

Jane Eyre: The Spiritual Self in Feminist Awakenings

By Mac McAree

Advised by Mary Stella Deen

Abstract: *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë portrays a variety of spiritual discourses which are integral to the heroine's self-preservation throughout the novel and personal fulfillment by its end. Although Jane is a Christian, her affinity for folklore and faeries, as well as her reverence for divine female figures in nature are both aspects which complicate her faithfulness to orthodox beliefs, and are an alternative spiritual space that she falls back upon when the influences of patriarchal Christianity are failing her rights to personal autonomy as a woman. *Jane Eyre* is a novel which ultimately espouses the hybridization of spiritual belief in supporting a person's individual pursuits when society pressures one to conform to premade roles, as well as a text which opens up a tolerant and open spiritual discussion in which people can discuss what sort of spiritual beliefs are right for them individually.

Keywords: english, english literature, Victorian, Victorian literature, spirituality, alternative spirituality, paganism, pagan, Christianity, patriarchal Christianity, patriarchy, feminism, faith, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë

Jane Eyre: The Spiritual Self in Feminist Awakenings

I have always thought of *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë as a remarkable book for the age it was written; an intelligent young woman of barely 18, with no family and connections, is able to escape the confines of both a restrictive religious institution and a traumatic childhood devoid of love and still become an independent and principled person despite the gender ideology of the day preventing her at every turn. Amongst all of her tribulations, Jane is accompanied by a strong religious faith, whose principles give her the ability to respect herself, her autonomy, and her intuition. When Rochester is attempting to convince her to stay with him, despite the fact that he would make Jane his mistress, Jane is able to resist both her logical and emotional temptations because of the fact that she cares “for herself,” and “will keep the law given by God” (Brontë 284). Here, Jane’s religious beliefs keep her from falling into moral degradation under the guise of romantic and earthly fulfillment, but curiously, these same beliefs in a Christian God, or more accurately, the influence of the Anglican Church’s patriarchal teachings, will later on tempt her into a position which would surely bring her personal and emotional misery. When St. John Rivers asks for her hand in marriage in alignment with his plan to go to India as a missionary, Jane almost gives in despite her acknowledgement that it would be a loveless and constraining marriage in which she would have to “daily...disown half [her] nature...force [herself] to the adoption of pursuits for which [she] had no natural vocation,” (Brontë 355). In the climax of this proposal, her “veneration” of his Christian piety, “talent and principle” (Brontë 367) leads her to feel that “Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded...it seemed, that for safety and bliss [in eternity], all here might be sacrificed,” (Brontë 373). Disregarding her own feelings about the sanctity of love in a marriage, she almost

gives in if she “were but convinced that it is God's will,” (Brontë 373). What happens next is a telepathic connection between her and Rochester, which is the sign she needs to resist St. John’s offer, and an event which Jane relegates to “the work of nature,” who did “no miracle—but her best” (Brontë 374). Jane’s reverence for feminized and deified figures in nature, such as Mother Nature or the moon, are important aspects of Jane’s alternative spiritual experience, and are central to how she navigates a world dominated by the Christian Church’s patriarchal influence.

This feminization and personification of Nature is key to how Jane’s religion is not just purely Christian, but influenced by pagan tendencies to venerate figures in nature, like the moon; Jane also believes in spirits, creatures from folklore, and in signs and omens, which she considers to be “the sympathies of Nature with man,” (Brontë 198). Although, as we will see, her belief in a masculine Christian God takes precedence over her superstitions as well as her reverence for divine female forms, Jane’s hybrid spirituality allows her an alternative spiritual space that she falls back upon when the masculine influences of the Christian Church are failing to provide her with her right to spiritual, emotional, and personal autonomy as a woman. Her bricolage of spiritual components allow her to both conform and survive in her society, as well as avoid the temptations and mediations of male figures in her connection to Divine will. Although many critics have examined the Christian discourses present in the novel, I find that they often discard or reason away the more nonconformist aspects of her spirituality. Although these aspects, which I reference as pagan¹, due to the fact that they are simply non-Christian unorthodox ideas or images, are not as prominent to her devotion to the Christian God, they are sources of comfort to Jane’s natural human and emotional needs which, as I shall discuss later, are desires that are repressed by masculine religious representations like Brocklehurst, who claim that Christians are

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “paganism” as “spiritual beliefs and practices other than those of Judaism, Islam, or especially Christianity.”

“not to conform to nature” (Brontë 60). Jane’s spiritual hybridization gives her the ability to circumnavigate the wholehearted domination of the patriarchal, institutional Church whose teachings demand impossible perfection, self-denial, and submission from women.

The religious discourses during the nineteenth-century, both within Christianity and without, were remarkably diverse. Although some Christian sects such as evangelicalism and Quakerism gave some leeway to women who wanted to assume spiritual authority, much of Christian thought was wrapped up in Pauline teachings, which demanded that “women should remain silent in the churches, they are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1 Corinthians 14:33-35). As such, evangelical Protestant teachings, which is one of the main threads of religion found in the novel, as well as the main religious influence in Brontë’s own life, was attractive to women as it espoused “the belief that individuals have the ability to hear from God directly, to interpret God’s will for themselves...and thus to become responsible for their own salvation” (Griseinger 32). While this was evidently empowering for women who wanted to resist male domination in their lives, the influences of patriarchy in the Church did not prevent the implementation of men’s voices in women’s psyche. We see this in the novel as Jane questions St. John’s insistence on her becoming a missionary; she says if one is really “qualified for the task, will not their own hearts be the first to inform them of it?...My heart is mute,” to which St. John replies, “Then I must speak for it,” (Brontë 358). Later, I will examine more in depth the way that male figures in the novel control and coerce women into their ideas of the feminine model—all of which are constraining and distance these women from their own spiritual self-definition and knowledge. In order to resist these men, Jane looks towards the spiritual teachings of other women in her life,

as well as her pagan beliefs and the world of fairy tales, which connect her to a world which respects the spiritual and didactic authority of women and the presence of divine feminine beings, which help to remind her of her own inner power and divinity. Jane's individualization of spiritual beliefs is foundational to both her ability to create and define her Self under patriarchal authority, and to her spiritual maturity and empowerment, which, as I will conclude, lends itself to becoming more tolerant and accepting of other religious expressions, specifically a tolerance which comes from open discourse and debates between people; and this tolerance is central to the problem of Victorian England at the time, whose crises of faith and diversity in religious discourse demanded a more secular, and tolerant society.

Critical works which analyze the dominant religious discourse in the novel are numerous indeed. The influences of different Christian sects on both Brontë's upbringing and the novel itself are presented in Emily Griesinger's comprehensive essay "Charlotte Brontë's Religion: Faith, Feminism, and *Jane Eyre*," which she concludes with the idea that women of faith like Brontë and Jane are able to blend "feminism and Christianity such that women...are not disempowered but find strength to obey God even if it means going against social and literary norms and conventional morality" (32). This article highlights the importance of religion to the confined woman, which was arguably more influential in expanding the sphere of female power than feminism at the time, as it gave women a connection to a Higher Power to which they were more beholden, and therefore might resist the earthly, patriarchal ideas of their place in society². Maria Lamonaca argues for a more pessimistic outcome of the novel and analyzes the ending as a representation of Brontë's inability to "reconcile her heroine's spiritual integrity with female desire and with the rhetoric of nineteenth-century femininity."³ Although I will later on illustrate

² Bebbington "evangelical religion was more important than feminism in enlarging [women's] sphere in the nineteenth century" (129)

³ Lamonaca, Maria "Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*"

why I disagree with this pessimistic analysis, it is still important to reckon with the societal constraints present in both the novel and in Brontë's world at large. Left out from these critical articles is the influence of unorthodox spiritual beliefs, and folktales in Jane's spirituality, a topic which I wish to analyze in conjunction to, and not in conflict with, the Christian aspects of her religion. Robert K. Martin, in his article "*Jane Eyre* and the World of Faery" says that, living in rural Haworth, Charlotte Brontë would have been "aware of the world of superstition and magic, of the Old Religion which had survived in rural England among the less educated and which kept alive a tradition totally alien to the ideals of a progressive, industrial and patriarchal society," (86). Brontë's fondness for the "world of faery" is an expression of her longing for a "non-patriarchal world" in which "womanly knowledge" (86) and their didactic authority through oral traditions is revered and sought out; when these magical, fantastical aspects are shown in the novel, they are symbolic of a female authority, oftentimes feminized Nature or deified moon, which he interprets as a figure which reflects Jane's inner power, and, I would add, gives her an option to refuse the choices handed to her by patriarchal society. Indeed, superstitions and belief in magic were not wholly incompatible with a faithfulness to the Christian doctrine, which already proclaimed the reality of miracles, revelations and resurrections. The "syncretism" of pagan beliefs with Christian faith is defined by Jeffery Franklin in his book *Spirit Matters*; he says that "it involved no inconsistency for a villager to attend the parish church on Sunday morning . . . and with equal conviction to . . . ask the permission of the 'Old Gal' before chopping elder wood." This is further illustrated by Franklin in another work of criticism, "The Merging of Spiritualites: *Jane Eyre* as a Missionary of Love," in which he states that *Jane Eyre* "is a representation of the hybrid religious discourse of rural England in the middle part of the nineteenth century," (470). Finally, I've consulted Robert B.

