The Function of Religion in *Jane Eyre* from a Feminist Viewpoint.

Marie-Anne F. Taylor
Abstract

This study is a literary analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which focuses on how female and male characters approach religion. A stark contrast is presented between the two approaches - differing according to gender - which point to two different forms of religion. The novel highlights one form, the religion of the heart, as the superior form as it empowers women to achieve spiritual, mental and physical independence. The analytical approach is based upon Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s theory of imprisonment/escape as well as Carol Gilligan’s discussion of ethic of care and ethic of justice. Through these theories my study shows that the function of religion in the novel is not to discredit it, but to bring to the fore the disadvantages and benefits of religion. In the character Jane a biblical feminism is displayed which challenges the novels patriarchal society.

**Keywords**: religion, ethic of care, ethic of duty, imprisonment, escape, feminist
Table of contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5

2. Literature ..................................................................................................................... 5
   2.1 Primary Literature .................................................................................................... 5
   2.2 Secondary Literature ............................................................................................... 6

3. Theory and Method .................................................................................................... 7
   3.1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Theory of Imprisonment and Escape ............. 7
   3.2 Carol Gilligan's Discussion of Ethic of Care and Ethic of Justice ....................... 8
   3.3 Method .................................................................................................................. 9

4. Religion from a Male and Female Viewpoint: The Approach and Effect ............... 10
   4.1 Aspects of the Religion of the Heart ........................................................................ 12
   4.2 Aspects of the Religion of Duty ............................................................................ 14
   4.3 Exceptions to a Gendered Approach to Religion ................................................. 16

5. Imprisonment and Escape ........................................................................................ 17
   5.1 The Bildung of Jane - Biblical Feminism ............................................................. 20

6. The Purpose of Religion in the Novel ....................................................................... 22

7. Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 24

8. Works Cited ................................................................................................................ 25
1 Introduction
This literary analysis will focus on the function of religion in Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë. Male and female characters depicted in the novel are described as approaching religion in different ways and consequently religion has different outcomes in the characters lives. I will be exploring different attitudes towards religion from a gynocritical perspective, with the aid of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s theory of imprisonment/escape. Gilbert and Gubar base their theory on research of Victorian literature written by female authors, of which Brontë is one. I will also explore a psychological perspective of the attitudes towards religion, with the help of Carol Gilligan’s discussion of ethic of care and ethic of justice. Although Gilligan’s theory does not relate to Victorian literature, I find that her research is applicable as it sheds light on the fact that, in a patriarchal society, the way males and females are socialised and the way they make moral choices is related.

The thesis of this essay is that religion is used to challenge the moral standards of the novel’s patriarchal society, by describing religious experiences which differ according to gender. Brontë makes a clear difference between the religion of the male and female characters in the novel. A religious form embraced by the female characters, a religion of the heart, values a person as an individual and emphasises a relationship with a God who looks after them: it engages their hearts. Historian Elisabeth Jay in her book A Religion of the Heart introduces this term whilst describing the religious belief of Evangelicalism in the eighteenth century. The male characters, primarily clergymen, follow a religion which focuses on duty, outward piety and is heartless, what I have chosen to call a religion of duty. The religion of the heart is a way for the women to escape the stifling religion of duty, and it empowers them to achieve spiritual, mental and physical independence. As the religion of the heart sets the women free from male supremacy the novel implies that this form of religion is superior to the religion of duty.

2 Literature

2.1 Primary Literature
I have chosen to work with only one novel by Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, for the benefit of a narrow scope. The voice of this novel is that of a female narrator who tells
her life story. The reader follows the protagonist Jane from the age of ten, through adolescence, into married life with a family of her own. The focus of the novel is on the *bildung* of the protagonist: the coming of age and the forming of her character. Religion plays a significant part. As the novel was first published under the title *Jane Eyre, an Autobiography*, it could be assumed that the novel is an autobiography of Charlotte Brontë’s life. However, only part of the novel, especially the first chapters of the novel, is based on Brontë’s childhood and the school she attended with her sisters. Brontë’s views on religion are known as she left many letters which researchers have collated into books (for example Margaret Smith). She was herself a daughter of a clergyman, and grew up in a time of unrest in the Church (Thormählen 13).

