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**Female Emancipation through Education: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre***

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The power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only acquirement, for an immortal being, that really deserves the name of knowledge.

(Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*)

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## Introduction

In the days of the early feminist writer, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), women were looked upon as inferior beings. They were weak, fragile, dependent and living in a fantasy world, mostly preoccupied with their outer beauty, and performing their duty by being obedient to their fathers or husbands. Already in infancy females were guided towards a behaviour based on these criteria, not being allowed the same rights to exercise their minds and bodies in the way male children could. This is what Mary Wollstonecraft reacted against. She claimed that to establish balance in society and make marriage an institution of equality, women should also receive proper education. Mary Wollstonecraft's book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), is a long and accurate description of her thoughts of what changes should be brought about in education for women. Wollstonecraft's principal idea might be stated as follows: "the most perfect education [. . .] is such an exercise of understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart" (Wollstonecraft 103). In this way women would become independent and also virtuous in mind, by their own reason, and not that of others, which might destroy their character. This thought is directly inspired by the ideas of Rousseau.<sup>1</sup> However, Rousseau only addressed men and made women inferior subjects, who should be educated only to please men. Wollstonecraft extends Rousseau's concept to apply also for women and discards his ideas about the inferior female mind as "Nonsense!"(108).

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft rejects as well the Biblical interpretation of Eve being created from one of Adam's ribs, believing instead "that man [. . .] found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure"(109). Wollstonecraft was also very influenced by the French Revolution and the

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<sup>1</sup> Rousseau's *Emilius*.

work done by French Feminists, whom she met during her stay in France at the time of the Revolution. Wollstonecraft's mind was of the revolutionary kind and this is clearly seen in *A Vindication*. However, her arguments were not seriously considered until fifty years later, firstly, because of the English anti-Jacobin reaction against the French Revolution and secondly, because of William Godwin's autobiography about Wollstonecraft, which was published after her tragic death due to the aftermath of childbirth. The publication of this autobiography made Wollstonecraft unpopular, because it was considered that her own life had not been lived in accordance with her philosophic theories. The critic, Jennifer Lorch, concludes that a result of the autobiography was that Wollstonecraft was seen as "the wanton iconoclast who had associated with revolutionaries and borne an illegitimate baby" (107).

Fifty-five years after the publication of *A Vindication*, another historical and feministic important work, *Jane Eyre*, was published in 1847. The author of this work, the Victorian novelist, Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), has been portrayed as a feminist writer because the novel is considered by many feminist critics to be as a good example of how a woman can develop her own history. The story of *Jane Eyre* has been seen as highly autobiographical. In the same way as Jane rejects the typical Victorian female behaviour and exerts her own way of dealing with situations, Charlotte Brontë has been seen as a forerunner of women's rights. This fact is referred to by Sue Ann Betsinger, who relates as follows: "Charlotte Brontë believed that adequate education, more than anything else, empowered woman to make conscious decisions and establish her individuality and independence" (75). However, in spite of Brontë's view on this matter, she has been accused of inconsistency between her life and writing too. There are critics who think that Charlotte Brontë shows signs in her letters that she did not live the way she pictured her heroines doing, for instance Jane Eyre. Again, it must be said that, just as Wollstonecraft, Brontë wrote from her own experience as a woman

living in a society which did not grant women the same rights as men, and her writing might imply that she wished to portray a future with more equality.

Both Wollstonecraft and Brontë received harsh criticism from contemporary critics. Wollstonecraft was pictured as a masculine misogynist who had not at all understood woman's position in society. Not only contemporary critics, but even some critics today, have misunderstood Wollstonecraft's intention to openly face the subjugation of women, in order to create more equality between the genders. For instance, the well-known feminist critic, Susan Gubar, discusses how Wollstonecraft's work started the "feminist-misogynist dialogue" (148). As a contrast to Gubar's view, it will be shown that it is important to keep the historical facts in mind when criticising authors, especially if the authors are not of our own contemporary time.

With regard to Brontë, her work was described as dangerous and misleading by some of her contemporary critics. As time has passed, the criticisms on *Jane Eyre* and Brontë's writing have become more positive. Susan Gubar, together with her fellow feminist critic Sandra M. Gilbert, who make important connections to women's literature, represent a recent and more positive kind of criticism of *Jane Eyre*. However, there are also shortcomings in their interpretations, particularly, with regard to historical facts. On the other hand, there are other critics who point out historical facts, for example Carol A. Senf, who thinks that Brontë was influenced by "the prevailing nineteenth-century preoccupation with history" (67). Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar even fail to make the link between Brontë and one of her greatest predecessors on the subject of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft.