Heilman's work "Charlotte Brontë, Reason and the Moon," which explains the importance of the personified and feminized moon in the novel; this work explores the power of a divine female presence by stating that the moon represents the power of feminine "feeling-imagination-intuition" which opposes masculine "solar reason," (288). These comforting, cosmic, and most importantly, female presences give Jane the permission she needs to follow her heart instead of her head, like in the transcendent scene in which the personified moon tells her to "flee temptation," (Brontë 286).

Although, to our modern eyes, Jane seems to be staunchly and prudishly Christian, such dismissals ignore just how blasphemous the novel appeared to Charlotte Brontë's contemporary reviewers; Elizabeth Rigby, who wrote for *The Quarterly Review* in 1848 said that the novel was altogether an "anti-Christian composition" which asserted the "rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence," (Franklin 458). Rigby very well may have said the "rights of women," because, as I will demonstrate in this paper, that is exactly what Jane's hybrid religion allows her to do: protect her right to spiritual as well as romantic and personal fulfillment despite the pressures of patriarchal society. Such declarations as "women feel just as men feel... they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer," would have been direct challenges to what "custom has pronounced necessary for" women (Brontë 101), and would have angered women like Rigby who likely conformed to the passive and obedient ideal for women. Brontë was right when she had no doubt that many would call her and her character, "discontented," (Brontë 100). For Victorian women, especially writers, who were despised for undertaking a historically masculine art, the idea that they could be discontented with their place in societal structures *at all* was revolutionary. My analysis will begin with how the novel represents the problem of spiritual self definition and

autonomy for women under the patriarchal Church, as well as Jane's secular struggle to find her own voice. Following that, I will present how Jane's hybrid religious influences, specifically the influences of Christianity interpreted by the women in her life, empower her to resist the control that men attempt to leverage against her under the guise of religious or moral piety. Finally, I will end the discussion by illustrating how the novel reconciles Jane's alternative beliefs with societal expectations and explaining how the novel's interplay of spiritual discourses necessitates an open spiritual dialogue in which people can discover their own individual belief systems, and that open dialogue's merit in the growing diversity of religious expression in Victorian England.

I.

We will begin our discussion by first describing the type of spiritual atmosphere and expectations that were in place during the mid-nineteenth-century, as well as the problem of self-definition which women faced under the domination of patriarchy. Carol Engelhardt-Herringer, in *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830-85*, describes Victorian religion on the official level as a "largely masculine enterprise" which allowed women to neither preach nor hold positions of authority, stating that their "role in religious assemblies, as in the home, was to support male authority," (144). In addition, gender ideology of the time prescribed women a very sacrificial role, with the ideal woman of the age being an "Angel in the House" whose pure moral prowess passively influenced her family members to be more moral themselves. This passivity inherently denies her a sense of identity however, which is why it is so integral to Jane's spiritual journey to actively resist the masculine voices of authority around her. In the revolutionary feminist work *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the Angel in the House's feminine ideal of purity as "metaphysically empty," which signifies the fact that she is "self-less" (21), both in a sacrificial

way, and in a metaphorical sense of identity. Jane refuses to play the role of savior or moral reformer to Rochester, asserting that she is “not an angel” and that she “will be myself...you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me—for you will not get it” (Brontë 233); in some of her first conversations with Rochester he asks her whether he has a chance of being transformed from “India-rubber back to flesh,” to which she internally questions “how could I tell whether he was capable of being re-transformed?” (Brontë 121), reinforcing the Protestant tenet that individuals “have the ability to hear from God directly, to interpret God’s will for themselves, to act accordingly, and thus become responsible for their own salvation,” (Griseinger 32). In both this way and in her rejection of St. John’s proposal of marriage and of the missionary life, Alison Searle, in “An Idolatrous Imagination? Biblical Theology and Romanticism in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” interprets Jane’s assertion of her own and other’s individual identity as “accountable to God and his commands, which provides her with the energy to resist the role of savior/martyr scripted for her in romantic terms by both Rochester and Victorian culture,” (50). Jane’s connection to a higher being gives her the strength to resist social pressures, both from male authority and from Church doctrines which would prescribe her to this role.

Before we discuss the ways the novel represents masculine religious ideals, I want to begin with Jane’s secular journey with self-definition, which is the first step in her being able to both reject the social as well as religious roles that her society has given her, as the religious, social, and political necessarily influence each other, especially in England where the Church and State are not separate entities. Jane’s actualization into the pain of being denied the rights and dignity of an autonomous person begins early. As a child, Jane is defined by the adults in power around her; before she is sent to school, the proprietor of the school Reverend Brocklehurst asks if Jane is a “good child,” to which her aunt Reed “answers for [her],” in addition to answering

many of the other questions *about her for her*, therefore removing her agency in defining her own identity. Furthermore, when Jane is about to ask a question on the subject of religion, Mrs. Reed interjects, “telling [her] to sit down” while proceeding to “carry on the conversation herself” (Brontë 32). She continues to defame Jane as a liar to Brocklehurst, an act which Jane perceives as “obliterating hope from [her] new phase of existence,” and “sowing aversion and unkindness along my future path; I saw myself transformed under Mr. Brocklehurst’s eye into an artful noxious child” (Brontë 33). Words are a powerful tool, capable of defining oneself and others; Carla Kaplan, in her essay “*Jane Eyre* and the Romance of Women’s Narration,” says that “To be shut out of human dialogue, to be silenced, isolated, and spoken for by others is to be denied identity and being” (507). This is why after the following scene in which Jane proclaims, “*speak* I must,” in her own defense, she feels as though “an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty,” (Brontë 35). The fact that the liberty she feels had been “unhoped-for” only emphasizes the effect of having other people control your expressions of self and agency has on your ability to imagine a world where that freedom is possible. However, young Jane’s perspective is that she had been “trodden on severely, and *must* turn” (Brontë 35); her goal was to simply retaliate against her aunt, and having been only punished in the past for retaliating against her oppressors, she has little idea what true liberating power that rebellion holds. In fact, Mrs. Reed responds to her in a way one “might address an opponent of adult age” (Brontë 35) rather than a child, proving that this event in which Jane addresses the injustices done to her have matured her to a level in which she can claim her right to human dignity and autonomy equal to her adult, upper-class aunt. This instance and many other little rebellions during her childhood are the source of Jane’s understanding that she *must* speak up when down-trodden on, or else the cycle will continue; this is the source of which Jane realizes the

power in conversation, in disagreements and conflicts, which I will later characterize as key to the necessity of open religious discourse, which leads to religious tolerance and spiritual maturity. The fact that Mrs. Reed silences Jane when she is about to ask Brocklehurst a question about religion represents how women were suppressed from asking questions so that they could develop their own opinions on these matters; like the Pauline doctrine which shames women for speaking in the Church, Jane is barred by authority figures from coming to her own conclusions through open dialogue, and is instead expected to passively accept the pre-existing doctrines of the Church. What allows Jane the ability to disagree with these figures is her relationship with Bessie, whom she finds comfort in the idea that this rebellion against authority figures is not necessarily a bad thing.

