Summary

The subject of this thesis is Charlotte Brontë‘s novel *Jane Eyre*, which was published in 1847. I review the historical background and consider which options were available to women in the Victorian period, and therefore to the eponymous character of *Jane Eyre*. I found that women were not viewed as individuals with their own rights but only as property belonging to either a father or a husband. Their legal rights were practically nonexistent, and they were for the most part expected to do no more than to find a husband and take care of their family. If the women were unable to fulfill those requirements, they were doomed to become governesses, mistresses or spinsters. From this historical background discussion I move to the novel and explore which of those options are viable for Jane as a poor orphan, and which of them she chooses for herself. Jane faces all the options available to her as a Victorian woman, she becomes a governess, receives marriage proposals, has the chance to become a mistress and chooses to be a spinster rather than marry for anything but love. On this I base the final part of the essay, where I adopt a feminist approach and state that Jane is in fact a feminist, since a vital part of feminism is to battle the inequality of the sexes. That is what Jane does by going against what is expected of her and not marrying when she has the chance, but instead following her own principles even though it means she could end up a poor, ridiculed spinster. Thus my conclusion is that Jane, through her character and choices, critiques the inequality that she faces as a Victorian woman, and is therefore a feminist.

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Introduction

In 1847 Charlotte Bronte published *Jane Eyre*, the story of its eponymous character which demonstrates the life of the Victorian woman and which problems she had to face. By looking at the laws during the period you can see that the women barely had any rights to speak of: they did not really own anything, whether it was possessions, their children, or even themselves as they were considered the property of either their father or their husband. Although new legislation was passed during the period which was in theory meant to improve the women's status, little changed in actuality and the women had the same poor choices until the 1900s.

These choices are the subject of *Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, a compilation of essays edited by Martha Vicinus, which give a detailed account of the life and options of the Victorian woman. As the women's legal status indicates, these options were few and each had their disadvantage. The first was to get married, which was what most Victorians believed to be the only right choice for women in life. The women's job, as it was viewed, was to take care of the home and the family. The life of the married Victorian woman was therefore very restricting; she was not supposed to do anything except center her life around other people, which is what Jane objects to in the novel: she feels that women should have the same options as men, since women think and feel just as they do. Marriage was nevertheless the best option for women at the time, as it was the only option which guaranteed a safe life, secure and free of public ridicule.

However, as statistics from *The Victorian Web* (Everett) show, marriage was not available to everyone as women vastly outnumbered men during the Victorian Age. The unlucky women who could not find a husband had to resort to other measures; some were forced to work for a living, which was not considered respectable for women, and they

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became governesses (or prostitutes). Others were able to find a married man to support them, and as mistresses they were taken care of, although they received no respect. The worst option though was to be a spinster, for the spinster was laughed at for failing to find a husband, or worse, still believing she could.

In the novel, Jane Eyre faces each of these options. As a poor orphan she is not considered eligible for marriage and is consequently forced to become a governess, as it is the only way for her to keep up appearances since she is a born lady. Her life as a governess is relatively easy; luckily for her she gets a job where she is for the most part saved the ridicule that was a part of many governesses' existence. She holds on to her pride and is not willing to give up on what she considers to be her rightful privileges: she keeps her sense of self-worth no matter what happens. When she finds out that Mr. Rochester is married, she is not willing to become his mistress despite his off of a comfortable life away from prying eyes as it goes against her principles and ideas of what is right and wrong. She would rather be alone, poor, and facing an uncertain future. When she does get the chance to get married, she does not do so simply for money or security; she turns down her suitors instead, which was unimaginable to the majority of Victorians. She feels that love is the only reason to get married, and that marriage should be a union of equals, which was a groundbreaking idea in Victorian times.

After exploring the novel's historical background (Chapter 1) and discovering what is was that Jane Eyre chooses based on the options available (Chapter 2), I consequently take on a feminist approach and maintain that Jane Eyre is a feminist (Chapter 3). As described in Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, an important act of feminism is to demand equal rights for women. That is exactly what Jane does, as reflected in her statements, actions and choices, through which she continually defies the view most Victorians had on women and breaks the rules they set for her: thus campaigning for the equality of the sexes.

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Chapter 1: Available Options for Women in Victorian England

In 19th century England things began to change for middle-class women. Before this time, they were thought of simply as property belonging to either their father or husband, but in this period, new laws were passed which changed their situation somewhat. The women went from having no rights to being able to keep their children after a separation or divorce, and being able to get a divorce (although that was still easier to achieve by men), as well as owning property. Eventually, at the end of the century a woman was even considered having a separate identity in the eyes of the law instead of just being part of her husband's entity. But despite these changes, the situation remained practically unchanged and drastic changes would not occur for these women until the 1900s. Middle-class women in Victorian England only had three options to maintain themselves if they did not find a husband: to get a job as a governess (or worse, a prostitute), to become a married man's mistress, or a spinster living off her relatives or other benefactors.

