



# In Conflict with Conformity

The Protagonist's Struggle against Victorian Institutions and Gendered Behavioral Norms in *Jane Eyre*

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Robin Axén

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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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English

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Supervisor: Anna Linzie

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Examiner: Johan Wijkmark

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## Abstract

This essay examines the theme of conformity in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. It highlights in particular the protagonist's conflict with conformity as criticism of social inequality in terms of gender. The analysis builds on the patriarchal concept of the angel of the house, as described by Lois Tyson and Alastair Henry and Catharine Walker Bergström, which is a definition of the governing codes of behavior women of the nineteenth century were expected to follow within both the domestic and professional sphere. Specifically, these spheres are organized through significant Victorian institutions such as the household, the education and employment of women and the marriage. The behavior of Jane is discussed in relation to these institutions as a means to support the argument of the protagonist distancing herself from contemporary gender norms. The conclusion of the essay shows that Jane's circumstances within these institutions leads to her deviation from behavioral norms as a deliberate action.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, behavioral norms, conformity, gender, nineteenth century, patriarchy, Victorian.

## Sammandrag

Den här uppsatsen undersöker temat konformitet i Charlotte Brontës verk *Jane Eyre*. Den framhäver i synnerhet protagonistens konflikt med konformitet som en kritik riktad mot sociala ojämlikheter mellan könen. Analysen bygger på det patriarkala konceptet ängeln i hemmet, så som det beskrivs av Lois Tyson och Alastair Henry och Catharine Walker Bergström, vilket är en definition av de rådande uppförandekoderna som kvinnor under den viktorska eran förväntades att leva upp till inom familje- och yrkessfären. Dessa sfärer utgör viktiga inrättningar inom det viktorska samhället. I synnerhet hemmet, skolan, yrket och äktenskapet. Jane Eyres uppförande diskuteras i relation till dessa inrättningar som ett led i att understödja argumenten för protagonistens distansering från samtida könsnormer. Uppsatsens sammanfattning visar att Janes omständigheter inom var och en av dessa inrättningar leder till hennes avvikande från uppförandekoderna i form av medvetna handlingar.

**Nyckelord:** Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, konformitet, könsnormer, patriarkat, viktorska, uppförandekoder.

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) has been subjected to analysis in terms of gender matters in a patriarchal society many times. It is perceived by many as critique of the inequalities between men and women of nineteenth-century England. A closer examination of the domestic and professional sphere in the novel indicates that it reflects nineteenth-century expectations of female behavior derived from contemporary patriarchal norms.

In order to understand the patriarchal norms of female behavior that are reflected in *Jane Eyre*, it has to be analyzed in relation to its historical context. For many women of the Victorian-era, remaining within the home and tending to domestic matters, as well as providing comfort and relief for their spouses, were fundamental responsibilities. In essence, their function within the household was to act as an angel of the house. Lois Tyson explains this patriarchal ideal as a concept known as the *angel of the house* and states that women under patriarchy are categorized in two different variations; the *good girl* and the *bad girl* (89). She further states that the typical good girl is someone who "accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules" whilst the bad girl is "violent, aggressive... [and] monstrous" (89). As a result of these characteristics, a woman who does not comply with the rules of patriarchy has no other prospects other than being perceived as a monster (Tyson 89).

In addition, there were women during this historical period that also supported these domestic standards. For instance, it is stated in Adams that texts written by nineteenth-century writer Sarah Stickney Ellis were significant in terms of how they argued in favor of women dedicating themselves wholly to the domestic sphere (85). Adams claims that Ellis' publications were "monuments to sexual inequality" which took focus away from their actual political criticism; arguing that women's influence on affairs, personal and professional, is what keeps interactions between individuals civilized. Without women's influence, these affairs would turn to "savage aggression" (86). Instead, Ellis' arguments became supportive in terms of maintaining separate and domestic gender ideals. This connects to Henry and Walker Bergström's statement that angels of the house were women "shielded from all of life's unpleasantness and ... denied any opportunity for individual expression" (143), which reveals that Victorian women were to be confined within the four walls of the household. Within the home, they were supposed to suppress their own needs in favor of those of the children and husband as well as focusing on creating a comforting and serene environment (Tyson 90).