Bessie is the first female role model or figure who is kind to Jane, and Bessie's "knack of narrative" (Brontë 28) makes an impression on her, perhaps being the first to show Jane that narrative voice has a special power of its own, a power which comes from the ability to assert personal truths which keep the self's integrity intact. When Jane is able to do this, she defines herself on her own terms, and by consequence rejects the patriarchal ideals of femininity which she will refuse to conform to. Bessie's stories, which persist in Jane's mind even beyond childhood, give Jane the indication that, although down-trodden in her position, she has the ability to gain a sense of freedom through the act of authorial voice in telling one's own story—what Kaplan calls the power of "self-narration" (506). The novel itself, although fiction, is labeled by Brontë as an "auto-biography," a form of narration which highlights how important it is for Jane, and women at large, to have a medium through which to impart her own perspective and life experiences. It is no wonder that after the aforementioned dispute with Mrs. Reed, when Jane regrets her rebellious act, that it is Bessie who Jane finds comfort in, reconciling their

relationship and pleasing Bessie by becoming “frank and fearless” (Brontë 37). Jane, accustomed to being punished after every act of rebellion by her aunt, is shocked when Bessie actually suggests she become “bolder” (Brontë 37). It is with Bessie that Jane discovers that using her voice to rebut those who would try to oppress or control her is not necessarily a bad thing, and is in fact, a mode of establishing the Self and is the first step to rejecting the preexisting molds one is permitted by society to conform to. In her volley with Mrs. Reed, Jane dares to “affirm” her aunt’s cruelty because, “it is the *truth*” (Brontë 35) reemphasizing the way that narrative voice and discourse is a way to assert personal truths and the integrity of the self. Jane’s affirmations of “personal truths” will later be how she resists the emotional manipulation of Rochester, as well as the logical reasonings of St. John. In her conflict with Rochester, she clings to and proclaims her principles as a rebuttal to his emotional and indulgent temptations, claiming that she is calmed by a sense of “inward power” (271) which comes from the fact that she chooses to leave Rochester based on “the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now” (284). Further, in the face of his physical coercions, she acknowledges that although he may physically hold power over her, that “mentally I still possessed my soul, and with it the certainty of ultimate safety” (284). Her understanding of her personal truths allows her to stand firmly in the face of material oppression, in the same way that she resists Mrs. Reed’s physical abuse with her proclaiming personal integrity and independence. What is important here is that Jane must actively, and even offensively, protect her integrity via this self-narration and self-definition; she asserts to Rochester that although it is not wicked to love him, that, “it would be to obey [him]” (283) and when she insists on splitting her inheritance with her cousins, she rebukes St. John’s rational and economic reasonings by asserting that she must “indulge [her] feelings” (345), and, as St. John continues to try to convince her to marry him, she tells him, “I scorn your idea of

love” a statement that she “could not help saying” (364). These aggressive rebuttals to a male authority’s coercion of her autonomy are vital to her resistance. Jane protects her personal autonomy by her active assertion of her opinions, truths, and self-definitions, and this gives her the power to resist these authority figures, a power exemplified in her saying to Rochester, “I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now” (228).

Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers, both representatives of patriarchal Christian authority, abhor conforming to “nature” and repress feeling, instead holding fast to the legalistic framework of religion, whereas the women who are Jane’s role models in the novel are examples of Christ-like compassion and sympathy. The “sympathy” which Jane so desperately needs is found in the company of these women, and as I will discuss in the next section, important to Jane’s acceptance of the validity of her emotional and personal needs. Brocklehurst, the proprietor of the Lowood Institute where Jane goes to school, is described in cold, stone-like terms, often called a “black column” whose mission at the school is to “mortify...the lusts of the flesh,” (Brontë 61) and make the students “self-denying” (Brontë 50). His goal is to make the girls at Lowood into the self-sacrificing angels that Victorian culture thought was the only place for moral women. This clergyman is evidently a representation of the hypocrisy of many gentile Anglican preachers during this age⁴, as directly after he commands a girl’s hair must be cut off because it curls naturally, and “we are not to conform to nature,” (Brontë 60) his wife and daughters enter the room, adorned with the latest fashions and “elaborately curled” hair (Brontë 61). The presentation of hypocritical male preachers is a part of the reason Jane must find spiritual supplementation from pagan and unorthodox sources, as the patriarchal Church

⁴ In *The Victorian church: Architecture and society* Chris Brooks describes how “Anglicanism...was perceived as the morally coercive arm of the ruling elite.” “The parson who dined and hunted with the squire...who handed down harsh sentences for poaching from the bench, and who preached the immutability of the status quo from the pulpit every Sunday, was unlikely to win either the hearts or the minds of laboring people” (4). W. R. Ward as well describes the hostility towards the increasingly “fashionable habits of the clergy” which “embodied the sense that a social chasm...made spiritual fellowship impossible.” (*Religion and Society in England 1790-1850* 10)

insufficiently protects women's rights to spiritual or personal autonomy. In addition, his idea of discipline includes shaming Jane, standing her in the middle of the assembly room on a pedestal and telling the whole school to treat her as an "interloper and alien," and to "avoid her company...and shut her out of your converse," (Brontë 62). This cruel form of punishment is a way to isolate the girls, shut down community or solidarity within them, and a direct opposite approach to sin that we see from the women in the novel and from the form of tolerant, compassionate spirituality that Jane is attempting to develop, which we will discuss and characterize later on. St. John similarly has "marble-seeming features" (Brontë 328) and represses his emotions, curbing them "as a resolute rider would curb a rearing steed," (Brontë 326). In describing a sermon given by St. John, our narrator says: "there was...an absence of consolatory gentleness; stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines—election, predestination, reprobation—were frequent; and each reference...sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom," (Brontë 314); and the result of this sermon on Jane's feelings is not comfort, but an "inexpressible sadness," (Brontë 315). These doctrines of predestination and election upheld that God's chosen few had already been selected, and that heaven was only admissible through "Christian perfection," a demoralizing idea for those looking to religion for comfort or redemption, and something which Helen Burn's "universalist" creed will later rebuke. Both of these clergymen are described as "judges" (Brontë 63, 310) and represent the patriarchal image of God as a judge and punisher, and neither of these men hold their legalistic, dogmatic aspects of their religion to a higher standard than following the example of Christ himself. The patriarchal Church holds loving and being faithful to Jesus over being as loving as him to their fellow people; evangelicalism claimed that "faith alone" could be saving, and so actually practicing the love that Christ preached seems unnecessary to their eyes. By thinking solely of

the reward in heaven for their emotionless “Christian perfection” on earth, this philosophy leads followers to resent or think less on the importance of human connection, and the “bitterness” of St. John’s sermon seems to come from the fact that he so little needs nor gives “sympathy” (Brontë 353) to others. Jane even comments that she was sure St. John “had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding” (Brontë 315); St. John is pious and loves his “Redeemer” but he is not loving himself, Jane even comments that if she were to enter into a marriage with him that he “will never love me; but he shall approve me,” (Brontë 361). In her famous Author’s Preface, Brontë defends her faith and her writing by saying that “Narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ,” (Brontë 5); and the characters in the novel who are able to do this are the women who show Jane true Christian kindness, and who, as Lamonca says, “communicate their theological convictions by example rather than exhortation, thus imposing a feminine silence in contrast to male garrulousness about the Word,” (253). Like the insight she finds with Bessie, the women in the novel give Jane important secular as well as spiritual education, which help her to resist male authority; in the following section, I will discuss the spiritual empowerment Jane finds at Lowood in open discussions with her friend Helen Burns, as well as how the school’s superintendent, Miss Temple, is a facilitator of these conversations, and is therefore an representation of the women who communicate their beliefs via “example rather than exhortation.”

II.

In this section, I will discuss Jane’s spiritual struggle and adaptation of Christianity into a version which is interpreted by feminine role models in her life. Helen Burns, Jane’s friend at the Lowood Institute, reinterprets the judgemental, punishing, and pessimistic outlook of God and

the afterlife. Helen tells Jane that God is a “friend,” a “universal Parent,” who will accept everyone regardless of their sins and makes “Eternity a rest—a mighty home, not a terror and an abyss,” (Brontë 55). This kinder and more nurturing version of God does away with the Calvinistic image of God as punisher, and is perhaps why Jane does not take to the stern, absolutist, and patriarchal definition of God that Brocklehurst represents. This God is a comforting presence to Jane, and she frequently turns to him in times of distress or isolation; after the discovery of Rochester’s mad-wife Bertha, Jane returns to her room in misery, with only one idea to comfort her— “a remembrance of God”—and she quotes lines from the book of Psalms which emphasize the fact that despite her earthly loneliness, there is still a divine presence which is “near,” (Brontë 266). Although Helen supplies Jane with a spiritual enrichment which better helps her to “bear what it is [her] fate to be required to bear,” (Brontë 53) in such a world where she realistically will have to bear hardships as a woman, Helen’s doctrine has its own issues as well, which is why Jane isn’t simply a Christian figure and looks to other forms of spiritual guidance. Helen’s evangelical devotion to sacrifice is fulfilled literally by her premature death—a representation of what happens to women who *only* and *always* “bear what it is [their] fate to be required to bear,” (Brontë 53). Helen, who is the embodiment of purity like the Angel in the House, is selfless and has no drive to survive or assert herself, and we know that to be pure is to be empty and “to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead,” (Gilbert and Gubar 25). This passive ideal of endurance in which she awaits heaven as reward for a life of misery on earth makes Jane uneasy. When Helen states that “why...should we ever sink overwhelmed with distress when life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness,” Jane thinks, this idea “calmed me; but in the tranquility she imparted there was an alloy of inexpressible sadness” (Brontë 53); it is a sad and un motivating life to simply await the glory of death. Later

on I will analyze Jane's reverence of nature as a symbol of this rejection of this pessimistic eschatological Christian doctrine.

