

SUNY New Paltz

“I Know I Must Conceal My Sentiments”:

The Repression of Female Emotions in *Dombey and Son* by Charles Dickens, *North and South*

by Elizabeth Gaskell, and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

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**Abstract:** As the 19th century progressed, emotional and sexual repression became integral norms in Victorian society. This norm fell most heavily on middle class British women. Among the cultural indicators that best exemplified this phenomenon were the novels written at the time. In Victorian literature, the heroine was often characterized by her need to repress her own emotions and sexuality. Three such heroines are Jane Eyre from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Margaret Hale from Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, and Florence Dombey from Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son*. Their behavior reflects societal expectations for young women in Victorian England.

**Key Words:** English major, *Victorian*, *Victorian literature*, *19th century fiction*, *emotional repression*, *sexual repression*, *Dombey and Son*, *Charles Dickens*, *North and South*, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, *Jane Eyre*, *Charlotte Brontë*, *angel of the home*, *fallen women*

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***“Selfish Feelings and Violent Passions”*: Emotional Restraint in Victorian England**

In his book, *Inhibition*, historian Roger Smith writes, “The word ‘Victorian’ conjures up a British literature of order and disorder that stressed individual control and the individual’s duty to society” (Ryan 5). Smith’s summation of Victorian literature is accurate: the emphasis on emotional repression omnipresent in 19th century British novels reflects a culture that prized emotional suppression to such a degree that it became synonymous with stability and respectability. In her essay, *Righteous Restraint in Hard Times and Jane Eyre*, author Annika Mizel neatly summarizes the Victorian ethos, “It is generally understood that Victorian England tended towards the suppressive side of the pendulum, urging constriction in everything from the moral to the intellectual, the sexual to the emotional” (179).

The origin of the Victorians’ infamous obsession with self-regulation can be traced to the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. The early 1800’s saw a shift in ideology from the Romantic Era to the Victorian Period. Romanticism placed a strong emphasis on emotions and glorified individualism (Leporati 90). However, the Romantic emphasis on emotional expression became conflated with the passionate violence of the French Revolution, leaving people wary of sentimentality. It was thought that an “over-warm heart” ultimately led to intolerance, malicious behavior and violence (90). As a result, in the ashes of the French Revolution, “The cult of sensibility had swept Europe...giving way to a stress on restraint, self control and stoical wry

acceptance” (Todd 131). This apprehensive reaction against Romanticism began in the early 19th century. As author Gesa Stedman summarizes:

For the Romantics, the ability to express... emotions... is seen as something which is necessary to the preservation of the individual and-- by that implication-- social health. Although post-Romantic Victorians acknowledge this necessity they worry about the consequences of uncontrolled emotional expression. This gives rise to the tensions and the unease so typical of Victorian texts on the feelings (48).

As the 19th century progressed, emotional and sexual repression became increasingly normalized until it became an integral part of Victorian society.

Repression became a common practice in Victorian England as a way to manage emotions. In *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, John Kucich defines repression as a “refusal of expression” (26). Victorians were expected to exert self-control and conceal their emotions when in public. Kucich describes repression as a “19th century strategy for exalting inferiority”--people were not supposed to be braggarts or live in a way that drew attention to themselves (27). Modesty and humility were prioritized over personal emotions. Kucich’s understanding is that through the “insular dynamics” of repression, Victorians believed that one would be more in touch with emotional sensations than if they expressed these emotions in public or to another individual. Victorians believed that repression creates a “destabilizing split within the self as it transforms assertive energy into self negating energy” (29). Essentially, public displays of emotions were considered a waste of emotional energy that should be conserved for intimate self-reflection in private.

Victorians used emotional and sexual repression to deal with the allegedly unsavory aspects of their characters. If a person made a spectacle of his or her emotions, he or she would be considered out of control. The Victorian people believed that displays of emotions and sentimentality were dangerous because they belonged to the “uncontrollable realm of the animal” and were therefore potentially “destructive to the body” (Stedman 50). That being said, Victorians did not believe that emotions and desires were unhealthy. In fact, they believed that ignoring emotions could have a deep psychological impact. However, society expected people to self-regulate and never display emotions in public. This emotional dichotomy led to a dilemma in which people were unsure how to regulate their emotions:

Being too open hearted and willing to express one’s emotions without any restraint whatsoever was not in keeping with this court. But since the absence of all emotional expression not only implied the unhealthy absence of all feeling, but also rendered it impossible to judge what kind of class an individual belongs to, and what type of character he or she represented, the Victorians found themselves confronted with an almost unsolvable dilemma. This dilemma is the reason why authors of texts on the emotions oscillate between the call for total emotional control and this sometimes only grudgingly admitted individual and social necessity of emotional expression (55).

This socially mandated dilemma was especially significant because unregulated emotions were grounds for mental disorder diagnoses. Individuals who were unable to exert self-control over their emotions were in danger of being hospitalized. Early 19th century cases of split personality disorder were characterized by the patients displaying a “radical duality” between passion and

repression (69). Conversely, it was believed that healthy individuals could use self-control to repress the “unspeakables” (desires, emotions and passions) within their subconscious (Ryan 13).

If a person in Victorian England wanted assistance with conscious suppression of their “selfish feelings” or “violent passions”, he or she had many tools at his or her disposal. For instance, the first self-help book (simply titled *Self-Help*) was published by Samuel Smiles in 1859 which sparked a movement of similar texts over the course of the Victorian Era. Smiles and other self-help authors like Sarah Stickney Ellis (*Wives of England*) and Marjorie Morgan (*Manners, Morals, and Class*) devoted large sections of their guides to the proper ways to manage emotions (5). For example, Smiles praises the value of self-control in all aspects of life but especially the formation of “habits, moods, and the attention” (4). For Smiles, self-denial is the apotheosis of cultivating and maintaining self-control: “The worst education which teaches self-denial, is better than the best which teaches everything else, and not that” (5). For those who favored a more medical approach, there were many medications that promised to increase self control. The most popular was called “Fennings’ Cooling Powder” which treats “unhealthy heats of the system” for people who suffer from an “indulgence of the passions” (Stedman 63). The label on the bottle depicted a man fighting a many headed dragon which represented the struggle against emotions.

While Victorians were encouraged to regulate their emotions, society expected the most from women. This expectation is reflected in the novels that were written during the Victorian era. In his essay, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*, author Donald Stone summarizes that the Victorian heroine was characterized by her habit of “masking her feelings and repressing her fancies” (104). Over the course of this essay I will be analyzing three popular Victorian

novels (*Dombey and Son*, *Jane Eyre*, and *North and South*) to demonstrate the ways in which the behavior of the heroines in these texts reflect the societal expectations for young women living in Victorian England. First I will be analyzing the societal pressures that impacted Florence Dombey (*Dombey and Son*), Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre*), and Margaret Hale (*North and South*) as children and how they were trained from a very young age to self regulate. Next I will be analyzing the heroines' emotional repression once they reach maturity. In conjunction, I intend to break down the Victorian ideal of the "Angel of the Home" and demonstrate how this harmful ideal exists in symbiosis with repression. I will additionally show how repression effects the heroines' responses to displays of sexuality. Finally, I will analyze the fallen woman in each novel to whom the respective heroines are compared and over whom each ultimately triumphs.

## I

### ***"My plan in bringing up these girls... is to render them hardy, patient, and self denying": The Repression of Young Girls***

The foundation for the emotional repression displayed by Victorian women was laid during childhood. In her essay, *Mid-Victorian Conceptions of Character, Agency, and Reform: Social Science and the 'Great Social Evil'*, author Amanda Anderson writes, "All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self will, and government, but self-control, submission, and yielding to the control of others" (37). Here, Anderson argues that the lessons adults imposed on young girls, especially in contrast to boys and men, laid the foundation for the rigid emotional repression that they would come to see as normal. This strategy is present in the three novels that

I intend to discuss because Florence Dombey, Margaret Hale, and Jane Eyre were all trained to conceal and repress their emotions from a young age by the adults in their lives.

Florence receives her introduction to the emotional expectations placed on women at age six after her mother dies in childbirth. Instead of comforting Florence's frequent bouts of sobbing, both servants and family members scold her for irritating others and soiling her expensive mourning clothes (Dickens 38, 40). The motif of Florence not being allowed to express her grief after losing a loved one recurs a few years later when her little brother, Paul, dies. For example, Mrs. Chick delivers the following lesson to an emotionally distraught Florence who has been caught weeping over Paul:

‘My dear child...when you are as old as I am... you will then... know that all grief is unavailing, and that it is our duty to submit... We are called upon on all occasions to make an effort. It is required of us’... Mrs. Chick abandoned herself to her feelings for half a moment, but, as a practical illustration of her doctrine, brought herself up short, in the middle of a sob and went on again (269-270).

Mrs. Chick's lesson to her niece aligns with the parenting advice found in many Victorian self help books. For instance, one popular self help book called *The Physiology of the Will* encourages parents to, “teach their children self-control by distracting their attention away from their emotional reactions to unpleasant events in order to control their urgent impulses to immediate action” (Ryan 122). The aforementioned quote from *Dombey and Son* also reveals the cycle that is generated by the practice of emotional suppression in Victorian women: girls are taught from a very young age that they must “make an effort” to regulate all displays of emotion; the girls then internalize these lessons as they get older until repression becomes the default; then

these girls become women and have children of their own and impose these lessons onto new generations of children.

Young Margaret Hale is also forced to control her emotions by the adults in her life. When she was still very young Margaret was sent to live with the Shaws in London. Although Margaret adores her aunt and cousin she has a hard time adjusting to being away from her home. When Margaret is older, she reflects on her time with the Shaws and recalls that she had “been bidden not to cry by the nurse” (Gaskell 10). Margaret’s deceptively innocent childhood memory reveals the harmful ideology that was forced onto her when she was an impressionable young girl. A few pages later Margaret also remembers that she had responded to the nurse’s chastisements with the, “healthy shame of a child” (Gaskell 19). These moments reflect the emphasis on cultivating a child’s sense of self control that was common in Victorian England. Victorian psychologist Alexander Bain wrote in his book, *The Emotions and the Will*, “The systematic calming down of physical excitement cannot be over-inculcated in [a child’s] education” (Ryan 45). To a contemporary reader, Margaret’s musings reveal that she has internalized the lessons that adults forced on her as a child to such a degree that she now agrees with them and considers them “healthy”.