The evangelical movement of the nineteenth century was split in different factions, and I believe that Brontë used this background for her novel *Jane Eyre*. During the nineteenth century the evangelical movement was integrated into the Church of England, which itself was a three-part entity: Low Church (mainly evangelical), High Church (Tractarians and Ritualists) and Broad Church (liberal teaching) (Griesinger 35). In the beginning of the integration of the evangelical movement into the Church of England, even women were able to preach and go on the mission field by themselves (38). However, by the mid-nineteenth century, when Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre*, women were no longer seen as capable of this by some factions. This change came about as a doctrine of different spheres of influence for men and women was introduced, as well as that Calvinism and its doctrines of election, predestination and reprobation took a firm hold of the Church (Griesinger 37-9). The result was that Evangelicalism was no longer the way it had set out, and it could be said that the “heart” had gone out of the movement (39). In the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë wrote “appearances should not be mistaken for truth; narrow doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ” (5). I believe that Brontë reflects here on the doctrine of Calvinism which teaches predestination. In short, this doctrine holds that only those who God has chosen will be saved. Brontë seems to oppose this doctrine as she holds that Christ died so that all men would be saved. Brontë’s words also reflect the turmoil of the time she lives in with so many different forms of Christian belief, and piques my interest into the subject of religion and what the novel seems to say about it.
2.2 Secondary Literature
Late twentieth century feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar see *Jane Eyre* as a pivotal point for feminism and have highlighted the social injustices of women described in the novel. Others like Maria Lamonaca concentrate on the different types of religious beliefs and how Jane encounters them. Emily Griesinger in “Charlotte Brontë’s Religion: Faith, Feminism and Jane Eyre” differs from them as she focuses on the history of evangelicalism of the nineteenth century, the impact of it on Charlotte Brontë herself, her religion and the connections between Brontë’s spiritual development and the spiritual development of the character Jane Eyre. In addition, a very short chapter is dedicated to feminism, her view that *Jane Eyre* is a Christian feminist *bildungsroman*, and the introduction of the term biblical feminism, by which she means a feminism that recognizes that “men and women stand at God’s feet…equal” (48), as well as emphasizes women’s religious authority of discerning the voice and the will of God for themselves” (52). Besides the fore mentioned authors, I will engage with other research related to *Jane Eyre*, such as works written by Catherine Brown Tkacz, J Jeffrey Franklin, John G Peters and Susan VanZanten Gallagher. These writers recognise the importance of religion in the novel. Furthermore, to understand the historical background I make use of works by Elisabeth Jay, Margaret Smith and Marianne Thormählen. These works focus on the historical aspect of the time period *Jane Eyre* was written in, as well as on the Brontë family. My research, although taking Griesinger’s term of biblical feminism into account, differs in that I focus predominantly on the difference in the way religion is approached by the different genders. At present I am not aware of any other study with this narrow scope of research.

3 Theory and Method

3.1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s Theory of Imprisonment and Escape
The theoretical approach I have chosen to work with is the theme of imprisonment/escape, one of the theories of gynocriticism. Gilbert and Gubar state that
the theme of imprisonment/escape is commonly used in a writing tradition unique to women writers of Victorian literature. Not only are the female authors themselves trapped in specifically literary constructs of patriarchy, they also have to live “enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society” (xi). As a result, their writings mirror their existence. Their novels generally begin by using houses as symbols of imprisonment (85). *Jane Eyre*, for example, starts with Jane expressing her dread of coming home (Brontë 9), a place where she is not wanted nor can escape from, followed by the enclosure in the red room (13). Houses then, are not only a symbol of imprisonment, but can also be used literally as a prison. The ultimate expression of confinement is Bertha, Mr Rochester’s wife, who is locked up in the attic. Imprisonment of a woman can however also be expressed in enclosure of her spirit, her self. Escape on the other hand is often depicted in the novels as the female character “imagining, dreaming, or actually devising escape routes … to the glittering town outside” (Gilbert and Gubar 313). In *Jane Eyre* escape is depicted for instance in Jane’s vision after her first marriage proposal by Mr Rochester. Jane sees a vision of a white human form telling her to flee temptation. Jane escapes Thornfield in the night, but her escape route does not direct her to a “glittering town” (313), rather it leads her to a small cottage on the Moors after a near death experience. In my understanding the way religion is depicted in the novel falls under this category of imprisonment/escape, and I have applied this theory accordingly.

### 3.2 Carol Gilligan’s discussion of ethic of care and ethic of justice

Psychologist Carol Gilligan argues in her book *In a Different Voice* that the moral development of men and women may have different paths as they are often socialized differently (10). Her stages of the ethics of care theory, focuses on two different approaches to morality: care-based morality and justice-based morality. Justice-based morality approaches whether or not something is right or wrong from a justice orientation viewpoint and is often what men are socialized into using, according to Gilligan. The care-based morality on the other hand has a responsibility orientation viewpoint, and is often a female morality. Gilligan found that men solve moral problems “impersonally through systems of logic and law” and that women solve moral
problems through “communication in relationship” (Voice 29). The main difference between the two moralities is that women, whilst growing up, seem to have a care-based morality where they develop to the conventional stage, but often do not grow to the postconventional stage. The conventional stage can be understood as making moral judgments based on the “shared norms and values that sustain relationships, groups, communities and societies, but places the value of the other person above the self” (73). When confronted with a moral dilemma a woman solves it in such a way that no one is hurt, but does not take herself into account – in other words I love you more than me (73). In the postconventional stage a woman has reconsidered relationship, and has grown into taking responsibility not only for others but also herself – in other words I love myself and you (74). In Jane Eyre we are introduced to a woman who does grow into the postconventional stage. Furthermore, Gilligan states that “[s]ince masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation” (Voice 8). In my opinion, Gilligan’s theories are reflected in Brontë’s writing where religion is concerned, especially as relationship or the lack of it plays such a large role. The clergy are self-centred, whereas the women focus on a relationship with God and each other. Furthermore, applying the ethic of care and the ethic of justice to Jane Eyre gives another dimension to the theme of imprisonment and escape as well as a better understanding of the different forms of religion and why they are attractive to the different genders. In this essay I will apply Gilligan’s theory to the characters in order to achieve a deeper analysis.

