

**A tale of a “half fairy, half imp”: the rape of Jane Eyre**

by

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For Kathy Hickok

Thank you for everything. I shall be forever grateful to you.

**Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Power, Patriarchy, and Silence</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Rape in the Red-Room</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 3: The Split of the “half fairy half imp’</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Consequences of Rape</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Fleeing Patriarchy</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>34</b>

## Introduction

In the 1848 December issue of *Quarterly Review*, critic Elizabeth Rigby writes a scathing criticism of Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*. Rigby writes:

.... the author's chief object, however, it is a failure—that, namely, of making a plain, odd woman, destitute of all the conventional features of feminine attraction, interesting in our sight...we feel for her struggles; but, for all that, and setting aside higher considerations, the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman—one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess. (165)

Rigby, then, would be astounded that Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is one of the most celebrated novels today. A success in Brontë's time and now, *Jane Eyre* has aided in revising literary canons and in paving the way for women readers and authors. That Brontë's novel followed a "plain, odd woman" could not be further from the truth. In fact, this "odd woman" has incited many scholars to spend their lives researching and writing about *Jane Eyre*, the very woman that Rigby cited as the one "whom we should not care for as an acquaintance...." Almost a hundred fifty years later, critics are still hypothesizing about *Jane Eyre*, offering new ideas, and proving old ones false.

The primary reason for literary theorists' mass interest in *Jane Eyre*, as Rigby alludes to in her article, is that the protagonist, Jane Eyre, is a "decidedly vulgar-minded woman" or rather, she is not the prescribed feminine angel that

the Victorian society highly prized. Instead, Jane constantly fights for the right for women to exist in society without adhering to the patriarchal structure, an anomaly for a woman in Victorian society. That Rigby would deem Jane “destitute of all the conventional features of feminine attraction” derives purely from Jane’s anger towards the very patriarchal system that has victimized her so often. Readers see her denunciation of the patriarchal structure as they follow Jane from childhood, a childhood where she is orphaned and forced to live with her austere and cold aunt, Mrs. Reed. In Mrs. Reed’s home, Jane is subject to the abuse of her cruel cousin, John Reed, who constantly reminds Jane that she is a dependant and therefore not as “good” as he. Although Jane fights back against John’s accusation, she is no match for his tyrannical patriarchal power over her. Yet, what is important, and what Rigby and other critics found fault with, is that Jane *does* fight back. In an altercation in the beginning of the novel, John strikes Jane with a book. Shouting that she is being treated unjustly, Jane refuses to be categorized as subservient. It is this reaction, this anger, which allows readers to advocate for Jane; she is standing up for the rights of women who, in Victorian society, were seen as worthless. Women who did not fit into the prescribed feminine gender role, women who did not come from the upper class, and women who did not have a prestigious name were cast to the periphery and deemed valueless. Thus, Jane’s fight becomes everlasting; readers both then and now feel her sentiments and believe in her cause: all women deserve to be treated fairly.

Yet, in the novel, Jane is punished for championing women's rights. For fighting back against her cousin, Mrs. Reed locks Jane in the red-room where, to little Jane, it seems that a ghost is haunting her. Finally, Mrs. Reed tires of Jane and her "rebellious" ways and sends her to Lowood Institution, a boarding school where there is little to eat and poor health care. Here, Jane is introduced to education and fights for the right to work in a male dominated system. Again, a patriarchal figure at the school, Mr. Brocklehurst, attempts to beat Jane's supposed rebelliousness into submission; however, Jane challenges his defamation of her character and wins. This win is for women everywhere: it is a symbol of empowerment for the downtrodden woman who was, and still is, cast aside in a male-dominated society.

After completing school, Jane procures a position as a governess with Mr. Edward Rochester of Thornfield Hall. Here, Jane cares for a young girl and eventually falls in love with Rochester, despite his violent patriarchal nature. Jane finds that Rochester is already married to a "mad woman," and Jane subsequently flees. After wandering for some time, Jane comes upon the home of St. John Rivers in Marsh End, where she is sheltered and eventually appointed as head schoolmistress. St. John falls in love with Jane; however, she cannot live up to his expectations and demands, as he is yet another patriarch attempting to dominate her. Coincidentally, Jane finds that St. John and his sisters are her cousins and that she has inherited a great deal of money. After generously dividing the money with her cousins, Jane senses Rochester calling to her, as though he were in danger. Jane goes to him and finds that his "mad"

wife has physically injured Rochester and that she has died. Realizing that Rochester is wounded and therefore dependant upon Jane, the two marry. Thus, we may assume that Jane and Rochester will live together happily ever after, as the final chapter alludes. Although readers may assume she is content in her marriage, Jane is still representative of a woman trapped in the patriarchal structure. Because of her struggles against the structure in which she is constantly trapped, readers following the life of Jane see her as a heroine, championing the rights of the underclass and all women everywhere.

What is so seemingly peculiar about Jane, or at least to the Victorians it seemed so, is her way of fighting the patriarchal system. From the outset, readers are aware that Jane has an internal conscience that guides all that she says and does. She is moral and just. Yet, throughout the novel, she says very little. Many cite her silence as creating an ambiguous character within Jane. Readers must ask themselves why she acts in such a manner; why do her silences say more than her words? A close examination of the red-room scene will provide answers to such questions.

Such a silence is observed when examining this particular section of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—yet it is evident that a traumatic occurrence happens to Jane in the red-room. This scene sets the tone for the rest of the novel because it heavily influences Jane's adult life. Critics have long argued over what the red-room episode represents, or even what happened to Jane in the room. Yet, when examining the red-room scene critically, we can see that it is not a ghost that plagues Jane, but instead her cruel cousin, John Reed. Critics believe that

this red-room episode indicates a rite of passage for young Jane. This rite of passage is a point of realization regarding her situation in the Reed home as well as within Victorian society. Yet, the use of language before, during, and after the red-room episode indicates something far more despondent than a rite of passage: Jane Eyre is raped in the red-room.