Miss Temple is another important figure at Lowood Institute; like Helen who holds a "creed which no one ever taught" (Brontë 55) her, she too represents the way that Jane is looking for "female precursors" who can show her that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible (G&G 51). Despite Brocklehurst's idea that if she feeds "their vile bodies...you starve their immortal souls," (Brontë 59) Miss Temple defies his authority by feeding the girls a heartier lunch when their breakfast of porridge is burnt and inedible and even allows Jane to "speak in [her] own defense" (Brontë 66) when she is accused of being liar by Brocklehurst himself. While Bessie gives Jane the indication that to speak is to have power, Miss Temple gives Jane the space to do her own "self-narration" (Kaplan 506). Miss Temple extends this space of conversation to both Jane and Helen, whose conversation with the teacher is a profound experience for Jane; she comments that Helen's "soul sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell," (Brontë 68). This open discourse and sympathy between women, something which reassures her emotional, intellectual, and intuitive self, and is something Jane will search for the rest of the novel, and eventually find in the company of her cousins Mary and Diana. This open dialogue which Miss Temple provides for the girls is spiritually enriching, and later I will enlarge how the novel ultimately calls for this open space as a pathway for spiritual maturity and religious tolerance. Miss Temple gives Jane the a secular realization that the authority of men is not all-powerful, and that to be "self-denying" is actually just a mode of deference to that authority, and that it is her right to be able to defend herself, her religious beliefs, and her right to chose her own path in life.

The male authorities in the novel all attempt to redefine Jane or other women into roles which serve their goals, definitions which disparage these women into submission or deference to their authority. Both Brocklehurst and St. John clearly weaponize moral standards and “Christian” principles to uphold the dominant religious gender ideology of women as inherently sinful, submissive and in need of guidance; Brocklehurst’s disciplinarian ways have clear “economic purposes” which funnel these young women into accepting their submissive social statuses either as demure wives or domestic servants (Franklin “Merging” 464), and St. John even redefines Jane in his own terms of femininity to convince her to accept his mission, saying that she is “docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant” (Brontë 360). Both of these strategies develop either Jane or other women into figures which suit these men’s own needs, and are examples of how religious male authorities often use spiritual doctrine to disguise their misogynist motives. Gilbert and Gubar speak to the difficulty of separating patriarchal definitions of women from a woman’s own definition of herself, saying “the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (17). These definitions of women from men, disguised by moral justifications, both confuse and pressure women into conforming to a feminine ideal which would metaphorically castrate their agency or ability to make space for refusal. As I mentioned in my introduction, Jane nearly gives in to St. John’s insistence that they marry because she is almost convinced that it is “God’s will,” when in actuality it is St. John who wants a wife he can “influence efficiently in life and retain absolutely until death” (Brontë 362). Jane’s struggle with authority is with their insistence on controlling her identity, self-definition, and their refusal to allow her a space for her voice and self-assertion—and this interference with her connection to God is a reason why Jane must look for spiritual guidance elsewhere.

Men's interference with Jane's connection to God, is symbolic of the larger problem of patriarchal authority, whose absolute power corrupts absolutely, causing them to conflate their own authority with God's. In Janet Larson's article "Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul: Discourse, Gender, and Spirituality in Women's Texts," she says that for "Victorian women it was often hard to discern" godly will or messages from "the god-like voices of the hegemonic implanted 'within'...the female psyche," (46). Her point is that because women were so bombarded with sexist ideology from both masculine and religious authorities, it must have been hard to separate what God or oneself actually wanted from what *those in power wanted you to want*. In addition, spiritual teachings of submission to both God and husband often lead a woman to "mistake her husband *for* God" (Lamonaca 248). Rochester, who represents secular male authority, and St. John, who represents the absolute power of the institutional Church, are both masculine figures who attempt to use their authority under social or spiritual norms to sequester Jane into roles they, or more accurately their society, have created for her. Rochester, although still married, wants Jane to remain with him and become his mistress, a role which would morally degrade her for his benefit—his "angel." Jane's marriage to Rochester before his accident is inappropriate for many reasons, but it is spiritually inadequate because Jane believes he "stood between me and every thought of religion...I could not...see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol" (246). After Jane finds out about Rochester's wife and he attempts to get her to stay and become his mistress, he launches an emotionally manipulative attack on her which guilted her into staying on behalf of "reforming" him morally, saving him with her love and becoming his "rescuer," (285). When Jane insists she must leave him and not become his mistress, Rochester tells her "It would not be wicked to love me...[you] condemn me to live wretched...you snatch love and innocence from me? You fling me back on lust for a

passion—vice for an occupation?” (Brontë 283) and this emotional tactic appeals to Jane’s deep “Feeling” which almost gives in, telling her to “soothe him; save him; love him” (Brontë 284). Jane’s love and near idolatry for Rochester blinds her and she is tempted to submit to the social authority of Rochester and become his mistress—giving up her respect for God and self by sacrificing herself for his benefit. St. John also attempts to control her autonomy for his own gain, under the guise of spiritual and not social obligation; he states that his “claim” on her is “not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service,” but this cover is later complicated by his insistence that for her to accompany him as a sister or curate would be unacceptable because “a sister might any day be taken from me” and he wants a wife who he can “retain absolutely till death,” (362). Although St. John attempts to guilt Jane by saying that “if you reject [my proposal], it is not me you deny, but God,” (356) he is deplatformed by his gendered ideas of a wife as property. However, what saves Jane from succumbing to these pressure is her recognition of their flaws, and realizing their equality as fellow humans; although Jane’s love of Rochester sees her “forgetting all his faults,” (Brontë 170) she is able to resist him once the secret of his mad-wife is revealed, for Mr. Rochester “was not to [her] what he had been; for he was not what [she] had thought him” (Brontë 265). Consequently, Jane is able to see that Rochester’s motives were selfish and not out of pure love for her; she realizes that if he truly loved her he would, like her, want her to “live sinless” (Bronte 283). Jane’s attraction to St. John is in his purity, his nearness to God, but it is only when she realizes that his idea of marriage is without love that she can see “his fallibilities” and recognize that she “sat at the feet of a man, erring as I.” Once she recognizes his humanity she “takes courage,” seeing that she is “with an equal—one with whom I might argue—one whom, if I saw good, I might resist,” (Brontë 362). These scenes in which Jane recognizes the man in front of her is not flawless as God, but her equal in their imperfection and

humanity are important to women's ability to discern between calls from God, and those that are mediated by the men in their lives. Once this is recognized, they, like Jane, are able to take courage and argue against men who are attempting to coerce their wills.

However, what happens when Jane is unable to discern God from his creature? Jane comes closest to accepting St. John's proposal when her feelings for his religious purity become "veneration," which tempts her to "rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose [her] own," (Brontë 373). Once again Jane is tempted to sacrifice her existence and individual agency for the mission of a man, and her conflation of him *with* God prevents her from seeing him for what he is: "a feeble creature" (Brontë 65) who has his own selfish motives for forcing her into a mission she is not called for. The thing which saves her during this scene is the supernatural "call" from Rochester, which we will discuss later on as a crucial scene in how Jane's spiritual belief is not just Christianity, but in nature as a force of cosmic goodness, which helps her to preserve her identity and agency. Her balance of Christian and pagan beliefs is what helps her to balance her spiritual and earthly emotional needs. Each time she turns from a man who asks for her hand it is because they would fulfill one aspect of her life but not another; when Jane runs from Thornfield it is because her romantic love for Rochester does not outweigh the respect she has for herself and for the "law given by God" (Brontë 284); and when she turns away from St. John's offer is because she knows that the missionary life he offers would be spiritually fulfilling, but would simultaneously require self "sacrifice" (Brontë 360) in many ways, including bodily and emotional sacrifice. Like the idea of Jesus being a balance of both man and god, when Jane runs from Rochester it is because she respects the divine integrity of her soul, and when she runs from St. John it is because she respects her humanity; she balances the two to lead her life in the most holistic way possible. While critics like Lamonaca have

concluded that this balance between her passionate, romantic, earthly love and her “spiritual integrity” is incompatible with the “constraints of Victorian domesticity,” (259) it is my belief that her spiritual hybridization is precisely what allows her to avoid this, because by the end of the novel Jane has found a space at Ferndean, outside of these societal constraints, in which she is free to both express her spiritual and earthly instincts and desires. But before she is able to escape the constraints of patriarchal society, she must use her hybrid spirituality to connect to her feminine intuition and feeling, and ultimately trust in what she already knows to be true about herself.

III.