The adults in Jane Eyre’s life also policed her displays of sentimentality when she was a child. After being orphaned as an infant, Jane goes to live with the Reeds. The novel opens with nine year old Jane reading on a windowsill after she was banished from the family room for not possessing a, “more sociable and childlike disposition” or a “more attractive and sprightly manner” (Brontë 11). Clearly, Jane’s inability to mask her emotions is what leads to her being frequently punished by her guardian. Jane’s feisty and emotional nature is even more

condemnable because she is a girl and Victorian society mandated that girls conceal their emotions more than boys. In the article “Righteous Restraint in *Hard Times* and *Jane Eyre*” author Annika Mizel argues, “[Victorians] advocated differing degrees of restraint for the young... insisting that the bold, independent, enterprising spirit encouraged in boys should be suppressed in girls” (178). This double standard is plainly present in the early chapters of *Jane Eyre*. While living in Gateshead Hall, Jane is abused by her cousin John and neglected by her Aunt Reed. While reflecting on how she was treated as a child Jane remembers, “[John Reed] called his mother ‘old girl’... bluntly disregarded her wishes; not unfrequently tore and spoiled her silk attire; and he was still her ‘own darlin’. I dared to commit no fault: I strove to fulfill every duty; and I was teemed naughty and tiresome” (Brontë 15). Although John and Jane both have a temper, John’s behavior is excused while Jane’s is condemned.

Adults are constantly policing the emotions of Florence, Margaret and Jane and the result is that the three young heroines become afraid of expressing their emotions in front of other people. For example, Florence’s fear of displaying her true feelings in front of her negligent father once she is an adult is a motif throughout *Dombey and Son*. As the text makes clear, Florence’s inability to emote in front of her father started when she was a child and was strengthened as she grew older. Dickens devotes a lot of time to Florence’s grief over her mother’s death and her inability to cope with her loss. While Florence initially turned to her father for guidance, she soon learns that Mr. Dombey has no patience for her or her grief:

When little Florence timidly presented herself, Mr Dombey stopped in his pacing up and down and looked towards her. Had he looked with greater interest and with a father’s eye, he might have read in her keen glance the impulses and fears

that made her waver; the passionate desire to run clinging to him, crying, as she hid her face in his embrace, ‘Oh father, try to love me! there’s no one else!’ the dread of a repulse; the fear of being too bold, and of offending him; the pitiable need in which she stood of some assurance and encouragement; and how her overcharged young heart was wandering to find some natural resting-place, for its sorrow and affection (Dickens 42-43).

The repetition of words with negative connotations show that Florence has been ridiculed for being emotional in public so often that she is now physically unable to express her feelings to her father. Similarly, Dickens’ use of enjambment is meant to demonstrate Florence’s inner turmoil at not being able to express the emotions that are weighing on her.

Margaret also recalls a childhood fear of upsetting other people by being too emotional. When Margaret is scolded for crying after her parents leave her in London, Gaskell writes, “The little Margaret had hushed her sobs, and tried to lie quiet as if asleep, for fear of making her father unhappy by her grief which she dared not express before her aunt, and which she rather thought it was wrong to feel at all after the long hoping, and planning, and contriving they had gone through at home” (10). Margaret reveals that she was afraid that her sadness would upset her father. She also expresses guilt at being upset in the first place. Margaret’s response to the nurse’s scolding shows that she has begun to internalize the lessons that have been imposed on her. Margaret’s fear of upsetting other people is also strengthened when the nurse expresses concerns that Margaret’s hysterics will have a negative impact on her cousin Edith with whom she shares the nursery.

Jane, too, expresses extreme fear of displaying her emotions. After an altercation with John Reed, Mrs. Reed tells the servant Miss Abbot to lock Jane in the Red Room until the next morning. Jane, who is terrified of the Red Room because Mr. Reed died in it, starts to sob. Instead of comforting her, Miss Abbot remarks to another servant that, “God will punish her: he might strike her dead in the midst of her tantrums” (Brontë 13). Miss Abbot’s fear tactic certainly works because Jane becomes frightened that her crying will disturb not only God but the ghost of Mr. Reed, who Jane is positive haunts the Red Room. Jane reflects, “I wiped my tears and hushed my sobs; fearful lest any sign of violent grief might wake a prenatal voice to comfort me... with all my might I endeavored to stifle it - I endeavored to be firm” (17). Even though Jane has been locked away in a room all alone, she forces herself to stop crying because she is afraid that a metaphysical being (either deity or ghost) will hear her sobs and punish Jane for her emotional display.

The constant regulating of emotions and the fear that the young heroines attach to public displays of sentimentality cause them to internalize the lessons that have been imposed onto them to such a degree that emotional repression becomes innate. Nine year old Florence is understandably distressed when she finds herself in the clutches of Mrs. Brown. Instead of vocalizing her concerns Dickens writes that it was “natural” for Florence to “be quiet” and “repress what she felt, and feared, and hoped” (88). Dickens’ use of the word “natural” is proof that repressing her emotions has become second nature to Florence. Dickens allows Florence to apply her new sense of self control a few pages later when Walter finds her and offers to take her home. Florence bursts into tears after thanking Walter profusely, “giving full vent to the childish feelings she had so long suppressed” (92). Florence’s shame at her own “childish” emotional

display in front of a boy who is only a few years older than her reveals that she has internalized the interpersonal rules of a society that links virtue with self regulation. The naturalization of Florence's emotional repression reaches its full height a few chapters later when she entreats her father to assist Walter and his uncle financially: "Florence came running in: her face suffused with a bright color, and her eyes sparkling joyfully: and cried, 'Papa! Papa! Here's Walter! And he won't come in'... 'Walter Papa, said Florence timidly, sensible of having approached the presence with too much familiarity. 'Who found me when I was lost'" (149). Florence's abrupt shift from childlike excitement over the idea of helping her new friend to feebly awaiting a cue from her father in a matter of sentences encapsulates a dynamic in which Florence has learned to check herself instead of waiting to be reprimanded.

Like Florence, Jane also comes to regard emotional repression as natural and this is evident by her emotional turmoil after she yells at Mrs. Reed for mistreating her. Jane initially feels exalted after she confronts Mrs. Reed but her sense of triumph is short lived:

I enjoyed my conqueror's solitude. First, I smiled to myself and felt elate; but this fierce pleasure subsided in me as fast as did the accelerated throb of my pulses. A child cannot quarrel with its elders, as I had done; cannot give its furious feelings uncontrolled play, as I had given mine, without experiencing afterwards the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction . . . half an hour's silence and reflection had shown me the madness of my conduct, and the dreariness of my hated and hating position (Brontë 46-47).

It only takes Jane a few hours to be consumed with guilt over losing her temper at Mrs. Reed. Jane's profound sense of shame aligns with what Annika Mizel argues was central to every

Victorian child's emotional education: children were trained to never lose control nor speak badly to an adult. Mizel argues that this training often involved, "a [fallen] child's sickening regret and agonizing realization of error". She continues that once children learned to self regulate, "childhood, like adulthood, came to be characterized by a somberness and solemnness that often seems strange to modern eyes" (Mizel 177). Clearly, Jane is on the ideal Victorian path toward maturation because she already finds her own passionate displays to be distasteful and her moments of emotional repression to be natural and virtuous.

The events in the early chapters of the three novels reveal that growing up means fully mastering sentimentality. After Paul dies and Mr. Dombey leaves town, Florence is sent to spend the summer with the Skettles. She is unable to connect with anybody she meets and she spends her time in self-enforced isolation. One day, while out picking flowers, Florence overhears a mother and daughter talking about her: "Though we see her so cheerful; with a pleasant smile in every amusement here, she can hardly be quite happy... Not an orphan in the wide world can be so deserted as the child who is an outcast from a living parent's love" (Dickens 380-381). The conversation that Florence overhears lasts for several pages and every time they say something that upsets Florence she accidentally drops one of the flowers she is carrying. When the conversation concludes, Dickens writes that, "The flowers scattered on the ground like dust; the empty hands were spread upon the face; and orphaned Florence, shrinking down upon the ground, wept long and bitterly" (381). This sequence marks the end of Florence's childhood. The dropping of the individual flowers is a metaphor for the control that Florence is exerting in order to keep her emotions in check; which is why she ultimately flings the remaining flowers to the ground and succumbs to tears once she is finally alone.

For Jane, maturation also comes from mastering self control. When Mrs. Reed decides to send Jane to Lowood School, she explains to Headmaster Brocklehurst that Jane requires discipline and education because she is too “passionate” (Brontë 37), something that Mr. Brocklehurst ensures that his institution will iron out of her. Mr. Brocklehurst eventually explains that the purpose of his school is to render girls, “hardy, patient, and self denying” (65). Mr. Brocklehurst’s teaching methods align with Victorian ideals. Victorians believed that learning restraint and self control was the overarching goal of a young girl's education (Mizel 177). Clearly, Mr. Brocklehurst made good on his promise to Mrs. Reed because, as eighteen year old Jane reflects after being at Lowood for ten years, “More harmonious thoughts, what seemed better regulated feelings had become inmates of my mind. I had given allegiance to duty and order, I was quiet... I appeared a disciplined and subdued character” (Brontë 84). Jane’s assessment of her own character is a direct contrast to the precocious and excitable young girl that she used to be.

## II

### ***“You must resolve to set a watch upon yourself and to be firm in your control over yourself”: The Repression of Female Emotions***

Victorians were expected to repress their feelings but this was even more prominent for women. In order to be viewed as proper ladies, Victorian women had to show restraint and mask any overly emotional or passionate displays. In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, author Nancy Armstrong quotes Romantic pseudoscientist Erasmus Darwin on this issue:

The female character should possess the mild and retiring virtues rather than the bold and dazzling ones; great eminence in almost anything is sometimes injurious

to a young lady; whose temper and disposition should appear to be pliant rather than robust; to be ready to take impressions rather than to be decidedly marked; as great apparent strength of character, however excellent, is liable to alarm both her own and the other sex; and to create admiration rather than affection (135).

