In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brontë, who expresses strong sympathy for the working class and the poor, forcefully condemns both upper-class exploitation and arrogance. Jane's own struggle makes clear the integral relationship between wealth and survival, though her experience is actually less precarious than other characters in the novel. However, the book also abounds with subtly condescending attitudes regarding the "constitutional" limitations of society's neediest members. Ironically, then, in *Jane Eyre* Brontë simultaneously fosters democratic attitudes while perpetuating a rigidly class-based system of social relations. The tone of her work — inspiring in its compassion, disturbing in its traces of elitism — reflects a striking contradiction in the intellectual and moral sensibility of British society at mid-century.

An 1842 article entitled "Industry and its Reward in Great Britain and Ireland," published in the *Westminster Review*, demonstrates this contradiction. The authors argue on the behalf of the working classes, specifically agricultural laborers. They explore the relationship between subsistence wages and impoverishment in order to depict the arduous struggle for survival faced by the rural poor. Much like the majority of *Jane Eyre*, the tone of the prose is fervent and highly attuned to the suffering of the underprivileged. The unidentified authors emphasize the cruel indifference of those in power,

"There is a mighty evil connected with the condition of the working classes in this country which has to be met, exposed, and overcome. That evil is the following: — The upper and even the middling classes have been so long habituated to the knowledge of the existence of misery, want and privation, that they ask, with indolent or vapid indifference, when pressed upon to consider the whole question, "What is there new then, that we have not heard of?"

This article identifies and disparages self-congratulatory elitist rationalizations of the status quo. Apparently, many people in the ruling classes justified their apathy towards the poor by dwelling upon the absence of legal barriers (i.e., slavery) against improving one's situation. According to this line of reasoning, it is the fault of the poor themselves if they remain destitute; for, they have failed to lift themselves up. The article analyzes the economic well-being of agricultural laborers in France, Switzerland, and Belgium to emphasize the magnitude of the problem in Britain. This study claims that, although these other nations also had very modest living standards in the middle of the nineteenth-century, their workers fared far better than their British counterparts in fulfillment of such basic needs as food, clothing and shelter.

Such statistical analysis sheds light on *Jane Eyre* because it emphasizes the magnitude of the suffering in rural England endured during Brontë's day. With the exception of Jane's early days at Lowood, Brontë primarily limits herself to alluding to such stark social realities without depicting them, until briefly focusing on rural village life when Jane begins teaching at Morton. Here, the harsh realities of country living in northern England creep into the novel, even if very briefly. Jane's ambivalence about her career as a schoolteacher is clear; it undermines the social ethic of equality which she invokes throughout the novel. Her antipathy primarily stems from her own unfulfilled passions. Yet, in light of the hardship and deprivation she experiences, her mixed emotions towards these girls conveys a great deal about her own sense of obligation to those "below" her. She reflects upon her new position, "I felt, yes, idiot that I am-I felt degraded. I doubted I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence. I was weakly dismayed at the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw round me." The limits of her compassion alter Brontë's portrait of Jane's lifelong rally against injustice. Here Jane identifies the nature of her quest not as a struggle against injustice. She strives for the elevation of her own social standing.

Throughout *Jane Eyre* Brontë shows that two moral creeds exist: one for the lucky few and another for everyone else. What becomes apparent towards the end of the novel is that Jane herself endorses the social caste system. The tone of her words reveals this contradiction. This *Westminster Review* article speaks with an extraordinarily similar voice, "It would neither harmonize with our tastes or opinions to make any long profession of our attachment to the working classes." Unsurprisingly, the paradigm established at the outset of
the article suggests a paternalistic, bourgeois sensibility rather than a genuinely democratic spirit. The authors continue by reassuring their readership that revolution is not their intention, "The distinctions of society we acknowledge and respect. The rich man must have his mansion, the poor man, his cottage."(217) Emphatically, it is not my intention to castigate the analysis provided in "Industry and its Reward in Great Britain and Ireland". Sincere concern for the suffering of the poor is evident in this work. Such is also the case in *Jane Eyre*. I admire these portraits of social and individual injustice. However, these same intellectuals constructed their arguments in such a way as to perpetuate the class-based system which they claimed to vilify. From reading the *Westminster Review*, it becomes immediately apparent that *Jane Eyre* is not the revolutionary text which many revisionist scholars — particularly feminist scholars — have recently claimed it to be. *Jane Eyre* is not a saint. She struggles and rebels and fails just like the rest of us.