Analyzing Jane's actions of defiance, her overall low self-esteem, and her need to flee when confronted with domineering patriarchy, it is evident that the child has been raped. In addition to this, the rape colors Jane's subsequent actions and reactions. The rape also dictates the fate of her rapist. Most importantly, the theme of rape runs throughout the novel and is an important aspect to the novel as a whole. This analysis will examine the red-room episode as well as passages from the rest of the text to prove that Jane Eyre is a victim of rape, which in turn, affects her entire existence. From feminist rape theory, it will become obvious that the rape influences the way Jane acts and reacts to patriarchal tyranny the rest of her (fictional) life.

## Chapter 1: Power, Patriarchy, and Silence

In the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to Jane Eyre, an orphaned child living with her aunt. Immediately, the reader witnesses cruelties perpetrated upon Jane, especially from her cousins. Readers witness Jane's cousin John Reed's patriarchy from the very beginning, which is illustrated in his verbal and physical assaults upon Jane. It is clear that John wants to dominate his "dependant" cousin. Brontë writes,

'What do you want?' I [Jane] asked, with awkward diffidence.

'Say, "What do you want, Master Reed?" was the answer. "I [John] want you to come here;" and seating himself in an arm-chair, he intimated by a gesture that I was to approach and stand before him. (5)

John, angered that Jane refuses to be subservient, strikes Jane for her seemingly insolent behavior. Insisting on being called "master," John is a clear representative of the Victorian patriarch. As John is the heir to both money and property, and by his insistence on being called "master," Brontë has shown her readers the domineering patriarch that the lower class—and women—must obey. John is so adamant that Jane be subservient to him that he not only verbally bullies Jane, but he also physically attacks her. Brontë goes on to write:

He [John] ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder; he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw in him a tyrant, a murderer. I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down my neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent suffering: these sensations for the time predominated over fear, and I received him in frantic sort. I don't very well

know what I did with my hands, but he called me 'Rat! Rat!' and bellowed out aloud. (7)

Jane's fear and her injury are essential to this passage. John is physically pummeling Jane into submission. While he is attacking her, Jane refers to her cousin as a "tyrant" as well as a "murderer." Although only ten, Jane is aware of John's status as a patriarch as well as his vile character. She realizes that John is attempting to "murder" her spirit.

Moreover, John is not the only family member that wishes Jane to be submissive. The first line Mrs. Reed utters to Jane in the text indicates that she, too, believes that Jane's place is to be silent. Mrs. Reed states, "Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent" (3). Disguised as a "motherly" statement, this direction from Mrs. Reed is actually bidding Jane to remain a quiet fixture in the home. Mrs. Reed makes many attempts to silence Jane throughout the novel, likely for two reasons. First, Mrs. Reed is attempting to indoctrinate Jane into her position in a hierarchical structure. Because Jane is poor and has no relations other than the Reeds, she is expected to be silent. Since she has no money and no property, Victorian culture dictates that Jane has no voice. Second, and perhaps most important, however, is that if Jane is silent, she cannot report the injustices inflicted upon her by Reed family. By not allowing Jane to speak, Mrs. Reed can rest assured that Jane will not report anything "improper" about the Reeds, and thus the Reeds can remain prestigious in their society, despite treating Jane as though she were subhuman.

This enforcement of silence upon Jane, however, is unsuccessful for Mrs. Reed. In her silence, Jane begins to think, dream, and even process these injustices the Reeds inflict upon her. Jane's silence actually serves as a solace as well as a source of courage to fight back under the tyranny of the Reeds and therefore Victorian values and patriarchy. This silence, meant to oppress Jane, instead allows her to form a moral and just inner self that will aid her later in life. Although feminists posit that silences represent oppression in fiction, in the case of *Jane Eyre* however, this is false. In her article "Women's Silence as a Ritual of Truth: A Study of Literary Expression in Austen, Brontë, and Woolf," Patricia Laurence writes about the use of silences in *Jane Eyre*. Laurence states:

By preserving their female characters' silence in the text as a space to think, feel, dream, or observe, these authors preserve and develop female insight into the self and society from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Silence is the space in narration where culture and feminine consciousness do sometimes reveal themselves... (166)

Instead of the silence being used as an oppressive tool, Laurence states that Jane uses it as a source of courage in order to fight back. Rather, Jane is feminized in her silence and allowed to develop her consciousness. Janet H. Freeman writes further about silences in her article "Speech and Silence in *Jane Eyre*." Freeman indicates another tool Jane gains by being silent. Freeman states, "While the child Jane is learning to be silent and listen, she is at the same time finding the voice by which to tell her own story, as if the two skills were inseparable, two sides of the same precious coin" (685). Thus, through her

silence comes her voice. In fact, readers see the effects of the silence when Jane finally tells Mrs. Reed how she feels. Brontë writes:

I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again so long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.' (29)

Jane is able to tell her aunt the truth because this silence has given her strength.

This silence, then, gives Jane her voice.

## Chapter 2: Rape in the Red-Room

As stated earlier, John, in hopes that Jane will recognize him as her master, attacks his cousin. Certainly, readers see Jane's courage when she strikes John after he hits her with a book. Mrs. Reed, outraged that her methods of dominance have not worked, becomes furious with Jane's willful ways and forces young Jane to stay the night in the red-room; a room Jane fears because it was the death chamber of her uncle, Mr. Reed.