3.3 Method
To find out what the text has to say about religion, I initially listed all the passages where religion was mentioned after a close reading of the text. A pattern emerged of different approaches to religion by the male and female characters. Applying the theory of imprisonment and escape gave a clearer picture still. To focus in on the different aspects of religion, I divided the research into three areas: Religion from a Male and Female Viewpoint: The Approach and Effect, Imprisonment and Escape, and The
Purpose of Religion. Finally, I applied Gilligan’s theory to the religion of the heart and the religion of duty.

4 Religion from a Male and Female Viewpoint: The Approach and Effect

Victorian Evangelicalism was above all a “religion of the heart” (Jay 40). Griesinger explains this religion as “God in the flesh coming to earth, seeking to visit individuals where they live, in their homes, their hearts, their secret chamber. It suggests a personal relationship with Christ” (35). This form of religion opposed formalism, and gave room for the experience of being intimately in touch which God. As a result it was an important source of independence and power for women (37). Women no longer needed a clergyman to be a mediator between them and God, but were capable of hearing God for themselves. Unfortunately, Victorian Evangelicalism also fostered a spirit of legalism which fractured the Church. It introduced spheres of influence, where women’s only influence would be the home. In other words, Victorian Evangelicalism, says David Hempton, “opened up new opportunities for women …[yet] at the same time constructed ideologies to keep them in their place” (197). These ideologies had changed the evangelical movement by the middle of the nineteenth century in such a way that it could be aligned with the religion of duty.

The two different forms of religion which I note in the novel have similarities with Evangelicalism and have two different moralities. The first form of religion, the religion of the heart, can best be explained as a religious form which is relationship based. It includes a moral approach which is largely concerned with caring for others. Gilligan calls this type of moral approach “ethic of care” (30). On the other hand, the second form of religion, the religion of duty, sees outward piety as very important, and has law or duty as a base. It includes a morality which focuses on a universal justice - what is right regardless of the consequences - and is therefore not based on relationship. Gilligan calls this type of moral approach the “ethic of justice” (174). There are two specific instances in the text which link the religion of duty to Evangelicalism: Brocklehurst, in rebuking Miss Temple, names Lowood “an evangelical, charitable
establishment” (Brontë 66), and Jane makes the link with Calvinistic beliefs when she comments on St John’s sermon where “each reference to these points [election, predestination, reprobation] sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom” (348). These two quotes place the novel around the middle of the nineteenth century, at a time when women were loosing their influence due to the legalism which Calvinism brought into Evangelicalism.

The religion depicted in the novel is presented as it is encountered by the characters in two different ways, and I would argue that there is a clear distinction between the genders and how they approach religion. The religion of duty is explored through the clergy/men. Marianne Thormählen in *The Brontë's and Religion* mentions that the true virtues of evangelical religion are “charity, warmth and humility” (184), qualities which neither Mr Brocklehurst nor St John Rivers, as representatives of the clergy, possess, however. These clergymen are described as heartless people, blind to the needs of the physical body, and exalting a spiritual lifestyle which is lacking the most important ingredient, compassion. Consequently their version of religion is a callous one focusing on an outward piety. It seems that for them their religion is a profession, not a conviction, and therefore it does not change their hearts. The clergy, I believe, represent two extremes of the religion of duty. Mr Brocklehurst mistreats the girls in his care by not feeding and clothing them properly, but he himself lives a nice and pleasant life whereas St John overexerts himself and manipulates others to live his lifestyle. Whether or not the clergy themselves experience a negative effect of their approach to religion, they use their religion as a means to imprison, literally or figuratively. Aspects of the religion of duty then are single-mindedness, lack of empathy and too much insistence on asceticism. The women on the other hand - for instance Helen Burns and Miss Temple - profess a religion which shows humility, warmth, and charity. This religion goes deeper; it affects the heart, the inner thought life, the core of the person for the better. They believe in a loving father, who comes to their aid in the hour of need, who hears their prayers, a God of goodness (Brontë 83). Furthermore, this religion of the heart gives importance to the physical as well as the spiritual, gives justice, is kind, teaches forgiveness, and teaches a woman that she can hear God for herself: she does not need a man or clergy for this. God becomes the one who guides, not the men, and thus leads the women out of oppression. Characteristics of
the religion of the heart then include a justice, that is driven by righteousness rather than a justice that is impersonal through a system of logic and law. Furthermore it promotes strength, and gives outward support. The religion of the heart counterbalances the religion of duty and equips its followers to stand against or to escape the entrapment of the religion of duty.