Jane’s literal motherlessness is symbolic of her search for representations of female power, both on earth and in the ephemerally divine; her pagan sensibilities, which come in two forms, are representations of how Jane looks to archaic forms of belief which connect to more instinctive and “feminine” ways of knowing, as well as a space in which Jane can look up to both divine and human female figures to inspire her own sense of authority. The first form of pagan belief is in her belief of a folkloric faerie world, which is sourced from the cultural and didactic authority of female storytellers like Bessie, and the second form is in her reverence for divine female forms. She looks towards representations of a divine femininity through her reverence of Mother Nature, and in the deified moon, and we see these presences at many important points in Jane’s story, one being the transcendental scene where the personified moon actually becomes a “white human form” in Jane’s dream and commands her “daughter” to “flee temptation,” to which Jane responds “Mother, I will,” (Brontë 286) and the other being how she finds comfort in the “breast” of “the universal mother, Nature” (289) after her escape from Thornfield when she is estranged from all human ties. In opposition to this, the strictly Christian St. John derives no

pleasure from the beauty of nature, and literally crushes blooming flowers under his boot (Brontë 324); Jane's appreciation for the natural world is an answer to the repressive and sacrificial aspects of Christian eschatology, which pessimistically awaits the afterlife. The idea that Jane is searching for a connection to lost forms of feminine spirituality resembles the way that female writers searched for a "matrilineal heritage" which would help them to recover their "distinctive female power" (Gilbert and Gubar 59) within a monolithic patriarchal literary tradition. To find this distinctive female power, women needed to see images of the divine or God, who is associated with power, as feminine-images which are not present in the all-male Christian Trinity. In addition, her belief in a kinder Father God supplements this Christian aspect; she learns from Helen Burns that God is not a punisher but a "friend," and "father," the "universal Parent" (Brontë 76) that Jane does not have, helping Jane to heal the loneliness of her orphan status. And so, Jane's spirituality is a mix of beliefs which includes a paternal Christian God, a maternal Mother Nature, as well as in a fae or folkloric world which connects her to a sphere in which women's spiritual and cultural authority is respected.

The consistent presence of folkloric references in the novel connects Jane to an oral and cultural tradition which is founded on the didactic and spiritual authority of women. The first form of pagan influence we see in the novel is sourced from the stories of Bessie, which are "old fairy tales and older ballads" (11). The fact that these are "old" stories indicate that they are folktales which harken back to a pre-Christian "tradition totally alien to the ideals of progressive, industrial and patriarchal society" (Martin 86). Robert K. Martin's essay "*Jane Eyre* and the World of Faery," explores how Charlotte Brontë does not just allude to fairy tale motifs, but has effectively "woven" them "into the fabric of the novel" (86). He analyzes lower class servant Bessie Lee as the archetypal figure of the fairy tale's "source...in womanly knowledge," a

person who “becomes a surrogate mother culturally as well as physically” (86). Bessie represents the pull of traditional female knowledge which the patriarchal Church has silenced, and the “female precursor”—which Gilbert and Gubar mentioned was integral to female writers’ liberation—to the more matriarchally focused form of belief that is English paganism. Even after being introduced to the merits of Christian God who is paternal rather than punitive Jane does not abandon her belief in a folkloric fairy world. As an adult, when she thinks of applying for a new job, she credits her idea to “a kind fairy” who had “surely dropped the required suggestion on [her] pillow,” (Brontë 80). In addition, in her first conversation with Rochester, when he asks if he has broken through one of her “rings,”⁵ Jane “seriously” replies in the negative that, “The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago” (Brontë 112). Folkloric and pagan beliefs were still prevalent in Victorian England, specifically in rural or country areas, like where the novel takes place⁶, and amongst the lower and working classes, of which Jane is a part of, and even raised by. Throughout the novel, Jane as well as Rochester make many references to folkloric creatures such as fairies, brownies, “green men,” genii, and other English folkloric figures such as the Gytrash. The Gytrash, the footnote of the Norton Critical Edition of *Jane Eyre* explains, was a spirit of ill omen who took the form of either a great black dog or horse, and creatures like fairies, brownies, and green men were a part of the world of the elves or “little people,” which was an aspect of rural folk belief. Jane has a “seeing is believing” attitude which, as a child, drives her to search for these figures “among foxglove leaves and bells” and “under mushrooms” until she makes up her mind that they “were all gone out of England to some

⁵Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type F261.1, *Fairy rings on grass*. Seen after fairy dance. Irish and English myth. (the lore is that if one breaks through these rings they will anger the little people)

⁶ Franklin, *Spirit Matters* “persistence through several millennia of pagan beliefs and practices within indigenous British Isle cultures” (4)

savage country where the woods were wilder and thicker,”--not, however, that they don't exist. She doubts not that she may one day “see with [her] own eyes” (Brontë 21) such mythical figures, and such a belief in the world of fairy and the supernatural lends itself to Jane's open-minded, tolerant attitude towards religious matters--starting with the supernatural and ghostly event which takes place during Jane's childhood.

The first ten chapters of the novel, which cover Jane's childhood and subsequent educational years at Lowood, narratively present us with multiple streams of spiritual discourse. The second chapter presents us with an unexplained and ambiguous supernatural event, in which Jane, locked in the red-room, sees, or imagines, a ghostly phantom light. Jane, simply thinking about her deceased uncle returning to comfort her, “prepared” her mind “for horror” and thinks of this light as a “herald of some coming vision from another world” (Brontë 18). The supernatural is not foreign to Christianity--miracles, mysteries, spirits, transformations and transmogrifications are common in the Bible-- but the ambiguity of this event shows us Jane's connection to the spirit world which, aided by the lower-class servants' superstitions, establishes a plausible deniability in which the novel can assert the supernatural as possible. Adult narrator Jane conjectures that “this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by someone across the lawn” (18) but child Jane does not understand this in the moment, and comments from the servants such as “something passed her all dressed in white, and vanished...three loud raps on the chamber door” (Brontë 20) certainly influenced the frightened and impressionable Jane. Franklin argues in “Jane Eyre as a Missionary of Love” that the reader “is intended to accept the supernatural as real,” and that it contributes “directly to Jane's empowerment,” (471). While I agree with his interpretation I would extend that empowerment to the development of Jane's imagination and ability to remain open-minded--even to things deemed

“impossible” or “superstitious,” by the rational. This training of Jane’s imagination is key to how women are able to imagine other forms of spirituality which can help circumnavigate the patriarchal orthodox religious influence which would prescribe them to their sacrificial and secondary roles. And so later at Lowood, although she engages in religious conversations with Helen, which, as discussed earlier, indoctrinates her into a Christian faith more aligned with an accepting, non-judgemental God, Jane’s recounting of her childhood involves prominent spiritual experiences from both sides of her faith, both the supernatural and unorthodox, as well as the Christian, preparing her to consider all aspects of the divine world as possible. Her open-mindedness is a tool for her to accept all the gifts and mysteries of life, and later down the line when she experiences her “ESP” calling from Rochester, will accept its spiritual importance despite her rational inclinations.

Jane searches for female figures, both divine and earthly, in order to find sympathy with and validation for her natural emotions, as well as connect to and trust in her intuition and herself; and by doing so she can circumnavigate the patriarchal influences of logic and control in her material world. Jane naturally finds comfort in the sympathy of other women and female mentors, but when their ability to intercede in the patriarchal structures at play are exhausted, it is necessary for her to look towards divine female figures. This struggle is illustrated by her relationship with her female cousins Diana and Mary, who, as Adrienne Rich, in “*Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman*,” points out, bear the “names of the pagan and Christian aspects of the Great Goddess—Diana or Artemis, the Virgin Huntress, and Mary the Virgin Mother” (473). These two women are representative of how Jane’s pagan and Christian influences are combined to create a spirituality which allows her to prioritize her own feminine intuition and feeling, and embrace the natural feelings which masculine Christianity does not.

When Jane tells her cousin Diana of St. John's plans for their loveless marriage in the goal of missionary work, explaining her stance that, if "I am not formed for love, it follows that I am not formed for marriage," Diana agrees, feeling that a marriage to a man who "regarded one but as a useful tool," would be "insupportable—unnatural—out of the question!" (Brontë 370). Although Jane finds community and sympathy with her cousins, and a space in which she is assured of "a sense of Divine will and purpose which is more allied with human nature and human desire" (Lamonaca 254) which rebuke the extreme control and constraint demanded by patriarchal and legalistic spiritual teachings, her cousins are still powerless to help Jane resist these pressures, and can only validate her feelings and offer emotional support. This dilemma illustrates Jane's need for a *divine* feminine power in which she can place her trust; although a female community is helpful and necessary to her emotional growth, a divine feminine presence represented by Mother Nature and the defied moon is what Jane relies on for spiritual growth.