In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar declare the importance of the red-room episode. They state,

For the little drama enacted on 'that day' which opens *Jane Eyre* is in itself a paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book: Jane's anomalous, orphaned position in society, her enclosure in stultifying roles and houses, and her attempts to escape through flight, starvation, and—in a sense which will be explained—madness. And that Charlotte Brontë quite consciously intended the incident of the red-room to serve as a paradigm for the larger plot of the novel is clear not only from its position in the narrative but also from Jane's own recollection of the experience at crucial moments throughout the book: when she is humiliated by Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood, for instance, and on the night she decides to leave Thornfield. (314)

Gilbert and Gubar affirm the overall importance the episode sets for the tone of the rest of the novel. Certainly, Jane's anger and resiliency can be chalked up to

this scene because, as Gilbert and Gubar write, it symbolizes Jane's lot in society. Further, Brontë likely did position the red-room scene early in the novel to orient the readers to the patriarchy Jane would face both as a child and as an adult. They go on to write, "For the red-room, stately, chilly, swathed in rich crimson, looming out of the scarlet darkness, perfectly represents her vision of the society in which she is trapped, an uneasy and elfin dependent. 'No jail was ever more secure,' she tells us" (340). Although Gilbert and Gubar accurately state the importance of the red-room episode, as well as the overall metaphoric value of the scene in terms of Victorian culture, they also offer their readers their hypothesis about what actually happens to Jane while being imprisoned. These critics posit that Brontë is symbolizing the imprisonment of women by the patriarchal Victorian society. These Victorian sentiments can be further seen in how Jane is treated by the household as well as how she is viewed in society. One of the lady's maids states,

'And you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because Missis kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money, and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them.'

(8)

By these standards, essentially Jane is a throwaway person who can be subject to any treatment the upper class deems necessary or desirable.

In addition to their analysis of Brontë's critique of Victorian culture, Gilbert and Gubar offer further interpretation of the red-room episode. They write, "In

the red-room, however, little Jane chooses (or is chosen by) a third, even more terrifying, alternative: escape through madness” (341). Gilbert and Gubar claim that Jane becomes mad in her prison, and through her madness, she finds an escape. Specifically, Gilbert and Gubar claim that Jane escapes to a place where the patriarchal structure cannot dominate her or her thoughts.

Certainly, if anyone needs an escape, it is young Jane Eyre. Tormented by John Reed, Jane can find no escape. John is described as being “a schoolboy of fourteen years old” and as having “heavy limbs and large extremities” (5). These “large extremities” readers are to imagine, are used to hit Jane when she is not being subservient. Also, readers see phallic symbols in the description of John Reed’s extremities. Jane further states of John Reed,

He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually; every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh in my bones shrank when he came near. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired, because I had no appeal whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions... (5)

Thus, readers are aware of Jane’s terror regarding John. That Jane “shrank when he came near” indicates something far worse than John striking Jane. Although Gilbert and Gubar state that Jane uses madness to escape her situation, readers never witness Jane’s escape. Although she does leave the home of her aunt, Jane still encounters patriarchy. If she did go mad, why does she continue to struggle with the patriarchal system? Why did she not end up as Rochester’s first wife Bertha Mason did, imprisoned and insane? Instead, it is

evident throughout the novel that Jane does not find an escape. Something stays with the young woman and both colors her perception as well as influences her actions. So, if it is not madness, what is it? A closer examination of the text reveals the demons that haunt Jane. She is not merely imprisoned, but instead, imprisoned and raped. The hypothesis of rape supports the idea of Jane's abhorrence to patriarchy, her fear of being dominated, and undoubtedly her need to flee when confronted with domineering men.

Readers are first introduced to Jane's rape as she is being punished for fighting back against John's offences. Upon being sentenced to the red-room, Jane fights and pleads, likely because she knows the fate that awaits her.

Brontë writes of her punishment:

I [Jane] resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me. The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather out of myself, as the French would say: I was conscious that a moment's mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths. (7)

In this quotation, Jane is characterized as a "rebel slave." Not wanting to go into the red-room, she fights back as she has never done before. The reader wonders what terrible fate could accompany her in the red-room. What "strange penalty" awaits her? Why fight back so hard? Why, the reader wonders, is Jane

“a trifle out of herself” when being forced to go into the red-room? Brontë goes on to write,

'Hold her arms, Miss Abbot: she's like a mad cat.'

'For shame! for shame!' cried the lady's-maid. 'What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress's son! Your young master.'

'Master! How is he my [Jane's] master? Am I a servant?'

'No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down, and think over your wickedness.'

'If you don't sit still, you must be tied down,' said Bessie. 'Miss Abbot, lend me your garters; she would break mine directly.'

Miss Abbot turned to divest a stout leg of the necessary ligature. This preparation for bonds, and the additional ignominy it inferred, took a little of the excitement out of me.

'Don't take them off,' I [Jane] cried; 'I will not stir.' (7)

Here, it is clear that bondage is happening and has most likely happened before. By Jane fighting back and calling her punishment a “strange penalty,” it is evident that she is aware of what awaits her. As panicked as Jane is, she is aware that she is being tied down for a reason. Most notably, however, the lady's maid tells Jane that she is “less than a servant” and does nothing “for her keep;” thus, Jane owes something to her “master,” her cousin John. In fact, everyone, from John to the house servants, informs Jane of her shameful status in the house. The lady's maid states, “You ought to be aware, Miss, that you are under obligations

to Mrs. Reed: she keeps you: if she were to turn you off, you would have to go to the poor-house.” (8). Readers know that Jane is a poor orphan, considered a “dependant” and because of this, the only thing Jane can offer up is her body. Jane’s inability to “pay for her keep” results in John taking her sexuality.

