



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG  
Department of Languages and Literatures  
English  
at the University of Sussex

**WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND FRIENDSHIP IN *JANE EYRE***

Beate Carlsson

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Supervisor:  
Patricia McManus

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this essay is to investigate how women were educated during the Victorian period; it will show how Charlotte Brontë incorporates the conditions of the Victorian school, as well as the importance of female friendship, into her novel through the education of Jane, Adèle, and Mary and Diana Rivers in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Female friendship and female education are related through how women learnt, not only in school, but also through each other. In the novel it is exemplified in how Jane learnt from Helen. This essay will consider the relationship between Jane Eyre and Helen Burns, through the view of education and friendship, in order to find out how their relationship effects Jane; not only who she is but also through what and how she learns, while at Lowood Institution and throughout her life. This essay will argue that Helen has a big effect on Jane and her life, and that their relationship is what helps Jane conform to the Victorian view of women. Through analysing *Jane Eyre*, this essay will explore how Jane and Helen's relationship effects Jane, and more generally how women's education is described in the novel.

## **Keywords**

Literature

*Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë

Victorian period

Women's education

Friendship

Childhood

Gender

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most interesting and important novels ever written about female struggle and rights, is arguably Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In *Jane Eyre*, we get to follow young orphan Jane and her struggles in life as a Victorian woman. The novel has been written about in many books, articles and essays and this essay will deal with the novel yet again, although with something very different. This essay will focus on how Victorian values and views of women are incorporated in the novel, and how the friendship between Helen Burns and Jane Eyre affects Jane throughout her life; how their friendship arguably helps Jane to cope with the harsh conditions while at Lowood Institution and also later in life.

Brontë is considered of importance as someone who arguably succeeded well in aiding the view on women, and women's rights, to be brought into focus as something very important, through her novel. The Victorian view of women is reflected in Jane and Helen's friendship, as well as in the education women are given in the novel. Brontë arguably resists the old values through letting her main character deviate from the existing 'norms' and by letting her heroine keep her passionate nature even after being affected by Helen's enduring and silent nature. Jane behaves correctly most of the time in the novel, but in her heart she is quite a rebel. Helen, arguably, has qualities women should not have, but she is struggling to correct her faults and silently endures the punishments she is given with the feeling that she has earned them. What effect have Helen's characteristics on Jane and on her behaviour through their friendship? Does Jane learn anything about herself through Helen, about how to handle different social situations? Will the effect Helen has on Jane last and show in Jane's behaviour, not only at Lowood but throughout her life? This essay will argue that Helen has a big influence on Jane and on who she is, through their friendship. That their friendship is something very important for the novel as a whole, since their friendship arguably has a great impact on who Jane is and how she behaves in social contexts. Their relationship is also historically significant as women learnt through each other, arguably like how Jane learnt how to be from Helen. Friendships between women during the Victorian period were arguably the only safe place for women to be themselves: where they could make mistakes and learn from each other in a positive environment.

This essay will deal with concepts such as a 'proper education' and 'femininity' or having 'feminine' qualities. With the use of the concept a 'proper education,' this essay refers to having been educated in writing, arithmetic, history, grammar, geography, needle work, French, German, Latin, music and drawing etc. (Kathryn Hughes, 1993: 167). To define what this essay means with the notion of 'femininity' and what it actually denotes, a definition from a dictionary will clearly account for it. It stands for: "having qualities or appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness." (*New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2005) In this novel, there are arguably two major models of 'femininity' which this essay will deal with; one is Helen and the other is Jane. Helen has arguably achieved the 'feminine' values a Victorian woman ought to have. She is quiet, submissive and feels as if she deserves every difficulty life has given her because of the faults she is told to have, without questioning why she receives punishments at all or why she should bend for anyone's wishes but her own. Jane is described to have a will of her own that cannot be silenced and she questions every unjustness with a passion Victorian women should arguably not have. Brontë arguably uses Jane to challenge the old Victorian values of women as dependent and suffering middle-class women. (Langland, 1992: 291).

## **1.2 Aim**

The aim of this essay is to connect a reading of women's position in society during the Victorian period, in particular of how they were educated, and the importance of women's friendship with the novel through looking at how Brontë deals with women's education. It is important because Brontë incorporates, both through celebrating and critiquing, many Victorian social rules and views of education into her novel *Jane Eyre* through the description of Jane, Adèle and Jane's cousins' education and Helen and Jane's friendship. By looking at the education Jane herself receives, as well as the education of Adèle and Jane's cousins, Diana and Mary Rivers, this essay will argue that Brontë helped bringing women's rights into focus. It will explore the relationship between Jane Eyre and her friend Helen Burns in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to establish if that relationship affects Jane in how she deal with the hardships she meets in life both while at Lowood Institution as well as throughout her life. How their friendship might help her to conform to, or rebel against, the Victorian view on 'femininity.' This

essay will argue that Jane is affected by her friendship with Helen Burns in a way that makes her deal more easily with the difficulties she meets in life.