This essay sets out to draw a parallel between Wollstonecraft and Brontë, and to examine how *Jane Eyre* can be seen as a disciple of Wollstonecraft's theory on education, and how

Wollstonecraft's ideas echo in the mind and words of Jane Eyre.<sup>2</sup> The essay also sets out to examine the historical context in which these two books were written, by trying to trace the limitations and possibilities which both Wollstonecraft and Brontë had in expressing their thoughts on gender equality. As has been mentioned, some recent critics have tended to value these works from the standards of society of today, forgetting that all children are products of their time, and that the terms were not the same 150-200 years ago. Therefore, this essay will focus on these two major works in the light of their contemporary society, otherwise the understanding of their impact on society will be unfair and out of context.

### **Education for Girls**

Jane Eyre is an eager child, willing to study and to learn. Already in the first chapter we are told that Jane is reading in the Reed's library at Gateshead, and we are also told that she has "undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings" (Brontë 10). This is where ten-year-old Jane starts her journey, as an oppressed child wanting to learn more about the world, but not, as yet, having received any kind of valuable education. All her aunt has tried to teach her is obedience, a lesson which Jane does not understand and as a result of which she is punished. Jane is denied permission to play with her cousins, since Mrs Reed does not want her children to be influenced by Jane, causing them to differ from accepted behaviour, as Jane does. Jane's deviation when residing in the Reed's family is clearly expressed in the maid Abbot's words: "I've told [Mrs Reed] often my opinion about the child, and missis agreed with me. She's an underhand little thing: I never saw a girl of her age with so much cover" (14). Jane is not accepted as she is, but she will not conform to the prevailing opinions of how a girl should be. She speaks her mind, says what she thinks, not what others expect her to say. For example,

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<sup>2</sup> So far, there has not been any other published work on this comparison between the literary works *Jane Eyre* and *A Vindication*, as far as the author of this essay knows. Though, James Diedrick has written an approach of how to teach *Jane Eyre* in combination with *A Vindication*.

she is quite frank when she is about to leave Gateshead, and she tells her aunt: "I am glad you are no relation of mine. I will never call you aunt as long as I live. [ . . . ] and if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick" (38). Despite the fact that her aunt becomes mad, Jane continues to dare to speak like this because "it is the *truth*" (38). This is, as Gilbert points out, "an extraordinary self-assertive act" (160), which an ordinary Victorian child would not have performed. These statements of Jane show the reader what kind of spirit Jane has. She is an honest child, searching for the truth, speaking her mind independent of other's thoughts or expectations. She has her own will right from the start in the novel, and we learn very quickly that she will not be subdued, that she will go her own way. She sees Gateshead as a prison, but soon those prison gates will be opened.

However, Jane is far from certain about her feminine role, and already when living at Gateshead she wonders why she never could "please" (Brontë 16). She is also jealous of her cousin Georgiana, because of "her beauty, her pink cheeks, and golden curls" (16). In this way she shows that she is influenced by the ruling gender ideals of her time, whereby women are expected to care very much about their appearance and to be obedient. Parallels can be drawn here between Wollstonecraft's thoughts and the way Jane is treated at Gateshead, and the gender ideals she faces. These are points which Wollstonecraft argues against in the following:

women are told from their infancy, and taught by example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives. (100)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There are several long quotations from Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* in this essay. The reason is that it is essential to show Wollstonecraft's use of rhetoric and her style, as will be further pointed out in the conclusion.

These are the very same terms which Brontë uses to picture Jane's first part of childhood, when she is faced with Georgiana's vanity and striving for beauty. She is also exposed to Mrs Reed, who is a mothering, role model of vanity, demanding that Jane should be subservient and not make her voice heard. Jane revolts against Mrs Reed's way of mothering her, even though she is sad that she cannot compete with Georgiana in terms of beauty. A part of her wants to be beautiful and pleasing, because she wants to be loved, and she sees the methods which females use in order to be loved, but another part of her wants the liberty of being herself, becoming whatever she herself wants to be. This is a struggle for ten-year-old Jane, who begins to battle against stereotypical female behaviour. Already as a child, Jane is not willing to give up her integrity for love. Senf is even more explicit about Jane's struggle, pointing out that Charlotte Brontë "creates a heroine who refuses to stay in her place, a heroine whose own approbation is her reward, and a heroine whose autobiography incarnates what is seen today as a feminist approach to women's history" (71).

