families tended to choose a suitable wife on the basis of a woman's dowry, which was a sum of money that the man received from the bride's family through marriage.

Carl: Throughout the book, we see social class represented in Jane Eyre, through Jane's lack of money through the first part of the book in particular, and how others view her because of this.

Extract:

"I believe she thought I had forgotten my station, and yours, sir."

Carl: That was Jane Eyre discussing Mrs Fairfax, who is the housekeeper of Thornfield while Jane is the governess. And that is Mrs Fairfax's reaction when Mr Rochester announced he was going to marry Jane. Mrs Fairfax shunned her and now she's horrified that, as she sees it, Jane has stepped above her social class.

Jean: We also get an idea of Charlotte Bronte's true feelings about social class and how she wants to challenge it as she has Rochester respond to Mrs Fairfax comments with, "Station! station! -- your station is in my heart." It's fair to say that Mr Rochester, like Jane, believes in marriage for love, which is in complete contrast to St John Rivers and his belief in the purpose of marriage.

Carl: He says that when Jane is the governess and she doesn't have much money. But she does get the inheritance from her uncle, which seems to change things for her. Not outwardly with her social class, but within herself.

Extract:

I told you I'm independent, sir, as well as rich. I am my own mistress.

Jean: So this all happens towards the end of the novel when Jane has returned to Mr Rochester. And as we hear she deems herself now as being independent. The money she has inherited has given her that independence and she now sees herself as being Mr Rochester's equal, which is Charlotte Bronte's ideal situation.

Carl: The final theme we're going to explore on this episode is personal discovery.

Extract:

You will change your mind I hope when you grow older, as yet you are but a little untaught girl.

Jean: This is Helen Burns, speaking to Jane about not always reacting or retaliating to punishments. It's just a really lovely introduction to this young girl Jane or little untaught girl as Helen says, and how she will do so much growing and learning.

Now I actually think Jane's personal discovery is one of my favourite themes of the book. I love that we see her find out who she is within her identity and personality. We watch her find happiness, and at times, we don't think she'll get to that happiness. But then she figures it out.

Carl: Bildungsroman is a German word meaning any piece of fiction that follows a protagonist through their life and struggles, typically through childhood to adulthood, which is exactly the story of Jane Eyre. We talked about that, particularly in episode two when we looked at the character of Jane Eyre. The main protagonist of Jane Eyre is Jane. She learns from experience, she develops along the way and ends with a somewhat happy ending.

Jean: And Helen told her from the beginning how much she'd grow and really predicted that Jane had such an exciting but challenging journey ahead of her.

Carl: There are a few key moments where we really see that growth and discovery.

Extract:

"I scorn your idea of love," I could not help saying, as I rose up and stood before him, leaning my back against the rock. "I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it."

Jean: This is the moment Jane turns down St John Rivers offer of marriage and we all let our collective cheer because she knows that she wants to marry for love and that isn't why St John proposing. He wants her because he believes that she would be a suitable missionary's wife, and she can't go along with that. She sticks to her principles and says no.

Carl: Not only does she want to marry for love, but she has a moment of personal discovery where she realises that she's still in love with Mr Rochester. This is the same little girl who once only knew cruelty and punishment, but now is so open to love that when she hears Mr Rochester calling to her in a dream, she makes a huge decision about her life.

Jean: As a coming of age story dictates, we see her happy ending. She is now an independent woman who marries Rochester as an equal. She's learned the value of both independence and love and she finds perfect harmony, when they're joined together.

Extract:

I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine.

Carl: She worked through all of those challenges that came her way, went on a journey of personal discovery, and ended up with happiness.

Jean: The definition of a heroine is a woman admired for her courage, outstanding achievement and noble qualities and Jane is a true heroine. She conquers Victorian society by pursuing her own happiness and she finds love and peace along the way. Charlotte Bronte shows us that instinct and integrity are guiding principles even when they conflict with social expectations. What more could you want from a story?

Carl: These are some of the most important themes for Jane Eyre: the concepts of love and hate, the concept of social class, and personal discovery.

Thanks so much for listening to episode five. In episode six, we'll be looking at the form, structure and language in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. You can listen to this and the rest of the episode right now. Just search Bitesize on BBC Sounds.