In order for nineteenth-century women to become angels of the house, their education was not intended to stimulate or develop their intellect but rather to hone their practical skills. Intellect was, from a Victorian perspective, something belonging to the male gender. According to Simon Morgan, this belief affected many Victorian men into believing that

women were such fragile beings that the process of learning would actually be damaging to them (36). This correlates with the design of curricular activities of nineteenth-century schools; they are properly preparing women for the necessary chores that relate to managing a household, for example weaving, sewing and cooking. The overall purpose of these schools for women, as stated by Debra Teachman, is twofold:

First of all, the education is focused on forming young women of the working class into effective workers within the fast expanding, productive nineteenth century industry (27). Although this is not addressed in the novel of Jane Eyre, it was common for women similar to the protagonist to receive an education aimed at future employment within industry.

Secondly, the pupils are trained to become useful servants and governesses within large households (Teachman 27). Useful in these circumstances means women who are playing by the patriarchal rules; being obedient, loyal and ambitious – without personal goals – other than serving the employers for whom they work.

As for female writers such as Brontë, Victorian views on appropriate professions for women certainly denied them the possibility to write literature. The difficulties for women writers are clear when examined together with the opinions of contemporary male writers. For instance, Victorian poet Robert Southey claims that literature “is not the business of a woman’s life, and it cannot be” (Gilbert and Gubar 8). Southey was not the only nineteenth-century writer who conveyed patriarchal opinions of male superiority regarding literature; poet Gerard Manley Hopkins also declared that writing literature was a profession which required mastery, which is a quality belonging to the male gender (Gilbert and Gubar 4). These contemporary perceptions of women and literature led to Charlotte Brontë publishing her books under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. Female authorship was, according to Teachman, liable to public suspicion because it was outside the “traditional role of the proper nineteenth-century lady” (112).

The controversy connected to proper behavior for a lady is shown through the protagonist’s thoughts and actions in Brontë’s novel. This became clear at the time of publication, after which the novel was reviewed by Elizabeth Rigby who considered it to be a flagrant “personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit” as well as an autobiography of “anti-Christian composition”. Rigby further argued that the “rebellious feminism” of the novel lay in its defiance of the “forms, customs, and standards of society” (qtd. in Gilbert & Gubar 337-338). Evidently, the reactions to the novel by contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Rigby, show that the content of the novel was provocative in terms of how it conveyed actions and thoughts in conflict with appropriate female behavior of the

nineteenth century. With these views of women as a backdrop for the story of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's novel is unique in terms of how it eloquently describes a woman's struggle for achieving greater equality within a society strongly governed by patriarchal norms.

In this essay, I will contribute to the debate on gender matters in *Jane Eyre* by arguing that the novel criticizes contemporary patriarchy through the protagonist's conflict with conformity within the domestic, marital and professional spheres. These three spheres are in turn divided into four significant Victorian institutions; the household, the education of women, employment of women and the marriage. Examples of conformity conflicts will be drawn from actions by and between Jane and other characters and discussed in terms of how they correspond to contemporary perceptions of appropriate female behavior within the areas of the aforementioned Victorian institutions. My claim is that Jane strays from the codes of behavior as deliberate actions.

