

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Role of Costumes in Victorian Fiction: An Analysis of *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre***

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the role of costumes in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre* have been chosen as they are widely read texts, and investigating the aspects of costumes can shed new and necessary light. Through a detailed analysis of key characters and scenes, this study highlights the symbolic significance of costumes in these two classic works of Victorian literature. Very often, costumes that individuals wear daily do not get the required academic attention as they are considered too ordinary to devote quality time. However, the paper claims that costumes can serve as a crucial narrative device that mirrors and reviews social norms, class distinctions, gender roles, and character development in the creative literature of a particular period. After all, costumes play a critical role in Victorian fiction, which often serves as a means of conveying profound understandings of characters and societal structures.

Keywords: costumes, class, mobility, identity, gender

Introduction:

The often taken-for-granted costumes that individuals wear daily fail to garner the required academic attention as they are considered too ordinary to devote quality time. Nonetheless, the paper argues that costumes can serve as a crucial narrative device that reflects and critiques social norms, class distinctions, gender roles, and character development in the creative literature of a particular period. The paper will analyze two widely read novels, investigate these issues, and highlight the multi-layered role costumes played in shaping the literary and cultural landscape of the 19th century.

Need of the Study:

The Victorian era, from 1837 to 1901, was a significant period primarily marked by rapid industrialization, social change, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, colonization, the

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expectations of strict moral codes and conducts, and a gradual change in the condition of women who wanted to seek employment, no doubt with limited choices available. Costumes can also become a marker to gauge these aspects prevalent in that society, justifying the need for a study. Thus, costumes worn by the characters of the selected novels will be analyzed through different frames as the paper progresses. After all, costumes play a critical role in Victorian fiction, which often serves as a means of conveying profound understandings of characters and societal structures. *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre* have been chosen as they are widely read texts, and investigating the aspect of costumes can shed new and necessary light.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of this paper are to investigate *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre* through:

- i. the social significance of costumes in terms of class distinctions
- ii. the gender roles and expectations prevalent in Victorian society
- iii. costumes as a narrative device, especially in terms of character development
- iv. costumes as a social critique

Costumes in *Great Expectations*:

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens uses costumes to highlight the themes of social class, identity, and transformation. Here, the characters' clothing mirrors their social status, aspirations, and inner changes.

Social Class and Aspiration:

The evolution of Pip's attire as the novel progresses symbolizes his changing self-perception and aspirations. One can notice the transformation in his profession from a blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman and the simultaneous transformation in his wardrobe as he journeys his life. Pip's transformation from a common village boy to a gentleman is vividly depicted through his clothing. Initially, Pip's rough and practical attire replicates his working-class status and social standing. When Pip first visits Satis's House and meets Estella, he is embarrassed when Estella mocks his boots and hands:

"And what coarse hands he has. A

..... Her contempt was so strong that it became infectious, and I caught it. (55)

However, in his foray into the world of *great expectations* and movement into the society of London, his attire changes dramatically, becoming more refined and fashionable and a symbol of his newfound affluence and social ambitions. His new clothes symbolize his aspirations and his perceived rise in social status; nonetheless, he also has to pay dearly for this extravagant life, as Pip mentions:

"I began to contract he soon followed." (249)

"As we got more and moreand hollower form (251)

The transformation in Pip's clothing is not seamless, as it underscores the interior conflicts and the superficial nature they imbue as he struggles to fit into the higher social class. When he

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realizes the deceiving nature of wealth and gentility, disillusionment seeps into Pip's life, and clothing gradually loses its value, illustrating his return to an unaffected self where his attire becomes simple and no longer becomes a marker of his identity and values with his realization that true gentility comes from character rather than appearance.

Miss Havisham's Perpetual Wedding Dress:

Miss Havisham's 'perpetual wedding dress' is one of the most iconic uses of costumes in the novel. Her refusal to change out of the decaying garment symbolizes the stagnation that entered her life, thwarting her dreams on her wedding day. Her once white dress, which metamorphosed into yellow and became tattered, reflected her physical, emotional, and psychological deterioration because of her traumatic past. Pip observes, "But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its luster, and was faded and yellow" (52).

Her dress, worn every day since her jilted wedding, represents her inability to move on from the past and her obsession with her betrayal. She is described by Pip as "the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see . . . dressed in rich materials—satins, and lace, and silks—all of white" (52). It indicates her entrapment in it, resulting in her obsessive desire for revenge against men, which she enacts through Estella and reinforces the themes of bitterness and the destructive power of living in the past.

