
**THE DEPICTION OF THE SOCIAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE
NOVEL *JANE EYRE******Evanthia Saridaki**

University of Thessaly.

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*Corresponding Author: Evanthia Saridaki

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University of Thessaly.

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.8409>**ABSTRACT**

The novel 'Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Brontë is focusing on the intersection of gender, social class and the pursuit of female autonomy in Victorian England. The present paper investigates how Charlotte Brontë deconstructs the Victorian 'Angel in the House' archetype by presenting a protagonist, Jane Eyre, who navigates the intersections of gender, class and colonial power to achieve a status of radical autonomy. Through the symbolic Jane's refusal of economic servitude, Brontë argues that a woman's status is not a biological destiny but a social construct that can be dismantled through intellectual and moral agency. By the novel's end, Jane achieves a status of true equality not through marriage alone, but through economic independence and self-respect. The present study demonstrates *Jane Eyre* as a radical text that envisioned a world where a woman's status is defined by her own agency rather than social convention.

KEYWORDS: women status, social conventions, female autonomy, Victorian era**INTRODUCTION**

In Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, the status of women is depicted through a sharp contrast between oppressive Victorian societal norms and the protagonist's revolutionary pursuit of individual autonomy and equality. In the Victorian era, women were largely defined by their domestic roles and economic dependency on men. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) challenges these standards by presenting a protagonist who refuses to be a "passive, inferior, domestic-being". Through Jane's journey, Brontë explores the limited status of women while asserting their inherent equality and need for independence. For women without wealth, like Jane, the status of a governess was particularly precarious—they were socially superior to servants but economically dependent and often marginalized by

their employers. Brontë uses characters like Blanche Ingram to represent the "upper-class ideal woman" whose value is tied to beauty and social standing, contrasting her with Jane's intellectual and moral depth.

1. THE VICTORIAN GENDER PARADIGM

The mid-nineteenth century in Britain was a period of profound social anxiety, characterized by what historians often call "The Woman Question." As the Industrial Revolution shifted the economic landscape, the rigid boundaries of the "separate spheres" doctrine became a defining feature of Victorian life. Men were assigned to the public world of commerce and politics, while women were relegated to the private domestic sphere, idealized as the "Angel in the House." Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) arrived as a radical disruption to this status quo. Through the eyes of a "plain, obscure" protagonist, Brontë deconstructs the legal, economic, and moral status of women. The novel argues that a woman's status is not a biological destiny but a precarious social construct that can be challenged through intellectual integrity and economic independence.

Jane's journey, from the marginalized orphan at Gateshead to the independent mistress of Ferndean, serves as a roadmap for female emancipation. Brontë does not merely depict the status of women as it *was*; she critiques the institutional forces (education, religion, and marriage) that kept women in a state of perpetual "legal infancy" (Poovey, 1988). By examining Jane's refusal to submit to the various patriarchal figures in her life, we can see how the novel functions as a proto-feminist manifesto.

2. THE LIMINAL STATUS OF THE GOVERNESS

To understand the status of women in the novel, one must first analyze the unique and painful position of the governess. In the 1840s, the governess was a figure of intense social contradiction. She was a "lady" by education and birth, yet a "servant" by economic necessity. As Mary Poovey (1988) notes in *Uneven Developments*, the governess occupied a "liminal space" that threatened the Victorian class structure.

When Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall, she is acutely aware of her invisible status. She is superior to the housemaids but socially invisible to the guests of Mr. Rochester. This is most vividly depicted during the party at Thornfield, where Jane is forced to sit in the corner like a piece of furniture while the aristocratic Blanche Ingram ridicules the very idea of governesses. Blanche's status is rooted in her "ornamental" value—her beauty, her singing,

and her potential to bring a dowry to a marriage. Jane, conversely, has no status other than her labor.

Brontë uses the governess role to highlight the economic vulnerability of women. Without a male protector or an inheritance, a Victorian woman had almost no path to survival that did not involve the loss of status. Jane's insistence on "earning her bread" is a radical claim to dignity in a society that viewed working women with pity or contempt.

3. EDUCATION AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SUBSERVIENCE

The status of women was also maintained through a specific type of "feminine" education designed to produce submissive wives. At Lowood Institution, Mr. Brocklehurst attempts to strip Jane and her peers of their individuality under the guise of Christian humility. He famously orders the girls' hair to be cut, aiming to "mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh" (Brontë, 1847).

However, Jane utilizes education as a tool for social mobility. By excelling in her studies and eventually becoming a teacher herself, she gains the "capital" necessary to leave the oppressive environment of her childhood. Unlike the "accomplishments" taught to women like Blanche Ingram (French, piano, drawing)—which were meant to attract a husband—Jane's education provides her with a sense of intellectual equality. This is the foundation upon which she later challenges Mr. Rochester, asserting that "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (Brontë, 1847). This moment is one of the most significant in 19th-century literature because it suggests that human status is divinely equal, regardless of gendered social hierarchies.