These divine female forms are the second part of Jane's pagan beliefs, which provide her with a divine space to turn to when she is pressured by mortal and patriarchal influences. During her exile from Thornfield, we see how Jane supplements her faith in God the Father with a connection to Mother Nature, specifically when she is isolated from the pressures of her Christian society; when she escapes into the moorlands, Jane says that "not a tie holds me to human society at this moment...I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature" and this presence comforts her, imagining this spiritual mother to be "benign and good" and this "mother would lodge [her] without money and without price" (Bronte 289). She turns to the "bosom" of this "universal mother" and after her profound spiritual monologue, in which she observes the Milky Way and feels assured of the presence of a loving God who shall "save what He had made," she nestles into the maternal "breast of the hill" to "ere long in sleep forget sorrow"

(290). Although alone and destitute, Jane still finds comfort in her belief in a kind Father God and a loving Mother Nature, and what is important here is that she finds “strength of God” while observing the beauty and grandeur of nature. Harkening back to her belief that all elves have “all gone out of England” for somewhere where “the woods were wilder...and the population more scant” (Brontë 21) Jane’s spiritual revelation occurs in this natural world where she is isolated from society and enters the realm of the fae. By running from Rochester’s societal pressures and carnal temptation into Nature she upholds the merit of a natural fae world unburdened by societal and patriarchal constraint—a world which, as I shall discuss in my conclusion, she ultimately must escape to at the end of the novel. The importance of her belief in magic and in fairies is especially reinforced when what leads her back to society, and ultimately safety, is a light on the marsh which she at first thinks is an “ignis fatuus,” (Brontë 295) or will-o-wisp,⁷ and is her “forlorn hope” (Brontë 296) towards the end of her journey and voluntary exile from Thornfield. Her belief in the light as magical, at least at first, saves her from death, and delivers her into the compassionate hands of soon-to-be relatives. Ultimately, her pagan beliefs and the hope she finds in nature are the things which guide and protect her through her lowest point in the story.

I consider the presence of the moon at every major event in Jane’s life to be too coincidental to dismiss, and in fact consider the moon to be another divine feminine presence that Jane can turn to for confirmation of her feelings and intuition. Jane leaves Gateshead for the first time by “half-moon” (Brontë 39), her and Helen meet Miss Temple for their conversational communion by “her light” which “shone full both on us and on the approaching figure” (Brontë 65) and she meets Rochester, accepts his proposal, and is called back to him at the end of the novel, all by the light of the moon. Robert B. Heilman’s paper, “Charlotte Brontë, Reason, and the Moon,” begins with an excerpt from the essay *White Goddess* by Robert Graves who claims

⁷ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, F217.1. Fairy lights seen in low places.

that the, “avowed purpose of science, is to banish all lunar superstitions and bask in the pure light of solar reason.” This “lunar superstition” contains all that is feeling, imaginative, and intuitive (288), concepts which are rejected by patriarchal Christianity because they connect women to aspects which might actualize them into unrest or a sense of injustice. The form of the deified moon is a mysterious presence which Brontë uses as a sympathetic comrade for her heroine’s moments of crisis; Heilman suggests that the ambiguity of the moon’s presence is something which allows it to be a “cosmic sensibility” which reflects the “existent mood” of the character (293). The moon can then become a constant divine figure, who reflects Jane’s own feelings and is the empathetic female presence she relies on when she feels alone and is in need.

In the same way that Jane was repulsed by the idea of a patriarchal, punishing God, she is attracted to the sympathetic presence of the deistic moon, as it is a comforting feminine presence which aids her in relating to her own feelings, and trusting herself. Because in both moments when Jane is pressured into accepting a man’s hand her reason is on their side, it necessitates the presence of, and even intervention of, the feminized moon or nature to inspire trust in her own feelings and intuition, both of which help Jane to make the *right* decision for her when Reason fails. Before she leaves Rochester, his emotional manipulations lead her to feel like her “very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with the crime in resisting him,” (284) and in the climax of her conversations of marriage with St. John, she reasons that “for safety and bliss [in eternity] all here might be sacrificed in a second” (Brontë 373). Because Jane is such a rational person, she finds it hard to allow her feelings some levy over her decisions; Rochester even comments that in her mind “Reason sits firm and holds the reins, and she will not let the feelings burst away and hurry her to wild chasms,” (Brontë 182). And so in a room “full of moonlight” which presides over a decision Jane can only make after being thrilled

and pushed by “inexpressible feeling” (Brontë 373), she hears Rochester’s call and is finally able to fully deny St. John’s spiritual and ideological reasonings. In addition, the lunar “Mother” figure which demands that Jane “flee temptation” at Thornfield is “immeasurably distant” but as “near” as a whisper in the heart (Brontë 286) which Heilman interprets as, “Charlotte’s strong sense of the paradoxical alliance between the intimately personal and the universal,” (298). The lunar and cosmic divinity of nature is a part of Jane’s own inner voice, a presence which is at once a higher power which guides her, but also the intuitive, self-protective force which originates from within herself, echoing the truth in Franklin’s statement, that, the “self always is a component of the Higher Self,” (*Spirit Matters* 211); just like in the Christian tradition in which God created humankind “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27) religion is a way for humans to relate themselves to a divine cosmic plan—the Higher Self is often a representation of our Best Selves, an aspirational image. Indeed, John Stuart Mill’s theory in “Religion’s Utility” that, “The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire,” is similar to how Jane experiences her connections to divine beings—as a guide which values the ideal and the paramount, and not the impulsive or indulgent. We will see this continued in her telepathic calling from Rochester, an event which she later recalls feeling as an “inward sensation,” and of the “unspeakable strangeness” of the voice which, she states, “seemed in *me*” and not “the external world” (Brontë 375) The sympathetic and even mysterious image of Nature is a force which allows Jane’s “powers” to “assume ascendancy” (Brontë 374) and therefore trust in herself and refuse an option a man has chosen for her.

The coincidence of timing between Rochester calling out to Jane and her hearing it far away is deemed by her to be “too awful⁸ and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed,”

⁸ Oxford English Dictionary defines “awful” as “arousing or inspiring awe”

(398) and she decides to keep “these things...and pondered them in [her] heart” (399). To the extent that Jane refuses to delve into that “deeper shade of the supernatural” (Brontë 399) perhaps shows us the caution she takes not to stray from dominant religion, certainly as a form of self-preservation and conformity, but perhaps also in a Christian respect for divine “mysteries” which make life richer. Overall, Jane recognizes that the “deeper shade” she would enter into if she were to consider this event fully would pull her deeper into superstitious and pagan beliefs, so she instead prefers to balance her religious ideas and moderate her alternative beliefs; during the telepathic event she says “down superstition!” and instead chooses to mark it as “the work of nature,” (Brontë 374) which shows us the limits of Jane’s pagan belief system, and her choice to instead focus on nature as a source of divine guidance instead of a supernatural presence. Despite her personal fears and beliefs however, it is still this inexplicable “natural supernatural” (Franklin *Spirit 5*) event which calls on her to return to whom she truly loves, and who is now an appropriate match for her. We can determine that, especially because she was a woman, Brontë’s “readership exerted tremendous pressure upon heroines to exemplify Christian faith and morals,” (Franklin *Spirit 5*) so her creative choices of figuring in and interpreting such supernatural events were limited. Like Franklin, I interpret her feelings here to be “indicative of her author’s own mixed allegiances to multiple discourses of spirituality” (477) in addition to being the limit to Brontë’s delve into the supernatural, unorthodox world under the constraints of her Christian society’s pressures on her.

The novel resolves this tension between Jane’s orthodox and unorthodox spiritual influences by situating Jane at the isolated Ferndean, where she is able to express her non-conforming spirituality in peace. In 1967 Kathleen Tillotson argued that the novel was not so much an incidental social commentary as it was “primarily a novel of the inner life, not of

man in his social relations” but that it “maps a private world.” Nineteenth-century women writers, who were entering into a male-dominated practice, had to relegate their social or gender criticism to interpersonal domestic affairs, such as the parlor rooms of Jane Austen, or the gothic houses of the Brontë sisters; these spaces represented the constraint they felt to the house, as well as the societal pressure to only represent the domestic affairs which they were socially allowed to have authority over. In this renunciation of other worldly aspects we see how women under patriarchy have “traditionally cultivated accents of acquiescence in order to gain freedom to live their lives on their own terms, if only in the privacy of their thoughts,” (G&G 74). The pain and relief in this momentary escape from outward pressures is beautifully described by Charlotte Brontë herself,

“I crept up to the bedroom to be *alone* for the first time that day. Delicious was the sensation I experienced as I laid down on the spare bed and resigned myself to the luxury of twilight and solitude. The stream of thought, checked all day, came flowing free and calm along the channel. My ideas were too shattered to form any defined picture, as they would have done in such circumstances at home, but detached thoughts soothingly flitted round me, and unconnected scenes occurred and then vanished, producing an effect certainly strange but, to me, very pleasing.” From her *Roe Head Journal* 1836, her italics.