In the Victorian age, the situation of middle-class women in England started to slowly improve through legislation. This improvement of their legal rights began in 1839 when the Child Custody Act was passed (Everett). That act allowed women to keep custody of their children (though only the ones under the age of seven), no matter what the cause of the separation from their husband was, whereas before the husband would have had sole custody. This law was later improved in 1873 when women were allowed to keep their children which were under the age of sixteen (Altick 58).

In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed which meant that it was possible for people of the middle-class to get a divorce. However, that act did not change that much for women, as Ursula Vogel points out: "By transferring jurisdiction over matrimonial matters to a secular court it extended the availability of divorce to the middle classes. It did not establish

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the equality of women and men in relation to adultery" (161). What Vogel refers to is the fact that, although women could file for a divorce, they needed an additional reason besides adultery (for example incest or cruelty) to be granted one, while men only had to list adultery as their reason for filing for a divorce (Altick 58). This reason, as well as the fact that getting a divorce was very expensive, meant that very few people were actually able to see it through.

These acts mentioned above dealt only with divorce and the custody of children, but other acts were also passed which were meant to grant married or separated women property rights (Brinjikji). However, these acts took a long time to develop: 18 acts were proposed in 25 years (from 1857-1882), and they were often of little significance. They were in fact not intended to give women any real power over their lives. It was not until 1882 that women were seen as a separate entity from their husband, and granted their property rights. Hiam Brinjikji states: "Unfortunately, the legal system and individual men attempted to maintain the status quo of keeping women firmly subordinate. It was not until 1882 that married women were able to exercise separate rights over their inheritance, earnings and property." Thus despite these acts, the situation of middle class women in Victorian England did not change dramatically. The aforementioned double standard in law still existed, and it was not until the 1900s that these women's situation started to really change – when women over 30 were, for example, granted the right to vote in 1918, and received equal voting rights to men in 1928 (Everett). By the end of the century, the situation of middle class women in Victorian England was still bad, and they barely had any options to speak of.

One of the options an unmarried middle class woman did have was to become a governess. That was not something most women desired, because a woman was born and bred for marriage, but certain women (who for various reasons were unable to find a husband) were forced to seek employment. Being a governess was the only job available for these

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women, besides prostitution, which, as Martha Vicinus points out, "even the respectable might be forced into" (xii). There were three main reasons why these women, who were meant to be wives, had to get a job. First of all, there was a surplus of women in Victorian England; a census in 1801 revealed that women outnumbered men by 400,000 (Everett), a number which presumably only grew larger as the century went on. At this time, many young men emigrated to colonies to search for a better livelihood. Add to that the fact that women were more likely to live than men (Peterson 6), which meant that there simply were not enough men for every woman to get married. Secondly, the men that stayed in England and were looking for a wife, were looking for a particular type of woman. Their families expected them to find a wife who was of equal, or preferably higher, status than they were, and who came with a fortune. Marriage was a business deal, intended to further the men's welfare. Therefore, these men were not going to marry a woman from a good family, unless she had money as well. It was not enough for her to a be a lady, if she no longer had the money to support the lifestyle she had been brought up in (16). Which brings us to the third and final reason for why these unmarried women were forced to seek a job: their families could no longer support them. The family had more than often run out of money, which meant that the young woman was not desired for marriage, and when she failed to find a husband, she did not have her family to fall back on. These women, therefore, had no other choice than to find a job, since there was no one who could take care of them. As poor women, becoming a governess (preferably with a private family) was the only resource still available to them (6).

Being a governess with a private family had its positive and negative traits. On the positive side, it meant that these women had a home, and that they did not have to work in public, which would have been more humiliating to them. As ladies, they were not supposed to work for a living, so, being a governess in a private home was the only way for them to

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earn a living without losing their status completely (Peterson 6). However, being a governess was not easy. The woman had to find employment, and once she did, there was no guarantee that she would keep it for a long period of time. And even if she did, the wages were low, and some women had to take care of their other family members as well. They also had to prepare themselves for retirement, or unemployment, since there was no system to take care of them if they could not find work (7). Finally the way these governesses were treated depended largely on the families that they were staying with. Some families expected them to do more work than others, and did not require their children to respect their governesses, which led to them being harassed by their pupils (8-9).