### **1.3 Methodology**

The second chapter of this essay will explore the Victorian view of women and education. It will try to find connections between how education is described in the novel and how female children were educated during the Victorian period. It will look at how women were viewed during the Victorian Period. It will also give a short description of how it was like to be a governess in connection to the novel. The third chapter intends to briefly explore and focus on how differently women were seen and educated during the Victorian period compared to how the women were educated in the novel. This will be done by discussing and commenting upon the education and upbringing that Jane, Adèle and Jane's cousins, Diana and Mary Rivers, receive. It will argue that Brontë has both critiqued and celebrated many of the Victorian social rules for children and Victorian views on education, especially for girls, into this novel and that she has used the education of Jane, Adèle and Diana and Mary Rivers to voice them. This essay will demonstrate that she has used women's education in the novel to voice Victorian social rules and views, by identifying these connections and by discussing extracts from the novel, as well as through looking at how female children were viewed and educated during the Victorian period. In order to examine how children and women were treated and educated during the Victorian Period, secondary sources will have to be examined, as will literature written on social history that deals with that period as well as literature written about fiction and non-fiction dealing with social history during that period.

The fourth chapter will argue that Helen and Jane's friendship has a very big impact on Jane; that female friendship between middle-class women during the Victorian period was important for learning, and also important for the characters in the book. It will argue that what Jane has learnt from Helen, she carries with her for the rest of her life. This essay will do so through discussing extracts of the novel itself and examine what scholars have written on the subject before. Through analyzing Brontë's text *Jane Eyre*, and in particular by focusing on Jane in her younger years, this essay will

try to establish that Jane and Helen's friendship is important for Jane's continued residence at Lowood Institution, and to how she handles the hardships life deals her; at Lowood, later on while serving for Mr. Rochester and throughout the rest of her life.

#### **1.4 Literature review**

There are countless books, articles and essays written on Brontë and *Jane Eyre* and therefore it was necessary to screen out titles that did not focus on the interests at the heart of this research essay. The most important sources used here are Harriet Björk's *The Language of Truth – Charlotte Brontë, The Woman Question, and the Novel* (1974) and Marianne Thormählen's *The Brontës and Religion* (1999). Both treat Helen and Jane's friendship in detail, as well as comment upon the education described in the novel. Books that have helped me develop an understanding of the social context of Victorian England in relationship to Brontë's novel are Kathryn Hughes's *The Victorian Governess* (1993), Penny Brown's *The Captured World – The Child and Childhood in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in England* (1993), Anne Digby and Peter Searby's *Children, School and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (1981) and Beate Wilhelm's *The Role of Women in Victorian England Reflected in Jane Eyre* (2005). In order to get a better understanding of Brontë and her life, work by critics such as Barbara Gates (1990) and Pat McPherson (1989) have been reviewed. Many other sources, such as books and articles, have been looked into in excess of the mentioned titles.

#### **2. Victorian values**

During the Victorian period, women, and especially middle-class women, were seen to naturally differ from men in every respect, and especially intellectually. (Beate Wilhelm, 2005: 4). That led to that men and women had different roles in society; men were to provide for their wives, mothers and sisters, and women were to organize the household, oversee their children's education and provide a tranquil and peaceful environment at home. Women should also teach their children and male relatives moral values and good virtues. (see Wilhelm, 2005: 4).

## **2.1 The Victorian view of the role of the middle-class woman and women's education**

The view of middle-class women in Victorian England changed drastically in the 1850s because many women remained unmarried, due to a general lack of men at that time. (Wilhelm, 2005: 4). Fathers and brothers strained under the burden of providing for so many costly women and in turn, families let their daughters take up paid occupations for a short time. This occupation was often governessing, as the tasks women were allowed to perform were limited, resulting from the insignificant amount of education women received, among other things. The reason why governessing was acceptable for women was due to that women did not have to leave the house to perform their duties, and that the work they performed was in line with what they ought to do. Since Jane, who has family from the upper-middle class, does not have anybody willing to support her further financially after having quit Lowood, she has to go on to governessing, just like many other women without means to support themselves had to do. (Björk, 1974: 93-94).