3.1. Societal Constraints and Gender Roles

The novel reflects a patriarchal society where a woman's status was largely defined by her relationship to men and her social class.

- **Economic Dependency:** Women were expected to depend financially on fathers or husbands, with limited employment opportunities primarily restricted to roles like teaching or serving as a governess.
- **The "Ideal" Woman:** Figures like Blanche Ingram represent the Victorian ideal, beautiful, decorative and trained solely to be an ornamental hostess and wife.

- The Marginalized "Other": Women who worked for a living, like Jane, were often stripped of their "feminine" identity in the eyes of the elite and treated as second-class citizens.

3.2. Jane Eyre as a Feminist Counter-Image

Jane's character serves as a "feminist heroine" who consistently challenges these rigid structures. Jane's status is redefined through her repeated assertions of self-worth. In a pivotal scene, she tells Mr. Rochester, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will". This declaration highlights her refusal to be an "automaton" or a mere object of male control. Her insistence on being treated as a "spirit" equal to Rochester's challenges the patriarchal view that women were inherently inferior.

- Quest for Equality: Jane famously asserts her spiritual and intellectual equality to Mr. Rochester, stating she is his equal as a human being, not just a dependent servant.
- Moral Independence: She refuses to become Rochester's mistress after discovering his existing marriage, prioritizing her own integrity and principles over romantic fulfillment or financial security.
- Financial Autonomy: Ultimately, Jane only enters into marriage after gaining her own inheritance, which allows her to be Rochester's "equal in means" and enter the union of her own free will.

In addition, the novel uses another female character to highlight the consequences of female oppression:

4. BERTHA MASON AS THE SYMBOLIC SHADOW OF REPRESSED STATUS

Bertha Mason, often interpreted as a "madwoman in the attic," Bertha symbolizes the extreme repression of women in a patriarchal society, representing the "madness" that can result from forced submission and the loss of agency. The character of Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic," serves as a provocative symbol of how women can be repressed and controlled within marriage. Bertha represents the "madness" or violent passion that society sought to restrain in women. By contrasting Jane's self-restraint with Bertha's confinement, Brontë illustrates the psychological and physical tolls of Victorian gender roles. In any serious academic discussion of the status of women in *Jane Eyre*, the character of Bertha Mason is central. While Jane represents the struggle for social and moral status, Bertha represents the absolute loss of status, legal, physical and psychological.

4.1. The "Madwoman" and the Domestic Prison

The Victorian legal doctrine of **coverture** dictated that upon marriage, a woman's legal existence was incorporated into that of her husband. Bertha Mason is the extreme personification of this erasure. Locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall, she is a "non-person." Her status is reduced to a secret burden, a "clothed hyena" (Brontë, 1847) that Rochester hides to preserve his own social standing.

As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) famously argued in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Bertha is Jane's "truest and darkest double." She represents the fiery, rebellious passion that Jane has been taught to suppress since her childhood in the "Red Room" at Gateshead. When Bertha tears Jane's wedding veil, she is symbolically destroying the symbol of Jane's impending submission to Rochester (Meyer, 1996). Bertha's "madness" can be interpreted as the inevitable result of a woman being stripped of her agency and voice within a patriarchal marriage.

4.2. Colonial Status and the "Other"

The status of women in the novel is also complicated by imperialism. Bertha is a Creole woman from Jamaica. In the Victorian hierarchy, her status was doubly marginalized by her gender and her "foreignness." Spivak (1985) critiqued the novel for "sacrificing" Bertha to allow Jane to achieve her own status. In this view, Bertha must die (literally burning down the house of the patriarch) so that Jane can eventually marry Rochester as an equal. This highlights a uncomfortable truth of the era: the rise in status for white, middle-class Englishwomen often relied on the continued oppression of colonial "others."

4.3. Confinement vs. Freedom

The physical confinement of Bertha in the attic mirrors the social confinement of Jane in the schoolroom. Both are "trapped" by Rochester's power. The difference lies in their reaction: Bertha expresses her status through violent, non-verbal rage, while Jane uses her intellect and moral boundary-setting to navigate her way to freedom. By refusing to become Rochester's mistress, a status that would have made her a "fallen woman" in Victorian eyes, Jane avoids the metaphorical attic that Bertha occupies.

5: THE TURNING POINT – MOOR HOUSE AND ECONOMIC AGENCY

For a woman to have true status in the 19th century, she needed money. Without it, her "independence" was an illusion. This section of the essay explores how Jane's status shifts from "pauper" to "heiress."

5.1. The Rejection of St. John Rivers

After fleeing Thornfield, Jane encounters St. John Rivers. If Rochester represented the "status of a mistress," St. John represents the "status of a tool." He views Jane not as a woman, but as a "useful instrument" for his missionary work in India. His proposal of marriage is devoid of love; it is a demand for total submission to his will and his God. Jane's refusal—"I am ready to go to India, if I may go free"—is her ultimate rejection of a status defined solely by male utility.