4.1 Aspects of the religion of the heart

The religion of the heart affects the core being of the women by strengthening them. This is made clear by several examples in the novel. Miss Temple, a woman “full of goodness” (Brontë 58) who is the superintendent of the Lowood evangelical institute, is publicly reprimanded by Mr Brocklehurst for being charitable. She is accused of “starving their [the girls’] immortal souls” (65), when she replaces the burned inedible porridge and feeds the children with bread and cheese. The character Miss Temple who is confronted with the moral dilemma of malnourishment however, chooses relationship over law, even if it means adverse consequences for herself. She therefore does not defend herself when rebuked, rather “her mouth, [was] closed as if it would have required a sculptor’s chisel to open it” (65). She knows she has broken Mr Brocklehurst’s law and will endure his rebuke. Feeding souls means something else to Miss Temple; for her looking after the body and the spirit goes hand in hand. Although the rebuke is unpleasant Miss Temple’s convictions give her strength to endure and not to be self-centred.

The same inner strength which Miss Temple possesses is also seen in Helen Burns. Helen is able to endure whatever comes her way as she lives by a belief that states “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you” (60). This belief helps her to see the difference between the person and their actions (61). It also enables her to forgive whilst wearing the “untidy badge” and condemned “to a dinner of bread and water on the morrow” (69). Both Miss Temple and Helen Burns have found an inner strength which enables them to rise above the situation they find themselves in.

In addition to inner strength, the religion of the heart also enables a character to focus outward and give support to others. Brontë constructs Miss Temple in such a way
that the character can look further than herself when she has just been publicly rebuked. This becomes evident when Jane, moments later, has to stand on trial before Mr Brocklehurst and Miss Temple whispers to Jane “Don’t be afraid, Jane, I saw it was an accident; you shall not be punished” (67). Miss Temple’s strength enables her to care for others in a difficult situation. In turn, Helen is able to encourage even when oppressed herself, being condemned to having less food than usual. Whilst Jane is standing on a stool falsely accused, Helen passes Jane and looks up at her with a smile. “What a smile!” (69) The oppression of the religion of the clergy does not affect the core being of neither Miss Temple nor Helen Burns. They are able to focus outward and give expression to what they believe in by helping others.

Furthermore, the religion of the heart is displayed through characters seeking justice by finding the truth when faced with oppression. When Jane is falsely accused by Brocklehurst, an accusation which heightens her fear of rejection as she has been longing for friendship and acceptance and is afraid that the new found friendship will be stripped away, both Helen and Miss Temple come to her aid.

Helen Burns aids Jane by explaining a type of spiritual justice which differs from the religion of duty. She presents God as a relational God rather than a God of the letter of the law who will punish her, regardless of the circumstances. After the distress of enduring Mr Brocklehurst’s accusations, Helen comforts Jane saying that she recognizes a “sincere nature in your [Jane’s] ardent eyes” (Brontë 71), and that God has created a supernatural world around her to aid her. Most importantly Helen states that God does not reject her “and God waits only a separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward” (71). God accepts her in the here and now, and will reward her at the end of her life; there is a place for her with Him. J Jeffrey Franklin sees Helen as the antidote to Brocklehurst’s beliefs (464). I agree, especially as Brocklehurst has just questioned if she could be saved, taking all hope from Jane of being accepted for who she is, not only by others but also by God. Gilligan argues that women’s “identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care” (Voice 160). Therefore, where morality is concerned, women judge situations from their own experience of connection and conceive the moral problem they are facing as a problem of inclusion rather than of separation (Voice 160). As the character Helen is having a belief which includes her being accepted by God, she wants Jane to understand
that she does not agree with Brocklehurst’s doctrine. Her experience is one of inclusion. The type of spiritual justice she gives Jane then is hope not judgment.

Miss Temple, for her part, comes to Jane’s aid by giving justice in the here and now of a more practical nature. After the false accusation of Jane, Miss Temple wants to get to the bottom of it. She tells Jane that she listens and believes her. In doing so, she instils a trust in the fact that truth is powerful, and that it is right to stand up for herself. There are two different results of her telling the truth; immediate trust in what she says, “to me Jane, you are clear now”, and a promise that her name will be cleared publicly after Miss Temple has spoken with Mr Lloyd (73). Both women, Miss Temple and Helen, show compassion to Jane. Moreover, “[c]ontemporaneous manuals for clergymen”, states Thormählen, “insisted on the necessity of offering enlightenment and comfort in a spirit of love and tenderness” (210). The character Mr Brocklehurst is presented as not possessing these qualities, and in a sense Miss Temple and Helen are examples of good clergy “women”. In doing so the reader is invited to interpret the religion of the heart to be superior to the religion of duty.