Girls and women during the Victorian period usually received "little or no education at all" (Wilhelm, 2005: 6), although in Brontë's novel, all the women I have looked at receive an education. Why is that? At this time, a view that women were actually able to perform mental exertions was developed and although learning was only considered of relevance to men, women were trained in dancing, singing, playing the piano and drawing. Women were not given an advanced education as they would never come in contact with situations where they would need it. (see Wilhelm, 2005: 6) Shortly before Jane is born, the education system in England changed. Many families rose socially and thereby their sons needed a more advanced education. (Wilhelm, 2005: 6-7). As many governesses were not well enough educated at that time, many boys were sent to school. Another reason for not trusting boys above a certain age with a governess was arguably due to the governess's low status which allowed many masters and their sons to exploit them. (see Esther Godfrey, "Jane Eyre: From Governess to Girl Bride", 2005: 5). Girls were sent to school later as people realized that moral principles, which were especially important for girls to learn, could be attained through religious education. Jane was sent to Lowood, which focused on religious values in the education. (see Wilhelm, 2005: 7). An interesting phenomenon occurred in Victorian England when



Queen's college for the better education of governesses was founded in the 1840s. Many men were worried that the higher education of women would make them become less 'feminine' and thereby less suited for marriage, which would destroy a woman's "Christian woman's modesty" (Wilhelm, 2005: 7). Arguably women would become less dependent (Elizabeth Langland, 1992: 291) upon men through education, and they might want to change existing values to their own benefit, which would debatably be a good reason for many men to want to keep their women unschooled in more intellectual subjects.

Harriet Björk comments well upon women's education and connects it to Jane and her cousins in Brontë's novel. She draws conclusions which are arguably very substantial for this essay and also for the novel; "[S]elf-improving females [...] seem to trespass into the sphere of male prerogatives, i.e. higher education and personal ambition" and yet "[t]he Brontë heroines do not set out to compete with the men in the sphere of intellect." (Björk, 1974: 77). In other words, Jane and her cousins Diana and Mary Rivers are women who do not settle only with the small amount of knowledge social conventions want them to have, they try to improve their own knowledge and thereby enter the 'forbidden' intellectual world of men. Yet they do not wish to compete with men when it comes to knowledge, they are fully satisfied with just gaining knowledge for their own sake, to become better governesses. They do not need to become better than a man. To avoid women such as Diana and Mary Rivers gaining knowledge and making them less 'feminine', many doctors proclaimed that women had smaller brains than men, which made women inferior and unsuitable for more intellectual activities. (Wilhelm, 2005: 7). All in order not to break the Victorian principles and ideals of womanhood: a woman should not be educationally successful, unless in subjects such as singing, dancing, drawing and playing the piano etc. (see Wilhelm, 2005: 7). Yet, in Brontë's novel, Jane receives a relatively 'thorough education' for the position she is in. She "belongs to the upper middle class world" (Björk, 1974: 78), since that is where Mr. and Mrs. Reed's money puts her. Even though Jane has received an appropriate education, she later views herself as being inferior in knowledge to both Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers, especially the latter one. That she sees herself as inferior in knowledge is arguably due to women being seen as inferior to men in the Victorian period. By viewing herself as inferior, Jane arguably implicitly expresses a wish to possess a great amount of knowledge. Although, why does Jane, a

Victorian woman, want knowledge? Does she wish to be in an equal position to Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers? Questionably not, since she always refers to Mr. Rochester as “Sir” and “Master” up until she marries him. (JE, p. 394).

Discrimination against women greatly influenced the Victorian school and its pupils, as well as social class. (Anne Digby and Peter Searby, 1981:46). The descriptions in the novel of Lowood and the village school, where Jane later teaches, are of course not a fully accurate description of schools during the Victorian period, but they “illustrate” (Björk, 1974: 99) the historical background and the existing situation in the eighteen-forties” and Brontë, does “not create an Utopian vision” (Björk, 1974: 99) of the Victorian schools in *Jane Eyre*. Noticeably, girls were given a different education to boys, they were usually even taught different subjects. When boys learned advanced mathematics and geography, all girls studied sewing and domestic subjects, and girls from higher social backgrounds studied many other subjects as well. (see Digby and Searby, 1981:46). When boys and girls were actually taught the same subjects, the girls’ classes were adjusted to fit their future of domesticity better. (Digby and Searby, 1981: 46). This is something which is very apparent when Jane teaches the working-class children in the little village school for girls in Morton because “[p]oor girls were thought to need domestic training in their schooling which would fit them for their future as domestic servants or working men’s wives.” (Digby and Searby, 1981: 46). This is one of the reasons why Jane finds it difficult to “adapt herself to teaching at the village school” (Björk, 1974: 78). Jane believes, like many others did during the Victorian period, that because the children were poor and belonged to the working class they had to be dull and difficult to teach (Digby and Searby, 1981: 46), but as Jane continues to work with them she realises that there “was a difference amongst them as amongst the educated” and that some of them were of “excellent capacity, that won both my goodwill and my admiration.” (Charlotte Brontë, 1987: 322).<sup>1</sup> In short, and in the light of the girls in the village school, “a girl’s education was seen as being different from that of a boy” (see Digby and Searby, 1981: 46) Men were better educated than women, due to that they were considered to be more worth by society than women, who only had to fulfil roles within the boundaries of home. Why were men considered to be more worth than

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<sup>1</sup> Brontë, Charlotte. 2<sup>nd</sup> Norton Critical Edition 1987. *Jane Eyre*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. Will hereafter be referred to as JE in this essay.

women? Was it arguably due to that men made up and enforced the rules? Did women also consider men more worth than themselves? Arguably, due to women being seen as inferior, it is not surprising that when St. John Rivers teaches Jane Hindostanee and wants her to come along with him to India, she yields to his wishes against her own will; because he knows better than her what is good for her. That is until he comes up with the condition that they must marry and then Jane declines his offer, but only because she cannot live in a marriage that is a lie, not because he is wrong in taking life altering decisions for her. Jane exclaims: "I freely consent to go with you as your fellow-missionary ; but not as your wife; I cannot marry you and become part of you." (JE p. 359).