Most Victorians shared the same beliefs as Erasmus. One notable example is Charles Dickens who founded a home for fallen women in 1847. In the appeal that was printed and distributed to its inhabitants, he wrote, “You must resolve to set a watch upon yourself and to be firm in your control over yourself and to restrain yourself to be gentle, patient, preserving and good tempered” (Ryan 5). In these homes for fallen women, the women were examined daily for good behavior according to a mark table that consisted of nine categories: truthfulness, industry, temper, propriety of conduct and conversation, temperance, order, punctuality, economy, and cleanliness. In Dickens’ home for fallen women, “temperance” was the greatest emphasis. Dickens explains that the category of temperance should be characterized by “moderation, patience, calmness, sedateness, and a moderation of passion”. If a woman could master temperance then she was ready to be an upstanding member of Victorian society again (11-12).

Women were pseudo-scientifically characterized as more emotional than men. That stereotype was supported by many nineteenth century psychologists, scientists, and doctors. French philosopher Auguste Comte wrote that men and women were complimentary because the male properties of “culture” and “reason” and the female properties of “nature” and “feeling” created a sociological balance. While Comte viewed the male and female emotional dichotomy as complementary, Victorian evolutionary scientists viewed it as hierarchical. They argued that the female properties outlined by Comte were proof of women’s subservience-- a subservience

that was established not only socially but by natural law. As a result, evolutionary scientists and doctors accepted the notion of women's inferior mental capacity as innate (Wood 165-166). Such evolutionary ideas were supported, too, by Victorian scientists, whose works claimed that women were biologically weaker in the brain. Dr. Henry Maudsley wrote in his widely read magazine *The Fortnightly Review* that a woman's inherent emotional inferiority was supposedly, "intensified by the birthing and raising of children". He argued that women needed to exert even more self control over their emotions and actions in order to combat their biological inadequacy (Ablow 197). The work of Dr. Maudsley contributed to a society that already viewed women as inferior. As Jane Wood writes in her book, *Passions and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*, "social and political politics manipulates objective scientific fact and it scarcely needs saying that seekers after emancipation continually came up against the might of establishment forces intent upon affirming women's natural subordination" (168). Essentially, the efforts of Victorian medical experts both constructed and reflected a misogynistic society that understood women to be inferior at birth.

Victorian novels reflect a society that has been indoctrinated to emphasize female emotional repression. According to Jane Wood, 19th century fiction, "self consciously engages with the physical and medical sciences, and with social and educational ideas" (167). The heroines in Victorian novels are expected to display complete emotional control, even though their efforts are often taxing. For instance, despite the lack of a maternal figure, Florence came of age surrounded by many upper class women who met society's emotional standards. In an ultimately poignant scene, Mrs. Chick delivers the following reprimand to Fanny Dombey (who Mrs. Chick does not realize has died after giving birth to Paul): "I shall be quite cross with you,

if you don't rouse yourself. It's necessary for you to make an effort, and perhaps a very great and painful effort which you are not disposed to make; but this is a world of effort you know, Fanny, and we must never yield, when so much depends upon us" (Dickens 20-21). Mrs. Chick's insistence that Fanny must force herself with great difficulty to appear amiable in front of other people reflects the views of a society that abhors women who do not conceal their sentiments. Mrs. Chick's chastisement is overheard by young Florence who has climbed into the bed of her recently deceased mother. As Florence ages, it becomes apparent that she has learned to conform with the emotional regulations that lay the foundation for respectable Victorian society. Mr. Dombey finally tells a teenaged Florence that he is going to remarry and invites Florence to meet her new soon-to-be mother. Dickens writes that Florence gazes at Mr. Dombey and Edith with "a conflict of emotions". He continues to write that Florence struggles with a combination of, "surprise, interest, admiration" but most notably an "indefinable sort of fear" as well as the urge to cry over the loss of her own mother once the word "mama" is mentioned (443). Instead of giving into or expressing her many concerns, Florence simply wrenches her emotions under control and meekly cries, "Oh, papa, may you be happy" (444). Like the advice Florence hears Mrs. Chick deliver to her mother, Florence forcefully subdues her many painful sentiments in an attempt to please her overbearing father.

Like Florence, Margaret also forces herself to conceal her own emotions at a great emotional, and sometimes physical, cost. While walking in Helstone with Mr. Lenox, Margaret is caught off guard by the first of several unwanted proposals that she will be subjected to over the course of the novel. Margaret is instantly overwhelmed at Mr. Lenox's declaration of affection: "For she saw her lips quivering almost as if she were going to cry. She made a strong

effort to be calm; she would not speak till she had succeeded in mastering her voice” (Gaskell 30). Margaret, not wanting to appear rude, wills herself to conceal the distress she is clearly feeling and attempts to decline Mr. Lenox’s offer with civility and poise. By describing Margaret’s display of self regulation as requiring a “strong effort”, one can discern that Margaret’s calm facade is achieved at a strenuous emotional and mental cost. Indeed, over the course of *North and South*, readers are privy to the physical toll that emotional repression has on Margaret. Margaret suffers both a physical blow (getting hit on the head with a rock) and a psychological one (being humiliated by Fanny Thornton insinuating that Margaret is in love with her brother) after getting caught in the crossfire of the strike that occurs outside the Thornton's window. Instead of confiding in her parents when she gets home, Margaret conceals the day’s events because she does not want to worry them with the news of her injury and because she is ashamed of her lack of propriety. After finally escaping to her room, Margaret lets “her color go - the forced smile fell away - the eyes grow dull with heavy pain. She released her strong will from its laborious task” (189). Margaret’s staunch efforts to conceal her pain from her parents leaves her feeling “ill” and “weary” for the next several days while Margaret’s rigid self control does not allow her to seek the help she clearly requires.

Jane Eyre, too, understands that she must regulate her own feelings even when it is difficult. Jane is aware, and even proud, of the self control that she exhibits on a daily basis: “Ere long I had reason to congratulate myself on the course of wholesome discipline to which I had thus forced my feelings to submit” (Brontë 162). Here, Jane is praising her own ability to stifle the feelings that she has started to develop for Mr. Rochester. It is through passages such as this that the reader can see the Lowood constrictions that still “cling” to Jane; regulating her

emotions, actions, and private thoughts. Although Jane seems to think that her repression is subtle and obscured, Charlotte Brontë will soon reveal that Mr. Rochester is able to perceive and assess Jane's austere self regulation. Under the guise of a fortune teller, Mr. Rochester delivers the following evaluation of Jane's character:

The forehead declares, 'Reason sits firm and holds the reins, and she will not let the feelings burst away and hurry her to wild chasms. The passions may rage furiously, like true heathens, as they are; and the desires may imagine all sorts of vain things: but judgement shall still have the last word in every argument and the casting vote in every decision (201).

Through Rochester, Charlotte Brontë personifies Reason to comment on how Jane's self regulation controls her every action the same way that the person holding the reins controls the actions of the horse. Rochester's metaphor and subsequent observations are crucial to the reader's understanding of Jane because he accurately observes that while Jane does possess a great multitude of passions, she refuses to let them reach the surface.

Jane's devout emotional repression is certainly accomplished but at a great emotional and sometimes painful cost. Instead of embracing her feelings for Mr. Rochester, Jane describes her love as a "newborn agony" and a "deformed thing which I could not persuade myself to own" (244). Author John Kuich writes that, "in Brontë's protagonists, emotional breakthroughs are always carefully limited by the capacities for repression they imply. Extremes of feeling are never separated from the will to create distance" (46). Kuich's argument is most strongly supported by the fight between Jane and Mr. Rochester in volume II where Jane's declaration of love to Mr. Rochester is overshadowed by her threat to abandon him: "Do you think I can stay to

become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?... I have as much soul as you, — and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you “ (Brontë 253). Jane’s argument with Mr. Rochester on the eve of her departure to Gateshead is one of the few times in the novel that Jane expresses the emotions that are weighing on her. However, instead of rejoicing in her emotional liberation, Jane resigns herself to more pain by asserting that she will “exert” her newfound “independent will” to leave Thornfield and the man that she loves (253).

Since Florence, Margaret, and Jane have all been trained to repress their emotions, they become ashamed whenever they allow their true sentiments to be revealed. After an altercation with Mr. Dombey that concludes with him striking Florence, she decides to run away from the man who has neglected and abused her all of her life. At first, when Florence is running through the streets, she does so while crying because she is shrouded by her own grief. However, as she calms down infinitesimally, she finally begins to take notice of the people she runs past on the crowded London streets. Florence thinks that she is grateful for the pedestrians because, “they did her the good service of recalling her in some degree to herself, and reminding her of the necessity of greater composure”( Dickens 722). Here, Dickens explicates that the anonymous crowds help reinforce the need for feminine restraint by serving as a constant reminder to act like a lady at all times. Florence is so ashamed at expressing her emotions in public that the strangers that she passes on the street still force her to keep her sentiments to herself even though she has just experienced a traumatic event.

Margaret is also ashamed of her own emotional displays. When Margaret returns home after flinging her arms around Mr. Thornton to protect him from the mob of enraged strikers she

chastises herself for her actions. Gaskell writes, “I, who hate scenes - I, who have despised people for showing emotion - who have thought them wanting in self control - I went down and must needs throw myself into the melee, like a romantic fool!” (188). If Margaret had been a man, her attempt to protect Mr. Thornton would have been deemed admirable and heroic. However, since Margaret is a young woman, her actions are the subject of ridicule and humiliation. The diction in Margaret’s rant shows that Margaret is angry and ashamed with herself for giving in to her emotions. The fact that she refers to herself as a “romantic fool” is the most telling because one can discern that Margaret is primarily upset that other people think she lost control of her emotions because she is in love with Mr. Thornton. The intermixing of emotional displays and shame is best exemplified towards the end of the novel during Margaret’s analysis of proper funeral behavior. She reflects to her father that, “Women of our class don’t go [to funerals], because they can’t control themselves. Women of our class don’t go, because they have no power over their emotions, and yet are ashamed of showing them. Poor women go, and don’t care if they are seen overwhelmed with grief” (261). Here, Gaskell touches on the socio-economic politics that further suppressed Victorian women. Women of all classes have trouble dealing with grief. However, lower class women are allotted a small degree of emotional freedom whereas upper class women (who were viewed as the epitome of polite society) were crippled by shame in the face of emotional displays.