4.2 Aspects of the Religion of Duty
The religion of duty leads to a lack of empathy and can therefore be used as an excuse for hypocrisy, deprivation and mistreating of others: the lack of empathy is exemplified through the character Brocklehurst. The reader is invited to be appalled by Mr Brocklehurst’s actions which are cold and abusive. Lowood follows his strict regime, which reveals his belief in a religion of duty. In a long speech, he explains that this regime is in place because he does not want to “accustom … [the girls] to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying” (65). He believes it is necessary to “punish her body to save the soul” (68). The missing of a meal is described as “temporary privation” (65), yet the daily portions are not enough to “keep alive a delicate invalid” (62). Furthermore, the way the girls are dressed is not enough to keep them warm and as a result, in winter, the lack of good warm shoes or gloves causes chilblains. Mr Brocklehurst’s objective as a clergy does not include taking the consequences of his laws or behaviour into consideration. Furthermore the hypocrisy of his belief is seen in that he has one standard for Lowood and another for
himself and his family. He himself is well dressed, and his family dresses after the latest fashion, and what more, warmly. His wife and daughter even have curls, something which Brocklehurst is repelled by when he sees the orphans having them. The different standards he holds make him stand out as evil, especially as he is misquoting scripture to justify his behaviour. Catherine Brown Tkacz in her essay “The Bible in Jane Eyre” points out that Brocklehurst “uses distorted verses about hungering for righteousness to condone, even glorify, malnourishing children” (6). Lowood then, becomes not only a place which can be compared with a physical prison but also a spiritual one: physical because of the bad standards and its regime, and spiritual as Brocklehurst places himself above the girls/women. He sees himself as already being one of the chosen, and as the man in charge representing God, he shows God as being heartless too. As Brontë focuses so much on the faults of Mr Brocklehurst and the standards he holds, it seems that she invites the reader to deduce that he is misguided in his beliefs. This then leads to the possible conclusion, that the religion of duty is falling short and that the religion of the heart is superior.

Secondly, the religion of duty can lead to single-mindedness and too much emphasis on asceticism of which St John is an example. He has only one standard, that of asceticism, as for him, duty, servitude, is the most important. He describes himself as “a cold, hard, ambitious man” and he lives his life being guided by “[r]eason and not feeling” (371). He is calculating how to get the best use out of Jane, who feels in debt to St John as he saved her life. But from the quote above we can deduce that John saved her out of duty, not out of a sense of compassion, when he found Jane near to death on his doorstep. He pushes himself physically to the extreme by never letting the hour of day nor deep snow drifts stop him from visiting the sick. He is not driven by a concern for the sick however. He sees facing the elements as a way of training for the hardship on the mission field, “honour[ing] endurance, perseverance … because these are the means by which men achieve great ends” (371). In doing so he also does not look after himself very well as Jane comments “you are recklessly rash about your own health” (374). St John does not see it as recklessness however as, when he is starved and tired after having performed an act of duty, he “felt his own strength to do and deny, and was on better terms with himself” (390). Duty gives St John satisfaction, and at the same time it seems as if he has replaced his feelings with this duty. Gilligan observes that
“instead of attachment, individual achievement rivets the male imagination, and great ideas or distinctive activities defines the standard of self-assessment and success” (163). The character St John’s “great idea”, is that of becoming a missionary, and everything he does has to submit to this aspiration. As he is observing Jane he is devising a plan for her to accompany him to the mission field. When he tells her of the plan he says “it is a long-cherished scheme, and the only one which can secure my great end” (404). That he sees Jane as an object, a means to an end, becomes clear when he tells Jane “you are formed for labour, not for love” (398). The negative workings of the religion of duty on St John, is that he has put his “heart on the altar” as he calls it to perform a duty for God (364). In his single-mindedness and diligence St John does not consider that Jane might have different ideas. The religion of duty then focuses on performing a duty for God, and in the process paying less or no attention to the needs of the body, instead of focussing on relationship with God which changes the heart for the better.

4.3 Exceptions to a Gendered Approach to Religion

Whilst Brontë depicts the different approaches to religion as gender specific, this does not mean to say that it is impossible for a man to take on the religion of the heart, or for a woman to take on the religion of duty. In a patriarchal society it is the men who rule, who are the head. As such, also in the church, the clergy are male. Their doctrine is followed by the congregation. Regardless of whether women take on the religion of duty or not, they are described as heartless if they do not follow the religion of the heart.

At Lowood not all women are described as having found a way out of the religion preached by Mr Brocklehurst into a religion of the heart. The girls are so mistreated that some of them, in their turn, become abusers. Narrator Jane describes the elder girls who steal food from the younger girls or stand around the fire, close to each other, so that the younger girls cannot warm themselves (62). For these girls their survival becomes a priority and they become self-centred. Another example is one of the teachers, Miss Scatchard, who only focuses on the outward behaviour of her students. A student can be as bright as the “clearest planet”, but Miss Scatchard can only see the minute flaws of demeanour as she is “blind to the full brightness of the orb” (69). She cannot see the good in her students, nor their personal qualities and consequently mistreats her
students, by punishing them with a rod or withholding food, to force them into a particular behaviour. Narrator Jane, however, does not give the older girls at Lowood or Miss Scatchard more attention than a few sentences, as she puts emphasis on how women can find a way out.