Jane leaves Gateshead to encounter the rules and habits of an orphan school for girls, at Lowood. This is a great change for the "undeveloped" Jane (Brontë 10), who now gets a chance to study, to learn and to make something of herself. Attendance there is a chance for Jane to broaden her mind by studying geography, history, grammar, writing, arithmetic, and also the typical female subjects of that time: drawing, music, sewing and conversation in French. Had Jane stayed at Gateshead, she would not have received much intellectual stimulation. Moreover, at Lowood, Jane gets a chance to develop friendship and to be part of a group, thus, her stay there leads to a chance for her to develop a kind of reasoning mind, instead of being further suppressed at Gateshead. If Wollstonecraft had read *Jane Eyre*, she might have called The Reeds at Gateshead a model of "coquettish arts" (115). Brontë's view on female education is quite obvious by her use of such contrasting settings as Gateshead and Lowood, showing two typical situations for girls of Victorian times and how restricted female

education was. Senf clearly sees Jane's experience at Lowood in the light of historical facts when she points out:

No longer alone, she becomes a member of an entire group, implying that Jane's history is not individual history any longer but an historical treatment of her entire sex. The Lowood section is also a reminder of the complexity of historical oppression. While Jane and her fellow students are victims of both poverty and gender, Jane also suggests that women remain oppressed because of their inferior (or at the time the novel takes place, virtually non-existent) educations prevent them from understanding their condition. (72)

Even though Jane receives an education under poor circumstances, when compared to our contemporary standards, it is a development for her to attend Lowood, where she is exposed to quite different influences than at Gateshead. An interesting comparison with the standard of education at Lowood can be made with Wollstonecraft's view on how elementary school should be:

[ . . . ] boys and girls, the rich and poor, should meet together. And to prevent any of the distinctions of vanity, they should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline, or leave the school. The school-room ought to be surrounded by a large piece of ground, in which the children might be usefully exercised [ . . . ] For instance, botany, mechanics, and astronomy; reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy, might fill up the day; but these pursuits should never encroach on gymnastic plays in the open air. The elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics, might also be taught, by conversations, in the Socratic form. (293)

Some similarities can be seen here between the methods used at Lowood and Wollstonecraft's theory. At Lowood, the girls should focus on their learning, not their appearance. Even if the rules for dressing and keeping order are very rigid in the beginning of Jane's stay there, they nevertheless make a strong contrast with the vanity rules of Gateshead. There is also a playing ground at Lowood where the orphan girls get to play every day. Even if the subjects that are

taught at Lowood are not as comprehensive as Wollstonecraft prescribes, the girls receive more education there than the average Victorian middle-class female. In trying to give Jane a kind of proper education, it can thus be argued that Brontë is delicately balancing between vanity and reason in *Jane Eyre*.

Furthermore, Jane gets somewhat more supportive role models to study at Lowood, for instance, Helen Burns and Miss Temple, whom Gilbert describes as "a sort of shrine of ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy-and repression" (161). Jane does look up to Miss Temple, who becomes another kind of mother figure, although an extreme variant, a stereotype, just as Mrs Reed. Gilbert adds to her description of Miss Temple saying that she "embodies that impossible Victorian ideal, the woman-as-angel-in-the-house" (161). During Jane's time at Lowood she adopts a great deal of Miss Temple's way of behaving, and even becomes her colleague as a teacher towards the end of her Lowood period.

Helen Burns is Jane's first friend and also a female role model. Here, Gilbert points out that Helen is "an ideal of self-renunciation, of all-consuming (and consumptive) spirituality" (162). Helen thinks that it is in order that she is punished for her "faults" (Brontë 58), that she is not as her teacher, "who is neat, punctual and particular" (58). Jane finds Helen's attitude wrong and asserts her own belief: "I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who punish me unjustly. It is natural as that I should love those who show me affection, or submit to punishment when I feel it is deserved" (60). Here, Jane again shows proof of her independence and how her thoughts are developing in the direction of equality. Moreover, Helen is not only a model of self-renunciation, she also gives Jane ideas on how to exercise her own reason. When Jane is crushed by Brocklehurst's false accusations, Helen tells her: "If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends" (71). This quality of relying on one's own reason is something Jane develops as she

grows up, stimulated by her daily acquisition of knowledge and encouraged by her friend, Helen Burns, and her mentor, Miss Temple.