Jane expresses a similar sense of shame when handling her own emotions. Like Florence and Margaret, Jane’s shame is an internalization of perceived public disapproval. Mr. Rochester grabs Jane and kisses her before they both retire to bed after they become engaged. As soon as Mr. Rochester exits, Jane realizes that Mrs. Fairfax saw them together but Mrs. Fairfax leaves

before Jane can explain that they are engaged. Jane thinks, “I felt a pang at the idea she should even temporarily misconstrue what she had seen” (Brontë 274). Here, readers can see that Jane’s fear that Mrs. Fairfax’s opinion of her will be reduced is able to break through Jane’s joy. Jane’s anxiety over how other people perceive her is so consuming that it extends into scenes when she is alone. Jane is heartbroken after discussing Mr. Rochester’s impending marriage to Blanche Ingram. Instead of coping with her emotions, Jane is furious with herself for having an emotional response in the first place: “You repeated to yourself this morning the brief scene of last night? - Cover your face and be ashamed... it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them... Order! No snivel! - no sentiment! - no regret! I will endure only sense and resolution” (161). It is important to note that Jane is not angry with herself for expressing her emotions to another person. On the contrary, Jane’s claim that she should “cover her face and be ashamed” of her sentiments reveals a person who is so burdened by a society that demands total emotional repression from women that she is ashamed that she had the audacity to reflect on her own pain when she is alone.

The fear of expressing their emotions in public leads to the heroines isolating themselves whenever they are distressed so as not to inconvenience other people or bring shame to themselves. While Staying with Sir Barnette and the Skettles, Florence’s estranged relationship with her father causes her to frequently become depressed when she is presented with so many happy families. Florence’s frequent bouts of crying inform her decision to return to the Dombey estate even though it is empty. While deciding to leave, Florence reflects that “the dull home, free from such embarrassments, such reminders of her sorrow, was her natural and best retreat” (Dickens 440). Upon returning home, Florence expresses that it is “better and easier” to remain

“shut up [in the Dombey estate]” so that she may “hide from the crowd of happy eyes” (441). Clearly, Florence views total isolation as the only “natural” solution to her emotional distress.

Margaret also has a habit of hiding her tears from onlookers. Margaret remains impressively composed on the eve of her family’s departure from her beloved Helstone. However, as soon as Margaret is able to escape to her room, the reader is able to see that Margaret’s cheerful exterior is a front: “She rushed up-stairs to throw herself on her bed, and hide her face in the pillows to stifle the hysteric sobs that would force their way at last, after the rigid self-control of the whole day” (Gaskell 48). Margaret’s effort to stifle her sentiments in the presence of others continues for the duration of the novel. For instance, before Margaret and Mr. Bell depart for Helstone, Margaret gets dressed long before they were supposed to leave so she would have the “leisure enough to cry a little, quietly, when unobserved, and to smile brightly when any one looked at her” (375). Similarly, when Captain Lennox and Margaret are on the train ride back to London after their time in Oxford, Margaret reflects that she was grateful that Captain Lennox fell asleep in the car so that she could, “cry at leisure” (401). As a young woman living in Victorian England, Margaret is ashamed to express her emotions in front of others out of fear that their perceptions of her will be diminished.

If Florence, Margaret, and Jane are ever unable to isolate themselves when they are distressed, they do whatever they can to mask their tears so that they will not inconvenience or disturb the people around them. While spending time with Edith and Mrs. Granger, Florence discovers that Mrs. Granger (unaware of the damaged relationship Florence has with her father) has orchestrated the evening so that Florence’s presence at dinner will be a surprise for Mr. Dombey. Florence is horrified and does not know how to proceed: “She dared not approach the

window, lest [Dombey] should see her [tears] from the street. She dared not go upstairs to hide her emotion, lest, in passing out at the door, she should meet him unexpectedly” (Dickens 465). Florence’s attempt to hide her tears persists over the course of the evening. Florence becomes so overwhelmed that she has been seated across from her father that she, “hardly dared to raise her eyes, lest they should reveal the traces of tears” (467). Florence’s compulsive need to hide her sadness from her father reflects a society that forced inflexible rules about the proper ways to display sentiments onto young Victorian women.

Margaret is also wary of expressing her pain in front of other people. When Mr. Thornton pays a visit to the Hales after Mrs. Hale’s funeral, Margaret is so touched by his dedication to their family that she begins to cry. Gaskell then writes that Margaret, “turned away to hide her emotion” (266). Anika Mizel writes that a large component of a Victorian girl’s coming of age is what she calls the “discernment of social standards”. She argues that a young woman’s ability to determine when repression and restraint is necessary marks her entrance to maturation and respectable society (176). The fact that Margaret is too afraid to show her tears even though she has just lost her mother shows that Margaret has internalised this component of the Victorian bildungsroman. Gaskell also demonstrates that Margaret’s fear of distressing other people with her grief is grounded in reality. Margaret finally succumbs to tears after Mr. Hale informs her that their family is leaving Helstone. Gaskell writes, “the sight of her distress made Mr. Hale nerve himself in order to try and comfort her” (36). Here, the word nerve means, “to brace oneself mentally to face a demanding situation” (OED). Gaskell’s diction reveals that Mr. Hale is unequipped to deal with the task of comforting his sobbing daughter. His discomfort reflects a

society in which people, especially men, were not used to encountering a young woman who has given in to her emotions.

Jane, too, endeavours not to upset other people with her emotional displays. After Jane admits to Mr. Rochester that it would be difficult for her to leave him she is overcome with emotion: “I said this almost involuntarily; and with as little sanction of free will, my tears gushed out. I did not cry so as to be heard, however; I avoided sobbing” (Brontë 251). Despite finally telling Mr. Rochester that she cares for him, Jane is still too proud and too repressed to let him see her cry. On the topic of emotional repression in Victorian fiction John Kuich writes, “complete surrender to passionate expression in Brontë’s fiction is always viewed as a diminishment of feeling.... And the very few spontaneous outbursts of passion by Brontë’s heroines... are all found to be deeply disturbing, partly because they disperse the self’s energies into the public world (49). Clearly his analysis is evident in the aforementioned quote because Jane is too afraid to cry in front of Mr. Rochester moments after losing control and telling Mr. Rochester that she has feelings for him. It is worth mentioning that Jane is not simply afraid to cry in front of Mr. Rochester because she is in love with him. Jane displays an aversion to sobbing even in front of strangers. After fleeing Thornfield and seeking refuge in a storefront Jane reflects, “I felt sorely urged to weep; but conscious how unseasonable such a manifestation would be, I restrained” (Brontë 326). Here, Jane is unwilling to cry because she is afraid that it will disturb the woman who owns the shop.

Florence, Margaret, and Jane are three very different women who come from three very different worlds. Florence is the only surviving child of a wealthy London businessman, Margaret comes from a close knit upper middle class family, and Jane is a poor governess whose

parents died in poverty when she was only a baby. Despite their different backgrounds, these three heroines all exhibit a compulsive need to repress their emotions at all times but especially when they are around other people. As was previously mentioned at the beginning of this section, most Victorian doctors, psychologists, and scientists were adamant that women possessed an overly emotional constitution and required total repression for women wishing to remain in polite society. The Victorian emphasis on respectability and total composure in the face of distress created a culture in which people were constantly policing each other's emotions whether it was intentional or not. Although all people were held to a high emotional standard, women received the bulk of the scrutiny. As a result, the public sphere policed the repression of female emotions and caused women to feel as if they were being watched and subsequently judged at all times.

### III

#### ***“Glowing with beautiful shame”*: The Repression of Female Sexuality**

Victorian women were especially expected to repress their own sexuality in order to remain appropriate. Female sexuality was not meant to be public. If a woman experienced sexual arousal she was expected to keep this to herself. Displays of feminine sexuality within literature were deemed inappropriate and were often censored by Victorian editors and publishing companies. For instance, Thomas Hardy's editor made changes to “soften” Hardy's novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* because he thought the original portrayal of Bathsheba's sexuality would undermine her self-control. He described Hardy's many depictions of Bathsheba's emotions and sexuality as “excessive” and believed they would lead to a strong moral backlash

from readers. The editor shared this belief that female sexuality must be kept in check with many members of Victorian society (Ryan 73).

Victorians thought that all female emotions came out of the “animal instincts of hunger and sexuality” and that “the human mind can and should be trained to master the body” (Armstrong 180). Many doctors thought that these “animalistic instincts” were a result of a woman’s biological makeup. For instance, late Victorian neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was celebrated for his work on Female Hysteria. The word “hysteria” comes from the Greek word for uterus, *hysteria*. Historically, the erratic, emotional behavior displayed by Hysterical Women was attributed to disturbances in a woman’s uterus. Hysterical Women “suffered” from a wide variety of symptoms but two notable examples were a high libido and frequent emotional outbursts. Charcot compared the emotive, sexual behavior of Hysterical Women to a person who was possessed by a demon; but in this case, the women were controlled by a biological dysfunction instead of an external antagonist. Emotions and sexuality were linked in Victorian England and women were expected to repress both.