The fact that Diana and Mary Rivers are very well educated women is arguably something very rare. Many women during the Victorian period were not particularly well educated at all as it was not until 1870 that the Education Act, which enabled every child free education provided by the state, was enforced. (see Penny Brown, 1993: 8). Before that, many female children were not properly educated and if you were to receive an education at all depended upon what social class you belonged to; if you had someone who valued education and who could pay for your education. Since Jane belonged to the upper middle class, she was well off with a 'proper education' although not good enough to compete with Diana and Mary Rivers.

"Jane Eyre puts the topic of female education into the perspective of history" (Björk, 1974: 91) and it is easy to read through the eyes of Jane, Adèle or Diana and Mary Rivers how it would have been to attend a Victorian school or receive such an education. Brontë was arguably one of the women who helped advance the development of female rights and she did so through allowing her heroine express things such as:

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. (JE p. 96).

The novel deals with many aspects of how it was to be an educated woman during the Victorian period but it also deals with how the author wishes it would have been like to

be a woman during that time. By giving Jane qualities that question the existing view on women and society, Brontë arguably tries to question that view herself, through the medium of her novel. As can be seen above, Brontë incorporates the conditions of how it was to be educated as a woman during the Victorian period well in a thoughtful and credible way through upper middle-class heroine Jane and her life first as a student and later as a governess and teacher.

## **2.1 Being a Victorian governess**

Many middle-class women took up governessing in the Victorian period since that was the only thing they could do to keep their social status, if they did not have relations to support them or relations that could not support them. The only profession middle-class women could take up, in order to safeguard their non working status as gentlewomen, was governessing. (Hughes, 1993: 147). The social positions of governesses during the Victorian period were very delicate as they often came from middle-, or upper-class families and served in families with the same social status. (see Wilhelm, 2005: 6-8). This could make life very awkward for governesses as they were not seen as equals to the family. Yet they did not belong to the servant class either, which both the family and the servants were keen to point out. (Hughes, 1993: 86, 88). Both within the household and society at large, the governess was in the same position. She needed to be treated as one of the family to keep her gentility and only if she was could the similarity to performing working-class tasks be hidden. (Hughes, 1993: 85). The “governess found herself falling between two stools” and often took some hard blows through that. (Hughes, 1993: 147). Often, the family did not know how to treat their governess due to her equal social status, and they and their children usually took advantage of the fact that the governess was in no position to defend herself against false accusations or even to say anything at all. Yet, sometimes governesses were treated as family members and could be invited to spend an evening with the family but they could just as easily be considered intrusive and asked to leave. (Hughes, 1993: 85). In the novel for instance, Jane is often asked to join Mr. Rochester for the evening, but is just as often not invited.

All this resulted in governesses being very exposed to their family's treatment and goodwill. Being a governess was far from having an easy life (see Wilhelm 2005: 8) due to their status, and also because most "Victorian governesses received barely more than pocket money on top of their bed and board" (Hughes, 1993: 147). The Victorian images of a governess were "dry, old and ugly" which were qualities interlinked with the spinster. (Hughes, 1993: 118). The Victorians looked upon spinsters with particular scorn and pity as they were viewed as "unable to fulfil the highest female goals of marriage and motherhood" and a woman who was unmarried at thirty-five was considered to have "failed at life." (Hughes, 1993: 117). Although many governesses were under thirty, the spinster was the image of the governess, as there were many women who took up governessing at their mid twenties when they realized that they would probably not marry. (Hughes, 1993: 118).

The governess brought with her a "threat of unregulated sexuality" into the household and she would be daily scrutinized by men, around her own age, living in the household. (Hughes, 1993: 119). It was expected of the governess to stay single and due to this, many mistresses feared that their governess would elope with their sons in order not to have to remain in the schoolroom. (see Hughes, 1993: 119-120). Living with strangers left the governess unprotected and although "the vast majority of governesses had not been the victims of actual seduction", many were. (Hughes, 1993: 119-120). Jane is arguably very lucky to work as a governess for Mr. Rochester as he treats her well, compared to how badly many governesses were treated by drawing their masters' sexual attention, as Esther Godfrey argues. (see Godfrey, "Jane Eyre: From Governess to Girl Bride," 2005: 5). By being a governess, the position which that puts her in, Jane could not have turned down any inappropriate suggestions Mr. Rochester could have voiced, just like any other governess of this time might find it very difficult to turn down her master's advances as well. In Jane's case, Mr. Rochester actually intends to marry her and therefore arguably treats her reasonably well.