Because John, as well as the others in the home, perceive him to be Jane’s master, it would be within his realm that he would want to assert his powers through rape. Further, because Jane characterizes herself as a “rebel slave,” John likely sees himself as a slave master. In her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* Susan Brownmiller writes, “But rapists may also operate within an emotional setting or within a dependent relationship that provides a hierarchical, authoritarian structure of its own that weakens a victim’s resistance, distorts her perspective and confounds her will” (256). As a result, John, who feels that he is an authoritarian, or rather, *the* authoritarian, needs to assert his assumed patriarchal power over his seemingly disobedient slave, Jane Eyre. Rape, in his mind, would teach her the hierarchical order of the house. Brontë writes of John’s insistence on being seen as master when she writes John as saying,

‘You have no business to take our books; you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do and wear clothes at our mama’s expense. Now, I’ll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the

mirror and the windows.’ (6)

Clearly, John feels it mandatory that Jane know she belongs to him. By taking her sexuality, John would seemingly “own” Jane. Moreover, that he wanted Jane to stand where no one could see her further indicates that he is attempting to violate her. Robin Morgan in her article “Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape” writes of rape and the cultural meaning of the act. She states, “...rape is the perfected act of male sexuality in a patriarchal culture—it is the ultimate metaphor for domination, violence, subjugation, and possession” (134). Imperative to John was to dominate his cousin. To show Jane that he not only possesses her, but also dominates her, he rapes her.

Further supporting this hypothesis are the observations Jane gives upon entering the red-room. Brontë writes,

The red-room was a square chamber, very seldom slept in, I might say never....A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep red damask, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre; [...] Scarcely less prominent was an ample cushioned easy-chair near the head of the bed, also white, with a footstool before it; and looking, as I thought, like a pale throne. (8-9)

The description of the red-room is strikingly male. The bed, described as having “massive pillars of mahogany” and as being of large size, illustrates the phallic image in the room. In addition, the “throne” image represents patriarchal command. Further sexual undertones seen in this passage is the juxtaposition of red, a clear indicator for sexuality, especially for a young girl who may bleed

during intercourse, and white, meaning purity and innocence. The overall description of the room foreshadows the sexual activity that awaits Jane there.

After thrown into the red-room, Jane realizes that the house servants have locked her in and that she cannot escape. Upon realizing that she is locked in, Jane examines herself in the mirror. Brontë writes,

Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp...

(9)

This juxtaposition of a “half fairy” and “half imp” is crucial. Describing herself as “half fairy,” or half childlike and innocent, and “half imp,” a gremlin, indicates that something has changed her childlike innocence. When looking in the mirror, Jane sees a dissonance between her former and current self. Where she was once an innocent child, she now sees a “strange figure gazing” at her. This person, different from herself, is full of “gloom” and “fear.” It is evident that an event has caused this dissonance between her two selves. She is now a changed person. Brontë goes on to write,

Superstition was with me [Jane] at that moment; but it was not yet her hour for complete victory: my blood was still warm; the mood of the revolted slave was still bracing me with its bitter vigour; I had to stem a rapid rush of

retrospective thought before I quailed to the dismal present. (9)

The blood that is “still warm” indicates that perhaps her hymen has broken, and not, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, that she maybe starting menstruation. Further, this “vigour” and “revolted slave” seems to take over Jane in light of her newly lost childhood so that she does not shrink at the situation. This new self serves to protect her child self.

In her book, Brownmiller writes further about the mindset of rape victims. She writes, “They [rapists] operate within an institutionalized setting that works to their advantage and in which a victim has little chance to redress her grievance. Rape in slavery and rape in wartime are two such examples” (256). Readers see that Jane, categorized as a rebel slave, does not have time to examine her rape. Brontë writes of Jane’s attempt at not crying or examining what had happened to her: “This idea, consolatory in theory, I [Jane] felt would be terrible if realised: with all my might I endeavoured to stifle it--I endeavoured to be firm” (11-12). Jane resolves to protect herself by hiding the rape and splitting herself in two in a determined attempt to keep her spirit.

While Jane is in the locked red-room, Brontë writes of Jane’s observations regarding John Reed. Brontë writes, “John no one thwarted, much less punished; though he twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest plants in the conservatory....” (10). This quotation is interestingly placed within the text as Jane is in the red-room. It is Jane recalling her “master” and all of his misdeeds. Yet, what is most important is the fact that

Reed is said to have “violent tyrannies” and said to have “twisted the necks of the pigeons” and “stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit and broke the buds off the choicest plants.” Thus, the reader can see that Reed kills the innocent and the fruit he strips and the buds he crushes are those of Jane Eyre. In her book *Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women’s Poetry*, Kathleen Hickok writes of floral imagery and its meanings. She states,

Omnipresent floral imagery frequently alludes to virginity; the nineteenth-century preoccupation with chastity in women can be discerned also in the numerous references (in both poetry and prose) to feminine “modesty,” “virtue,” “maidenliness,” etc., and the abhorrence of the “bold,” “forward,” “or shameless” woman. (46)

Thus, if the flower buds were crushed and the fruit stripped from the vine, so was Jane Eyre’s virginity.

Moreover, realizing she is powerless, Jane scrambles for a way to have some sort of control over her fate. Jane thinks,

'Unjust!- unjust!' said my reason, forced by the agonising stimulus into precocious though transitory power: and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression- as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die. (10)

The only power Jane sees that she has is in committing suicide. In realizing that John had power over her physically, Jane saw no other way out. The only thing she had power over was her own death. Yet, ultimately, Jane does not kill

herself, as she feels she is unfit to die because she was raped. She sees herself as no longer innocent. Certainly, after being raped, Jane would have realized that she was, according to Victorian culture, no longer a child, but instead a woman who is impure. In fact, young Jane alludes to the idea that she is impure. She states, "All said I was wicked, and perhaps I might be so; what thought had I been but just conceiving of starving myself to death? That certainly was a crime: and was I fit to die?" (11). Realizing that according to the Anglican church's doctrine, an "impure" woman, or a woman who has had premarital sex, voluntarily or not, is not fit to die, Jane decides not to kill herself; however the idea of suicide does come back to her again.

Further evidence that Jane is raped can be seen while she is in the red-room and something "suffocates" her. During this scene, the actual rape occurs. Although young Jane believes that it is some sort of ghost, and then later reflects that it was merely a shadow from a lantern, it is evident that something far more violent occurs. Brontë writes,

My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort. Steps came running along the outer passage; the key turned, Bessie and Abbot entered [...]