However, these concerns were not the major ones for a governess. The problems with being a governess lay more in the conflicting ideas about a lady and paid employment (Peterson 9). Although being a governess in a private family meant that a woman could maintain her status, it did change her social position somewhat. Her interactions with the people around her was often awkward: the men could not flirt with her since she was generally not considered eligable for marriage, and the women, while aware of the governesses being ladies, still thought of them as beneath them (13). Finally, it was awkward for the ladies having these women teaching their children, since the fact that the governess had been raised for marriage inevitably reminded them of the possibility that the fate of the governesses could await their children as well. To make matters worse, no one could even agree on how to treat these women, since their status was never clear (10). People had different opinions on the matter: some thought that, even if the governesses were ladies who were forced to work for a living, they were still ladies, while others found that getting paid meant that the status of these ladies had changed (7, 10). The governess's status is perhaps best described by M. Jeanne Peterson who writes that the governess was "at best unenvied

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and at worst the object of mild scorn, and all she sought was survival in genteel obscurity" (4).

One thing that is certain is that these women were viewed as a problem in many ways, as can be seen by the proposed solutions. One of these solutions to a certain problem was to pretend that the governess was not a servant, but a part of the family, and that the house was her home. That was an attempt often made by the family to downplay the fact that a lady was forced to work for a living. Another way to cope with the situation was to hire an unattractive governess, which was supposed to minimize the threat a single woman occasioned in the house, whether to the possible corruption (as it was viewed) of the father, or the sons in the household. The preferred solution by far was to get a foreign governess, since she would not be offended by anyone's behaviour towards her, being unaware of English traditions. From the governess' point of view, the best way for her to deal with the situation was to get away, either by distancing herself from the family or by getting married. But since the reason she was a governess in the first place was the fact that she had been unable to get a husband, this was unlikely to happen (Peterson 14-16). For some governesses, who were lucky with their family and situation, the life that they led must not have been all bad. But even for those women, that was not the life that they would have chosen for themselves. Richard D. Altick points out that "they were regarded, and regarded themselves as failures" (56).

As mentioned above, becoming a governess was always the last option for the middle class woman, her first was always marriage. Marriage and procreation is what she was born and bred for, her sole purpose in life (Vicinus x). The belief in marriage was so complete in this period that the Victorians could not even imagine a suitor being rejected (Roberts 52). They generally felt that every woman must long to become a wife and a mother; she could have no other fate (53). Of course it was not enough to get married to just anyone, the women

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were, like the men, under the pressure of finding a husband with acceptable social status and wealth (Peterson 16). But that was not the only pressure the Victorian woman faced, it was also expected of her to fit a certain image. This image entailed her to be considered a symbol of purity (Roberts 56) — and how important that was is reinforced by the fact that the Victorians believed that the absolute worst thing a woman could do was to commit adultery (Vicinus xiv). And as a wife she was expected not to work but to focus her energy on worshipping her husband and her home (Vicinus ix). Vicinus describes this ideal: "The perfect lady under these conditions became the woman who kept to her family, centering all her life on keeping the house clean, the children well disciplined and her daughters chaste" (xiv).

The only thing that the lady was meant to do was to take care of her husband and children. Her life was supposed to revolve around them, nothing was about her, and no attention was paid to her thoughts or feelings. She was even counseled in etiquette books to silently endure her marriage (x). The life of the married woman was not always easy, but the Victorians preferred to focus only on the positive sides of marriage. Helene E. Roberts explores how the Victorian painters viewed their contemporary woman and discovered that the painters

> found it better to ignore shameful shadows on their family ideal. There were no scenes at the annual exhibition of brutal husbands beating their wives, no seductions of housemaids by the master of the house, and hardly a hint of the oppressive restrictions on the life of a married woman. . . . Few paintings suggested that marriage could be anything other than unrelieved bliss. (52)

The Victorians refused to see how difficult life could be for women, whether married or not (75). But despite her difficulties, the married woman was at least taken care of, which is more

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than can be said about the rest of the women who were forced to seek employment or live off their relatives.

The women who were not successful in acquiring a husband needed to find another way to survive but people had conflicting views of the unmarried woman. Some felt that she could be helpful in the homes of her brothers, others felt that she had failed to achieve what she was meant to achieve in life (becoming a wife and a mother) and therefore no alternative should be offered to her (Vicinus xii). Most people simply did not know what to do with these women, as Jane Lewis points out: "The discovery from the 1851 census that women outnumbered men provoked lenghty discussion under the heading of the 'surplus woman problem,' because commentators found it difficult to see what women who could not find husbands would do" (Lewis 5). Many spinsters shifted their focus from taking care of a family towards religion, which was considered an accepted outlet for passion (Vicinus xi). The passion that would normally have been directed towards their families was directed towards Christ instead (Cominos 164).