### 3. Education

It is difficult to read *Jane Eyre* without reflecting on the way education is treated in it, as education is arguably such an important part of the novel. That women are treated differently than men in many respects and especially in questions concerning education, is clear in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Especially when looking at the education that Jane, Adèle and Diana and Mary Rivers receive.

#### 3.1 Jane's education

Girls seldom received such a "systematic and regular education that Jane did, as the aim [was] not to provide a girl with an overall intellectual knowledge." (Wilhelm, 2005: 7). Girls were not usually sent to school during the Victorian period when Jane was a child, yet Jane is sent to school and thereby she breaks that Victorian 'norm'. It is arguable that Brontë sent Jane to school to express what she thought it should have been like to be a young girl, and what education that girl should be entitled to, through giving Jane a proper education in the novel.

While Jane lives at Gateshead, Mrs. Reed's residence, she is looked after by Bessie who becomes somewhat like Jane's nurse. Bessie is a fantastic storyteller and when Jane is about to leave home for school, Bessie tells Jane about what it is like to attend a school as a young lady. "Bessie sometimes spoke of it as a place where young ladies sat in the stocks, wore backboards, and were expected to be exceedingly genteel and precise" (JE p. 20). The result of that is that Jane believes that school is a pleasant place to be as a young lady, although the rules Bessie described could also have sounded a bit harsh to Jane. (see Björk, 1974: 91-93). Then, when Jane finally arrives at Lowood Institution, her vision of what school is like, which she has learnt by Bessie, is completely altered. "Lowood is a grotesque caricature of the schools for young ladies which Bessie described to Jane in the nursery at Gateshead." (Björk, 1974: 92-93). The rules Bessie described to Jane seemed very tolerant compared to the actual rules that were enforced at Lowood Institution, yet the students would still acquire the 'feminine skills' required of them. (see Björk, 1974: 92-93).

So, “Jane Eyre is not sent to a fashionable boarding-school”, she is in fact imprisoned at an early nineteenth-century semi-charitable school (Björk, 1974: 92) and she suffers greatly from the harsh conditions of the school rules, as well as having too little to eat and the coldness and dampness in the buildings. After Helen’s death and the outbreak of typhus among most students and staff at Lowood, Mr. Brocklehurst, the school director, is rebuked for not having run the school in a reasonable way. After this, life at Lowood becomes much easier for all its inhabitants. When the public is made aware of the awful conditions at Lowood, rich families donate money to the school in order to make it better and it does indeed become much better. While at Lowood Institution, Jane becomes accomplished in many subjects that were considered suitable for women such as sewing, knitting, French, playing the piano and drawing. She becomes especially accomplished in drawing as she has a talent for it. In short, she receives a pretty ‘thorough education’ for a woman during the Victorian period.

### **3.1 Adèle, and Diana and Mary Rivers’ education**

Jane leaves Lowood Institution to become a governess at Thornfield Hall when she is around 18 years old, and her new employer is the brusque yet charming Mr. Edward Rochester. Mr Rochester’s young ward is Adèle Varens, a little French girl, who becomes Jane’s pupil. Adèle develops well under the influence of Jane and “she soon forgot her little freaks, and became obedient and teachable.” (JE p.95). Because Adèle is the daughter of a French opera dancer, she is not considered worthy of a thorough education by Mr. Rochester: “there is no need for higher education or professional training” (Björk, 1974: 99) because she has “no great talents, no marked traits of character [...] which raised her one inch above the ordinary” (JE p. 95). Yet, Adèle receives a reasonably ‘good education’ for her position. The main reason why Adèle is not better educated than she is, depends arguably on the fact that she does not have to support herself. She has Mr. Rochester who will provide for her and her upbringing is adapted to her capabilities and her future social role (see Björk, 1974: 99). That women were educated to perform well in society, in their social roles as married women, was very common during the Victorian era and is, arguably, well reflected in Adèle’s case as she is only given a basic education, including basic knowledge in many subjects. (compare Björk, 1974: 77). Adèle’s school day under Jane’s influence lasts almost all day,

and before and after class she is looked after by Sophie, her nurse. The control the adults exercise over Adèle might be due to a belief that existed during the Victorian period: that children must be supervised; if not, they would become immoral. (see Martha Vicinius, 1972: 8). Arguably, children would develop bad habits and qualities if they were not 'properly' looked after. Since Adèle is educated at home and not sent to school, like Jane and Jane's cousins, she has to make do with Jane's knowledge, which is more than enough to cover Adèle's basic education.