'Take me out! Let me go into the nursery!' was my cry. (12)

As can be seen by Jane's feelings of oppression, suffocation, and her endurance being broken down, something far more serious has happened than seeing a

shadow. The feelings described could easily be those of a rape victim. Jane goes on to plead with her aunt to let her out of the red-room. Jane states, “O aunt! have pity! Forgive me! I cannot endure it- let me be punished some other way! I shall be killed if-” (12). Jane’s overall feeling of impenetrable doom is further evidence of rape. Her desire to be punished “some other way” indicates that her aunt knew of the rape, and likely supported John Reed’s act, as Mrs. Reed is the one who sent Jane to the red-room. Yet, Mrs. Reed does not allow Jane out of the room. Jane becomes unconscious because of the trauma.

In her article “Acute Panic Reactions Among Rape Victims: Implications For Prevention Of Post-Rape Psychopathology,” Dr. Heidi Resnick writes about common feelings women have during and after rape. She writes that many women feel shortness of breath, dizziness, rapid heart rate, choking, and hot flashes (1-3). Thus, the feelings Jane had could easily be symptoms of rape. Her descriptions of physical responses, that her “heart beat thick,” and her “head grew hot” can easily be seen as physical symptoms of rape. That Jane thought she would be killed if the punishment continued shows readers the absolute horror of the punishment, versus a childhood fear of a ghost.

Moreover, Susan Brownmiller writes further about the reaction some women have to rape. She writes, “It is no wonder, then, that most women confronted by physical aggression fall apart at the seams and suffer a paralysis of will” (402). Thus, by Jane going into unconsciousness, the reader can see that the “physical aggression” was too much for Jane to handle.

### Chapter 3: The Split of the “Half Fairy, Half Imp’

After fainting into unconsciousness, Jane is brought into the nursery to rest. An apothecary is brought in to examine her. Although it is stated that an actual doctor was almost never brought in to examine the “servants,” further motivation for Mrs. Reed to not call an actual doctor would be that she did not want anyone, especially a doctor who holds more status in Victorian society, to recognize that Jane was raped.

Jane continues to have symptoms of something violent happening to her the night before. Brontë writes,

The next thing I remember is, waking up with a feeling as if I had had a frightful nightmare, and seeing before me a terrible red glare, crossed with thick black bars. I heard voices, too, speaking with a hollow sound, and as if muffled by a rush of wind or water: agitation, uncertainty, and an all-predominating sense of terror confused my faculties. (13)

Brontë goes on to write,

No severe or prolonged bodily illness followed this incident of the red-room: it only gave my nerves a shock of which I feel the reverberation to this day. Yes, Mrs. Reed, to you I owe some fearful pangs of mental suffering, but I ought to forgive you, for you knew not what you did: while rending my heart-strings, you thought you were only uprooting my bad propensities. (14)

Although no “bodily illness” stays with Jane, she certainly never forgets the incident and continues to suffer from it emotionally. This emotional disturbance illustrates that something terribly violent happened in the red-room. In fact, Jane notices the change herself when looking at a children’s book she used to love.

She states,

Yet, when this cherished volume was now placed in my hand—when I turned over its leaves, and sought in its marvelous pictures the charm I had, till now, never failed to find—all was eerie and dreary; the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps, Gulliver a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions. I closed the book, which I dared no longer peruse, and put it on the table, beside the untasted tart. (15)

Where Jane used to love this children’s book, she now realizes she has changed. She is no longer the innocent fairy; she is now, in her mind, the fearful imp. The rape has taken away Jane’s childhood, adventure, and youthful disposition and replaced it with the frightful realities of women’s place in the patriarchal structure of Victorian society.

Further, Jane continues to suffer from paranoia, especially when she is undressing. Brontë writes,

I then sat with my doll on my knee till the fire got low, glancing round occasionally to make sure that nothing worse than myself haunted the shadowy room; and when the embers sank to a dull red, I undressed hastily, tugging at knots and strings as I best might, and sought shelter

from cold and darkness in my crib. (22)

Jane, who keeps her doll out of comfort, not out of childish adoration, waits until it is dark so that no one can see her get undressed. Even then, she hurries to take her clothing off so that she spends as little time as possible being exposed.

Again, this is a clear indication that Jane had been violated.

Resnick writes further about common symptoms of women who have been raped. She states,

Data from longitudinal studies of recent rape victims indicate that degree of initial psychological distress, including fear and anxiety and intrusive symptoms are significant predictors of longer term psychological distress and anxiety as well as posttraumatic stress disorder. These studies assessed early symptom distress within the first few weeks post-rape and used these measures to predict clinically significant psychological distress .... (*NCP Clinical Quarterly* 7(3): Summer 1997)

Thus, the emotional reactions Jane has can easily be classified as reactions to rape. This chronic distress stays with Jane throughout the novel; however, the emotional difficulties Jane experiences are more prevalent after being locked in the red-room. Jane, after escaping from the red-room, states: "I felt physically weak and broken down: but my worse ailment was an unutterable wretchedness of mind: a wretchedness which kept drawing from me silent tears; no sooner had I wiped one salt drop from my cheek than another followed" (14). Here, the reader is able to see that Jane was deeply affected by the happenings in the red-room. Her physicality of being "weak and broken down" as well as her

“wretchedness of mind” supports that she was raped. After the incident, the apothecary recommends that Jane be sent to school. Readers can infer that although the apothecary is not a “real” doctor, he still sees that something violent has happened to Jane. After examining her, he states, “The child ought to have change of air and scene,’ he added, speaking to himself; ‘nerves not in a good state” (19). Although we cannot be sure that the apothecary knew Jane was raped, we can be sure that he knew something horrible had befallen her, enough for her nerves to be so rattled. Mrs. Reed, realizing that it would be far better to have Jane out of her home, agrees, and sends Jane off to a school for orphaned children.