Victorian heroines are constantly trying to repress their own sexuality in an effort to maintain their respectability. Margaret has been influenced by a culture that rejects feminine displays of sexuality. While watching her cousin interact with the man she is about to marry Margaret reflects that, “Edith came back, glowing with pleasure, half shyly, half proudly leading in her tall handsome Captain” (Gaskell 15). Margaret mirrors Edith’s behavior whenever she is around Mr. Thornton after she realizes that she is in love with him. The first time that Margaret is in Mr. Thornton’s presence after her romantic epiphany she spends the duration of the evening in a state of relative silence while attempting to regulate her own sexuality: “With his first calm

words a vivid colour flashed into her cheeks, which never left them again during the evening” (418). The final scene in the novel is reminiscent of this moment. After offering her marriage proposition to Mr. Thornton, Margaret becomes overwhelmed and covers her face with her hands. When Margaret obeys Mr. Thornton’s request to uncover her face, Gaskell describes Margaret as “glowing with beautiful shame” (425). Margaret has lived a very pious life. The implications of being a bride cause Margaret to blush. Society has taught Margaret that romantic emotions are inappropriate which is what prompts her attempt to mask this amorous display. In the presence of the man that Margaret has decided to marry, she feels a compulsive need to repress the strong sexual undertones of this scene despite its romantic nature.

Like Margaret, Jane also feels the compulsive need to repress her own sexuality. On the eve of her wedding to Mr. Rochester, Mr. Rochester remarks to Jane that “Rochester” will soon be her new last name. Jane’s response to Mr. Rochester’s seemingly innocent comment is complicated. Jane immediately starts blushing and thinks, “The feeling, the announcement sent through me, was something stronger than was consistent with joy - something that smote and stunned: it was, I think, fear” (258). Jane’s response reflects her internal battle with self-negation. On the one hand, Jane is excited at the prospect of becoming Mr. Rochester’s wife. On the other hand, Jane is also filled with a sense of fear at both her own outward display of desire and (like Margaret) the sexual implications that accompany marriage. Jane’s complicated relationship with sensuality persists throughout the remainder of the novel. While reflecting on her feelings for Mr. Rochester after she learns of Bertha Mason, Jane thinks, “I held passion by the throat, and told her... she had yet but dipped her dainty foot in the slough” (287). By

personifying passion and having Jane strangle “her”, Charlotte Brontë demonstrates to the reader that Jane is constantly trying to subdue her own passions.

It is important to note that both Margaret and Jane blush while attempting to subdue their own sexuality. In a Victorian novel, blushing was the only acceptable way for a Victorian author to indicate that a character (especially a woman) was sexually conscious. Since it was deemed improper to mention sex in nineteenth century fiction, both male and female authors had characters blush to show that they were experiencing or responding to displays of sexual desire (Stedman 70). It is a coded register of sexuality that was a product of authors trying to preserve propriety by omitting what could not be included in a polite Victorian novel. When a heroine in a Victorian novel blushes she is physically betraying her own thoughts. Blushing often indicates that a person has something to conceal that they do not want other people to know. In the case of Victorian fiction, blushing revealed that a woman was having a difficult time repressing her own sexuality.

In addition to repressing their own sexuality, Victorian heroines also had to worry about the sexual advances of others, particularly whenever they entered the public sphere. City streets were a place of sexual danger for women because they would be at the mercy of any man that they passed; it was best to repress any possible signs of sexuality to avoid unwanted attention. As a result, upper class women and girls were expected to stay within the home or (if they must leave) travel with an escort to guard against the appearance of impropriety. Working class women could afford neither luxury and did enjoy a little more movement (Zemka 806-809). Sue Zemka quotes British literary critic Ann Wallace who remarked, “how powerful, how unavoidable was the sexualization of women's entry into urban space” (809). She goes on to

write that these social customs impacted the literary female *flâneur* because while the Victorian male *flâneur* may, “aspire to a personal utopia of interclass crossings”, society still regulated the feminine sphere within the bustling British streets (810).

As a result of her family's situation, Margaret must walk the streets of Milton unchaperoned and becomes sexualized as a consequence. The Milton streets are sexually charged because women cannot help but come into contact with members of the opposite gender. In “Brief Encounters: Street Scenes in Gaskell's Manchester,” author Sue Zemka summarizes, “Victorian novels of urban life use the temporality of the street encounter to comment upon their limited capacity to forge and sustain intimacy with all of their characters” (791). Men and women were not often in mixed company so the moments that they were together become instantly sexualized. While describing Margaret’s walk in Milton, Gaskell writes:

But she already dreaded and fired up against workmen, who commented not on her dress, but on her looks, in the same open fearless manner. She, who had hitherto felt that even the most refined remark on her personal appearance was an impertinence, had to endure undisguised admiration from these outspoken men... Out of her fright came a flash of indignation which made her face scarlet, and her dark eyes gather flame, as she heard some of their speeches (72).

Margaret’s unaccompanied presence on the Milton streets makes her a magnet for unwanted sexual attention because it was uncommon for a woman of her status to be walking the crowded streets on her own. As Zemka summarizes, “For when strangers pass in the streets of a Gaskell novel, the plots that they set in motion run on the basic drives: sex and death” (798). The

workmen's blatant disregard for acceptable social interactions proves that sexuality can briefly overpower working-class boundaries within the public sphere.

The manner in which Victorian heroines respond to male displays of sensuality reflects a society that has trained women to guard against sin and impropriety. Florence Dombey nearly makes it to the end of the novel before she has to deal with the sexual implications that accompany marriage and romance. However, in the scene where Florence and Walter decide to marry Charles Dickens writes,

‘Walter,’ said Florence, looking at him earnestly, but with a changing face, ‘what is that which is due to me, and must be rendered to me, at the sacrifice of all this?’

‘Respect,’ said Walter, in a low tone. ‘Reverence.’

The colour dawned in her face, and she timidly and thoughtfully withdrew her hand; still looking at him with unabated earnestness.

‘I have not a brother's right,’ said Walter. ‘I have not a brother's claim. I left a child. I find a woman.’

The colour overspread her face. She made a gesture as if of entreaty that he would say no more, and her face dropped upon her hands (769).

Although Florence truly loves Walter, she is overwhelmed after she is able to see the desire that he clearly harbours for her. Florence's body language (covering her face, blushing, asking Walter to stop his praises) reveals a young woman who does not fully understand how to reconcile with the sexual undertones of a marriage proposal.

Margaret also has rather telling responses to displays of sexuality over the course of *North and South*. Margaret acts on impulse when she shields Mr. Thornton from the strikers and does not see anything wrong with this interaction in the moment. However, after the adrenaline fades and she is lying on the Thornton's couch she feels ashamed. Margaret has already been characterized as a sympathetic soul who wishes to help others. However, the interactions between Margaret and Bessie were an appropriate display of emotions whereas stepping in front of Mr. Thornton in the midst of a large crowd was an inappropriate display of passion (Koppen 261). As Margaret lies on the couch she overhears the servants gossiping with Fanny over the whole ordeal. Fanny incredulously cries, "I don't believe her to be so bold and forward as to put her arms round his neck!" (Gaskell 181). That night, when Margaret goes to bed, she has a nightmare which she describes as "a cloud of faces looked up at her, giving her no idea of fierce vivid anger, or personal danger, but a deep sense of shame... yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes" (189). Despite being hit in the head with a rock and passing out, Margaret's nightmare is not about the danger in that moment. Instead she sees a sea of faces staring at and judging her for such an open display of sexuality. Margaret does not fear the violence; she fears her visibility in that moment. This alleged display of sexuality causes her to feel a deep sense of shame.

Jane Eyre's response to displays of sexuality is slightly different from Florence's or Margaret's because she finds herself grappling with whether or not she can become a mistress. After it is revealed that Mr. Rochester is actually married to Bertha Mason, Jane claims that their relationship is now "forbidden" (Brontë 299). Mr Rochester, who is unperturbed by the concept of living with a mistress while keeping his wife enchained in the attic, is astounded that Jane

means to sever their romantic relationship. When Mr. Rochester tries to persuade Jane to stay with him Jane says, “Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour” (317). Jane, a devout and pious woman, refuses to live in sin even though she loves Mr. Rochester. Jane’s piety in the face of sexuality returns a few chapters later when she congratulates herself for making the correct choice when she fled Thornfield:

Meantime, let me ask myself one question—Which is better?—To have surrendered to temptation; listened to passion; made no painful effort—no struggle;—but to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep on the flowers covering it; wakened in a southern clime, amongst the luxuries of a pleasure villa: to have been now living in France, Mr. Rochester’s mistress... Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles—fevered with delusive bliss one hour—suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next—or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England? (359).

The language in Jane’s reflection is telling. She compares staying with Mr. Rochester to accidentally falling into a trap which aligns with Jane’s previously stated principles. Here, Brontë uses sibilance to create a sinister tone to match the impropriety that Jane is rejecting. Contrastingly, Jane then juxtaposes the imagery of a trap to an Edenic paradise, showing that Jane is more tempted at the prospect of being Mr. Rochester’s mistress than she lets on. However, Jane is a respectable woman so it should come as no surprise that Jane ultimately decides to stay away from Thornfield. As John Kuich explains, in Charlotte Brontë’s fiction

sexual repression and rejection of sin is, “a militant and anarchic competition between individual selves... an anarchy of power that confuses thinking about social and sexual relationships” (39). Jane’s insistence that she must stay away from the “temptation” and “passion” that is posed by Mr. Rochester’s desire is reflective of a society that has trained Jane to protect herself against the appearance of sexual misconduct.

#### IV

***“Her eyes were continually blinded by tears, but she had no time to give way to regular crying. The father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief” : The Repressive Implications of the Angel of the Home***

The self-denying “angel of the house” was the idealized Victorian woman, popularized by literature and advice manuals, that posited the wife or mother figure as the “presiding hearth angel of social myth” (Landland 290). Victorian society was fundamentally divided into two sections: the male public sphere and the feminine domestic sphere. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter credits the Victorian era with the formation of the domestic female subculture: “In the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term “woman's sphere” expressed the Victorian and Jacksonian vision of separate roles for men and women, with little or no overlap and with women subordinate” (198). The idyllic Victorian woman is not meant to have an engaging life of her own but instead is supposed to selflessly aid the people around her so that they can feel fulfilled. It is this self-sacrificing, passive characterization that caused Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to describe the angel of the home as a “a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travellers whose lives do have a story, can set their course” (Mizel 180).