The unfair and oppressive nature of patriarchy is initially portrayed within the domestic sphere at Gateshead Hall, where the protagonist Jane is put in a position of behavioral suppression; receiving reprimands for being outspoken and free-spirited. This is shown through the conflict between Jane and her cousin John Reed. The portrayal of John's sadistic and controlling nature is representative of the most abusive sides of patriarchy. This becomes apparent in a particular interaction in which John declares that he is the master of the house (Brontë 5). John's demeanor overall towards Jane; calling her a dependent and physically assaulting her (5-6), is a portrayal of the extreme patriarchal view on women's position in relation to men, but especially towards women of similar social status as Jane. His disapproval of Jane stems from the protagonist's unwillingness to ask him, the man of the house, for permission to read books. Other members of the household staff share John's dislike of the protagonist's unwillingness to submit; they point out the necessity of Jane conforming to being "humble" and "agreeable" (Brontë 8) which are desirable characteristics for women similar to her.

The manner in which John Reed, with authoritarian gestures, orders Jane to approach him during the conflict is a display of power that further highlights the obvious difference in status between the two genders (Brontë 4). Jane is confined to a position of low status in comparison to her cousin. In addition, the deceitful action of her cousin Eliza; revealing Jane's whereabouts to John prior to the conflict (4) solidifies the perception of the protagonist as a counterpoint to agreeable female conduct, which in turn highlights Jane as the sole opponent against the abusive and oppressive conformity characterized by her cousin John.

Jane's behavior is far from what is expected of nineteenth-century women. It disagrees

with what is considered appropriate in terms of female conduct. According to Henry and Walker Bergström, women similar to Jane are “supposed to display neither emotion nor passion” (142). In relation to this kind of emotional indifference, Ellen Jordan claims that women of Victorian England perceived humility, humbleness and obedience as natural qualities of the female gender (53). These three characteristics of behavior essentially argue that a woman like Jane is expected to contain her feelings, which in turn means that her thoughts and opinions are supposed to be effectively confined within her own mind. However, Brontë’s portrayal of the abuse of Jane justifies her refusal to conform to the emotional isolation that is expected of her.

Following the conflict between Jane and John Reed, the protagonist is without inquiry or trial placed in solitary confinement within the room of her deceased uncle (Brontë 8). With the premise of knowing Jane is without guilt, the passage describing her isolation effectively creates a sense of injustice and understanding for her resistance to accept the reprimand, as is otherwise customary for a person in her situation. The protagonist describes her cell as “...chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and the kitchens; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered” (Brontë 9).

First of all, the imprisonment bears an important symbolic function. The chamber was previously occupied by Jane’s benevolent uncle who used to be the head of the family. The reason for incarcerating the protagonist within this particular chamber is likely an attempt to make Jane atone for the error of her ways in shame; by detaining her in the residence of the former family patriarch, who brought her into the family, she is expected to revert to an acceptable behavior.

Secondly, the mentioning of the room’s infrequent usage adds to the notion of a place in a state of oblivion; everything within the room is forgotten, which is a fitting location for detaining individuals whose faulty characteristics and behavior is in conflict with the appropriate behavioral norms; by isolating the anomalous Jane who deviates from the standards of behavior, order can be restored to Gateshead Hall. In addition, the isolation in this particular darkened room causes the young superstitious Jane to hallucinate and ultimately, according to the protagonist herself, suffer mental scarring (Brontë 13, 17). This kind of hyper-emotional reaction, as displayed by the protagonist, connects to Tyson’s claim that women, from a patriarchal perspective are perceived as emotionally irrational (85).

The protagonist’s emotional outbreak, which involves Jane comparing John to a murderous Roman emperor and calling him a “slave-driver” (Brontë 6), leads to her imprisonment. Tantrums similar to Jane’s are the opposite of the general perception of

acceptable behavior for Victorian-era women. Nineteenth-century codes of conduct dictate that women are supposed to be “gentle, submissive ... [and] angelic” (Tyson 89), suggesting that they are expected to keep their feelings, thoughts and actions to themselves. However, Jane’s situation is of such severity that it becomes impossible to remain calm. Lashing out emotionally, instead of confining her emotions as expected, thus becomes a necessary action.

