

Background into Jane's Social Standing

Contrary to Rochester's respectable high social standing, Jane's had an ambiguous social standing since birth. Her orphan status, gender, meritable educational background, and occupation as a teacher and later, a governess, have all contributed to the confusion in Jane Eyre's position in society. Even before birth, Jane's social status held ambiguity. Her father, a poor but educated clergyman, married an upper middle class woman, which threw the couple into social status limbo. Due to her father's collegiate level of education and connections, Jane's birth was considered respectable; however, their lack of wealth prevented aristocratic social rank. Therefore, to create a category for Jane's social position, she could be considered part of the impoverished gentry. Since coming from this ambiguous social class, Jane's position at Gateshead, with the upper middle class Reed family provided no clarity in that she was not accepted as an equal nor was she forced into servanthood. In the very beginning of chapter one, Bronte paints a picture of Jane's standing in the Reed family, which represents the appropriate framework for Jane's confusing social position in the rest of the novel. Sitting on the outskirts, Jane gazes upon a social class that will never accept her: "The said Eliza, John, and Georgiana were now clustered round their mamma in the drawing room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her, looked perfectly happy" (Bronte 9). Her social status in the Reed family is further established as she is forced to call her fourteen year-old cousin "Master Reed", which mirrors her devout attitude toward calling Rochester "master" even in their semi-equalized relationship of engagement. Apart from her Aunt, it is "Master Reed" who ostracizes Jane the most, establishing her social ambiguity further. He says to Jane: "You have no business to take

our books; 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, and wear clothes at our mama's expense" (13). Harshly casting Jane as an outsider from his wealthy family despite their blood relation, her cousin reminds Jane of her perpetual status as an orphan. He refuses any acceptance of Jane in their upper middle class social rank.

Jane's low social status, despite living with a middle class family, continues as she is forced to enroll at Lowood boarding school. This impoverished community provides Jane with a social niche unknown to her at Gateshead with her relatives. In time, however, Jane climbs socially, gaining a reputable education and becoming an educator herself, transitioning to the upper echelon of the impoverished gentry. Unfortunately, this does not last long as Jane decides to move on from Lowood and accept a position as governess at the wealthy Thornfield Estate. This occupation as governess brings several complexities. One, it now classifies Jane as the lower of the upper class. Two, in contrast to her higher level of education, this "low class" occupation places her in social ambiguity once again. Three, the role of the governess posed a particular threat to the middle class.

Role of the Governess

In her book *Uneven Developments*, Mary Poovey articulates the dangers of the governess to her "middle class contemporaries", stating there was a "mid-victorian fear that the governess could not protect middle-class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality" (131). The ideal woman of the middle class was considered "well-bred", "welleducated", "and the perfect gentlewoman" and a woman of

the working class was considered “low-born, ignorant, and vulgar” (128). Jane, being well-educated, but technically part of the impoverished gentry, poses potential threat to the household. Along with this distrust to her own sexuality, the governess’ role was to teach and mother young children, therefore, she was considered domestically virtuous. Even still, the governess was also expected to uphold a neutralized position. Poovey says “to gentlemen she was a tabooed woman and to male servants she was as unapproachable as any other middle-class lady” (128). As the governess, Jane’s social standing was not high enough to be considered acceptable for a gentleman, but in relation to her fellow male workers, she was off limits like any other middle class woman. However, as a single woman, the governess still emanated sexual desire, therefore posing a threat to the males in the home in which she worked.

The Turn of the Screw, a famous Victorian piece of literature, which alludes to Jane Eyre, also involves a governess as the main protagonist, proposing the same threats as in Jane Eyre due to the controversy in the occupation of the governess. Priscilla L. Walton addresses the precarious components the Victorian governess carries in her feminist perspective on The Turn of the Screw titled, “‘What then on earth was I?’: Feminine Subjectivity and The Turn of the Screw.” Although Walton applies her studies to the governess of that specific novel, her opinions can be directly applied to Jane Eyre as well because of the common reputation of Victorian governesses. Like Poovey, Walton discusses the governess as a single woman and how that status projects desire. She also discusses how the Victorian culture typically casts the woman as one of three persons: the mother, the whore, and the lunatic. Mothers were revered as respectable and pure, but women who displayed their sexuality were considered the whore or lunatic.

Further proving Poovey's point of the governess' dangers in her sexuality, Walton touches on the threat governesses pose as they display mothering qualities, but are still single women (257). Looking at *The Turn of the Screw*, Walton proposes that the narrator works to offset the governess's sexuality by establishing her credibility in reputation as "respectable and good". Despite this attempt, the governess' "position as subject to her own narrative" creates a desired woman regardless (Walton 258). Similar in *Jane Eyre*, it seems Bronte has no desire to devise Jane as the arousing governess, for when Jane first enters Rochester's presence, he "never lifted his head" insinuating there was nothing about Jane that allured Rochester's special attention (Bronte 141). Yet, if following Walton's line of thinking, Jane manifests the controversial image of the governess simply by narrating her own story. Although it may not be intentional, it can be argued Jane exercises her sexuality (and therefore proves the common view of governesses) through the power of narration and directness in her relationship with Rochester. These notions, along with Jane's full awareness that she is coming from the impoverished gentry, allow for Jane to be unafraid to infiltrate the middle class by applying for the governess position.

The Danger's in Jane and Rochester's Relationship

Still, even with the stereotypical dangerous reputation the governess holds, there is another level of danger by entering a relationship with the master of the house. Jane only knew Rochester as a position of power over her, as one who paid her wages, and as one to be respected and obeyed. Rochester, on the other hand, only knew Jane as his worker. She was the sheltered, Lowood school girl who cared for and educated the daughter he didn't even care about. Even if a friendship (and in their case, a romantic

relationship) is built, this dynamic of worker and master is the initial rapport between the two. In the Victorian Era social class was highly regarded, this relationship would be difficult to change. Even in the establishment and declaration of love, the male will always have the unconscious notion that he is in control and the one with power. This was, in fact, how marriage was viewed during the Victorian era. Marriage in the Victorian period can be most clearly classified as non-egalitarian, male dominated. Wives had very little say; while the husband could do most anything he wanted. Wives were unable to hold property in their own name, nor were they able to divorce their husbands (even though husbands could divorce their wives). Both their bodies and their earnings were considered possessions of the husband (Shanley 22). Therefore adding the dynamic of worker and master would only heighten the contrast in submission and mastery within the romantic relationship.