The safety in isolated thinking seems to be a sanctuary for women in the Victorian age, especially to female writers who felt that isolation poignantly by the lack of female writer representation. This is why we see a young Jane Eyre, in the opening chapter of the novel, seclude herself in a window nook with a curtain to “shrine” herself “in double retirement,” (Brontë 9). The book she reads, Bewick's *History of British Birds*, is full of images of chill isolation, images which she finds “mysterious,” yet “profoundly interesting,” (Brontë 11) and compares them to the stories told by Bessie. Jane takes a strange sense of comfort in these images, knowing that she is, at least for a moment, safe in the isolation she has chosen, and in the escapism of her thoughts; through self-isolation, she is able to find comfort within herself, and her imagination. After the reveal of Bertha Mason, Jane retreats to her room alone, and says that

“till now I had only heard” but now “I thought,” (Brontë 264). Perhaps it is only in isolation that women can hear their own inner voices, block out the external ones, and discern God's will for themselves, which is why the novel ends in the place it does: the societally secluded, wooded manor of Ferndean.

Jane's return to Rochester is framed at the woodland manor of Ferndean, a secluded place away from society. The building itself is one of “considerable antiquity,” (Brontë 382) which connects back to Jane's pre-Christian pagan influences, and she comes upon it after nearly losing her way,⁹ resembling folktale motifs, and enters into the property through a gate described as a “portal” (Brontë 383). The house is surrounded by a “thick and dark...wood,”¹⁰ and is placed in a “semicircle” (383) of a clearing, which is a reminder of the first time Rochester and Jane converse, when he questions whether he has broken through one of her fae “rings”¹¹ (Brontë 112). The house's antiquity, woodland isolation, and magical nature, enhanced by both Jane and Rochester referring to each other as “fairy” or “brownie,” are all emblematic of the pagan and folkloric influences in the novel, and the ending's endorsement of its implementation into religious belief. In Jane's case, her position at the secluded Ferndean may indicate an incompatibility with her chosen spiritual path and expression of female spiritual autonomy within polite society—a politeness and propriety which both she and Rochester disapprove of anyway (“confound these civilities!” (Brontë 119)). Just like the fae, who, Jane believes have “all gone out of England to some savage country where the woods were wilder and thicker, and the population more scant,” (Brontë 21) the two escape to a wooded area; and although she believes

⁹ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type F150.1, *Way to otherworld hard to find*. English: Gawain and the Green Knight

¹⁰ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type F143, *Wood at borders of otherworld*. Irish: *Cross

¹¹ Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Type F261.1, *Fairy rings on grass*. Seen after fairy dance. Irish myth: Cross; English: Brueyre RTP II 74ff.

there are no fairies left in England, it appears as though the spirit of the fae lives on in Jane and Rochester, in their continuing fondness for these stories and creatures, as well as in the location of their home. Charlotte Brontë's friend Ellen Nussey, considering the societal isolation of the Brontë family in the Northern countryside, defended the family's love of solitude: "For it was not the seclusion of a solitary person, such as Charlotte endured in after days, and which in time becomes awfully oppressive and injurious. It was the solitude and seclusion shared and enjoyed with intelligent companionship, and intense family affection," (Brontë "Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë" 429). Brontë abhorred the society of "lesser minds" which made her feel alone and misunderstood although she was in company with other people. If in fact *Jane Eyre's* tale is a semi-autobiographical one, we can assume that she feels the same way, and her isolation from other society at Ferndean is in fact an ideal place, because she is sharing it with the "intelligent companionship" of Rochester; back at Thornfield Jane thinks, "I feel akin to him...I have something in my brain and heart...that assimilates me mentally to him," (Brontë 158), and Rochester is also someone who has "some...superstition...in [his] blood, and always has," (Brontë 398) emphasizing their spiritual as well as intellectual similarities. Thus, our ending sees her at her happiest with someone who understands her, and whom she can be the most unrestrained self with in the privacy of their seclusion. Unlike St. John, who makes Jane feel as though she must "abandon half [herself]" (Brontë 361), Jane, quoting directly from the Edenic narrative, feels as though she is "absolutely bone of [Rochester's] bone and flesh of his flesh," (Brontë 401). And although at first Rochester's deficiencies leave him needing "all" of Jane's "time and cares," his gradual recovery leaves them with a more equitable relationship, as well as Rochester's full understanding of what dependency and vulnerability is like.

IV. Conclusion:

Although many critics and readers are disappointed by the novel's outcome, seeing Jane's return to Rochester as a cliché, a *deus ex machina*, or even, as Lamonaca negatively concludes, a result of Jane's society limiting her ambitious expressions as a woman to marriage and romance only (259), who is to say that domesticity and love are *not* Jane's ambition? As an orphan and governess, Jane has been shunted around to different houses which are never really her own; she is a dependent for the first 17 years of her life, and her line of work as a governess is famously isolating, as she is neither servant nor family member in the households that she works for, being separated from community on both accounts. Before their engagement, Jane sweetly tells Rochester that "wherever you are is my home—my only home" (Brontë 221) but her pessimistic idea that he is the only one who will love her or have her is later solved by the discovery of her cousins the Rivers—and so the ending sees Jane with a *choice* between two homes. When Jane discovers she is both an heiress and has living family members, she is happier to discover the latter fact than the former, telling St. John that he "cannot at all imagine the craving I have for fraternal and sisterly love. I never had a home, I never had brothers or sisters; I must and will have them now" (Brontë 346); and later, when she is moving into Moor House, she calls "domestic endearments and household joys" the "best things the world has!" (Brontë 348). Jane's options by the end of the novel are numerous, and so her return to Rochester could be read as her true calling, a spiritual choice she has made (or been guided to make) amongst her many options. Griesinger¹² also points out that there is no need to assume that Jane will become a domestic paragon, altogether confined to the house and spending the rest of her days making the "puddings" and "stockings" she abhors (Brontë 101). She has her own passions, an independent fortune, and as an artist she experiences "the keenest pleasure [she] has ever known" (Brontë

¹² Griesinger, Emily "there is no reason to think that Jane will end up with pudding and socks, however. She has an independent fortune after all which gives her other options." (54)

116) while painting. In this way, how can we *not* be happy for Jane, who has only ever wanted real love and a place in the world, and how can we deny her that individual happiness, despite the societal constrictions she has no ability to dismantle on her own. Her faith in herself has prevented her from falling into the torrent of another man's will, and she instead chooses to "indulge her feelings" (Brontë 345) which have always been strong and which the novel endorses despite repressive Victorian-Christian ideology. Although Jane's individualized religious expressions allow her to circumnavigate the dominance of patriarchal Christianity in her personal life, she is obviously unable to dismantle the gendered and religious ideology of her society singlehandedly. However, what *Jane Eyre* as a narrative does achieve is its place in the literary canon as one of the examples that a "revolt against patriarchal literary," or spiritual, "authority is possible" (Gilbert & Gubar 51), as well as becoming an example for other women to think on the merit of exploring their own individual spiritual connections through its challenge to institutional Christianity's dominance, and its endorsement of open religious discussion.

At the end of *Jane Eyre*, critics have often found the fact that Jane withholds her own supernatural experience from Rochester to be a confusing aspect of the novel's conclusion. Lamonaca compares her "keeping and pondering" of the miraculous event to the biblical story of Mary's Annunciation; her interpretation of this similarity is that Jane has reverted into the role of savior or angel to the spiritually deficient Rochester, however, as has been previously stated, I believe it is simply a testament to Jane's reverence of divine "mysteries," considering them too "awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed," (Brontë 398). I disagree with the idea that Jane has chosen to be Rochester's religious reformer, as he has turned to God even before her return; he attributes Jane's return to his supplication to God, thanking his "Maker that in the midst of judgment He has remembered mercy" (399) a line which resembles how Rochester has

also tempered his superstitious pagan beliefs by conforming to Christian morality and atonement. Choosing not to share her information with Rochester, Jane instead keeps the knowledge of their telepathic communication in her private thoughts, and imparts them to us, the Reader, in personal confidence. This choice to withhold information and keep it privately to herself may reinforce the idea that Jane is not just becoming an angel for Rochester, but holds her own power in the privacy of her mind. However, this is in opposition to and complicates Jane's claim in the epilogue that "all my confidence is bestowed on him...and perfect concord is the result," (Brontë 401), because it is not Rochester but the *reader* who has all of Jane's confidence. Even by the end of the novel, there is never a time when Jane fully imparts to Rochester all of the specifics of her origin story. In her essay "Girl Talk: *Jane Eyre* and the Romance of Women's Narration," Carla Kaplan notes that the ideal listener Jane searches for is "gendered as another woman," (508) perhaps leading us to conclude that her self-authorizing process of writing, or narration, means that the Reader themselves is intended to be another woman. Previously, Jane has been denied the space to speak up for herself and make her own choices, but with Rochester, who asks Jane, "but what do *you* think?" (Brontë 111) and through the auto-biographical book that is *Jane Eyre*, she is able to define her own voice and experience and therefore gain authority, creation, and definition of her own identity. Thus, *Jane Eyre* as a narrative becomes one of the examples that a "revolt against patriarchal literary," or spiritual, "authority is possible," (Gilbert & Gubar 51). Though the ending sees Jane choosing romantic, passionate, heterosexual love over the company of her female cousins Mary and Diana, we can conclude that Jane is able to define and fully relate her spiritual journey through the intimacy of the Reader reading the self-defining work of her narrative.