In contrast to the protagonist, Brontë portrays the stereotypically conformed and subdued Victorian woman through Jane’s benefactress Mrs. Reed. She personifies and resolutely upholds the behavioral characteristics of an angel of the house. Mrs. Reed adheres to the description of the *good girl* as she shows characteristics of docile behavior; she remains calm in heated arguments, which shows in her response to Jane’s tempered and contemptible outburst. Jane’s declares to Mrs. Reed that “the very thought of you makes me sick... you are bad, hardhearted” (Brontë 37). To this statement, Mrs. Reed replies to Jane “in the tone in which a person might address an opponent of adult age...” (Brontë 37). Instead of Mrs. Reed losing her composure in the conflict with Jane; scolding the protagonist immediately for her infractions, she remains calm and collected as is customary for civilized adults, in particular domestic angels, who are in verbal disagreement.

The differences between the protagonist and her benefactress Mrs. Reed become a struggle between two gender ideals. Brontë’s portrayal of young Jane signifies change and struggle against a conservative system which aims to confine her within the behavioral norms for women; Mrs. Reed however is strict, traditional and upholding of patriarchal social codes which leads to her inability of comprehending and accepting change, which shows in the final encounters between her and Jane; “so much annoyance as she caused me, daily and hourly, with her incomprehensible disposition” (Brontë 276).

An explanation for Mrs. Reed’s incomprehension of Jane’s character is presented by Tyson, who discusses patriarchal bad girls as individuals under patriarchy who have abandoned the rules relating to their gender roles, basically making them monsters (89). From Mrs. Reed’s perspective, the outward behavior and defiance of Jane and her refusal to adapt to the patriarchal rules are so far removed from the socially accepted norms that it makes her appear as an incurable monster. Mrs. Reed’s disapproval of Jane’s behavior hints that women, to some extent, were equally adamant as men in their struggle to enforce and maintain the codes of gender behavior, as well as rectifying those who strayed from the path of socially accepted conduct.

In order to rectify Jane’s deviation from the behavioral norms, she is considered to be in need of proper education. For Jane, this education is essentially supposed to teach her the

appropriate behavioral codes for women and takes place at Lowood Institution, which is equal to a prison of patriarchal indoctrination run by Brocklehurst. Furthermore, Lowood is a charity school, in which the students' education is paid for by wealthy people of the community (Brontë 53-54). Teachman states that these charity schools provided the students with values that would prove useful to their future employers, especially obedience (31). Brontë shows this through the interaction between Mrs. Reed and Brocklehurst; she emphasizes that education is vital in order for Jane to be "trained in conformity to her position and prospects" (35).

Jane's notion of Lowood and its purpose of behavioral conformity are shown in her description of Lowood's garden. She states that the garden is enclosed with walls high enough to render every idea of the free world on the outside as useless but that each and every one of the female students has a personal flower bed to cultivate (Brontë 51). The symbolism of cultivating plants within the enclosed garden is equal to the limited development of female individuality in society; they are not allowed to grow and prosper in the wild because they will receive adequate care and civilized growth within the borders of patriarchy. The prison-like walls or "exile limit" (Brontë 98) as Jane describes the enclosure of Lowood Institution is synonymous with the domestic boundaries for women like Jane.

As a means to break away from these patriarchal confines, Jane' declares that bravery is a necessary characteristic. She states that "the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had enough courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge amidst its perils" (Brontë 98). In a sense, Jane claims that there are possibilities for a fulfilling existence outside the patriarchal limits of the domestic sphere, but it requires the determination and willingness to reject the restraints of behavioral conformity, despite the risks that might follow when straying from the social codes.

Brontë's portrayal of Brocklehurst's leadership puts Jane in the position of a prisoner of patriarchy. At Lowood she is barely fed and lacks adequate clothing. This is a result of Brocklehurst's goal to render the young girls at the school "hardy, patient and self-denying" (70), which are significant qualities in women who are submitting themselves to the domestic and professional responsibilities as wives and workers. These three aforementioned qualities, as stated by Lydia Murdoch, relate to a nineteenth-century religious idea of children as innately sinful (154). This explains Brocklehurst's religious conviction and purpose to save the young female students from moral decay and simultaneously create hard working women who will have no doubts about their place in society.