Victorian self help books for women emphasize the importance of the angel of the home. In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, historian and literary critic Nancy Armstrong summarizes, “Throughout [the Victorian] period, countless female conduct books, ladies magazines, and books of instruction for children all posited a similar feminine ideal and tended toward the same objective of ensuring a happy household” (71). According to these manuals, women, especially upper class and aristocratic women, were meant to place their families’ needs above their own. The most popular female self help author was Sarah Stickney Ellis whose many books included such titles as *The Wives of England*, *The Women of England*, *The Mothers of England*, *The Daughters of England*, and *Social Distinctions; or Hearts and Homes*. In *Wives of England*, Ellis opined that a middle-class woman was “the least engaged member of the household” and therefore “should devote herself to the good of others” and “bring down [her] every selfish desire, and every rebellious thought, to a due subserviency” (Mizel 178). Another popular Victorian writer who shared the same views as Ellis was Mary Ann Stodart. In her self-help book, *Letters to Young Ladies on Leaving School*, she wrote that, “the author’s deep conviction is, that the part of woman is one of subordination and dependence; and that her duty in social life, is commonly speaking, to be expressed in one word ‘obedience’” (Stedman 154). The work of Ellis and Stodart reveal that the ideal Victorian woman was meant to be demure and accommodating at all times and to turn the home into a safe haven where others could take refuge.

The Victorian ideal of the angel of the home was maintained and reinforced by the literature that was published in the nineteenth century. As Florence Dombey ages, the readers can discern that she is becoming what every good Victorian girl grows up to be: idyllic,

domestic, passive, and sweet tempered. In describing Florence as a young woman, Dickens refers to her as an “angel” on many occasions (313, 705, 936). When describing her character, Dickens is sure to praise, “her patience, goodness, youth, devotion, and love” (315). Although Charles Dickens does not include many scenes between Florence and Walter after they agree to marry, the scenes that he does write perpetuates the ideal personality of a Victorian housewife-to-be. After agreeing to marry Walter, Florence cries, “If you will take me for your wife, Walter, I will love you dearly... I can give up nothing for you – I have nothing to resign, and no one to forsake; but all my love and life shall be devoted to you, and with my last breath I will breathe your name to God if I have sense and memory left” (806). In pledging her devotion to Walter in the face of a marriage proposal, Florence aligns herself with the feminine domestic ideal that was perpetuated by Victorian society.

Like Florence, Margaret exhibits the behavior of the ideal Victorian matriarch. Margaret is preoccupied with providing comfort for her family for the duration of *North and South*, often at her own expense. When Mr. Hale decides to uproot his family, Margaret dutifully suppresses her own heartbreak to relieve her father of his burdens. Because seeing Mrs. Hale's distress makes Mr. Hale feel “sick” Margaret obliges: “Margaret did dislike [having to tell Mrs. Hale], did shrink from it more than from anything she had ever had to do in her life before... ‘It is a painful thing, but it must be done, and I will do it as well as ever I can’” (39). Although Margaret’s dedication to her family is admirable, it is worth mentioning that her endeavours to assist her father often occur at a personal cost. Margaret’s self-sacrificing nature continues for the duration of the novel. Although Margaret is exhausted after managing the move into their new Milton home, she springs into action the moment she notices that her father is expecting

company: “She was tired now, and would rather have remained silent, and taken the rest her father had planned for her; but, of course, she owed it to herself to be a gentlewoman, and to speak courteously from time to time to this stranger” (63). It is behaviour such as this that makes Mr. Hale refer to Margaret as his “staff” towards the middle of the novel (168). In her popular self-help book, *Woman of England*, published in 1838, Ellis advises women to constantly “be on the watch for every opportunity of doing good to others; making it first and last inquiry of every day, ‘what can I do to make my parents, my brothers or my sisters happy’” (Ryan 54). Clearly, Margaret’s relationship with her father aligns with Ellis’ ideal domestic woman.

Over the course of *Jane Eyre*, Jane has two men vying for her hand in marriage because both Mr. Rochester and St. John view Jane as the ideal wife because of her mild, self sacrificing, and subordinate personality. When Jane and Mr. Rochester are talking on the eve of their wedding Mr. Rochester expresses his excitement for their upcoming honeymoon: “Ten years since, I flew through Europe half mad, with disgust, hate, and rage as my companions: now I shall revisit it healed and cleansed with a very angel as my comforter”(Brontë 260). Sarah Ellis writes that a wife must, “enter [each room] with a perception as delicate as might be supposed to belong to a ministering angel, into the peculiar feelings and tones of character influencing those around her” (Landland 297). Clearly, when Mr. Rochester describes Jane’s ability to comfort him as “angelic”, he is drawing on the notion of the angel of the home. Mr. Rochester then tells Jane that she will make a good wife: “You seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart” (260). St. John appears to share Mr. Rochester’s criteria for an ideal wife because when he is attempting to woo Jane he says, “Jane, you are docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous; very gentle, and very heroic” (Brontë 403). Mr. Rochester and St.

John share their design for the ideal wife with many men in the Victorian era. For instance in another addition to the *The Fortnightly Review* Dr. Maudsley writes:

Each sex must develop after its kind... since marriage and motherhood are, and will continue to be, the first and foremost function of women, it stands to reason that there energies should be conserved for the peculiarities of their constitution, to the special function in the life for which they are destined, and to the range and kind of practical activity, mental and bodily, to which they would seem to be foreordained by their sexual organization of body and mind (Wood 170).

Clearly, Jane aligns with this model of feminine perfection.

Additionally, a true angel of the home was always emotionally present for her family, often concealing her own pain in order to create an emotional safe haven for the male household members. In his book, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*, author Donald Stone explains, “The view that women have a monopoly on sympathy and self-denying behavior on behalf of others was prevalent throughout the century and was encouraged by both male and female writers” (138). The angel of the home’s self sacrificing nature allowed the men in her family to enjoy some emotional liberty within the home. The Dombey estate is plunged into despair after Paul dies when he is a young boy. Mr. Dombey is very public about his grief whenever he is home. Just before Paul dies, Paul asks Florence why Mr. Dombey keeps storming in and out of rooms while crying (Dickens 231). Florence, though only thirteen years old, is tasked with nursing her dying little brother. After Paul dies, Mrs. Chick describes Mr. Dombey’s grieving process: “He has said very little to me; and that I have only seen him once or twice for a minute at a time... I have said to your Papa, ‘Paul! Why do you not take something stimulating?’ Your

Papa's reply has always been, 'Louisa, have the goodness to leave me. I want nothing. I am better by myself'" (270). Losing a child is understandably traumatic but Mr. Dombey has given into grief and, in the process, left the women in the family to look after him in addition to themselves. His behavior is particularly detrimental to Florence who, despite being a child, now has to ignore her own grief in order to care for her despondent and neglectful father. When Florence's aunt catches her crying she is ridiculed instead of comforted: "Florence, pray let us see that you have some strength of mind, and do not selfishly aggravate the distress in which your poor papa is plunged in" (270). The burden of acting as a balm for her father's pain causes Florence to become even more depressed than she already is. After spending the entirety of Paul's funeral trying to be strong for her father, Florence flies to her bedroom so that she can finally cry after receiving, "no consolation: nothing but the bitterness and cruelty of grief (274). Florence's unwavering support for a father who has no interest in her, who once referred to Florence as, "merely a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested" proves that Florence has worth, after all, as a true Victorian angel of the home when she creates a refuge for a male family member who, in this case, does not deserve her.

The dichotomy of expressing emotions within the domestic sphere is featured heavily in *North and South*. When Mrs. Hale dies, her family members are obviously distraught. Margaret's brother, Frederick, breaks down immediately and "violently" cries for hours after Mrs. Hale's passing. Mr. Hale, too overwhelmed with his own emotions to cry, sits despondent and unresponsive next to his deceased wife. Margaret, while also experiencing a soul-crushing sorrow, does not allow herself to grieve the following morning. She became a "strong angel of comfort to her father and brother" (Gaskell 246). Her behavior continues for days after Mrs.

Hale's passing. Frederick and Mr. Hale are rendered incapable of maintaining the house in their grief and spend the days crying and wandering their home in a melancholic stupor. Meanwhile, Margaret and Dixon work to keep the house in order. It is important to note that Margaret is just as affected by her mother's passing during the interlude between the death and the funeral. However, unlike her family members, she is not permitted to act on her grief. Gaskell writes, "Her eyes were continually blinded by tears, but she had no time to give way to regular crying. The father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief" (247). Margaret was not able to succumb to her emotions like the rest of the family could. She wishes to appear buoyant so that the rest of the Hales might be persuaded to feel better despite the pain of the situation. Margaret is ashamed to display her emotions in front of her family members, choosing to only express them when she is alone: "She wanted everything to look as cheerful as possible; and yet, when it did so, the contrast between it and her own thoughts forced her into sudden weeping...kneeling by the sofa, hiding her face in the cushions that no one might hear her cry" (247). Margaret feels compelled to stifle her own grief so that the rest of her family does not see her lose control. When Mr. Hale finally leaves to visit his friend Mr. Bell, Margaret is relieved by his absence because she "had the comfort of feeling that no one had been kept waiting for her; and of thinking her own thoughts while she rested, instead of anxiously watching another person to learn whether to be grave or gay" (339). Margaret's behavior in the aftermath of her mother's death is emblematic of the ways in which the expression of emotions were to be handled in the domestic sphere.

Like Frederick and Mr. Hale, Mr. Rochester also enjoys his emotional freedom within the confines of his own home. In her book *Stemming the Torrent: Expression and Control in the*

*Victorian Discourses on Emotion, 1830-1872* Gesa Stedman explains that Victorian men felt safe expressing their emotions within the domestic sphere because the home is “firmly enclosed by being both private and female” (163). Essentially, men expressed their emotions liberally when home because the feminine presence within the home did not pose a substantial threat to a man's reputation. While describing Mr. Rochester's personality Jane comments that, “He was moody, too; unaccountably so; I more than once, when sent for to read to him, found him sitting in his library alone, with his head bent on his folded arms; and, when he looked up, a morose, almost a malignant, scowl blackened his features” (Brontë 146). Instead of viewing Mr. Rochester's sullen air as inappropriate and indecorous, Jane is filled with the urge to comfort him (147). It is interesting that Jane is so forgiving of Mr. Rochester's gendered, emotional displays given that she expresses rage at men who are free to express their passions earlier in the novel:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (109).