I believe that *Jane Eyre's* spiritual message is one that rejects religious absolutism; at the end of the novel, although Jane disapproves St. John's idea of marriage and lack of sympathy, she relinquishes the epilogue's final words to him ("Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!" 403), symbolically forgiving and embracing him. Ultimately, St. John's issue is that he does not have the religious tolerance that Jane has. He mentions that it "seems strange to [him] that all around [him] do not burn to enlist under the same [missionary] banner," (Brontë 358) whereas Jane acknowledges that St. John is right for this mission because his powers are suited to them, and that he may "eschew the calm of domestic life" because "it is not his element: there his faculties stagnate—they cannot develop or appear to advantage," (Brontë 351). In addition, St. John's choice to become a missionary symbolizes his drive to convert people to his faith, the direct opposite of religious tolerance; the way that he is "sworn to spread" his "Master's kingdom" and "to achieve victories for the cross" (Brontë 335) is a representation of his imperial inability to let others express their spirituality in their native, instinctual ways. Jane's anti-absolutist doctrine is one which connects back to the Judaic tradition of monolatrous belief, which is the worship of one god while not denying the existence of others (DeConick 7); God's commandment is not, "I am the only God," it is "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). And so, Jane reveres the power of a Christian God with more weight than she does her other pagan deities, however, she does not deny their existence, or even involvement in human life. She believes in the "presentiments"¹³ and "signs" of dreams and omens, which she thinks of as "the sympathies of Nature with man" (Brontë 198) and so she acknowledges the power of Nature to connect with and guide humans. In the same way that Jane rejects the overt domination of institutional Christianity through her merging of spiritual practice, the way that she runs from Rochester

¹³ Presentiment: a feeling that something will or is about to happen (see also—premonition)

because it would mean too much self-indulgence, and then from St. John, because it would mean too much self-restraint, symbolizes this anti-absolutist stance in the novel's message; Lamonaca states that both of these "extremes...must be purged from the text before Jane and Rochester's domestic paradise can be realized" (256) and that domestic paradise is made possible by Rochester's own religious compromise and reconciliation, as well as his physical disparagement.

While Lamonaca analyzes the novel's ending line being spoken by St. John, and not Jane, as a submission to a "repressive Victorian culture," (259) I instead recognize it as a symbol of Jane's spiritual maturity and therefore religious tolerance. Despite the fact that Jane "scorns," St. John's idea of love for herself, she does not deny him the right to have his own beliefs and spiritual path, and she acknowledges that St. John has made the right choice for himself, while she has made the right choice for herself. Griesinger states that Jane "chooses to forgive St. John and proves she has done so by giving him the last word," and that this "final tribute strengthens the case for Jane's spiritual maturity...their callings being equally fulfilling," (55). Because Jane's hybrid spirituality heralds a more diverse and discursive religious conversation in England as society approached the end of the nineteenth-century (Franklin, "Merging" 470), she necessarily endorses an open space where religion can be discussed, and although there may be disagreements, the fact that she holds space for St. John in the end implies that true spiritual maturity is allowing the complexity of faith to be explored and expressed by others. Like Miss Temple, in the scene in which she converses with Helen Burns and Jane, Jane understands the merit of an open discourse, a merit displayed in how the conversation reveals Helen's power: "her soul sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell," (Brontë 68). This space that the novel presents as necessary for spiritual maturity is one which necessarily entails disagreements and conflict; in her battle with St. John, Jane finds "courage" in the fact that she

can recognize him as “an equal—one whom I might argue” (Brontë 362). At many moments throughout the novel, Jane calls on the Reader for their opinion, interpretation or audience. The revolutionary scene in which Jane calls for anyone to “blame [her] who likes” is what Kaplan describes as a “call for a response, a gesture, an invitation” for discourse, regardless of the discussion’s outcome (Kaplan 23) and this invitation is repeated for a spiritual discussion at the time of her supernatural connection with Rochester, when she says that “whether what followed was the effect of excitement, the reader shall judge,” (Brontë 373). The novel is a call for others to engage in their own critical thoughts about religion and spiritual experiences, and by involving the reader in these moments, Brontë opens the conversation to others in a call for these open dialogues which can bring individual enlightenments.

By using and referring to unorthodox, pagan spiritualities, the novel promotes the freedom and liberation, especially for women, found when allowances are made for religious discourses. Even just looking at the reactions of Brontë’s audience, who deemed the novel “anti-Christian,” (Rigby) the novel’s interplay of individual faith necessitates the opening of a conversation which would challenge and prevent the domination of Christianity. Jane’s spirituality is not one that rests “in one place, one discourse or the other” but arises “from the confrontation between” these spiritual discourses (Larson 47). Amongst chaos and clamor, duality and transience, individual truth can be found for those who, like Jane, look at and participate in these discourses with an open mind. Despite the surface level resignation to conventional religion of the novel’s ending, the interplay of pagan and Christian facets throughout approves and necessitates this conversation. In the same way that Jane hybridizes her religion to her benefit, the novel ends with Rochester stating that, “God had tempered judgment with mercy,” (Brontë 402), emphasizing the vital need for feminine mercy and feeling to be

combined with masculine principle, which Jane is able to do through her pagan influences. Ultimately, Jane rejects both the absolutism of patriarchy and of Christianity, recognizing their limitations and embracing a tolerant approach to life, espousing understanding, and an open religious dialogue which has already begun by the novel's undertaking.

Works Cited

"awful, adj. and adv." OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2023,
www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/13943. Accessed 19 May 2023.

Bebbington, David W. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's*. 1989. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. edited by Deborah Lutz, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 4th edition, New York, 2016.

Brooks, Chris, and Andrew Saint. *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995, pp. 1–4.

DeConick, D. April. *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*, The Continuum International Publishing Group, New York NY, 2011.

Franklin, J. Jeffrey. *Spirit Matters : Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*, Cornell University Press, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central,
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/newpaltz-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4982981>.

Franklin, J. Jeffrey. "The Merging of Spiritualities: Jane Eyre as Missionary of Love," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 4, March 1995, pp. 456-482,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2933729>.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press, 1979.

Griesinger, Emily. "Charlotte Brontë's Religion: Faith, Feminism, and 'Jane Eyre.'" *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2008, pp. 29–59. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44313877>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2023.

Heilman, Robert B. "Charlotte Brontë, Reason, and the Moon." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1960, pp. 283–302. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3044261>. Accessed 4 Mar.

2023.

Kaplan, Carla. "Girl Talk: 'Jane Eyre' and The Romance of Women's Narration." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, p. 5., <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345845>.

LAMONACA, MARIA. "JANE'S CROWN OF THORNS: FEMINISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN 'JANE EYRE.'" *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2002, pp. 245–63. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533514>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2023.

Larson, Janet L. "Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul: Discourse, Gender, and Spirituality in Women's Texts." *Religion & Literature*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1991, pp. 43–64. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059487>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2023.

Martin, Robert K. "'Jane Eyre' and the World of Faery." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1977, pp. 85–95. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24780302>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2023.

"Paganism." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster,

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paganism>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

“Presentiment.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster,

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/presentiment>. Accessed 2 May. 2023.

Rich, Adrienne. “*Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman*,” *On Lies, Secrets and Silence, Selected Prose*, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1979,

<https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.cofc.edu/dist/e/748/files/2015/01/Adrienne-Rich-1pcqhj7.pdf>

Rigby, Elizabeth. “Classic QR - the Original 1848 Review of Jane Eyre.” *The Quarterly Review*, published by Derek Turner, 25 Aug. 2019,

<http://www.quarterly-review.org/classic-qr-the-original-1848-review-of-jane-eyre/>.

Searle, Alison. “An Idolatrous Imagination? Biblical Theology and Romanticism in Charlotte Brontë’s ‘Jane Eyre.’” *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2006, pp. 35–61.

JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44313553>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2023.

Thompson, Stith. *Motif Index of Folk Literature*. Ind. U., 1933,

https://ia800408.us.archive.org/30/items/Thompson2016MotifIndex/Thompson_2016_Motif-Index.pdf. Accessed 23 Apr. 2023.

Ward, William Reginald. *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850*. Schocken Books, 1973.