Another explanation for Brocklehurst's ambitions regarding the young girls relates to Murdoch's claim that the Victorian era understanding of original sin greatly affected the perception of childhood innocence and was common throughout the nineteenth century (154). Furthermore, Jennifer Sattaur states that all children of the Victorian era were widely considered to be adults in the making and as such they were "ripe for correction and instruction at the earliest opportunity" (5).

Furthermore, Brocklehurst's use of religion as a means to achieve submission is effective. The fear of burning forever in the pits of hell is grounds for Jane to execute duties effectively, especially if salvation can be achieved through learning obedience and servitude, two qualities that are highly valued in Victorian women when put in relation to the concept of the angel of the house (Tyson 90; Teachman 31). Brocklehurst and Lowood Institution are two examples of how nineteenth-century religious beliefs solidify the foundation for gender inequalities and conformity to gender roles. Furthermore, the novel shows through Brocklehurst a harsh religious justification for shaping the young women's behavior to fit within acceptable limits. This idea is supported by a particular passage of the text, in which Brocklehurst argues that Jane is "not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example" (Brontë 74). As someone who adamantly struggles to convey individuality, Jane is perceived by Brocklehurst as a great threat to contemporary ideals of character and is consequently branded an enemy of the codes of female behavior.

At Lowood, Jane also encounters her conforming alter ego in the form of the character Helen Burns. The difference between the protagonist's fierce resistance and Helen's timid and submissive *good girl*-personality shows in the aftermath of Helen's public humiliation, during which she has to wear a large sign marked "slattern" for being untidy with her work (Brontë 84). Josephine Kamm states that it was not uncommon for students at charity schools to experience a severe existence as they risked being "flogged for minor offences". (qtd. in Teachman 31). However, Helen faces the degrading treatment as "patient, unresentful" (Brontë 84) in contrast to Jane who speaks "without reserve or softening" (64) about her situation. Additionally, Helen explains to Jane that as a woman it is her obligation to endure reprimands for flaws in her character, otherwise it is a sign of weakness (Brontë 61). Helen also states that the reason for Mrs. Reed's dislike of Jane is due to her "cast of character" (64) which is in conflict with the ideal characteristics of domestic angels.

Helen's attempt to persuade Jane into conforming becomes evident when she entices the protagonist to forgive the previous injustices, especially the harshness of Mrs. Reed, by

forgetting “the passionate emotions it excited” (Brontë 64). The eventual demise of Helen is significant in terms of portraying the death of the patriarchal *good girl*. She represents a level of conformity that appears unthinkable to Jane; maintaining composure in extreme circumstances of unfair treatment. Helen Burn’s death is equal to the passing of Jane’s alter ego and, as such, it proves symbolic in terms of supporting the protagonist’s struggle against suppressive gender conformity.

This is further elaborated in the novel as Brontë shows that Jane does not submit herself to the patriarchal doctrines of Brocklehurst at Lowood. Instead, Jane puts up a facade in order to make it appear as though she has adapted to the norms of behavior. The protagonist herself states that she “had given in allegiance to duty and order; I was quiet; I believed I was content: to the eyes of others...I appeared a disciplined and subdued character” (97). Another reason for Jane feigning her *good-girl* personality connects to the expectations of her teachers. In a conversation with Mrs. Temple, following the public humiliation of Jane by Brocklehurst, in which she is branded a liar and servant of the devil, she is told to “act as a good girl, and you will satisfy us” (Brontë 74, 80). Jane eventually decides to leave because of the tiresome routine of working eight years as a teacher, which only feeds her longing for freedom (99). The chains tying her to Lowood are thus broken, signaling that the pressure of patriarchy has been unsuccessful in turning her into a stereotype for Victorian *good girls*.