## Chapter 4: Consequences of Rape

Although Jane is sent away from the Reed home, the act of rape continues to haunt Jane throughout her life. The effects of the rape are depicted in her actions and her relationships. After her stay in Lowood Institution, Jane obtains a governess position for the mysterious Edward Rochester. Rochester, from when he first meets Jane, is adamant about dominating her. Readers do not trust him as it is evident he has many secrets. Rochester is often away, and has, readers suppose, an illegitimate child, and he plays tricks on Jane. In his book *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction*, John Sutherland writes of Rochester's less than respectable character. Sutherland states that there is a clear connection between the character of Rochester and that of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," a character in a fable about a "...bad man who locked his superfluous wives in the attic" (68). Sutherland states,

The echoes of 'Bluebeard' in *Jane Eyre* are obvious. Rochester is a swarthy, middle-aged, rich country gentleman, with a wife locked up in a secret chamber in his house. He wants another wife—like Bluebeard, he is a man of voracious sexual appetite. (69)

Sutherland comments further about Rochester's character: during an elaborate trick he plays on his guests as well as on Jane, Rochester dresses up as a gypsy and offers to read palms. In doing this, Rochester is privy to all the secrets of his guests. Yet, during this time, Richard Mason, a supposed old friend of Rochester's, arrives. Readers soon find out that Mason is the brother of Bertha, Rochester's first and supposedly "mad" wife, whom Rochester has locked in the

attic. Sutherland states that the arrival of Mason thwarts Rochester's chance of marrying the well-to-do woman, Blanche Ingram. Sutherland states,

His hopes with Blanche dashed, Rochester still longed for a wife. Another marriage in high life, such as the Rochester-Ingram affair, would attract huge publicity. That option was now too dangerous. Having packed Richard Mason back to the other side of the globe, Rochester put his mind to a partner whom he might marry without anyone knowing. He wanted nothing to get into newspapers which might subsequently find their way to the West Indies. Up to this point, Rochester must have thought of Jane Eyre as a potential future mistress. Now, with Blanche Ingram out of play, she was to be promoted. (79)

Sutherland holds that Rochester does not love Jane; rather he needs a wife, or at least a woman who will perform "wifely" duties. His plan to marry the rich Miss Ingram fails, and thus Jane is the new possession Rochester must have.

Despite Rochester's bad character, Jane begins to fall in love with the patriarch. In realizing she is in love with Mr. Rochester, she begins to think herself unworthy. Her extreme low self-esteem and self-defeating thoughts ring throughout the text. Brontë writes,

*'You,'* I [Jane] said, 'a favourite with Mr. Rochester? *You* gifted with the power of pleasing him? *You* of importance to him in any way? Go! your folly sickens me. And you have derived pleasure from occasional tokens of preference--equivocal tokens shown by a gentleman of family and a man of the world to a dependant and a novice. How dared you? Poor stupid

dupe!- Could not even self-interest make you wiser? [...] Cover your face and be ashamed! He said something in praise of your eyes, did he? Blind puppy! Open their bleared lids and look on your own accursed senselessness! (140)

Jane finds herself disgusting and shameful for having feelings of love for a man because she sees herself as ruined from the rape. She instantly feels she is unworthy of such emotions. Referring to herself as stupid, blind, and senseless, Jane illustrates self-defeating thoughts, another indication that she was raped.

Jane goes on to feel as though there would be no chance of being loved by Rochester. Brontë writes Jane as saying, "He is not of your [Jane's] order: keep to your caste, and be too self-respecting to lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such a gift is not wanted and would be despised" (142). Her low opinion of herself dilutes the situation and Jane becomes blind to Rochester's love for her. When he finally declares his emotions, Jane does not believe him. Rochester must convince Jane that he loves her.

Furthermore, Jane refuses to accept any compliment regarding her beauty. She sees herself as a plain woman who possesses no fine qualities. Brontë writes,

'No, no, sir! think of other subjects, and speak of other things, and in another strain. Don't address me [Jane] as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess.'

'You are a beauty in my [Rochester's] eyes, and a beauty just after the desire of my heart,- delicate and aerial.'

'Puny and insignificant, you mean. You are dreaming, sir,- or you are sneering. (228)

Again, it is evident that Jane's self-defeating opinion of herself prohibits her relationship with Rochester. Many times throughout the book, Jane doubts that he loves her. At one point, she speculates that although he loves her now, he will soon turn cold to her.

According to Dr. Sue Orsillo, author of "Sexual Assault against Females: A National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet," poor self-esteem is common among rape victims. She writes,

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is a common reaction following sexual assault. Symptoms of MDD can include a depressed mood, an inability to enjoy things, ...and decreased self-esteem. Research suggests that almost 1/3 of all rape victims have at least one period of MDD during their lives. And for many of these women, the depression can last for a long period of time. Thoughts about suicide are also common. Studies estimate that 1/3 of women who are raped contemplate suicide, and 17% of rape victims actually attempt suicide. (1)

These symptoms in Jane are evident throughout the novel. She contemplates suicide, has difficulty enjoying aspects of life, for instance the love of Rochester, and has a very low self worth.

In addition to Jane's emotional difficulty, the fate of Jane's rapist is very telling in the novel. After being settled into Rochester's home, Jane learns of John Reed's death. Brontë writes,

'Mr. John died yesterday was a week, at his chambers in London.'

'Mr. John?'

'Yes.'

'And how does his mother bear it?'

'Why, you see, Miss Eyre, it is not a common mishap: his life has been very wild: these last three years he gave himself up to strange ways, and his death was shocking.'

'I heard from Bessie he was not doing well.'