The spinster faced both economical and social problems. Economically she faced difficulties since not every spinster could find a home with her relatives, which is why some had to become governesses or seamstresses (Vicinus xii). Socially, she was considered a laughing stock. In social circles she was ridiculed for not having found a husband, especially if she still entertained hopes of getting married one day, which the Victorians believed to be only for the young to desire. They regarded the spinster as a failure and were not sympathetic towards her situation. Martha Vicinus states that "all social forces combined to leave the spinster emotionally and financially bankrupt" (xii). However the spinster was not only mocked in social circles but in the theater as well. There she was painted as an ugly woman who was very concerned with her looks, and usually after a husband. Jane W. Stedman

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describes the characteristics which this character (the dame) ususally possessed. These characteristics were “a hasty, even a cruel temper; shrewishness; an unrequited passion; an avid love of flattery; and a misplaced dependence on the disguising powers of cosmetics and false hair” (23). The spinster was thus ridiculed by everyone for daring to still desire a marriage and passion in her life.

There was another possibility available in order to avoid ending up a spinster, which was for a woman to become a married man’s mistress – an option that Jane Eyre has to consider. If the unmarried woman found herself a rich lover she would at least have been taken care of. However, the Victorian view of women was that they were always one or the other: the pure or the impure woman. It did not matter whether a woman was a prostitute or had simply made a mistake once, if she was no longer a virgin she was seen as “doubtful, detected, detestable and destroyed” (Cominos 168). Her reputation was ruined – which meant that if she was someone‘s mistress and her lover would decide to leave her, she would never be able to get married after that. It was very risky since she could be left without warning, and with no financial support. Being a spinster might be more difficult economically, but the spinster was not ostracised from society the way the impure woman was.

As can be seen by this discussion, women’s options in Victorian England were very limited, and none of them guaranteed a good life. Arguably, a woman’s best choice was marriage, which meant that she was for the most part taken care of. Despite the law changes that were made during this time and were intended to improve their condition, women still were thought of as extensions of their husbands or fathers only, their property instead of actual human beings, and were only expected to do one thing: to take care of their family.

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Chapter 2: Jane‘s Character and Choices

Having described the options available for women in Victorian England I will now examine which of those options Jane Eyre chooses for herself. Being an orphan, she does not have many options to choose from and becomes a private governess. Despite her low status, she always maintains her pride and independence, and she is not willing to become a mistress or to marry without love, although that would improve her status in society. She is ready to work hard to support herself, without relying on men to take care of her, and she believes that men and women should be equals. As a wife, she feels that she should give as much to the marriage as her husband does, and that they should be of equal importance to each other.

Jane is born a lady, but since she loses her parents and is left without financial support, she is forced to rely on the generosity of her relatives. Her uncle takes her in and cares for her, but after his death his wife and her family make sure that Jane understands that her being poor means that she is not equal to them. Jane’s cousin, John Reed, tells her: “you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama’s expence” (6). Jane’s relatives are not the only ones who tell Jane this, even the servants inform her that she is “less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep” (7). Jane is also constantly reminded of the fact that she is considered a burden, and that she might be turned away and forced to beg if she does not behave (8). Jane does her best to try and behave in a way which will impress Mrs. Reed, but she never succeeds. Mrs. Reed continues to view Jane as a passionate, insolent child (12). She eventually decides to send Jane to school. However she does not send her to a normal school but a school intended for orphans which is run as a charity institution (41). Mr. Brocklehurst, the institution‘s manager, shares Mrs. Reed‘s opinions on how best to educate these girls. She tells him that she wishes Jane to be

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kept humble, in accordance to her future prospects (27), and he in turn intends to prepare them for a difficult life by rendering them "hardy, patient, self-denying" (53). As an orphan coming from a family of good breeding, Jane's only option, in order to keep up appearances, is to become a governess.

As discussed above, the Victorians (both the employers and the governesses themselves) were unsure as to the status of the governess in the household, and Jane seems to be no exception to that. She seems to be slightly confused as to her role at Thornfield. When she first arrives, she mistakes Mrs. Fairfax as the lady of the house and is very surprised at how she treats her since Mrs. Fairfax confers with her as they are of equal status (83). When she learns that Mrs. Fairfax is only the housekeeper she feels relieved to know that this treatment comes from them actually being of equal status, instead of being a matter of condecension of Mrs. Fairfax's part (87). However, despite expecting not to be treated by much respect because of her status, she still has some pride and thinks she has a right to certain privileges. She certainly seems to agree with Mrs. Fairfax in seeing the servants as beneath her (83), and she does not feel that Mr. Rochester has the right to treat her in any way that he likes (117). She believes that if she does her job right, she should be treated with respect (142). Contradicting herself, she also claims that Mr. Rochester should be able to command her to do whatever he wants, what with him being her employer (117).