Estella's Elegance:

Estella's elegant and sophisticated clothing camouflages her mysterious origins, elevating her status to the level of an upper-class lady under Miss Havisham's upbringing and guidance, transforming her into a tool for Miss Havisham's revenge against men. Her attire signifies her attractiveness, allurement, emotional aloofness, and detachment. Pip gets smitten by her beauty and observes, "She seemed much older than I, of course, being a girl, and beautiful and self-possessed" (51). He is impressed by her finer ways and fortunes as he opines, "Miss Havishamher pretty brown hair" (54).

Estella's costumes, figuratively, depict the superficiality of her charm and the barrenness in her life moulded by Miss Havisham's manipulative upbringing rather than her desires critiquing the shallow values of the upper class. Furthermore, her costumes symbolize the unattainable ideal that Pip aspires to, but ultimately, they represent the emptiness and manipulation behind her beauty.

Joe Gargery's attire:

Joe Gargery, the blacksmith, who is Pip's brother-in-law, is consistently depicted in working-class attire, symbolizing his humble, honest, and hardworking nature. Unlike Pip, Joe remains true to his roots, and his attire reflects his genuine character and lack of pretension, as well as his steadfastness, honesty, and integrity. Pip describes Joe's everyday appearance:

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In his working clothes, Joe was ... and everything that he wore then grazed him. (21)
Pip feels an affinity with Joe with whom he can open up and share his deepest thoughts, turmoil, and considers him as the support system in his life.

Abel Magwitch's clothes:

When Magwitch appears in Pip's life, his rough and rugged clothing starkly reminds his criminal past, his status as a convict, and the reality behind Pip's wealth. As Pip first encounters Magwitch on the marshes, he is described in unadorned and vivid terms:

And yet this man was dressed in coarse grey...and had a flat, broad-brimmed, low-crowned felt hat on. (16)

This description emphasizes Magwitch's desperation, coarseness, and the harsh realities he encounters as a fugitive. At the same time, Magwitch's attire also foreshadows the novel's themes of redemption and the true nature of gentility towards the end.

Costumes in *Jane Eyre*:

Costumes in *Jane Eyre* become a site to explore the themes of social class, identity, and personal growth. Throughout the novel, there are considerable changes and evolution as the primary characters encounter different situations, and their responses can be perceived in the way they dress.

Jane's clothing:

The simple and modest clothing that Jane wears echoes her low social status as an orphan and governess. The scene in the Red Room is one of the most significant in terms of costume symbolism. Jane is dressed in simple attire when she is punished and confined in the Red Room, symbolizing her vulnerability and the oppressive nature of her environment. The Red Room, with its opulent yet suffocating atmosphere, contrasts sharply with Jane's plainness, "I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage" (14).

This realization is the result of the beginning of Jane's fight against the oppressive forces in her life. She will no longer accept her situation as fated and resort to all possible ways to overturn them. The servitude that she is forced into because of her helpless situation as an orphan becomes her motivation to break the pre-determined system. She mentions, "I was conscious that a moment's I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths" (11).

As the novel progresses, Jane's plain attire denotes her humbleness, principles, and inward strength. Upon her arrival at Thornfield, Jane describes her appearance, "I rose; I dressed made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat" (92). Her work as a governess at Thornfield and her dressing sense indicated her lower social status and her desire to remain unnoticed. It is also interesting to note that her attire does not show any significant changes after she leaves Thornfield, and when she returns, displaying her moral fortitude, independence, and resilience. Despite her changing circumstances, her attire remains practical and plain, highlighting her rejection of vanity and her commitment to her principles. Jane's simple clothing contrasts sharply with the more elaborate and luxurious attire of the other characters, like Blanche Ingram, symbolizing

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her moral integrity and inner strength. Her attire underscores the novel's themes of humility, honesty, and the true worth of an individual.

Mr. Rochester's attire:

The costumes that Mr. Rochester wears reflect his riches and intricate personality, along with his changing fortunes. Ironically, his clothes are characteristically imposing, yet they are slightly carelessly worn, which epitomizes his disdain for societal standards. His attire often reflects his complex personality and the varying states of his relationship with Jane. Though rich, they also carry a sense of weariness and neglect, indicative of his turbulent past and inward turmoil. When Jane first meets Mr. Rochester, she observes:

“He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked.” (106)

Later, when Jane describes Mr. Rochester's more elaborate costumes for a party, the contrast is evident. The narrator mentions, “costumed in shawls, with a turban on his head. His dark eyes and swarthy skin and Paynim features suited the costumes exactly: he looked the very model of an Eastern emir (170).” This description highlights Rochester's ability to present himself as a figure of authority and wealth when the situation demands it, reflecting his complex social position and the burdens he carries. His attire at the time, though not described in detail, conveys a sense of practicality rather than vanity.