Since Jane originates from a poor family, her prospects for the future after leaving Lowood are very limited. Because of her social status, her outlook within patriarchal society is either as a servant or a governess. In particular, seeking employment as a governess was a reality for many single women of nineteenth century society (Teachman 79). Typically a governess works as a teacher, either at a school or as a tutor within the walls of private homes. For most unmarried women at this time in history, proper etiquette is required in order for them to apply to these jobs, primarily with the help of acquaintances, friends and family (Murdoch 197). It is shown in the text that the protagonist is well familiar with this procedure because Jane states in the novel that, in order to find new circumstances, she must “apply to friends” (Brontë 100). Jane is however a lonely person, and somewhat of a social outcast, with severed ties to the family at Gateshead hall, which makes finding employment through the assistance of family or friends problematic. Murdoch states that the only option for women without friends or family is to turn to helpful organizations such as the Governesses Benevolent Institution in order to find employment (197).

However, the protagonist’s decision to have an advertisement placed in the newspaper in order to find employment is, according to Murdoch, contemptible as it was considered a

“last, disreputable resort” (197). Consequently, Jane’s initiative to advertise is a provocative action; it conveys the great determination and capability of Jane acting independently. In a sense, it is a critique pointed towards an unjust society in which women are forced to rely heavily on others for help. The deliberate choice of advertising shows the protagonist’s strength and willpower to act against norms of dependency by acting in a way that is considered unacceptable for a young woman. Through her own initiative and ambition, without assistance, she finds employment as a governess at Thornfield Hall under Edward Rochester.

During Jane’s first conversation with her employer Rochester at Thornfield Hall, it is clear that Brontë’s portrayal of Rochester’s personality differs greatly from that of Brocklehurst. While Brontë depicts Brocklehurst as a religious hypocrite who shields himself behind the firmness of his beliefs and perception of society and gender, Rochester, by comparison, comes across as a more open-minded individual. However, he is still adamant in his attempt to establish dominance over Jane as her employer and immediately addresses her in such a way as to show the power imbalance between the two:

do you agree with me that I have a right to be a little masterful, abrupt, perhaps exacting, sometimes, on the grounds that I stated, namely, that I am old enough to be your father, and that I have battled through a varied experience with many men of many nations, and roamed over half the globe, while you have lived quietly with one set of people in one house. (Brontë 158)

With this statement Rochester attempts to “justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of... social power” (Tyson 86) by using his various achievements and experiences in life as proof of his superiority as a man. In comparison to Jane, his use of these experiences and endured hardships are justifications for his right to be dominant. Rochester’s demonstration of power is connected to Tyson’s idea that men “can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men.” (96). Jane’s reply to Rochester’s statement reveals the superficiality of men comparing themselves to women like Jane based solely on age and experience; “I don’t think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience” (Brontë 158). Moreover, the protagonist channels her dislike for the underestimation of women’s capabilities through her own palpable frustration. Prior to the

interaction with Rochester, Jane elaborately declares her view on the contemporary behavioral norms which restrain women within patriarchal society when she states that:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 129)

Jane argues through the text that women certainly have the same potential and need for creativity and intellectual development as men. This is, for all intents and purposes, meant to be stated as the exact opposite of what is considered applicable to Victorian *good girls* and household angels. Jane describes thoughts of qualities that are less than desirable in contemporary marriages.

In relation to marriages, the protagonist states that she is against such commitments based on the purpose of solely developing social connections. Jane declares that such relationships are for individuals “acting in conformity to ideas and principles instilled into them” (Brontë 223) and states that she cannot comprehend their underlying reasons for such engagements. Jane instead points out that if she was a man, she “would take...only such a wife as I could love” (223). Her argument for entering into marriage based on mutual affection stands as the counterpoint of contemporary middle-class marital ideals which, according to Murdoch, “still drew upon... kinship, and commercial networks to form attachments that benefitted the family’s interests” (76). This conventional perception of marriages is also shown in the novel by the protagonist’s aunt, Mrs. Reed; she states that her disdain for Jane stems from her late husband’s inability to disown his own sister, Jane’s mother, for marrying beneath her social class (Brontë 277). Jane’s parents’ marriage was most likely founded on mutual emotional attachment, and as a result Mrs. Reed projects her disapproval on to Jane.

