Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff

Heroines Who Paved the Way to Modernity

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay compares and contrasts Jane Eyre from *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and Sarah Woodruff from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) by John Fowles. The novels are set in the Victorian era, a time when women’s main role was to stay at home and be there for their husband and children. During this time, many conduct books, where women were taught to behave appropriately, were written and published and they were therefore under a great pressure to behave in a way society had decided was best for them. They were to be “the Angel in the House,” passive and meek. However, the two heroines, Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff, go against the rules and conventions of this patriarchal society. They are independent and strong women who follow their own heart and intuition. This essay shows how their attitude and actions made them into role models for women in real life and how they helped pave the way to modernity. Both Jane and Sarah are the complete opposite to the “typical” Victorian woman. They long for gender equality and act accordingly. Jane for instance always speaks her mind and Sarah is not afraid of behaving in an “improper” manner in order to get what she wants. Although *Jane Eyre* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* were written in two completely different time periods, the two heroines share the same values and they are very similar when it comes to their visions and longings. In fact, they prefer to be outsiders rather than having to yield to the pressure society put on women. As women were gradually beginning to gain more rights during the Victorian era and the gap between the gender roles was narrowing, Jane and Sarah’s attitude and behaviour can be seen as a foreshadowing for the new and better times ahead.
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Introduction

“After all, she was only a woman. There were so many things she must never understand: the richness of male life, the enormous difficulty of being one to whom the world was rather more than dress and home and children” (Fowles 139). This quote from John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) captures the essence of the Victorian era perfectly: a time when gender equality was practically non-existent. Men were superior to women and women were seen as mere accessories, apparent in their roles as wives and mothers. The structure and conventions of society as well as women’s lack of education can be seen as the cause of the difference in the roles of the genders and the reason behind the persistence of gender inequality. Women were expected to behave in a certain way society had decided was best for them. However, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant's Woman* show heroines who are not afraid to break out of the mould society has constructed for women.

This essay compares and contrasts these two heroines: Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff. First, the historical background is provided with references to works about the “proper” conduct of a lady in the era when the two stories are set. Secondly, the way the two heroines challenge society’s conventions is studied along with the reasons behind their status as outsiders. Notions of sexuality is also examined, as the topic of sex in the two novels is portrayed quite differently seeing that *Jane Eyre* was written in the Victorian era while *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was published in 1969. Finally, the essay will offer a view of some of the changes that were to come regarding gender equality starting with the coming of the genre of the New Woman fiction during the last two decades of the Victorian era to the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill in the 1960s.

Drawing a parallel between *Jane Eyre* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* might not seem like a sensible experiment at first because of the great difference between the time periods in which the two novels were written. However, as this essay will reveal, the two heroines, Jane and Sarah, share characteristics that are in many ways ideologically, politically and existentially similar – if not identical. They are strong and independent characters, who are an inspiration to women and help society’s progress towards gender equality as a result. They follow their heart and beliefs rather than society’s rules. They have become fed up with the injustice women face in everyday life and they long for equality. By standing up against patriarchy in their own
lives, they set an example for women everywhere. The setting of the novels, the Victorian era, saw many changes in terms of gender equality and feminism and Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff foreshadowed the new and better times ahead for women in real life with their inspirational attitude and behaviour.
Women’s Conduct According to Society

*Jane Eyre* is set in 1760-1820 in England when “definition of “women” and “femininity” played a crucial part in a wider redefinition of social categories and social roles” (Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century* i) and women of a certain class were under a great pressure to behave in a certain way. They had to be alluring yet not flirtatious. There is a fine line between the two: a line, which women were not supposed to cross. They were “objects of male desire, but in terms which [would] contain that desire within the publicly sanctioned form of marriage” (Jones, *The Lady’s New Year’s Gift* 14). This male-dominated society saw women as fragile, sensitive and modest and they were expected to show these traits in their behaviour.

During this time, many books on the conduct of women were written and published. Not surprisingly, most of them were written by men that saw it as their duty to teach young women appropriate behaviour. A good example of this is *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady* (1740) by Wetenhall Wilkes, where he informs his young niece that chastity is a virtue and without it, women would become impure and lose the possibility of ever getting married. He states that, “no charm can supply its place; without it beauty is unlovely, wit is mean and wanton; quality contemptible, and good-breeding worthless” (29). Thusly, Wilkes demonstrates the importance of this virtue to his young niece and claims that without it no man would want her. By practicing chastity, she will flourish with “all her virgin grace about her – sweet to the sense, and lovely to the eye” (29). Wilkes’ statement proves that these rules that women were to live by are made by men, for men.

In addition to society’s control over women’s behaviour, female leisure had become “an indication of the husband’s social status” (Spencer 194). Women did not have the same opportunities as men and their role was limited to domestic matters. The gap between men and women was wide and the Victorian writer John Ruskin describes the difference between the genders in detail in his essay “Of Queen’s Gardens.”

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest…But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. (par. 32)
The woman was to stay at home where she was protected from the dangers of the outside world: a world ruled by men. Ruskin continues, “The woman…is not to guide, nor even to think for herself. The man is always to be the wiser; he is to be the thinker, the ruler, the superior in knowledge and discretion, as in power” (par. 26). This perfectly summarises society’s view during the Victorian era, when the education women received was merely “to bring out her “natural” submission to authority and innate maternal instincts. Young ladies were trained to have no opinions lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man’s taste, and thereby unmarketable as a commodity” (Vicinus x).