Hence, at Lowood Jane learns to control her feelings, and learns also that she needs to channel her energy, her inner struggle, into intellectual creativity. Yet, she is still under suppression, because she does not exercise her own reason fully. However, as Brontë shows us, things change again for Jane. This happens when Miss Temple marries and leaves Lowood, and Jane can then no longer repress her innate desire for liberty. She has now reached the stage when she has to practise all what she has learnt at Lowood and to continue her path to further development. Wollstonecraft characterises a similar stage to that which Jane now finds herself in as follows:

By individual education, I mean, for the sense of the word is not precisely defined, such an attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the sense, form the temper, regulate the passions as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity; so that the man [or woman] may only have to proceed, not begin, the important task of learning to think and reason. (102)

### **Practising One's own Reason**

After Miss Temple leaves, Jane has no reason to stick to the ladylike codes, since her role model has gone. She is "now left in [her] natural element, and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions" (Brontë 86). Her innate longing for independent development is revived, and she is ready "[. . .] *to seek real knowledge* of life amidst its perils" (italics added) (86). This means that Jane wants more freedom than Lowood can offer her. She has learnt all there is to learn there, and thus proceeds her battle for liberty, by manifesting her own reasoning mind, outside the walls of Lowood. Wollstonecraft might have supported Jane's desire "to seek real knowledge" as follows: "In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from *the exercise of own reason*" (italics added) (102). Here we can see how parallels

can be drawn between the words of Jane Eyre and Wollstonecraft. In other words, the message is that to lead a truly honest and moral life is to exercise one's own reasoning mind. This means that Jane has to continue in her search for liberty, looking for something new outside Lowood, otherwise she will fail to make use of her own mind, and become "virtuous" (102).

Jane, therefore, does what she can to obtain more knowledge of the world. She obtains employment as a governess, one of the few kinds of work open to the Victorian middle-class woman who had to work and support herself. Brontë had herself been a governess, just as Wollstonecraft had also been, thus they were both very aware of the terms of how important economic self-support is for a woman. Brontë shows the importance of this by her example of Jane as a single woman striving to support herself. Wollstonecraft's view on self-supportive women comes forth in her declaration: "that a proper education [. . .] would enable woman to support a single life with dignity [. . .]" (117). However, even though Jane manages to support herself, her choices of education are limited. A good point is made by Senf on the connection between the choices of work and education for women during the nineteenth century: "The result of that kind of education is not 'access to knowledge and culture and to the power that goes with them' [. . .]. It is this 'education' which makes women dependent and guarantees that they will remain no more than ineffective governesses" (73).<sup>4</sup> This is exactly what Brontë shows in *Jane Eyre*. Jane has not much of a choice and constantly refuses to be supported by other persons, but she takes advantage of the degree of liberty she can find, searching to expand her choices all the time. Because she knows that dependence on others for support leads to degrading obligations, she demands freedom to make her choices and to exercise her own free will. Jane's education has at least given her an opportunity to support herself.

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<sup>4</sup> Senf is quoting *Jane Eyre*.

At this stage, as a grown-up woman, supporting herself independent of others, Jane starts to brood over equality terms. This is more than evident in her thoughts after she has worked at Thornfield for a short period:

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 restraint, too absolute 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. (Brontë 111)

This statement is a clear and strong feminist manifestation. Jane has matured, and her own reasoning mind tells her that she as a human being should have the same rights as any other person, no matter what gender. Once again, reading the strong feminist statement expressed here, one hears an echo of Wollstonecraft's opinion on the same matter:

Connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, their moral character may be estimated by their manner of fulfilling those simple duties; but the end, the grand end of their exertions should be to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue. They may try to render their road pleasant; but ought never to forget, in common with man, that life yields not the felicity which can satisfy an immortal soul. I do not mean to insinuate, that either sex should be so lost in abstract reflections or distant views, as to forget the affections and duties that lie before them, and are, in truth, the means appointed to produce the fruit of life; on the contrary, I would warmly recommend them, even while I assert, that they afford most satisfaction when they are considered in their true subordinate light. (109)

Here, it is quite clear that Brontë can be seen as a successor to Wollstonecraft. Both in Brontë's and Wollstonecraft's works there are strong incitements for women to demand equal rights with men, and to see women and men as equal spirits who, by exercising the reasoning

mind, support each other and strive for individual freedom. Both authors also connect the individual right to equality to the supremacy of God alone, thus underlining the idea that all humans are equal and subordinate to God.