In contrast to contemporary notions of marriage, the protagonist’s perception of matrimony is the exact opposite of what is considered desirable in Victorian marriages; Jane is in favor of equality in affection rather than promoting wealth or social status. This becomes clear in the discussion between Jane and Rochester following the revelation of him still being

married to the mad Bertha Mason. Rochester gives evidence to marriages aimed at promoting wealth when he explains his deceitful actions towards Jane by explaining that he, as a young man, faced a future without any significant inheritance from his father because all the assets of the family were appointed to his older brother, Rowland (Brontë 367). As a result of this, Rochester's engagement to Bertha was arranged in order for him to achieve financial security. Rochester states that, due to his prospects for the future, he "must be provided for by a wealthy marriage" (367). Not only does Rochester's statement agree with the marital preference of beneficial interests for the family, in particular financial gains, as described by Murdoch (76), it also proves that Rochester identifies himself with his social status. He can only be himself if he has wealth and wealth is what defines him as Rochester. In relation to Jane's view on loveless marriages, Rochester's reason for marrying Bertha in order to gain affluence and personal interests is madness, which leads to Jane leaving Thornfield Hall (Brontë 386).

According to Gilbert and Gubar, the madness of Bertha Mason is the manifestation of Jane's repressed feelings of anger in connection to her relation with Rochester (360). However, Rochester's mad wife can also be seen as the embodiment of Jane's opinions of loveless marriages based on maintaining affluence and personal interests; the idea of entering a holy bond on the basis of holding on to, or even expanding, social status is madness in itself. Consequently, the death of Bertha Mason (Brontë 518) thus becomes symbolic in terms of allowing the emotionally mutual relationship between Jane and Rochester to prosper. Bertha's suicide and incineration of Thornfield (518) is equal to the death of financially profitable marriages which serves to support the protagonist's own preference of affectionate relationships. Additionally, the burning of Thornfield is symbolic in the sense of it becoming the cleansing fire that eradicates all traces of Rochester's dishonest past and deceitful character.

In contrast to the relationship between Jane and Rochester, the religious aspects of matrimony served as a fundamental part in establishing male dominance over women. Griffin states that, through marriage, women were making both a religious and social promise to submit to their spouse (51). Henry and Walker Bergström also states that "a woman's loyalty to her husband demanded that she remain within the confines of the family home" (143). Griffin further states that the Victorian era was a "deeply religious age, when the education of the governing classes was saturated with religious teaching" (51). This led to various texts of the Bible being used to support the patriarchal hierarchies. For instance, Griffin refers to Genesis 3:16, in which it is stated that "thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule

over thee” (51) as an example of how Christian scripture helped in giving Victorian era marriages a righteous foundation for men to position themselves above women in the domestic sphere.

In relation to the religious justification of men being dominant to women within the institution of holy matrimony, Brontë portrays St. John Rivers as an individual who projects these religious beliefs on to Jane. For a man with St. John’s personality, marriage is “the only union that gives a character of permanent conformity to the destinies and design of human beings” (492). This conformity St. John speaks of connects to the religious views of marriage in the nineteenth century. According to Griffin, religion was the most significant part in justifying the submission of women during the nineteenth century (51) and is shown through Jane’s thoughts after conversing with St. John.