Perhaps, Jane's contradictory accounts of the gendered emotional dichotomy in Victorian England is a way for Charlotte Brontë to comment on how women internalise the lessons that society imposes on to them to such a degree that they start to subordinate themselves.

It is noteworthy that Florence, Margaret, and Jane are so accustomed to stifling their own pain in order to be a soothing emotional crutch for their male family members. My previously stated research proves that women were adamantly taught to repress their emotions while out in public. A logical conclusion stemming from that research would be that while women were unable to express their feelings in public, their constraints would be relaxed within the confines of their homes. However, the novels published in the Victorian era and the work of Ellis and Stodert reveal a paradox that is crucial to understanding the plights of Victorian women. Namely, that there were just as many rules about how emotions could be expressed at home that there were for proper behavior in public. Victorian women did not get to enjoy the suspension of censorship that you would expect from a public / private binary. Instead, they were expected to be caretakers who must put their own needs behind the needs of their family.

## V

### ***“That is my wife and this is what I wished to have”*: The Fallen Woman**

The repression of female emotions in Victorian times was an indicator of respectability while the failure to exert control over emotions rendered women as “fallen”. The absence of virtue or restraint is seen as an absence of respectability. The Victorian discourse on emotions was often gendered, arguing that women were much more likely to suffer from a lapse of control which would in turn render them "lost" or "ruined" (Anderson 36). Women whose emotional tendencies drifted outside societal norms were often compared to prostitutes. Prostitutes, marked by their inability and unwillingness to suppress their emotions or sexuality, became synonymous with women who had lost all respectability and were therefore the antithesis of the ideal

Victorian woman. Even the act of seeking work conjured images of prostitution as it connoted neglect of the family-- in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong calls this a “distinction so deeply engraved upon the public mind that the figure of the prostitute could be freely invoked to describe any woman who dared to labour for money” (215). Armstrong’s analysis of the Victorian perceptions of prostitutes and fallen women is unfortunately accurate. The obsession with remaining within society’s good graces forced Victorian women to repress all passions out of fear of being shamed and ostracized.

Women were understandably afraid to be called a prostitute since prostitutes were shunned from society with little to no hope of redemption. Under the subheading "Definition of a Prostitute," in his book *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (1844) author William Tait writes,

There is a distinction between the terms prostitution and prostitute, besides that which exists between a certain course of conduct and the individual who follows it. By ‘prostitution’ is understood merely an act; while ‘prostitute’ is always employed to denote a person who habitually follows the course of conduct implied in successive acts. Prostitution may arise from various causes; but by prostitute is generally meant a person who openly delivers herself up to a life of impurity and licentiousness, who is indiscriminate in the selection of her lovers, and who depends for her livelihood upon the proceeds arising from a life of prostitution (Anderson 49).

The fate of a fallen woman was a life of exclusion. She was shunned from polite society with no chance of reconciliation. Whereas a male drunk or a criminal could work toward rehabilitation,

the fallen woman was offered no forgiveness, no rescue, no escape. Instead, the morals of respectable society, “close[d] around her to hunt her back into perdition” (53).

The fallen woman is an archetype present in many works of Victorian fiction and Edith Dombey is an exemplar. She is often characterized as immoral, sexual, and indecorous. In *Dombey and Son*, Edith Dombey is characterized as a fallen woman through diction and metaphors that recall the image of the prostitute. Toward the middle of the novel, she refers to Mr. Dombey’s courtship as a “a matter of traffic in which she is a reluctant party” and reflects that, “she had beauty, blood and talent, and Dombey had fortune” (Dickens 425). Even the simple act of giving Mr. Dombey one of her drawings likens Edith to a prostitute: “She made and delivered [the sketch] as if it had been bargained for and bought . . . her haughty face . . . had been that of a proud woman, engaged in a sordid and miserable transaction” (431). But why liken Edith to a prostitute so soon after the readers meet her? The act of accepting a marriage proposal or giving someone a drawing is clearly not behavior that one typically links to prostitution. However, frequent use of phrases that call to mind the image of a sale and the negative diction used to characterize this sale reveals that Dickens wanted the readers to see Edith as a prostitute. Dickens characterizes Edith as a prostitute to foreshadow that Edith will become a fallen woman by the conclusion of the novel.

In addition to being compared to a prostitute, it is also revealed that Edith has a strong temper, something that was also a character trait of a Victorian fallen woman. Closely linked to fears of prostitutes’ unbridled sexuality were Victorian anxieties about unbridled anger. Although many self-help books were published at the time encouraging women to self-regulate, few books mention anger. This omission is because Victorian doctors assumed anger was an

emotion with which most women did not grapple. While self-help books did advise both men and women to control their tempers, it was assumed that women did not have much of a temper to control and were, “both by nature and social circumstances, less disputatious” (Ablow 195). Edith Dombey is a haughty woman whose anger is only intensified after her mother makes her marry a man that she cannot stand. Instead of generating sympathy for Edith, Dickens condemns her for her passionate displays. Dickens characterizes Edith’s anger as unfeminine during her arguments with Mr. Dombey: “Turning a bracelet round and round and round upon her arm; not winding it about with a light, womanly touch, but pressing and dragging it over the smooth skin, until the white limb showed a bar of red” (614). Edith’s aggressive temper and the Dickens’ allusions to prostitution rendered Edith “fallen” in the eyes of Victorian readers.

Arguably the most famous fallen woman in Victorian fiction is Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha Mason whose alleged madness renders her fallen and unrestrained. Victorians thought that women were more at risk of becoming insane because they have a “more exalted sensibility and stronger feelings and passions” and are “more prone to violent emotions” (Stedman 67). Bertha Mason represents the ultimate consequences of these unrestrained “violent emotions”. Bertha would have been jarring to a Victorian reader because of how far she “diverges from the period’s ideal of self controlled, well-adjusted adulthood” (Ryan 62). Mr. Rochester accuses Bertha of having a “violent and unreasonable temper”, an affinity for swearing and alcohol and “unchaste” sensual behavior (Brontë 306). As a result of her transgressions, Bertha (like Edith) is described as being unfeminine. In fact, she is not even depicted as human. The first time that the readers get a description of Bertha is when Jane describes the figure that appeared in her room the night before her wedding: “Fearful and ghastly to me... I never saw a face like it! It was a discolored-

it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the ligaments” (Brontë 283). Later in the novel Bertha is described as a “vampyre” (284), a “clothed hyena” (293), a “monster” (309) and a “fury” (310). These characterizations make Bertha seem like she is beyond the reaches of humanity.

Unlike Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell does not include a fallen woman in her novel. However, even without this Victorian archetype, *North and South* does illuminate how women could be ruined if they were suspected of improper behavior. Mrs. Thornton hears that Margaret was seen late at night, unchaperoned, with a man. Mrs. Thornton, unaware that the man in question is Margaret’s brother, is horrified that Margaret would make such a public display of impropriety. Mrs. Thornton is also morally outraged that Margaret is “gallivanting” with another man after Margaret had recently rejected Mr. Thornton’s proposal. She tells Mr. Thornton that Margaret must have had ulterior motives when she refused his hand: “She drew you on to an offer, by a bold display of pretended regard for you,—to play you off against this very young man, I’ve no doubt. Her whole conduct is clear to me now. You believe he is her lover, I suppose—you agree to that” (Gaskell 305). Mrs. Thornton is so horrified at Margaret’s behavior that she takes a carriage to the Hale’s home to reprimand her. She accuses Margaret of having “lost her character” and tells Margaret that if her own daughter had been caught in the same compromising position as Margaret that the Thornton family would be “disgraced” (309). Margaret, who knows that she can not reveal that she was with her brother out of fear that he will be arrested, has to listen to her name being slandered and is horrified that the Thorntons’ opinions of her will be reduced.

Fictional fallen women were also often juxtaposed with the heroines to create a good and evil binary. Many Victorian heroines have fallen women to whom they are compared and over whom they ultimately triumph. Florence and Edith represent the angel of the home / devil of the home binary. On the relationship between Florence and Edith literary critic Hillary Schor writes, “Just as Florence’s mother stands as an icon at the book’s beginning... so Florence will spend the second half of the novel posed against her darker angel, the fierce and moody Edith Granger Dombey” (53). As previously noted, Florence is an ideal angel of the home because she is attentive to her father and supportive and devoted to her husband. Edith Dombey, by contrast, is far from the Victorian feminine ideal. Mr. Dombey discovers that Edith’s performance of wifely duties are far from satisfactory soon after they marry: “There is a principle of opposition in Mrs Dombey that must be eradicated; that must be overcome: Mrs Dombey does not appear to understand... that the idea of opposition to Me is monstrous and absurd” (Dickens 645). He devises a series of lessons that he delivers to his new wife in the hope that she will smother her fiery nature and bend to his will, or, as he phrases it, “domestic deference and submission on which I felt it necessary to insist” (Dickens 646). By the end of the novel, Florence achieves what Edith never could: a cherished space in Mr. Dombey’s home. Although Mr. Dombey spends the majority of the novel resenting Florence, he eventually sees the light in his old age and becomes a loving father to Florence and a doting grandfather to her two children. Even Edith appears to understand the link between herself and Florence. When Florence and Edith meet several years after Edith runs away from the Dombey estate, she refers to Florence as her “better angel”. By using such coded language to describe the strained but powerful bond between Florence and Edith in their final meeting, Dickens solidifies that Edith is Florence’s foil. The

actions of an effective foil, highlight and contrast the qualities and motivations of another figure. Essentially, foils are used to illuminate what drives a character. In the case of *Dombey and Son*, Dickens writes Edith as Florence's foil to show the readers that Florence is driven by and prioritizes her domestic role.