When Jane begins to have feelings for Mr. Rochester, she immediately starts pondering the possibility of her becoming his wife. She reminds herself that she is a lady, like Bessie told her when they last met (137). However, when she hears about the existence of Miss Ingram, and Mr. Rochester's apparent interest in her, she tries to cut off her feelings, telling herself that Mr. Rochester could never be seriously interested in his inferior (140). She tells herself that Miss Ingram has much more to offer, wealth and connections, and that she

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must forget the idea of herself ever becoming Mrs. Rochester (141-2). Hiding her feelings is difficult for her, and she feels the pain of knowing that all that separates her from Mr. Rochester is "wealth, caste [and] custom" (221). However, that difference is no small thing in Victorian England, as can be witnessed by Mrs. Fairfax's reaction to their engagement: she tells Jane straight out that she is sceptic about the match since "equality of position and fortune is often advisable in such cases" (233). Jane and Mr. Rochester's engagement is truly shocking to her. It is unclear, however, whether she is shocked simply because of the difference in their status, or whether she knows that he already has a wife.

Jane's life as a governess is for the most part carefree, she only has her one pupil to take care of and no one to put her down on a daily basis. That changes, however, when Mr. Rochester receives his group of guests. Their reaction shows how Jane's life could have been if her pupil had been from a wealthy family and status, instead of being an orphan in Mr. Rochester's care. From the beginning, Jane has to listen to a discussion on the inadequacy of governesses (154-6), and throughout the group's visit, she is continually shown disrespect, especially by Miss Ingram who uses every opportunity to show disapproval of Jane's presence (162). She even describes governesses, while Jane is in the room, as "half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi" (154). The best that Jane can say about the group's attention to her is when describing Mrs. Dent and Mrs. Eshton who "sometimes bestowed a courteous word or a smile on me" (165). Jane is, however, immune to this ignorance of her presence, and even considers Miss Ingram inferior to herself, at least based on her character, especially since Jane knows that she is only after Mr. Rochester's money (162-4). Whatever situations Jane finds herself in she always manages to keep her sense of self worth. In the end, perhaps the best way to describe Jane's feelings of her status is to say that she knows her place but still has her pride.

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After Jane finds out that Mr. Rochester is already married, she has another option besides leaving him, that is to become his mistress. He has enough wealth to be able to offer her an extremely comfortable life in the south of France by his side (268). As Mr. Rochester points out, she doesn‘t have any family or friends that could judge her for it (280). However, she is not willing to do that. As soon as she knows that he already has a wife, she refuses even to kiss him (264). Mr. Rochester truly believes that he has no wife since Bertha is mad and that he is free to marry (274). But Jane does not accept his logic and tells him so: “Sir, your wife is living: that is a fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophisticated – is false” (268). In an attempt to persuade her, Mr. Rochester is completely honest about his past and tells her about his former mistresses (275). But while he thinks that he is convincing her that she is the only one he has truly loved, Jane sees the truth, that she could end up being one of the mistresses he left. She would thus become another discression for him to regret, and eventually weigh on his conscience, as Bertha and Adéle do already. Her fear is rationalized by Mr. Rochester‘s speech about mistresses:

> [H]iring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading. I now hate the recollection of the time I passed with Céline, Giacinta, and Clara. (275)

Despite this, Jane finds it difficult to do what she knows is right. She tells herself: “I must leave him, it appears. I do not want to leave him – I cannot leave him” (264). She loves him and wants to stay with him. However this is not the first time that she has been tempted, she could have been with him the night of the fire (133), and also while they were engaged, but she was not willing to be with him until they were married (241). Now that she knows that Mr. Rochester is married, she knows she can not show or act on her love any longer (268),

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and sees it as her duty to leave him (279). She sees it as her duty, not because she is worried about the judgement of strangers, but because she believes it to be the right course of action. When she witnesses Mr. Rochester's misery at her insistence of departing, she asks herself what the harm is in staying with him, and who will really care about what she does. Her answer to those questions is this: "*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (280). She believes in certain principles, and that she must obey these principles and not abandon them when convenient. She will "keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man" (280). She does not know where to go or what to do (285), but she prefers that uncertainty over betraying her beliefs. When she looks back she does not regret what she did, and feels that it is much better to have struggled and overcome temptation than having to suffer remorse and shame (318). In the end the only thing that avails her is Mr. Rochester's fate. She is afraid that her departure has veered him from the "path of right" (318) while she wishes for him to live a life without sin (279).