For Jane, marrying St. John is equal to unconditional surrender and submission to the authority of men. Jane further elaborates her fear of being bound within a marriage that seeks to submit her to the patriarchal ideals of a religious society; she states that “as his wife – at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked – forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital – *this* would be unendurable” (Brontë 492). This connects to Griffin’s statement that nineteenth-century “domestic ideology sought to prevent arguments through the total subordination of women” (45). Jane’s idea of such a marriage is equal to a prison in which many women of the nineteenth century are bereft the possibilities to utter opinions or ideas and suppress any expressions for individuality. Jane explains her opinion on this in the text when she states that men, similar to St. John, strive to coerce them into obedience (Brontë 494). Her emphasis on affection over connection is therefore in conflict with contemporary marital conformity.

To sum up, Jane’s conflict with norms of behavior is shown within three significant areas relating to the station of nineteenth-century women similar to her. The similarities between these three areas are all important in terms of how they relate to the protagonist’s struggle with conformity.

First of all, the harsh treatment involving physical abuse and isolation experienced by the hands of her cousin John and benefactress Mrs. Reed at Gateshead Hall connects to the contemporary perspective of angels of the house within the domestic sphere. The conflicts at Gateshead Hall derive from Jane’s refusal to acknowledge the domestic ideals of behavior because they aim to place her in a slave like relation to the rest of the family. Jane’s situation, in relation to her social status compared to the other members, further the sense of patriarchal

severity. Under such unjust circumstances, the necessity for combating conformity becomes a valid and even necessary course of action.

Within the professional/educational sphere Jane experiences a mortifying and demoralizing existence at Lowood where Brocklehurst strives to shape her with tools of fear and shame. The ulterior motive of Brocklehurst is to oppress and form Jane into a productive and loyal machine-like servant who is supposed to obediently follow the rules set for her gender. Moreover, the protagonist's initial meeting with her employer, Mr. Rochester, shows the shallowness of patriarchal conformity as Rochester attempts to categorize Jane as inferior; she is expected to accept Rochester's position as superior based on age and experience. But in contrast, the protagonist's rejection of such submission, derived from superficial claims, shows her defiant approach to behavioral conformity. For many women of the nineteenth century, the mere social position and role of employer similar to a man of Rochester's character would likely have been enough to establish superiority.

Finally, in relation to the marital sphere, the protagonist's view on the idea of matrimony shows similar severity. The proposal by St. John Rivers, who clearly supports the submission of women within marriages, would lead to suppressing Jane's longing for independence and opportunities to express individuality; it is far removed from any kind of equality in relation to companionship. Accepting such rules as the foundation of a relationship is equal to Jane surrendering the very core of her personality to patriarchal conformity, which would lead to her intellectual and emotional demise. On those terms, Jane is nothing more than a possession of her husband, an automaton who sets aside her own needs in favor of her future master and/or husband.

In contrast, Jane's preference within the marriage is equal affection, which was not preferable from a Victorian standpoint. Rochester's marriage to Bertha Mason, as well as the reasons it was built upon is an obstacle that has to, in a literal sense, die and burn before the relationship between him and the protagonist becomes true and honest in terms of affection.

In this essay, I have presented examples of the protagonist's struggle within the Victorian institutions relating to the domestic, marital and educational/professional spheres. The common denominator for these areas is that they are governed by norms pertaining to the behavior of women of the nineteenth century. However, this essay has proven that the protagonist Jane Eyre is not nineteenth-century everywoman content with her position in society; destined to live quietly under the patriarchal rules.

Jane defies and opposes the social codes and behavioral norms which aim to subdue her character; she resents the treatment of physical abuse and isolation received at Gateshead by

confronting her oppressors without restraint. She rejects the patriarchal doctrines of Brocklehurst, who aims to turn her into a compliant machine, at Lowood by acting conformed. She strays from the norms of female dependency by finding employment on her own and she deviates from the contemporary norms of matrimony by arguing in favor of affection rather than gaining wealth and affluence. Instead of complying with the patriarchal rules and accepting a destiny which was common for many women of the nineteenth century, Jane chose to enter a conflict with conformity.

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