Jane's cousins, Mary and Diana Rivers have, unlike Adèle but like Jane, been sent to school. Hannah, their housekeeper, told Jane that they "had liked learning" and that they took after their mother who "was a great reader, and studied a deal". (JE p. 302). After they finished their studies they also, like Jane, took positions as governesses as they had to support themselves. When their father passes away, they all gather at home and to "improve themselves in order to get on in their teaching career" they "study German on their own with the aid of a dictionary" (Björk, 1974: 98). The sisters study dictionaries to learn the grammar and vocabulary and they also converse in German. Arguably, in order to get better positions as governesses, the sisters need to be better educated, and through studying by themselves they have a bigger chance of better employment and a better life. Compared to Jane, Diana and Mary were better educated than her and that can be seen in this extract of *Jane Eyre*: Diana and Mary "were both more accomplished and better read than I was: but with eagerness I followed in the path of knowledge they had trodden before me." (JE p. 308). Diana Rivers taught Jane German and in turn Jane taught Mary drawing, as she excelled both sisters in this subject. In the novel, Jane expresses that this situation suits her perfectly, Diana wanted to teach and Jane felt very comfortable playing the role of her student.



#### 4. Women's Friendship

As Jane Eyre arrives alone as a very young girl, just 10 years old, at Lowood Institution, she meets another girl, Helen Burns, who attends the school as well, and they commence a very close and warm friendship. A friendship that Jane especially benefits from, which lasts throughout their education and life at Lowood. A friendship that arguably will last even beyond the death of Helen, through Jane's beliefs and actions during the rest of her life.

There are many different ways to learn, one is through school and education, and another is through friendship; something which Brontë arguably was aware of through making Helen and Jane's friendship so important for the novel. It is not only an education from school that influences what Jane knows, it is arguably even more importantly, Helen's friendship and values that form who Jane is.

Being a Victorian middle-class woman cannot have been easy, and being a Victorian governess would arguably have been even worse; as she would be very lonely by not having anyone of her own class to confide in. (compare Hughes, 1993: 85). A governess was not expected to love her pupils, only to govern them (see Wilhelm, 2005: 4), which would have been very difficult for someone who was herself arguably thirsting for love in any kind, since she most likely received none from her surroundings. Many governesses never had children of their own to love. (Hughes, 1993: 117-118). Women of the Victorian period were not seen as equals to men, and they were thus discriminated against in many respects (Wilhelm, 2005: 4), especially in their education, which arguably lead women to feel insecure and inferior. Therefore, women's friendships were very important, since the friendship arguably gave women a sort of 'safe haven,' which would allow women to feel safe enough to attempt to learn new things in each others company. The friendship would also allow them to feel equal to someone, as well as having a confidant. The bonds that were created between women through their friendship, arguably became very strong and had a huge impact on who they were and how they acted for the rest of their lives. That middle-class women during the Victorian period adapted themselves in order to become more like their friends, must have been very common. Just like Helen and Jane's friendship hugely influenced Jane to study many of Helen's qualities and values which she then carried with her the rest of her life.

#### 4.1 Jane's time at Lowood and her friendship with Helen Burns

Jane's passionate nature makes it more difficult for her to obey rules and commands that seem unjust, and Jane's first days at Lowood are very difficult for her until she befriends Helen Burns. It is arguably with the help of her friend Helen that Jane is able to cope with the rules and restrictions at all. Helen is the force which helps Jane tame not only her passionate temper but also her pride (see Margaret Smith, Sally Shuttleworth & Charlotte Brontë, 2000: xiv) and thereby also teaching Jane to conform to the ideals of children during the Victorian period. Björk also suggests that Jane's friendship with Helen actually helps Jane deal better with life at Lowood. She claims that Jane's "sufferings at Gateshead and Lowood from maltreatment, depression and illness are relieved by her friendship with Helen Burns" (Björk, 1974: 78).

Jane and Helen's friendship is arguably affected by that Helen is very calm and stoical (see Marianne Thormählen, 1999: 129). Helen endures injustice without complaining because she believes that she has many faults and that her teachers have a right to comment upon them. Jane is very confused by her stoical calmness, which can be seen in this extract: Miss Scatcherd cried out:

-'You dirty, disagreeable girl! You have never cleaned your nails this morning!'  
Burns made no answer: I wondered at her silence. 'Why,' thought I, 'does she not explain that she could neither clean her nails nor wash her face as the water was frozen?' (JE p. 46)

It arguably goes against everything Jane believes in that Helen should not defend herself against the injustice. Helen is imaginably Jane's opposite, and she tries to behave correctly and she arguably behaves the way children and young women were supposed to behave during the Victorian period, yet she has many "slatternly habits" (JE p.47) that she has to correct at all times. Why is it not acceptable for a Victorian woman to be slatternly? Was it not a quality women should have, but a quality only for men, or was it a thoroughly bad quality? Is Helen described as slatternly because she has to have faults because she is a woman, arguably to make her perceived as inferior?