In spite of the fact that Jane has come to some very important insights about equality, living at Thornfield means that she encounters more battles to fight. Again she faces the vain female stereotype, in the persons of Adèle Varens and Miss Ingram, who in a similar way to Georgina Reed both represent an ideal Jane refuses to conform to. However, at this point Jane has matured enough not to fall into that old trap of beauty ideals, a fact which comes forth in her evaluation of both Adèle and Miss Ingram. Jane sees Adèle as a spoilt child who has not received the right training, she has therefore "bad taste" (Brontë 104). Jane's impression of Miss Ingram is that "her mind was poor [. . .] she was not original [. . .] nor had, an opinion of her own [. . .] truth was not in her" (185). What is even more important is how Jane chooses to act when she and Rochester are engaged to be married, when she does not agree to be "dressed like a doll by Mr Rochester" (267). She knows that she has to take this stance in order to maintain her independence and not become a plaything for Mr Rochester. Once again a parallel can be drawn between this refusal of Jane's and Wollstonecraft's idea that women have to resign their "arbitrary power of beauty" (103). Wollstonecraft thinks that this resignation is necessary before women can become equal with men, otherwise the unequal game of power between the genders will continue. Women will keep on trying to manipulate by being pleasant and beautiful, while men will assert their power by referring to their belief in their superior reasoning minds.

As Jane does not go along with the stereotypical pattern of courting, she refuses to be a victim. A typical patriarchal view of this scene is given voice by Bernard Paris, who thinks "[Jane] feels inferior because of her lack of 'fortune, beauty, [and] connections'" (129). On the contrary, it can be argued that Jane feels inferior and feels a need to defend herself because of

Rochester, who sees himself as superior to her, otherwise, she will lose her independence. She even demands independence after her marriage, by earning her own living. It is quite a struggle for Jane to maintain her level of equality as Rochester's fiancée, especially since Rochester is still stuck in old patriarchal patterns, as Gilbert points out: "Rochester, having secured Jane's love, almost reflexively begins to treat her as an inferior, a plaything, a virginal possession" (168). Rochester's patriarchal attitude is displayed on their wedding day when Jane finds out that he already has a wife, and then offers Jane a life in luxury as his mistress. Due to Rochester's lack of understanding, Jane has to flee Thornfield. She will not be his hired mistress, which, as Rochester himself says, is "the next thing worse than buying a slave" (Brontë 309). Even though they have declared their equality to each other, Jane still feels subordinate to Rochester because of gender and social class, as Senf also points out (74). Jane desires liberty, not slavery, or as Wollstonecraft might have added: "Liberty is the mother of virtue, and women be, by their very constitution slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom" (122). Jane defies the slavery Rochester offers, and continues her search, since her struggle to become independent is not yet over. Here again, Jane's struggles can be compared with Wollstonecraft's view: "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience" (107). That is exactly what Jane does all the time; she keeps on trying to broaden her mind and constantly refuses to be obedient.

Furthermore, when Jane flees from Thornfield she turns all her faith to God alone. We see an example of this also in Wollstonecraft, who turns all her faith to God: "[. . .] becoming dependent only on Him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex" (122). This total faith in God as the only superior power over the human being is a mutual belief that is echoed in the work of Brontë. Having come this far, Jane has to face another sort of oppression, in the person of St John, where she runs up against religious patriarchal oppression, or "the masterly voice" (77) as Senf calls it. St John wants

her to marry him to be obedient to God, to do His work as a missionary's wife. There is no love offered to Jane in this proposal, and she feels that "he prizes [her] as a soldier would a good weapon, and that is all" (Brontë 400). Jane's attained level of independence and her strong desire for liberty prevent her from bending under another patriarchal yoke, and she recognises the disguised oppression in St John's reaction after she has rejected his proposal: "the disappointment of an austere and despotic nature, which has met resistance where it expected submission [. . .] as a man, he would have wished to coerce me into obedience [. . .]" (404). Jane realises that she will be in a position of slavery in this relation too. It is as Wollstonecraft describes, what choices a woman has, she "will be either the friend or slave of man" (120). Jane will be St John's friend as his unmarried missionary companion, but as his missionary wife she will be his slave. Once more, Jane manages to gather her reasoning mind to escape oppression. Betsinger summarises Jane's dilemma as follows:

She would not be the fool for love before, and now she will not be the fool for duty. [. . .] While Jane saves herself from the usual categorizations of woman-whore or angel-she understands that the two proposals offer the same outcome. The prostitution of Jane Eyre, the fragmenting of self into the parts-body, soul-that meet each man's demands. (83-84)

Thus, what Jane avoids when she rejects Rochester and St John is to become a victim of patriarchal authorities, which expect submission. Here there is a link to Wollstonecraft, who argues that men are "tyrants and sensualists" (107), who expect women to blindly obey and only want women to be their "slaves" and "playthings" (107). By using the words of Wollstonecraft, it could be argued that Rochester is a patriarchal sensualist who wants Jane to be his plaything, and St John is a tyrant who wants Jane to be his slave.

## Marriage and Parenting

Jane's choice to go back to Rochester evolves out of her experience that "[she] had felt what it was to be loved" (Brontë 414), and the fact that she has become "an independent woman" since she has inherited money (429). Jane has also learnt that being a mistress is not being free and that a conventional marriage means restrictions. She has seen all the faces of patriarchal oppression and has refused them all and is now a self-supportive woman with several options to choose between, who is ready to face Rochester on equal terms.

On her return to Ferndean, Jane finds a changed Rochester: he is no longer a prejudiced man, but has gained new insights. Firstly, he has himself experienced "subjugation of [his] vigorous spirit to a corporeal infirmity" (433). Secondly, he has realised that "[he] did wrong: [he] would have sullied [his] innocent flower- breathed guilt on its purity [. . .] [He] began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconciliation to [his] Maker" (441). Moreover, he exclaims: "I humbly retreat my Redeemer to give me strength to lead henceforth a purer life than I have done hitherto!" (443). This is a man who has matured in his thinking and is ready to share his life with a woman on equal terms. Rochester may have known the essence of the term equality in the beginning, but he had to make those painful experiences before he could understand what equality truly means. He has not been ready to meet a woman on equal terms until now.

Bernard Paris's view of the end in *Jane Eyre* is that "[. . .] since [Rochester] is maimed and blind, [Jane's] looks no longer matter [. . .] the ending of the novel is such a perfect wish-fulfilment fantasy that it obscures [Jane's] psychological problems" (129). What Paris does not perceive is Brontë's intention to show how an equal marriage might be. It is not the facts of Rochester being blind nor Jane being plain that are interesting. On the contrary, Brontë's way of ending *Jane Eyre* seems to focus on the development of how to practise one's own

reason, and what happens when one takes the liberty to fully be who one is, despite gender, appearance or class. Senf takes this argument further in her conclusion:

Jane can marry Rochester only after her circumstances have changed dramatically. Thus far, the novel appears to mirror the kind of historical progression which Charlotte Brontë had actually witnessed, for the marriages of members of the gentry to members of the rising middle classes were fairly common, and the rising political and economic power of the middle classes was one of the most important developments in nineteenth-century England. (76-77)

Thus, Brontë was well aware of what was going on in her contemporary time and tried to use her observances to create a new setting and new alternatives for women, she tried to bring the concept of equality further, by opening up new ways to look on gender and class. Therefore, Brontë makes Jane and Rochester equally dependent upon each other as wife and husband. In Jane's words we are given an emancipated view on marriage:

[. . .] because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine [. . .] I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine. [. . .] To be together is for us to be at once free as in solitude, as gay as in company. [. . .] All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character-perfect concord is the result. (Brontë 445-46)

Not only have Brontë's couple reached equality, but they have gone beyond equality to obtain "perfect concord" (9), as Margaret Moan Rowe argues. This achievement in marriage is only possible if man and woman receive the same possibilities to proper education, to be self-supportive and to exercise their own reason. This is an argument that is also seen in Wollstonecraft's thinking:

Ignorance is a frail base for virtue! Yet, that it is the condition for which woman was organized, has been insisted upon by the writers who have most vehemently argued in favour of the superiority of man; a

superiority not in degree, but offence; though, to soften the argument, they have laboured to prove, with chivalrous generosity, that the sexes ought not to be compared; man was made to reason, woman to feel; and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character. [. . .] I come round to my old argument; if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as the employment of life, an understanding to improve. And when, to render the present state more complete, though every thing proves it to be but a fraction of a mighty sum, she is incited by present gratification to forget her grand destination, nature is counteracted, or she was born only to procreate and rot. (156-57)

Hence, both Brontë and Wollstonecraft argue that women have inferior positions in society and that they should be granted the same rights as men. Brontë does this by creating a heroine, Jane Eyre, who asserts her rights, and who obtains a married life in perfect concord, in spite of the prejudices that surround her. Wollstonecraft uses a more sarcastic tone when she puts forward her theories. She is more blunt in her way of expressing what she thinks, and there is no doubt about what she wants to achieve, independence for women and equality in marriage.

The question of parenting is also discussed in both *Jane Eyre* and *A Vindication*. As a mother, Jane is prepared to meet the difficulties of parenting and to give her children a proper up-bringing. Jane sees Adèle as a girl who has turned out well, since she received proper education: "As [Adèle] grew up, a sound English education corrected in great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion - docile good-tempered, and well-principled" (Brontë 445). This statement of Jane signifies that Brontë does not approve of the French coquette female education, as Rousseau's Sophia receives, for example. What is more, Brontë wants to show that Jane has been a good role model for Adèle. She has matured just as Jane has done, and is educated to be able to use her own reason and to balance her emotions. Jane is the picture which Brontë draws to portray how a good mother might be. Wollstonecraft, too, has ideas on what it means to be a good mother:

I think I see her surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. The intelligent eye meets hers, whilst health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks, and as they grow up the cares of life are lessened by their grateful attention. She lives to see the virtues which she endeavoured to plant on principles fixed into habits, to see her children attain a strength of character sufficient to enable them to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example. (140)

Jane can well be seen as an example of Wollstonecraft's theory on mothering. We are told how Jane educates Adèle when she is little and what Jane thinks of her as an adult. Both proper education and exercise of her own reason is the outcome of Jane's upbringing of Adèle. Once again, Brontë and Wollstonecraft argue on the same terms.

## **Conclusion**

There are critics who think that one of the flaws in Wollstonecraft's theories is that she does not combine passion and reason. Susan Gubar, for example, believes "Wollstonecraft elevates friendship between the sexes over romantic and erotic entanglements [. . .], I would view this motif not merely as a repression of sexuality but more inclusively as a symptom of the paradoxical feminist misogyny that pervades her work [. . .]" (139). This view does not take into consideration the fact that many things have changed since Wollstonecraft's days, and that it is grossly unfair to make judgement according to our values of today. It could be argued that Gubar takes Wollstonecraft's words out of context, which results in Gubar's illogical discussion. We must remember that Wollstonecraft argues against her contemporary society and as a contrast to Gubar, a more logical conclusion of Wollstonecraft's theories is that of Catherine Parke, who argues that it is "paradoxical, but not unique, that Wollstonecraft's revolutionary insights are sometimes difficult to see precisely because they have become part of the way we see" (103). When considering Wollstonecraft's

contemporary society, it becomes strikingly clear that in order to convince the male decision makers, she had to use strong male rhetoric. She thus could not mix passion and reason, since she would just have been rejected as another silly woman, ruled by feelings.

When considering Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*, it also must be remembered that she is not writing for women primarily, but rather directs her vindication at the oppressive patriarchal society and not to subjugated women. In order to realise the changes Wollstonecraft advocates, changes have to be implemented in the practice of the law: "The laws respecting woman [. . .] make an absurd unit of man and his wife; and then, by the easy transition of considering him as responsible, she is reduced to mere cipher" (Wollstonecraft 262-63). Hence, women's equal rights, not least with regard to education, have to be prescribed by law. Lorch comments on Wollstonecraft's intention in *A Vindication* in the following way: "She looks forward to a day when both men and women will be active citizens. Here she is borrowing a term from National Assembly legislation, and she means by it, as the French did, full citizenship" (81). Furthermore, what can a person, especially a woman, do in order to bring an end to the abuse of power without relying on legislation? This has always been the case of how to improve the terms for oppressed groups, such as women, since those in power have always claimed superiority, and are not willing to readily share their power.