Eliza Reed stands out as she does not adhere to the religion of the heart, nor the religion of duty, but finds a way of escape from a patriarchal world into Catholicism. John G. Peters describes her as “insensitive, intolerant, and selfish because for her religion is merely a useful means to live an orderly existence” (57). It seems that Eliza is heartless and her selfishness is shown in being incapable of showing compassion to her dying mother or her sister. Eliza’s desired way of life is one which “makes you independent of all efforts, and wills but your own” (Brontë 234). To escape all the wills of others she is willing to be “walled up alive in a French convent” (240), as Jane calls it. By becoming a Mother Superior, Eliza has achieved her ultimate goal of independence, as in her function of head of the convent there is none above her.

In contrast to the female characters discussed above, there is only one male character in the novel who takes on the religion of the heart. Mr Rochester is described as making peace with God, after the fire at Thornfield where he lost his sight and one hand. His heart changes from a “state of proud independence” (440) to needing God who “judges not as man judges, but far more wisely”. (441). He wants relationship, not only with God but also with Jane. Not knowing if she is still alive at the time he expresses his hearts desire to God, and calls out her name. Supernaturally he hears her voice answering “I am coming wait for me”, followed by, “Where are you” (442). This supernatural answer is a prediction of what is to come; a restored relationship with Jane.

5 Imprisonment and Escape
Gilbert and Gubar argue that novels written by women writers of Victorian literature are primarily dramatisations of imprisonment and escape. This dramatisation is a result of a “female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (Preface xii). Defining the self is necessary in a patriarchal society where a woman is not allowed to be herself, but has to fit in a mould which men have created for her. As society and religion are so intertwined, analysing
religion in *Jane Eyre* from the viewpoint of imprisonment/escape will yield insights into the relationship between religion and the self.

That the female self can be imprisoned is highlighted by the narrative in the interaction between Jane and the character St John. Jane feels that she more and more cannot be herself in the presence of St John. She realises that he “was not a man to be lightly refused” (Brontë 393) and she does not dare to complain so as not to vex him, as she does not like him to show his annoyance (392). Jane starts to feel under a “freezing spell” (393). The narrative describes how Jane’s self is affected negatively; it even names the manipulation as a “cankering evil” which drains her happiness, and forces her to “disown half my nature” (394). Gilbert and Gubar describe this type of imprisonment as an “exclusion from the life of wholeness” (366). “Principle and law” (Brontë 356), the two yardsticks which aid Jane to leave Thornfield when she finds out that Mr Rochester is already married, have led Jane so far and she congratulates herself having made the right choice. Now however in the case of St John, she is confronted with a man of principle and law, who is lacking the one thing which Jane has come to understand as the basis for her belief, love. To Jane, being loved and accepted for who she is is of vital importance to live that “life of wholeness” (366). This type of imprisonment then, does not only restrain a freedom of expression, but it can even maim the self of the character.

Imprisonment of the soul can also be a conscious choice, which has consequences for the self and its relationship to others. For the character St John to follow the religion of duty means that he has to cut himself off from as many emotional attachments as possible. This entails that he denies himself earthly emotions, whether it is a matter of giving or receiving. This means that he denies himself to love Rosamond, and even to care for his sisters after their father’s death. In essence he has denied himself to live a “life of wholeness” (Gilbert and Gubar 366). It is not that he does not have the capacity to love and show compassion, but he has chosen not to do so. That St John has the capacity to love becomes clear when Jane shows a picture of Rosamond which she has drawn and asks St John if he would like a copy. Brontë describes St John as allowing himself, for not more than “a quarter of an hour” (Brontë 368) to feel “human love rising” and his heart to be “full of delight” (369). He has chosen a life of self-denial however, to be able to achieve the higher goal of becoming a missionary, and sees his
feelings for Rosamond as “a mere fever of the flesh” and his reaction of blushing and shaking when he meets Rosamond anything but “the convulsion of the soul” (370). He therefore describes himself as a hard and ambitious man. As St John does not see human love as of vital life importance, it follows then that he cannot love Jane. The text shows that he sees her as a tool, a means to an end. The love then, which he is offering Jane when he says that enough love will follow when they are married, is a counterfeit love.