As Florence is compared to Edith, so too is Jane Eyre compared to Bertha Mason. And where Edith is Florence's foil, Bertha is Jane's outright antithesis. After Mr. Mason bursts into the church and interrupts Jane's marriage to Mr. Rochester, readers are brought to Bertha's concealed attic bedroom and introduced to her for the first time. Mr. Rochester begins his explanation by gesturing to the enchained Bertha and saying, "*That is my wife*" (Brontë 294). He then places his hand on Jane's shoulder and says, "And this is what I wished to have" (294). From the start, Rochester depicts Bertha as Jane's unsavory binary. The comparison continues when Rochester says "Compare these eyes with the red balls yonder-- this face with that mask-- this form with that bulk" (294). In these few lines, Mr. Rochester depicts Bertha Mason as the unknowable and inhuman double for the knowable and familiar Jane. As the scene progresses, Mr. Rochester explicitly states that he attempted to replace his first wife with a milder substitute: "My fixed desire was to seek and find a good and intelligent woman, whom I could love: a contrast to the fury I left at Thornfield" (310). As a wife, Jane Eyre would be the idyllic angel of the house. Bertha Mason, with her demonic characterization, is the antithesis of the ideal woman: "Both Bertha's [sexual] license and her insanity represent the tyranny of the passion over intellect. By illustrating through Bertha the consequences of unrestrained passion, and by linking Bertha to Jane, this novel substantiates, by illustration, the premise upon which its didacticism is built — namely, that passion must be subordinated to restraint" (Mizel 186). Clearly, Jane's

devout restraint triumphs in the end because she is rewarded and Bertha is not. Jane is given a happy ending so Bertha must be destroyed. In the ruins of the house that drove Bertha to suicide, Jane ultimately finds happiness by marrying the man that reduced Bertha to a raging prisoner.

In *North and South*, the dualities between women characters notable in *Dombey* and *Jane Eyre* are manifested as an internal struggle within a single woman: Margaret. After Mrs. Thornton tells of Margaret's alleged rendezvous with a mysterious suitor, Mr. Thornton is distraught that the woman he loves would be capable of such a crime. That night, Mr. Thornton has a dream about Margaret. In his dream, he sees a warped version of Margaret dancing towards him with her arms outstretched. Gaskell writes that the Dream Margaret had "all Margaret's character taken out of it, as completely as if some evil spirit had got possession of her form" (324). Mr. Thornton is very shaken after the dream and has a hard time separating the real Margaret from the Phantom Margaret in his own mind. He compares his inability to differentiate between the pure hearted young woman that he loves and the sinful woman who flouts the rules of polite society to a man who cannot discern Una from the Duessa: the "dislike he had to the latter seemed to envelop and disfigure the former" (324). Through Mr. Thornton, Gaskell is making a reference to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*. In *The Faerie Queene*, Una is the embodiment of purity, piety, and truth whereas Duessa (the daughter of Deceit and Shame) represents falsehoods. If Margaret is Una and the Phantom Margaret is Duessa then the reader can assume that Mr. Thornton is Redcrosse-- the fearless knight who is separated from his lady after the villains manipulate him into thinking she is unchaste (Spencer Book One). However, as with *The Faerie Queene*, Margaret's name is ultimately cleared and she is reunited in holy matrimony with the man who has loved her from the beginning and whom she loves in return. It

is important to note that Margaret's name is cleared because the incident with her brother was a misunderstanding, not because a woman walking alone with a man at night was suddenly deemed respectable. The fact that Margaret still would have been condemned had she been in the company of a man that she was not related to proves that the grounds for her being absolved reinforce the strict moral codes that regulated Victorian society.

However, despite their misdeeds, Dickens, Brontë, and Gaskell represent their fallen women as surprisingly pitiful. Edith spends the rest of her days in poverty and shame after running away from Mr. Dombey with Mr. Carker and is separated from Florence, the only person she seems to have loved. Bertha Mason is also sympathetic. By the time the readers get to meet Bertha she is void of language and chained in an attic so it is unsurprising that the burning of Thornfield (her last attempt at defiance) concludes with her suicide. Dickens and Brontë force their readers to remember that Edith and Bertha were domestic angels once who fell from grace as a result of the oppressive society that they lived in. Edith and Bertha were regulated by Victorian society to stifle their pain until it became unbearable and caused them to deviate from the way respectable women were expected to behave. It is impossible to avoid feeling sorry for Edith and Bertha because they have been beaten down by the world and are unable to find peace upon the conclusion of the novel. Gaskell, too, sheds some light on the plights of fallen women by exploring how innocent women could be ruined simply because someone with false information slandered their name. Although Margaret is exonerated by the end of *North and South*, Gaskell forces the reader to consider how many women were destroyed because they were unable to clear their names. By presenting fallen women as deeply flawed but pitiful, Dickens, Gaskell, and Brontë complicate the good and bad binary by their nuanced portrayal of female

repression. However, the pity does not extend to any consciousness about the values that ensnared these women to begin with. Although the novelists want their readers to be badly for fallen women, they are still unable to achieve redemption and happiness.

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*Dombey and Son*, *North and South*, and *Jane Eyre* all feature heroines who repress their emotions in pursuit of respectability in Victorian society. Florence, Margaret, and Jane are all characterized by their single minded emphasis on propriety, piety, self-denial, and dedication to their family members. Dickens, Gaskell, and Brontë created these heroines but they did not create the social climate out of which their novels emerged. This suggests a body of questions: did the authors attempt to challenge these social norms or do their texts reflect an uncritical internalization of the rules? Are these texts a celebration or a critique of the emotional expectations for Victorian women? And what of the fallen women in each novel? To what degree are they met with sympathy or scorn?

Despite the masculine narrative that the title *Dombey and Son* suggests, Charles Dickens devotes the majority of his 1848 novel to the plights of the women who dominate his story. Although Florence and Edith are arguably the most crucial women in the text, Mrs. Brown, Alice Brown, Mrs. Chick, Polly, Mrs. Granger, Lucretia Tox and many others carry the novel to fruition. Through the actions of these women and the responses they produce in other characters, Dickens offers a fascinating consideration of the gender roles omnipresent in Victorian England. Through Florence, we see a celebration of the ideal Victorian woman. Her kind heart and generous spirit make every person she meets instantly adore her. Even Mr. Dombey, who spends

the majority of the novel rebuffing Florence, is eventually swayed by her unwavering dedication to her family. Although Dickens describes in detail the inner turmoil that Florence experiences as a result of her emotional repression, Dickens is not condemning the emotional expectations society places on her. By ending the novel with Florence in a state of domestic bliss, Dickens ultimately rewards Florence for her good behavior and celebrates the conventions of the society that brought Florence to her happy ending. Equally important is Dickens' surprising sympathy for Edith Dombey. Dickens' interest in Edith, which most likely stems from his philanthropic work with fallen women, ultimately leads (whether intentionally or not) to a character that readers find themselves pitying. Although Dickens condemns Edith to a life of pain and poverty after she falls, he offers a less black and white view of this ostracized, lost woman. That Dickens has a measure of empathy for Edith, however, does not suggest any real reluctance on his part regarding the mores of his time. Dickens' conflicted account of feminine restraint reveals how difficult it is to navigate proper behavior but his empathy for Edith does not extend to a critique of the values that condemn her in the end.

Where Dickens was on some level conflicted, Elizabeth Gaskell was abundantly clear regarding her stance on female emotional repression. As a woman herself, Gaskell understood the rigid self control to which women were expected to adhere. In the many scenes where Margaret hurries to her room to cry after spending the day beneath a cheerful facade, one can see the dutiful daughter, wife and mother that Gaskell has been her entire life. But her representation of the trials and tribulations of female emotional repression is less a critique of Victorian society and more a weary reflection of a woman who has internalized all of the lessons that she has been trained to absorb. While many of the scenes depicting Margaret's anxiety in the face of public

emotional repression read as a biting criticism to a contemporary audience, Gaskell's extremely pious and domestic personality reveal a woman who does not fully realize or acknowledge the struggles of Margaret specifically and Victorian women generally. However, one aspect of society that Gaskell does sharply criticize is the unwanted sexual and romantic advances that Victorian women were forced to endure in a patriarchal society. Apart from Mrs. Hale's death, Gaskell generates the greatest sympathy for Margaret during the times that Margaret has to conceal her pain while rejecting unwanted proposals and her discomfort in the face of the lewd comments from men on the Milton streets.

Charlotte Brontë-- whose misleadingly pious and sanitized Victorian biography was actually penned by Gaskell-- is the most critical of the emotional standards that bind Victorian women. Through *Jane Eyre*, Brontë critiques the ways in which Victorian women were expected to repress their sentiments. Brontë creates a character who is antagonized by her compulsive need to stifle her emotions and sexuality. The real villain in *Jane Eyre* (beside, I would argue, Mr. Rochester) is Jane's own psyche as she grapples with her emotions, punishing and denying herself in order to remain in society's good graces. Jane's emotions are not simply distressing. They are an "agony" which she is unable to soothe until the end of the novel. However, Brontë's critique of society also extends into her pitiful characterization of Bertha Mason. When the reader finally meets Bertha, she is void of language, shouting and contorting like a feral animal. Readers are supposed to fear Bertha and the violence she exudes but also pity her for the horrors of a past that the reader can only imagine (since, as a woman, she is never allowed to tell her own story.) Through the characterization of both Jane and Bertha, Brontë critiques the impact of feminine restraint.

“I know,” Jane chides herself in what amounts to a general prescription for Victorian women, “I must conceal my sentiments.” Indeed, the historical evidence that I have cited over the course of this essay points to a monolithic expectation of propriety and restraint for Victorian women. Accordingly, the manner in which heroines in Victorian literature repress their emotions is emblematic of the ways in which Victorian women were rigidly forced to behave in their public and private lives. Fiction, though, is different from propaganda. All three authors discussed in this paper approach the subject of female emotional and sexual repression with nuance and complexity. All three novels are subtle in their shades of meaning. Dickens, Gaskell and Brontë provide certainly open windows into the social expectations of Victorian women through the behavior of Florence, Margaret, and Jane. With varying degrees of intensity and success, these writers problematize these conventions even as they honor them.

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