5.2. The Inheritance as an Equalizer

The discovery of Jane's inheritance (20,000 pounds) is the most significant plot device regarding female status. It transforms Jane from a "dependant" into a "benefactor." She immediately divides the money with her cousins, the Rivers, asserting her status as a woman of financial authority. As she famously tells Rochester upon her return: "I am quite rich, sir... I am my own mistress" (Brontë, 1847). It is only with this economic backing that Jane feels her social status is finally equal to Rochester's, allowing her to marry him on her own terms.

6. THE ANATOMY OF A REBEL - JANE EYRE'S CHARACTER ANALYSIS

6.1. The "Unpromising" Heroine: Plainness as Power

In the opening of the novel, Jane is established as "less than a servant" because she is an orphan without "attractiveness" or "utility." Unlike the typical Victorian heroine, Jane is "plain" and "small." This physical description is a deliberate choice by Brontë to shift the focus from a woman's visual status to her internal moral status. Jane's lack of traditional beauty allows her to navigate the world through her intellect and spirit rather than through the "marriage market" mechanics of the era. Her character is defined by a "rebel spirit" that refuses to accept the status of a victim (Showalter, 1977).

6.2. The Dialectic of Passion and Reason

Jane's internal struggle is a microcosm of the 19th-century debate between individual desire and social duty (Li, 2011).

- The Red Room (The Seed of Rebellion): Jane's childhood imprisonment in the Red Room is the foundational trauma of her character. Her "fit" of rage against her cousin John Reed is her first act of resistance against male tyranny. It establishes her as a character who possesses "a ridge of lighted heath," a metaphor for the fire of her passion.

- Helen Burns and the Stoic Influence: At Lowood, Jane encounters Helen Burns, who represents the "status of the martyr." Helen teaches Jane the Christian virtue of endurance, but Jane's character ultimately rejects Helen's passive submission. Jane believes in justice over suffering, asserting that "when we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard."

6.3. Intellectual Equality and the "Spirit"

The core of Jane's character is her refusal to be an "inferior." When she falls in love with Rochester, she does not view it as a servant loving a master, but as one soul recognizing another. Her famous speech at the thorn tree—*"I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart!"*—is a radical claim. She asserts that her human status is independent of her social status. This intellectual confidence is what makes her "revolutionary"; she ignores the hierarchy of class to demand a hierarchy of the heart (Armstrong, 1987).

6.4. Integrity Over Security

The ultimate test of Jane's character occurs when she discovers Bertha Mason's existence. At this moment, Rochester offers her a life of luxury and "status" as his mistress in France. A weaker character might have accepted this escape from poverty. However, Jane's self-respect is her highest law. She famously thinks: *"I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself."* This internal "self-governance" is what separates Jane from other female literary figures of the time; she chooses homelessness and starvation over a compromised moral status (Eagleton, 2005).

6.5. The "New Woman" Archetype

By the end of the novel, Jane's character has evolved into a precursor to the "New Woman" of the late 19th century. She is financially independent, intellectually satisfied, and emotionally fulfilled. Her marriage to Rochester at Ferndean is not a "rescue" but a choice. Because Rochester is blinded and crippled, the traditional power dynamic is reversed: Jane becomes the "prop" and the "guide." Her character concludes not in submission, but in a state of active partnership (Spivak, 1985).

CONCLUSION: THE RADICAL LEGACY OF JANE EYRE

The trajectory of Jane Eyre's life, from a "discordant" orphan at Gateshead to the independent mistress of Ferndean, serves as a profound deconstruction of the Victorian gender hierarchy. Charlotte Brontë does not merely depict the status of women as a static social reality; she

presents it as a battleground where intellectual integrity and economic agency are the primary weapons of liberation (Eagleton, 2005).

Jane's ultimate status is achieved not through the traditional "marriage plot" of the 19th-century novel, where a woman is "saved" by a man—but through her persistent refusal to be defined by anyone other than herself. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue, Jane must navigate through the "monstrous" reflections of herself (Bertha Mason) and the "stifling" models of femininity (Blanche Ingram) to find a middle ground of authentic selfhood. Her journey proves that a woman's "status" is not a fixed biological or social cage, but a state of being that can be earned through moral courage.

Furthermore, Brontë's insistence on Jane's financial independence before her marriage to Rochester is a radical political statement. By making Jane "quite rich" and "her own mistress" (Brontë, 1847), the novel suggests that true equality between the sexes is impossible without economic parity. Jane does not return to Rochester as a dependent; she returns as a benefactor. As Poovey (1988) notes, this shift in the domestic power dynamic challenged the very foundations of the Victorian patriarchal home.

Ultimately, *Jane Eyre* remains a seminal text because it envisions a world where a woman's value is rooted in her spirit and intellect rather than her dowry or her beauty. Jane's final declaration of being "supremely blest" is not a sign of domestic submission, but a celebration of a union between two equals. Brontë's masterpiece paved the way for the "New Woman" of the late 19th century, asserting that the status of any woman is, and should be, defined by her independent will.

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