Furthermore, St John’s self inflicted imprisonment results in trying to imprison Jane’s soul, by manipulation. Gilbert and Gubar describe this manipulation as an imprisonment of “the ‘resolute wild thing’ that is her soul in the ultimate cell” (366). The full force of this manipulation comes to the fore in St John’s wedding proposal. Brontë presents St John as having an idea to solve his predicament of going to the mission field alone. St John is so caught up in his plan that he even states “do not forget that if you reject it, it is not me you deny, but God” (Brontë 404). He does not see it necessary for Jane to hear God for herself, as he puts himself in place of God. The only way of escape for Jane is to state the truth and realise that she “sat at the feet of a man, erring as I” (402). Even though Jane realises that St John is just a man, and that by refusing him she is not refusing God, the manipulation is still ensnaring her and her powers are not enough to escape St John’s hold over her. A supernatural intervention is needed to break the power of the manipulation, and to set Jane free. This intervention comes in the form of the character Jane hearing her name called “Jane! Jane! Jane!” (414), by Mr Rochester, who at that moment is many miles away. This breaks the spell and Jane can think clearly again, which enables her to stand up for herself and retire to her own room. When praying she “seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit” and is able to lie down “unscared, enlightened” (415). She has heard God for herself and is totally at peace, knowing what to do. It can be said then that imprisonment and escape are depicted in the two forms of religion. The religion of duty imprisons the self, resulting in ensnaring others, and is a power which can destroy the self, whereas the religion of the heart gives a means of escape as the character Jane can hear God for herself and gives her soul peace.
5.1 The Bildung of Jane - Biblical Feminism

Biblical feminism in the Victorian age is described by Griesinger as women standing up in a patriarchal Church for the recognition that women have spiritual authority themselves and that they do not need to be under the spiritual authority of men as in the eyes of God men and women are equal (48). This spiritual authority can be explained as women being able to discern God’s will themselves, rather than going through the intervention of men, whether they are clergy or not. This discernment comes from a relationship with God where God speaks to the women directly through the Bible, supernaturally through dreams and through visions (52). Furthermore God also leads and guides them, sometimes through divine intervention. Commenting on the novel Jane Eyre, Griesinger sees Jane’s development into a biblical feminist foreshadowed at Gateshead where Jane learns at an early age that it is not enough to be passive, sulking “behind the window blinds reading a book”, instead she learns that “[i]n the face of injustice, she must take a stand” (47). She must question and make her voice heard. In a patriarchal society, however, Gilligan comments, honest and direct girls’ voices “must be corrected or dismissed: otherwise, what they see and say must be addressed” (“Moral Injury” 96). In other words, these voices challenge patriarchy and even religious practices.

The character Jane’s bildung into adulthood and a biblical feminist is a constant interchange of imprisonment and escape, where religion is presented as both beneficial and restrictive. Jane needs to grow an ability to discern “possible dangers, abuses and misappropriations of Christian teachings and doctrines, specifically those that impact her capacity to know and follow God” (Griesinger 47). What Jane learns along the way is that the religion of the heart does not make a separation between the spiritual and the physical, a belief which she fully embraces in the end.

Jane’s time at Lowood is the first stage in becoming a biblical feminist. Jane is represented as growing into the religion of the heart, not because it is forced upon her, but because she freely accepts its practices. At Lowood, in the midst of stifling religious practices, her questioning and approaching religion with common sense enables her to escape the bonds of the religion of duty and find freedom in the religion of the heart. Jane’s longing for love and acceptance for who she is, is met by the friendship of Miss Temple and Helen. Miss Temple functions even as a “mother, governess, and, latterly,
companion” (Brontë 86), and in this function she is also a living example of what it means to follow the religion of the heart.

During the second stage of Jane’s *bildung* into a biblical feminist, Jane grows into a knowledge that God’s moral law is there to protect her which enables her to stand up for the principles she believes in. At Thornfield, Jane nearly becomes a mistress, but if she would have said yes she would have been enslaved. Marriage is not a human invention in Jane’s understanding, “I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man” (314). Jane adheres to the principle that by becoming a mistress, she will have lost her self esteem, her value as a woman, as Mr Rochester would have seen her as a prostitute and soon be tired of her (309). Her common sense then tells her that although this religious principle might seem restrictive, it is actually beneficial, and she consequently declines to become Mr Rochester’s mistress. The religion of the heart requires Jane to think through situations and make choices. She finds that God’s law is a law of love, not of judgement.

The pinnacle of discernment is required of Jane at Moore House when she is confronted with the marriage proposal of St John, which introduces the third phase of her development into a biblical feminist. The belief of the religion of the heart that there is no divide between the physical and spiritual needs of a person is put through the test. The time before the proposal, Jane is represented as having become an independent woman as she inherits a large sum of money. Also her needs for a home and relatives are met in Mary and Diana Rivers. This firm basis is important for what is to come. As the narrator Jane writes down her deepest thoughts, the reader is given an insight into Jane’s reasoning. Jane, examining the idea to marry St John, wonders if she could “endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit was quite absent?” and exclaims “No: such a martyrdom would be monstrous” (400). It would be the highest form of abuse to her. She is willing to give her heart to God, but not to St John as St John does not love her, and would never be her equal. For the character Jane then, marriage is out of the question, and she states this very explicitly. What strengthens Jane’s stance as a biblical feminist however, is that she even makes sex a spiritual matter. As she believes that God instigated marriage, she cannot imagine a loveless marriage. Yet in a patriarchal society, there are many loveless marriages. At the end of the novel when Jane nearly gives in to St John’s manipulation,
the supernatural intervention - where she can hear Mr Rochester’s voice although miles apart - could be interpreted as that it is not God’s will for her to sacrifice her physical need to be loved. Suzan VanZanten Gallagher draws the same conclusion as she argues that “the novel might embody a Christian feminism that … advocates the values of love, sexuality, and a marriage of partnership” (67). The fulfilling of the need to be loved then includes a giving and receiving of love.