Later on, while he opted for a subterfuge as a gypsy fortune-teller, his disguise embodied his lively yet devious nature as well as his efforts to unearth Jane's feelings without divulging his own, representing his deeper struggle with honesty and deception. The disparity between external appearance and internal chaos in male characters like Rochester's costumes highlights the weight of upholding the social facades that demand critical attention.

Rochester's attire, both in its simplicity and grandeur, reflects the dual aspects of his character – his deep-seated vulnerabilities and his commanding presence. Later in the novel, after the fire at Thornfield, Rochester's appearance is altered dramatically, symbolizing his transformation and the consequences of his actions:

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his hair was still raven black; nor were his features altered or sunk; not in one year's space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled or his vigorous prime blighted. But in his countenance, I saw a change that looked desperate and brooding. It reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird that was dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. (396)

Rochester's attire and physical state here signify his fall from his former grandeur and his journey toward redemption and genuine connection with Jane.

Blanche Ingram's costumes:

Blanche Ingram's expensive and trendy clothing represented her affluence, social rank, and conventional attractiveness. Her attire, which almost swept the ground, her veil streamed long on the

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breeze, mingling with its transparent folds and gleaming through them, shone rich raven ringlets (151), standing as a stark contrast to Jane's simplistic dresses, accentuating the societal expectations placed upon women and the superficial rulings based on one's appearance. Her extravagant and stylish clothing underscores her position as a member of the higher strata and her role as Jane's contender for Rochester's affection and as suitable as a match for him in the eyes of society. Jane describes Blanche's attire during one of the gatherings at Thornfield:

She was very showy, but she was not genuine; she had a fine person and many brilliant attainments, but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. (172)

Blanche's lavish dress underscores the superficiality of her character and the societal values that prioritize appearance over substance.

Bertha Mason's Attire:

Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife, is often described in animalistic terms, and her attire reflects her wild and uncontrollable nature. During the fire at Thornfield, Jane describes Bertha's appearance, "I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell . . . Fearful and ghastly to me . . . I never saw a face like it! It was a discolored face — it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!" (261-262). Bertha's ragged and disheveled clothing represents her madness. Her attire contrasts starkly with Jane's modest and neat dresses, emphasizing the differences between them. Bertha is described in animalistic terms as one that groveled, seemingly, on all fours; snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (270) that dehumanizes her.

Class and Social Mobility:

Both Dickens and Bronte use costumes to comment on class and social mobility. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's changing wardrobe reflects his aspirations and the superficial nature of social status; in *Jane Eyre*, Jane's consistent modesty contrasts with the ostentation of the upper class, emphasizing true worth over outward appearance. Both novels use costumes to delineate social classes and the barriers between them. Pip's transition from a blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman is marked by changes in his clothing, while Jane's consistent modest attire reflects her lower social status and her refusal to succumb to vanity. In both novels, clothing delineates social boundaries and the characters' struggles within these confines. Pip's evolving wardrobe reflects his social ascent and subsequent disillusionment, while Jane's consistent simplicity in dress emphasizes her moral integrity amidst societal pressures.

Identity and Transformation:

Costumes in both novels symbolize character growth and internal transformation. Pip's changing clothes mirror his quest for identity, his evolving self-identity, eventual self-acceptance, and realization of true values, whereas Jane's consistent simplicity in her dress underscores her

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steadfastness, moral clarity, and self-reliance.

Gender and Identity:

Costumes is also used to explore gender roles and identity. Brontë's portrayal of Jane's plain attire challenges traditional gender expectations and highlights her autonomy. In contrast, Dickens uses clothing to reveal the complexities of characters like Miss Havisham and Estella, whose attire reflects their psychological states and societal roles.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it can be said that costumes in Victorian fiction are far more than mere descriptions of clothing; they are essential narrative devices that enrich character development, provide social commentary, and enhance thematic exploration. Through the symbolic use of clothing, in the two novels in the discussion, Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte critique societal norms, highlight class distinctions, and delve into the complexities of identity and morality, offering readers a profound understanding of the character's internal and external struggles, and celebrate the triumph of authentic selfhood over superficial appearances. The importance of costumes in these works underscores the Victorian preoccupation with appearance and the deeper truths that clothing can reveal about human nature and social structures.

References:

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