Jane does have other options besides being a mistress: she receives two marriage proposals. Becoming a wife is what women at the time aspired to. However, in neither case does Jane go through with it, in both cases because of her strong opinions of marriage and what it means to be a wife. When she becomes engaged to Mr. Rochester, he immediately starts showering her with gifts, forcing her wealth on her, but she is not happy about that. She feels that a marriage should be a union of equals, and Mr. Rochester's treatment of her reminds her of the relationship between a sultan and his slave (237). It makes her feel degraded, and she wishes that she will one day have enough fortune to be able to repay everything Mr. Rochester has given her (236). She does not want to dress up because she feels that the things she has are "good enough for a woman who could bring her husband neither fortune, beauty, nor connections " (247). In the end when Jane and Mr. Rochester do finally

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get married, things between them have changed drastically, she has become a wealthy woman and he has lost the physical strength which enabled him before to be in control of everything in their relationship. Then Jane feels that she can contribute something to their marriage and is perfectly content (394).

However, at the time of their first engagement, the only thing that she can bring to the marriage is her love for him. Jane feels strongly that love should be a requirement for marriage and examples of this can be found on several occasions in the story. While witnessing Mr. Rochester's courtship with Miss Ingram, knowing full well that he does not love her, Jane reflects on the common practice of marrying for money. She feels that no one should marry unless it is for love, but accepts that there must be a reason for doing so that she does not understand, otherwise no one would ever marry for money (164). She herself would never marry for anything besides love, despite having the opportunity presented to her. Her cousin St. John proposes to her for the sole reason of needing a helper on his mission, but she does not betray her values by marrying him any more than she did when she could have become Mr. Rochester‘s mistress (356-58). St. John tells her that she was not made for love but her honest reply to that sentiment is: "in my opinion, if I am not formed for love, it follows that I am not formed for marriage" (368). Even when Jane becomes wealthy, she is not willing to marry anyone who only desires her for her wealth, even though it would certainly improve her social status to become a married woman (343).

Jane‘s two suitors, Mr. Rochester and St. John, present different versions of what kind of wife Jane could become. Victorians expected women to be raised in a certain way to prepare them for marriage, and the following description by Peter T. Cominos offers a detailed account of what might happen to Jane if she were to become St. John's wife :

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> [Victorian women] were brought up to be clinging and dependent and their relatedness to the world was a highly dependent one. When they married, they merged their existence into that of their husbands. It was widely believed that "the wife's true relation to her husband' was that 'her whole life and being, her soul, body, time, property, thought, and care, ought to be given to her husband; that nothing short of such absorption in him and his interests makes her a true wife. . ." (Cominos 161)

St. John tries to change Jane, and he expects her to give up her beliefs for his, to make his priorities her priorities (Brontë 352). When Jane at the end almost gives up and consents to being his wife, she describes her feelings thus: "I was tempted to cease struggling with him – to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own" (370). She is aware of the fact that if she gives up and becomes his wife, she will continue to do what he wants, for the rest of her life. It would mean the end of her independence. If she goes with him as his sister, however, at least her "heart and [her] mind would be free" (361).

Jane's relationship with Mr. Rochester is quite different. While St. John requires her to give up her opinions and feelings for his mission, Mr. Rochester wants her to be herself. From the moment they meet, he makes it clear that he wishes her to be who she is, and expects her to be "natural" with him (121). True, when Jane finds out that he is already married, he asks her to become his mistress, but in the end he tells her that he would never have gone through with that plan, since he loves her too much (390). He loves her because she does not betray her principles (229). And as mentioned before, in the end Jane gets the marriage she desired, a marriage of equals, or as she describes it: "I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (399).

Of the few options Jane does have, her decisions could easily have lead to a comfortable life as Mr. Rochester's mistress, or a respectable one with St. John, but she is not

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willing to compromise her beliefs for either of those lifes. Being with either man would mean betraying her principles, and she chooses rather to trust in herself, although that entails a low status and a more difficult life where she has to work and support herself. Her insistence to stay true to herself pays off in the end when she becomes Mr. Rochester‘s wife and is able to be his equal in every way, without remorse or shame.

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Chapter 3: Jane Eyre, a Feminist

In Victorian England it was clear what women should want, the only right choice for them was to have a husband and children. Not acquiring those meant that their lives were imperfect, and wasted somehow. Jane gets the opportunity to get married, twice even, but turns her suitors down because of her ideals which tell her that she should not marry simply for money or security. Her character, choices and opinions which she voices, are so drastically far from the "ideal woman" created by the Victorians, that Jane, whether she intends to or not, critiques the inequality of the sexes found in Victorian society: she is a feminist.