The character of Helen Burns is based on Brontë's eldest sister Maria (Smith, Shuttleworth & Brontë, 2000: xiii) and arguably, Brontë looked up to her sister as much as Jane looks up to Helen in the novel. If treated as truth, this would mean that

Jane's faults should be Brontë's own and that her sister Maria was a great support to her and helped her correct them, just like Helen did for Jane. Although, the question is whether this was really a good thing or not? Arguably, it helps Jane to handle her everyday life better, but only because she conforms to the view of how women should behave and suppresses herself in the process. Yet, the relationship between Brontë and her elder sister would explain why Helen and Jane's friendship is, disputably, so important in the novel, even though Helen only lives for a short while.

However, Helen is always struggling to become a better person and silently endures punishments given her because she feels that she deserves them. Though, does she really deserve them? Jane on the other hand is behaving correctly most of the time although we should not "regard it as model behaviour." (Thormählen, 1999: 129). Yet, in her heart Jane is quite the rebel, she would never endure what she perceives as an injustice in silence. This is due to Jane's passionate nature and the fact that she is a proud person, as Elizabeth Rigby argues. (Elizabeth Rigby, "Review of *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*", Barbara Gates, 1990: 139) Jane commits what is almost considered a sin for children of the Victorian period, by being proud and viewing everything she has got in life as her undoubted right, and viewing what she has as even having fallen short of what she is entitled to. She is not even thankful for what she has. (see Gates, 1990: 139). But is that a bad thing? Should she be content with what she has? Jane's aunt, Mrs. Reed, describes Jane as being unsociable and not childlike (see JE p.5). The descriptions are probably based on Jane's passionate nature and her sense of anger at being wrongly treated (see Thormählen, 1999: 129). Is she therefore perceived as less likable by her surroundings? Arguably she becomes less likable through her 'unfeminine' qualities, especially while at Lowood, although her nature is what debatably makes readers identify with her and what makes her easy to like.

Even though Jane cannot bear when injustice is conducted towards her or anyone in her vicinity (compare Pat MacPherson, 1989: 96), which was something Jane experienced everyday at Gateshead under her aunt's care, Helen, is able to balance Jane's pessimism and sense of anger arguably well due to her own silent optimism; so well, that Jane can see herself in a different light and improve her manners. By helping Jane to see herself in a different light, Jane is also able to better take in what she should learn and what is expected of her. Even though Jane is very influenced and formed by Helen's personality and becomes more mature by it, she seldom radiates Helen's "saint-

like calm and patience in the face of tyranny” (see Björk, 1974: 94). Although, is this a bad thing? Through making Helen conform to tyranny, why does Brontë glorify the idea that women ought to be self-controlled and thus suppressing themselves? Why does Brontë use Helen, who represents the Victorian values, as an idol for Jane, if she wants to change the view on women? Since Jane looks up to Helen, Jane arguably changes from being herself and expressing her opinions, to a woman who quietly endures whatever hardship is put upon her. Why would Brontë praise the existing Victorian view on women? Was it that that she could not let her heroine deviate too much from the Victorian values to keep the novel plausible and slowly help improve the view on women? Yet, Jane believes that as a mature woman, one must protest against social oppression, which goes completely against Helen’s beliefs (see Björk, 1974: 94) and Jane arguably never really loses that belief.

By what Jane learns from Helen, about how to behave and handle authority for instance, she carries with her all her life, as can be seen countless times. For instance, when Jane is accused of misbehaviour at Lowood she can handle the punishments she receives better, such as to be moved down to the bottom of the class or when accused of lying by Mr. Brocklehurst and she has to stand on a stool all day (see JE p.57). Jane can handle it better because she has learnt to restrain her own emotions which arguably makes her fit better into the Victorian beliefs and thereby become a ‘better’ woman. It is also noticeable later, when Jane works as a governess and she feels that she is not good enough to be seen as a lady by Miss Ingram. Due to her social status as a governess she is considered no better than an ordinary servant. It is evident that Jane carries with her what she learnt by Helen even when she works for Mr. Rochester. She finds it very useful when she is the subject for Mr. Rochester’s sphinx-like comments, which he uses to try and find out if she will succumb to admitting how she feels for him. Through having learnt “from the women at Lowood”, mainly Helen Burns,” that self-control is the true victory” (MacPherson, 1989: 96) Jane does not capitulate before his inquiries about her feelings. Also, when Jane goes back to Gateshead to take her farewell of her dying aunt, Mrs. Reed, it is really apparent that she was affected by her friendship with Helen and that she learnt something important from her, because as Jane was approaching Gateshead once more, she expressed that she felt a “firmer trust in myself and my own powers” (JE p. 200). She was not worried that the “discourtesy of her

cousins”(Thormählen, 1999: 130) would upset her anymore, arguably because she had learnt how not to show her emotions, even under stress.