Moreover, what Gubar interprets as misogyny in *A Vindication* could also be interpreted as Wollstonecraft herself being tired of the stereotypical female role, which causes her display of frustration. In contrast to Gubar's view, it has to be remembered that Wollstonecraft states over and over again how inferior positions women have and how she advocates change. In general, *A Vindication* is primarily a work written in defence of women's rights, a position which a misogynist would not take. Wollstonecraft might have defended herself from the

epithet of misogynist in this way: "[Women] were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine" (Wollstonecraft 119).

After Gubar's harsh criticism of Wollstonecraft she continues to a more positive view of *A Vindication* when she argues that what is important is "who is deploying these ideologies and with what political effect" (148). This is a more interesting discourse than the dialogue of the feminist versus the misogynist. Parke contributes to this discourse as follows:

Women, we must realize, are all in the same situation of oppression. Once this truth is perceived, it is no longer meaningful or appropriate to distinguish women according to their delicacy of feeling. When such a perception alters our view of the world so that no woman is seen as less oppressed than any other, we also come to recognize that this is the only fact that matters. (115)

Is this not exactly what Brontë and Wollstonecraft try to accomplish by their writings? Both writers obviously want to make impacts on the society in order to change the oppressed situation for women. Both writers want progress by making radical impacts on attitudes of their contemporary societies.

Brontë shows even more signs of feminist progress, in taking Wollstonecraft's ideas further. She manages to mix passion and reason in *Jane Eyre*. Jane not only obtains perfect concord but also passionate love, when she chooses to marry Rochester at the end. Thereby Brontë illustrates an example of how love and reason can come together in mutuality. Senf also points this out when she states: "Jane grows from victim to independent woman; she achieves mastery over herself without desiring mastery over others" (78).

However, there are critics who find the ending of *Jane Eyre* not as a good resolution to Jane's problems. Paris is one of those critics; he finds the life that Jane has with Rochester "to be a narrow existence that serves her neurosis but leaves little room for self-fulfilment" (129). This is yet another example of a patriarchal eye judging Jane from an oppressing point of

view. Not only does Paris forget the historical circumstances the Victorian woman, in the person of Jane Eyre, had to endure, but he also argues in a patriarchal tone of voice, as follows: "all Jane's needs are met without her having had to outgrow her anxiety and defensiveness" (128). Paris thinks the author intervenes by making things convenient for Jane, so that she will not have to face her conflicting needs (128). Now, what can he possibly mean by this? Can this really be so? Jane indeed proves her independence of mind many times in the novel. Is it not proof enough that she flees from Rochester, refusing to be his mistress, and that when she returns she is an independent woman, choosing her own way of life? What is more, is it strange that as a woman and a member of an oppressed group, Jane feels anxiety and defensiveness? If she did not carry those emotions, she would not be aware of the danger of becoming a victim of patriarchal oppression. Those feelings display Jane's awareness of her situation, and are not signs of immaturity. As has been shown, Jane's struggle consists of her search for "real knowledge of life amidst its perils" (Brontë 86). Betsinger supports the latter view: "knowledge is central to Jane's quest. Her academic education teaches her how to think; her experiential education teaches her how to live and what to live for"(Betsinger 76). Jane's life is a total strife for self-fulfilment.

In conclusion, neither Wollstonecraft nor Brontë accept the ruling patriarchal views of women and women's narrow field of education. Both writers struggled to improve the terms for women, focusing on education, and how to develop the reasoning human mind. Both of these writers were revolutionary thinkers for their time, writers who fought bravely to defeat prejudices against the female gender. Their literary works constitute manifestations of consciousness of sensibility to their own contemporary history. They broke many boundaries, but still there were more boundaries they did not challenge, just as it is today, since it is difficult to see the flaws and limitations of one's own contemporary society. However, brave are those who dare to criticise accepted standards of their own time, as Wollstonecraft and

Brontë have done. As a feminist, one also has to remember one's history in order to conquer the future, else one will be lost in gender prejudices and an easy prey to oppression. Both Wollstonecraft and Brontë knew their history well and are pioneering feminist thinkers whose aims were far ahead of their contemporary societies, in which they saw poignant egalitarian flaws.

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