One thing that is central to feminism and all feminist theories, no matter how different they are, is the emphasis on the inequality that exists between the sexes (Okin ix). *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* defines feminism as "the ideology of women's liberation since intrinsic in all its approaches is the belief that women suffer injustice because of our sex." It also states that "The definition incorporates both a doctrine of equal rights for women (the organised movement to attain women's rights) and an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equality" (Humm 74). This is important to the story of Jane Eyre who refuses to settle for what is expected of her by the Victorians, thus attacking the inequality that is part of the Victorian society.

Jane, by her character and choices, defies the standard that Victorians set for women in a number of ways. As described above, the Victorians had very fixed ideas on how the ideal woman should be: she should be passive and obedient, centering her love and attention on her husband and family. Jane, however, is for the most part very far from that ideal. From the beginning she is described as being passionate (Brontë 7), and she is not willing to obey anyone unless it does not betray her principles. She says of obeying her cousin Diana: "It was my nature to feel pleasure in yielding to an authority supported like hers, and to bend, where

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my conscience and self-respect permitted, to an active will" (304). In a similar way does she do what Mr. Rochester asks her to do; she is willing to obey him because he cares for her comfort as his subordinate (117).

The Victorians firmly believed as well that women could be only one thing, for example an angel or a whore (as discussed in Chapter 1), but Jane's character is a compilation of different and sometimes contradicting characteristics. The best example of that is perhaps when she discovers that Mr. Rochester is already married; her reaction to that news show that she is not either rational or emotional, but both at the same time. While the ideal woman is meant to be without contradictions and have simple goals in life, Jane is an actual three-dimensional human. She thus "rewrite[s] Victorian Woman into a whole, to include intellect *and* feeling, passion *and* reason, rebellion *and* propriety, transgressive desire *and* virtue" (Macpherson 9).

Jane is also not the passive Victorian woman but a fiercely independent one. Ideally women should want a man to take care of them but Jane does not need one for she is able to, and wants to, take care of herself whatever happens. When she leaves Mr. Rochester, she is ready to do whatever she has to to survive (Brontë 308), and she knows that she has to be her own helper (74). Mr. Rochester sees that she can and will take care of herself if need be (176). In the end when Jane finds out that she is an heiress, she is very happy, not only because she has discovered her relatives but also because the money signals her financial independence at last (338). The idea of never getting married does not bother her (343), even though that is what all Victorian women should strive for. She would rather be on her own than with a man that she does not love, or a man that does not return her feelings, which is why she refuses St. John's proposal (358). Turning down a proposal is, of course, an act which Victorians would not understand, they felt that a woman should always get married if she had a suitor. It might

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be possible to argue that Jane is not independent at all, since she is eager to return to Mr. Rochester after she visits her aunt, thus proving that she is just as dependent on a man as the Victorians believed she should be. However, it is possible to be independent *and* have feelings for someone at the same time, and those feelings are what make Jane so eager to return to him. Her independence lies in the fact that, despite her feelings, she still leaves Mr. Rochester when she must, for an unknown life, where the only sure thing is that she has to fend for herself.

Finally, Victorians clearly believed that it was possible to steer people to a desired outcome, since they were so preoccupied with making sure that girls were brought up to become virtuous and good wives but Jane remains herself despite the fact that different people try to change her behaviour and character. At the Reed household, Bessie tries to frighten her into becoming a good girl by threatening her with the poor house (8), and at the Lowood institution the girls are taught to be quiet and grave (27). But although these attempts have an effect on Jane for some time, she eventually goes back to being herself in the end. She can not surpress who she is, although she does so at first for the sake of Helen and Miss Temple, eventually she starts feeling the "stirring of old emotions" (72). She finally goes back to being herself when she meets Mr. Rochester, who wants her to be who she truly is (121).

In some ways though, Jane is the woman Victorians desired, for Mr. Rochester describes her gaze at him as "the very sublime of faith, truth and devotion" (248), but despite her admitting that she has made an idol out of him (242), she still has her own principles to adhere to that come before his. She has certain boundaries that she will not cross (for example not becoming Mr. Rochester's mistress although he begs her to) and so she does not follow his lead the way the Victorian woman was expected to. She is her own person, and is not afraid of being honest, or talking back to Mr. Rochester if need be (114).

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As has been mentioned, the Victorians tended to focus only on the positive, ignoring anything shameful in their lives. Jane being a three-dimensional character however, means that she has not only positive characteristics but flaws as well: she is not perfect all the time. She is for example very proud, but even more than that, she is not willing to be too low on the social scale. She can not imagine being poor (18), and she claims superiority over people based either on her rank or her character. She feels superior to Miss Ingram, for example, because she has critiqued her personality and found her to be inferior to herself in that perspective (162), and she feels superior to servants and her pupils and other people in the village because despite being a governess, she is still a lady. She is not ready to marry for her money, although she could climb the social scale in that way, but she still worries about her rank, even though she knows those feeling to be wrong (317).