After six years as a student at Lowood Jane continues to teach there for two years. After having quit Lowood, “[l]ike Helen, she can be a stoic in adversity and in the face of persecution.” (Björk, 1974: 94). “Jane Rochester did not forget the essence of what Helen taught her, nor the essence of her friend’s being” (Thormählen, 1999: 96), and a lot of what Jane taught her was about life, expectations and how to deal with hardships concerning the Victorian view on women and women’s education. As Helen dies before Jane graduates, she loses her guide. Although when Jane later stays with the Rivers family, they almost take the same role Jane had through Helen. They gently guide her through education and religious values, into how she is supposed to be and act; just as Helen did earlier at Lowood. (see Björk, 1974: 78)

## **5. Conclusion**

This essay has found that Brontë not only succeeded in entwining Victorian values and views on education and school in her novel, through the girls and women, but also both skilfully critiqued and celebrated the values through Helen and Jane’s friendship. During the Victorian period there was a great difference in how women and men were viewed and women were generally seen as inferior. Many middle-class women had to take up governessing in order to support themselves during the Victorian period, just like Jane takes up governessing, as it was the only profession that would allow women to keep their gentility. Women were not considered suited for education other than in entertainments such as dancing, singing and drawing etc., and they were rarely well educated. It depended upon which social class you belonged to, or if you had anyone willing to pay for your education, if you received any education at all. An educated Victorian woman was viewed as almost having lost her ‘femininity’ as she arguably would become much more independent, and doctors proclaimed that women were less intelligent and not suited for education in order to leave them uneducated. Yet, in Brontë’s novel, all the women this essay discusses, received an education, which was uncommon for a woman during the Victorian period, although it was only Jane, Diana and Mary that were sent to school when they were young. They all received an

education, although it was not until later that schooling for everybody became obligatory. Women's education was adapted to their future social roles in the Victorian society and Jane, Diana and Mary all received a pretty 'thorough education' for a woman of the Victorian period. All three were better educated than Adèle, who was not considered worthy of a finer education due to her social role as the daughter to a French opera dancer. Jane, Diana and Mary all strive for knowledge, although they do not wish to compete with men and be their equals. They strive instead to improve themselves in order to get better positions as governesses. Being a Victorian governess was far from easy, since she would usually work for a family from the same social class as herself and she was very exposed to the family's goodwill. The governess was not viewed as a family member or even having the same social status as them, yet she was not considered to belong to the same class as the domestic servants either, which arguably left her feeling very lonely. Friendship between women were something very important, not only because many governesses had no one to confide in, but also important for learning social codes. The bonds that were created between women were very important for building character and it influenced how many women behaved. The governess was not in a position to defend herself against unwelcome advances from the male members of the family and she was usually daily scrutinized by them. A governess was very unprotected through living with strangers, and Jane was lucky to work for Mr. Rochester who treats her well.

The Victorian school was usually very strict and the living conditions appalling. Before attending school, Jane believed school to be a pleasant place for a young girl to be, but she was taught differently through the harsh conditions that was reinforced at Lowood Institution. It was through Helen's friendship that Jane coped with the rules and regulations as well as she did. Helen is a great support for Jane while at Lowood and Jane carries with her the values her friend cherished, which were those of how the middle-class Victorian woman should behave, all her life. Jane is greatly affected by Helen's friendship and that is what helps her become a person better suited to succeed in life as a Victorian woman; to conform herself to the Victorian values. Jane learns something from Helen that will affect who she is and how she behaves in different social contexts through the rest of her life. Helen, who is arguably considered having qualities a Victorian woman should have, is self-controlled and suppresses herself and her opinions in order to behave "correctly"; qualities which make a great impact on Jane

who adapts her ways to resemble those of her friend. Yet, Jane never really surrenders her passionate nature fully, which is how Brontë critiques the Victorian values. Jane never stops viewing everything she has as her undoubted right, nor questions that she deserves more than what she has, still Jane is never immodest.

This essay also noticed how Brontë, through her novel, conveys how she wishes it would have been like to be a woman during the Victorian period, through giving Jane qualities that question the Victorian view on women; as Jane cannot be silenced and she wants knowledge, something only permitted to men. The question is really why Brontë idolized Helen if she wanted to support women's rights, when Helen is everything the suppressed Victorian woman stood for, and Jane everything she wanted it to be? Why would Brontë let her passionate heroine become so influenced by Helen if she wanted to change the existing view on women as inferior? Was it that Brontë could not disregard the existing view on women completely in order to be able to publish her novel; she had to acknowledge the existing view? Was it because Brontë let Jane keep some of her passion, and never really allowed her conform to the Victorian values completely that she actually slowly helped improve the view on women? Either way, Helen's influence and friendship are what make Jane fit better into the Victorian society's conventions and thus Helen's friendship affects her hugely, not only in the sense of having someone to confide in, but in to really form who Jane is and how she behaves. Helen did not affect Jane thoroughly positively, in the sense of what a woman is supposed to be like today, but she helped Jane to positively adapt herself in order to become a enduring, yet passionate, Victorian woman.

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