'Doing well! He could not do worse: he ruined his health and his estate amongst the worst men and the worst women. He got into debt and into jail: his mother helped him out twice, but as soon as he was free he returned to his old companions and habits....so he went back again, and the next news was that he was dead. How he died, God knows! - they say he killed himself. (194-195)

After learning of John's suicide, Jane does not project any sort of sympathy for him. She shows no sign of emotion regarding him, only for her aunt. Her rapist finally dead, Jane "was silent." Again, her silence in this instance says more than words.

Moreover, John's suicide is further evidence of his having raped Jane. His guilt for having raped and terrorized Jane can easily be seen in his unhealthy and

illicit lifestyle. His associating with the “worst men and worst women” constitutes self-punishment for John’s guilt. He, feeling terrible for what he had done to an innocent girl, shared company with people that matched him regarding morals and ethics.

Further, for the first time since she was sent away, Jane goes back to her aunt’s home. This indicates that she is able to go home because John Reed is dead and able to confront her aunt about the injustices Jane was forced to endure. Upon seeing her Aunt Reed, Jane states, “I felt pain, and then I felt ire; and then I felt a determination to subdue her—to be her mistress in spite both of her nature and her will. My tears had risen, just as in childhood: I ordered them back to their source” (203). Jane’s anger at her aunt, as well as her determination not to show any emotions, illustrates that Jane is still affected by the incident in the red-room.

Moreover, while visiting her dying aunt, Jane finds a possible cause of why Mrs. Reed allowed Jane to be raped. Mrs. Reed tells Jane how she came to live at the Reed home and how Jane was a favorite with her uncle, Mr. Reed. Mrs. Reed states:

He [Mr. Reed] would send for the baby; though I entreated him rather to put it out to nurse and pay for its maintenance. I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it—a sickly, whining pining thing! It would wail in its cradle all night long—not screaming heartily like any other child, but whimpering and moaning. Reed pitied it; and he used to nurse it and notice it as if it had been his own: more, indeed, than he ever noticed his own at that age....In

his last illness, he had it brought continually to his bedside; and but an hour before he died, he bound me by vow to keep the creature. I would as soon have been charged with a pauper brat out of a of a workhouse: but he was weak, naturally weak. (204)

Mrs. Reed's resentment of Jane may have motivated her to allow her son to violate Jane. Mrs. Reed, angered that her husband would pay attention to a "pauper brat" instead of his own children, takes her anger out on Jane. Jane realizes that her aunt should be pitied for her selfish ways, and thus she forgives her aunt, however readers are never told that she forgives John Reed.

## Chapter 5: Fleeing Patriarchy

Jane's overwhelming fear of patriarchy and her need to flee the situation at Thornfield Hall illustrate that she was raped in the red-room when she was ten. Her overall fear at Rochester's passion indicates her uneasiness with love as well as with anger. Rochester's violence frightens Jane so much that she runs away from him. Rochester states:

'Jane, I am not a gentle-tempered man—you forget that: I am not long-enduring; I am not cool and dispassionate. Out of pity to me and yourself, put your fingers on my pulse, feel how it throbs, and—beware!'

He bared his wrist, and offered it to me: the blood was forsaking his cheek and lips, they were growing livid; I was distressed on all hands. To agitate him thus deeply, by a resistance he so abhorred, was cruel: to yield was out of the question. I did what human beings do instinctively when they are driven to utter extremity--looked for aid to one higher than man: the words 'God help me!' burst involuntarily from my lips. (268)

Jane's fear of Rochester is an important aspect in understanding her reactions and her relationships. Immediately, Jane fears for her safety and she pleads for God to help her. She is aware that Rochester can both physically and emotionally harm her, and from his menacing statements, he intends to do her harm if she will not submit. Rochester's desire to control Jane frightens her as much as his threats of physical abuse. Realizing that Rochester's patriarchy is no different from John Reed's, Jane asks for God's help in order to protect her. It does not matter that this is the man she loves, nor does it matter that she knows

he loves her. Her reaction is fear at the prospect of being dominated or possibly even raped again.

Moreover, Jane's need to flee the scene is telling of her emotional state. Upon realizing her intense love for Rochester and his intense love for her, Jane promptly decides she must leave. Jane thinks,

I was experiencing an ordeal: a hand of fiery iron grasped my vitals.

Terrible moment: full of struggle, blackness, burning! Not a human being that ever lived could wish to be loved better than I was loved; and him who thus loved me I absolutely worshipped: and I must renounce love and idol.

One drear word comprised my intolerable duty- 'Depart!' (278-279)

The emotion is far too much for Jane to handle. When confronted with such extreme emotions, Jane feels she must flee. She realizes that although she desires Rochester's love, she does not desire Rochester's control and his violence that goes along with his love.

Rochester continues to be violent with Jane when he realizes that she is going to leave him. Analyzing Jane's reaction to Rochester's emotions is imperative when examining her rape. Brontë writes,

His [Rochester] fury was wrought to the highest: he must yield to it for a moment, whatever followed; he crossed the floor and seized my arm and grasped my waist. He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance: physically, I felt, at the moment, powerless as stubble exposed to the draught and glow of a furnace: mentally, I still possessed my soul, and with it the certainty of ultimate safety. The soul, fortunately, has an

interpreter--often an unconscious, but still a truthful interpreter--in the eye. My eye rose to his; and while I looked in his fierce face I gave an involuntary sigh; his gripe was painful, and my overtaxed strength almost exhausted. (280)

Once again, it can be seen that Jane breaks off into two selves in order to protect herself. Physically, she feels powerless, yet she tells us that her unconscious self takes over, and then the feeling of “ultimate safety” ensues. Jane develops this coping mechanism to ensure that she is able to function when confronted with situations that frighten her. She is sure to remind herself that no matter what, no one will own her soul.