These biblical feminist values of love and partnership are explored further in the last chapter, where Jane reflects on her life as a married woman. When Jane discusses that she and Rochester have been together for ten years, she describes their union as:

“I know no weariness of my Edward’s society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me” (Brontë 446).

This passage talks about the value of partnership and deep relationship. Marriage to the character Jane means not only being loved in a physical way, but also to be respected and accepted for who she is. This union is possible as Mr Rochester has had a change of heart. No longer does he see his role as being the “giver and protector” (440) standing at a distance being proud of his independence, but now he accepts his interdependence. Gilligan in her essay “Moral Injury and the Ethic of Care: Reframing the Conversation about Differences” discusses how she believes that “[l]ove is the force that has the power to upset a patriarchal order” (100). Relationship then becomes as important to him as it is for Jane. They have become equals, serving each other out of free will, not out of duty or obligation. Jane’s forming into a biblical feminist is complete.

6 The purpose of religion in the novel

Scholars are divided about the purpose of religion in the novel. Maria Lamonaca in her study “Jane’s Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in Jane Eyre” argues that many scholars see “Jane’s religious and spiritual autonomy as a major component of her bildungsroman” (246). Jane, in other words, believes that she herself can discern what
God’s will is for her, which helps her to make right life choices. Other scholars see the novel as anti-Christian as they believe the novel to contain “subversive elements which undermined religious conventions” (Peters 53). Especially Elizabeth Rigby in *The Quarterly Review* of December 1848 felt that the novel was an “anti-Christian composition” as she felt it to be written with a “tone of ungodliness”, and even called it “evil” (Peters 53). However, Brontë states in the preface of the second edition of the novel that “[s]elf-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last” (5). For Brontë to scrutinise religion is not the same as rejecting it all together. To depict the clergy as self-righteous is rather a way of questioning the different doctrines of religion at the time. She furthermore states that “narrow doctrines … should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ” (5). This last statement shows her belief in that there is a difference between the church as an entity and faith itself. It can be assumed then that when Brontë says something against the practices of the Church, this is not equal to denying her faith. At the time of writing, the Church and its clergy were seen as the embodiment of faith and to disagree with them was not done (Thormählen 7), hence Rigby’s indignation. Furthermore, Griesinger argues that the female characters in *Jane Eyre* can only be fully understood if the religious dimensions of Brontë’s life are taken into account (30). I agree with Griesinger, as not only is *Jane Eyre* partly biographical, but Brontë’s honest confession of her faith can be read in her correspondence with her friend Ellen Nussey (Smith 156), and her publisher (581). Taking Griesinger’s research into account, as well as Brontë’s own words, I find then that the function of religion in the novel is not to discredit religion as such. On the contrary, the depiction of religion challenges the different moral standards of the novel’s patriarchal society as the protagonist Jane makes her voice heard and her opinion known as she grows into a morality of her own. By bringing the different forms of religion to the fore the disadvantages and benefits of the different religion’s forms are shown. What is more, it is shown that women can engage their minds where religion is concerned and do not have to succumb to the religious practices which imprison them.
7 Conclusion
Looking at how religion is depicted in the novel, my research has shown that the function of religion is to challenge the moral standards of the novels patriarchal society by describing religious experiences which differ according to gender. Firstly, looking through the lens of the theory of imprisonment and escape at religion has highlighted that religion is not only a matter of belief, but that it can also be used to enslave or liberate. Secondly, whether religion is used to enslave or liberate has to do with what the characters base their morality on. Gilligan’s theory of the stages of the ethic of care sheds light on how - in a patriarchal society - men and women are socialized differently and have therefore different ways of approaching moral dilemmas. Men make moral decisions through systems of logic and law, which is a more self-centred approach, whereas women make moral decisions keeping relationship in mind, as to them being connected is of great value. What stands out is that empathy in religion is important, as the lack of it leads to abuse, hypocrisy and asceticism. Thirdly, taking the historical background of the Church in the nineteenth century into account, the two different forms of religion in the novel have similarities with the evangelical movement of the day. The point Brontë seems to make is that it is of vital importance to have discernment in spiritual matters and that no one else can do this on a person’s behalf. In the novel Jane develops this discernment as she grows in her relationship with God and into a biblical feminist as she stands up for her belief that women can discern God for themselves.

The novel ends with a victory of the protagonist who is able to break the fetters of the religion of duty and fully embrace the religion of the heart. Jane’s bildung into a biblical feminist is complete. The values of equality between the sexes, independence and self-knowledge, a search for love and family, all needs physical and spiritual come to a close in the union of Rochester and Jane. The supernatural intervention, where they both could hear each other speak, whilst miles apart from each other, implies the approval of God that Jane is right. According to Brontë, a religion of the heart is superior to a religion of duty.
8 Works Cited