Jane is also sometimes slightly vain and wishes on many occasions that she were beautiful. Sometimes because she thinks it would help her situation, for instance that she would have been tolerated better in the Reed household if she had been better looking (10), but on other occacions she can not explain why she feels that way (85). At other times however, she seems to mistrust beauty, like the time when she meets Mr. Rochester for the first time, she feels more relaxed around him since he is not handsome (100). This vanity is perfectly understandable though, as beauty was, and is still today, a quality treasured by most people.

Jane defies the current view of the woman in Victorian England by the way her character and choices in life differ from the "ideal woman", but that is not all she does. She also defies this view by voicing her opinions and commenting on the inequality she experiences as a woman. Simply by expressing her views, she breaks the rules, for that was only for men to do. She dares to desire learning, experience and power, which was not meant

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for women at all (Macpherson 17-18). Women were only meant to get married and to take care of their family, nothing more, but that does not satisfy Jane who needs more action than that. She feels that all people must feel as she does, or as she puts it: "It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it" (Brontë 95). Thus she quickly gets tired of staying at Lowood, and before Mr. Rochester arrives at Thornfield, she has become "weary of an existence all passive" while staying there with only Mrs. Fairfax and Adele for company (101). By desiring more to do than simple housework, Jane does not accept the logic that all women were meant to perform only this type of work, she insists that women are capable of more, just as men are (Macpherson 19).

But Jane does not only desire action, she also insists on equality between men and women, which is extremely provocative for her to do at this time, especially since Victorian women were for the most part viewed as property. Her "we are equals" (Brontë 223) speech is infamous, where she demands equality, but that is not the only time she expresses this view. Earlier in the novel she muses on the situation of women, telling her reader that women have feelings just as men do, and that they need action and more to do than simple housework. She also lashes out at people who attack the women who dare to try things that they are not meant to in Victorian society (95). Thus Jane's speech to Mr. Rochester is a culmination of thoughts and ideas which Jane has pondered over for a long time, going back to the time when she was staying with her aunt and tells her that she does have feelings although no one thinks she does (29), which is the same thing that she later tells Mr. Rochester (223). For Jane, being equal means that she is not comfortable with him giving her everything (236), she is not happy until she can give something to their relationship as well. She wants to be his equal on every level, socially, financially and spiritually (223). Finally, Jane's last words on her marriage are: "I am

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my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (399) which is revolutionary, since women were meant to make the comfort of their husband their number one priority, not the other way around, and certainly not in equal measure. And although she is a part of his identity the way the Victorians believed she should be, *he* is also part of hers:

> No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. (Brontë 399)

Their lives are intertwined in the way Jane always wanted, neither is the master of the relationship, they are therefore truly equals.

The Victorians had strict ideas on what a woman should be, she should devote her life to the care of her husband and family. Jane is, however, not willing to go along with this image of the perfect Victorian woman, even though it means being ridiculed by her society. Instead she defies this standard set by men, which tells her that all she should want is to take care of her husband, denying her any other choice or outbursts for her thoughts and feelings, which she surely has, just as men do. Her insistence on her getting the chance to live her life the way she wants, and to be able to express her feelings and convictions, are what make her a feminist.

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Conclusion

The Victorian woman grew up in a society where she was for the most part viewed solely as property of the men in her family: her legal status was very poor and the options available to her were in accordance. The majority of Victorian men had decreed that the only proper role for her was that of a caring mother and wife; her other options were to become a governess, mistress or spinster, all of which were considered degrading for a woman. Jane, however, is not willing to conform to the rules of Victorian society. When she gets the opportunity to become a wife she turns her suitors down, even though by doing so she forfeits the chance to become respected in the community, as well as financially secure. She lives by her own principles, which prescribe that you should only marry for love, and chooses to be on her own, poor and ridiculed, rather than to betray her beliefs.

Jane is not the woman most Victorians wanted for a wife, but an independent woman with her own opinions, which she is not afraid to voice. She believes that women should have the same opportunities as men do, as she is sure that women have the same capacities for them as men. Jane feels that she should be equal to men, and she battles the inequality she faces by resisting to go along with the rules men have set for her, and by voicing her opinions. Jane's character, and the choices she makes, are what make her a feminist. It is through these deeds that she carries out an act of feminism: critiquing the inequality of the sexes in the Victorian period.

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