In addition to the overt violence Rochester inflicts upon Jane, he also is tempted to rape her. Realizing that he is far stronger than she is and that he has far more power physically, economically, and socially, he threatens her. Brontë writes,

'Never,' said he, as he ground his teeth, 'never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable. A mere reed she feels in my hand!' (And he shook me with the force of his hold.) 'I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her? Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage- with a stern triumph. Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it- the savage, beautiful creature! If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose. Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to

heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place.  
 And it is you, spirit- with will and energy, and virtue and purity- that I want:  
 not alone your brittle frame. Of yourself you could come with soft flight  
 and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will, you will  
 elude the grasp like an essence- you will vanish ere I inhale your  
 fragrance. Oh! come, Jane, come!' (280-281)

Clearly, Rochester is threatening violence. His desire to crush Jane as if she were a “mere reed” shows his forcefulness as well as his confidence in making her submit. Rochester even considers that his violence could be the death of Jane. Thus, with his threats, it is clear that he is attempting to conquer her. His wish to own her “spirit-with will and energy, and virtue and purity” shows that he is attempting to force Jane into something. Furthermore, the last line, “Oh come Jane, come,” clearly shows Rochester attempting to rape Jane. Inhaling her fragrance and grasping her around her waist, he attempts to force Jane to have sex with him. Yet, Jane, realizing Rochester wants to rape her, flees.

After leaving Rochester, Jane finds a small cottage where she seeks shelter. There, she meets St. John Rivers. The two work together and eventually he asks her to marry him. St. John writes,

'Well- well. To the main point- the departure with me [Rivers] from England, the co-operation with me in my future labours-you do not object. I want a wife: the sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death.'

I shuddered as he spoke: I felt his influence in my marrow- his hold on my

limbs.

'Seek one elsewhere than in me, St. John: seek one fitted to you.' (359)

Jane shudders because of Rivers' patriarchy. That Rivers would want a wife whom he can "influence efficiently" and "retain absolutely till death" frightens Jane. Although he is not threatening violence, he is threatening absolute ownership over her body and soul. Rivers states further,

'It is what I want,' he said, speaking to himself; 'it is just what I want. And there are obstacles in the way: they must be hewn down. Jane, you would not repent marrying me--be certain of that; we must be married. I repeat it: there is no other way; and undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes.' (361)

Here, it is evident that Rivers is attempting to control every aspect of Jane. Like John Reed and Edward Rochester, St. John Rivers is enforcing his patriarchal hold upon Jane. It is clear that Rivers wants to own Jane in every way: mentally, emotionally, bodily, and spiritually. Rivers, stating that love would likely come later, frightens Jane primarily because if he does not love her, she would only be servicing him as a work slave as well as a sex slave. After shuddering at his attempt, Jane promptly turns him down, refusing once again to be dominated in that way. Although Rivers' patriarchy is not as violent as John Reed's or Edward Rochester's, it still illustrates total dominance over Jane.

After turning Rivers down, Jane feels Rochester beckoning to her and thus flees March End at this point. Jane finds that he has been burned in a fire and is blind. Thus, she decides to stay with him because of his weakness and inability

now to force his patriarchal will upon her. Just as she can go back to Gateshead because John Reed is dead, she can stay with Rochester because he can no longer force himself upon her. Brontë writes,

'I [Jane] told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress.'

'And you will stay with me?'

'Certainly- unless you object. I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion- to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master; you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live.' (385)

From this quote, the readers learn that Jane will go back to Rochester, primarily because she is now independent, and he needs her. By independent, Jane can now do as she wishes and not depend on Rochester for monetary goods. The fact that she loves him is secondary. Rochester will not be able to force Jane to submit to him because he needs her far too much and because he is disabled. Her need to be Rochester's caretaker illustrates Jane's desire for control of her own life. By essentially being Rochester's eyes, Jane no longer has to do or see what Rochester's wants. Rather, she is now in a situation that allows her to be an individual and no longer a victim in the patriarchal structure.

## Conclusion

Thus, throughout *Jane Eyre*, the theme of rape is the crux of the novel. The red-room scene is neither merely a rite of passage nor even a realization regarding Victorian culture. Rather, it is a huge loss of innocence for Jane. From noting the overt sexual imagery in the red-room, Jane's recollection of suffocation, and her overall fear of domination, it is evident that John rapes her. Furthermore, the rape influences Jane throughout the rest of the novel and dictates what she does. Therefore, the novel follows the story of a young woman who attempts to recover from a rape that occurred when she was a child. Circumstances force Jane to deal with that rape and other attempts of rape from male patriarchs during her young adulthood. The rape also explains why Jane has an overall low self-esteem, why she makes the decisions she does, and why she stays with Rochester at the end of the novel. She feels that because Rochester needs her, he would be unable to dominate her into submission. In addition, her splitting into two selves serves to protect her from being totally overwhelmed by instances of violent patriarchy. When her innocent side was unable to handle the situation, her strong-willed side took over and allowed her to live. Her survival of the rape and later attempts of rape show Jane's spirit, vivacity, and overall determination to succeed in a world of patriarchy.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has been a cornerstone for women authors and readers. It has single-handedly changed the way women's fiction is written, read, and interpreted. In her book *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Nina Baym writes:

One might claim that a seriously compromised version of *Jane Eyre*, a plot now called the gothic romance that still flourishes widely, was in fact instrumental in destroying women's fiction by undercutting some of its basic premises. Briefly put, Jane's goal in the Brontë novel is dominance while the goal of all the American heroines is independence—not at all the same thing. In the gothic romance the goal is to be a powerful male's only dependant—something different from what Charlotte Brontë was arguing, and different again from the thrust of woman's fiction" (30).

Although Baym means this statement in a scathing tone, citing Brontë as "undercutting" women's fiction, the truth is that Brontë did change women's fiction, but in a positive way. *Jane Eyre*, because of her anger, ire, and "dominance," encouraged women to take a stand against patriarchy. The story of *Jane Eyre* becomes a mantra for women victims everywhere, to overcome the subjugation of patriarchy.

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