In 1792, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft was published. Wollstonecraft was a “passionate advocate of educational and social equality for women” (“Mary Wollstonecraft”) and in her treatise, she explains how conduct books for women demonstrate the fact that men see females more as women rather than human beings; as if women lack a mind of their own. The mindset of the time also dictated women to exclusively aspire to become wives and mothers and absolutely nothing more. “Mrs. Ellis, a popular writer of etiquette books, counseled the unhappily married woman to remember that her ‘highest duty is so often to suffer and be still’” (Vicinus x) while Wollstonecraft on the other hand claimed that women “ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect” (Wollstonecraft 7).

Although Wollstonecraft’s treatise acquired attention, it did not result in any changes (“Mary Wollstonecraft”) and the repressive mindset of the eighteenth century carried on into the Victorian era. Victorians saw the perfect woman as “the Angel in the House,” which is a phrase that “comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women” (Ren 2061). The phrase only furthers society’s conclusion that women had no business outside of the home. They were to take care of their children and husband and “exert their good influence on” them (Rose). According to the conventions of the society, all women wanted out of life was to get married, have children and see that their husband was comfortable and content.

Women should be obedient to their husband, father and other male superiors. In no circumstances was the wife equal to her husband, as she was to be submissive and dependent on him. As Aihong Ren states: “She should possess a majestic childishness” along with being “passive, meek, charming, graceful, self-sacrificing, pious, and above
all---pure” (2061). The pressure women of this time experienced was unacceptable to
say at least but it was all about to change for the better. By knowing how women were
expected to behave during the time in which the novels take place, it is easier to see
how different Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff are from the norm.
Jane Eyre Against Society

Jane Eyre, the protagonist of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, loses her parents when she is but a baby and consequently grows up with her relatives where she feels unwanted and unloved. Despite that, she is strong and independent even when she is still a little girl and throughout the novel, she can be seen following her heart even when it conflicts with society’s conventions. She is already experiencing patriarchy and social injustice at a very early age. When she is ten years old, her cousin, John Reed, who is but four years older than she, insists on her calling him Master Reed. He as well as his sisters and mother, feels she is inferior to them and they exclude her and treat her like she does not matter. All this unfairness and abuse result in Jane’s rebellion and she begins to stand up for herself. One day, she cannot tolerate the injustice any longer and she feels a burning desire to do something about it: “*Speak* I must: I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn: but how?” (Brontë 38). At this moment, she decides to confront her aunt Reed. The confrontation shows Mrs Reed that Jane has now begun speaking her mind, which is inappropriate behaviour for a girl. “Her [Jane’s] adolescence is marked first by her sudden and unprecedented revolt against the Reeds, a self-assertiveness that incurs severe punishment and ostracism, but also wins her freedom from the family” (Showalter 113-114). She has become quite fearless and she continues to be so throughout her life.

In addition to Jane’s courage and frankness, she strives for gender and social equality. After she becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall and falls in love with Rochester, she feels it is necessary for them to be equal in order for them to be together. Unfortunately, as stated before, equality between husband and wife was not something to be expected during that time. Despite that, there is a sense of equality between Jane and Rochester from the moment they meet. She does not feel he is her superior before she finds out who he really is. Furthermore, Rochester does not feel superior to Jane. He excuses his tone of command when he is interviewing her and tells her he cannot change his custom of commanding people for “a new inmate” (Brontë 125). He even asks her if she agrees with him that he has “a right to be a little masterful,” and whether she is willing to receive his orders “now and then” (135). He simply forgets the fact that he is her employer and ordering her to do things is something she expects of him. He does not see her as someone who is beneath him, which might be the result of how different Jane is from other women. As St John Rivers says to her: “‘You *are* original,’ he said, ‘and not timid. There is something brave in your spirit, as well as penetrating in
your eye…”” (375). Jane is frank and sincere, which are manners not seen in the “typical” woman of that time.

Rochester’s attitude towards Jane and their sense of equality are essential for Jane because without it, she would not marry him. Before their engagement, when Rochester has made her believe he is to marry Miss Ingram but still wants Jane to live with them, she becomes quite angry with him because she feels Rochester does not respect her feelings:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; -- it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are! (Brontë 253)

Jane speaks to him as his equal and she is not afraid to be passionate and sincere. As Pat Macpherson states: “Her power is this welding of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual strength into speech, articulating her claim for equality and direct communication between the sexes” (70). Jane soon finds out that Rochester is not to marry Miss Ingram and he proposes to Jane. She is determined never to become a repressed wife like society expects women to become. However, as soon as they are engaged, Rochester starts to change for the worse. He wants to buy Jane jewellery and clothes and take her to Paris, Rome and other romantic cities (Brontë 260). He even states, “It is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently; and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I’ll just – figuratively speaking – attach you to a chain…” (271). The equality they had gradually begins to fade and it seems like Rochester feels that by marrying Jane, he is capturing her. By seeing it that way, the restraints of society will gain the upper hand and their forthcoming marriage is doomed to become like every other marriage during that time, where the husband has all the power and control over
his wife. However, Jane, being a pioneer for the modern day woman, does not allow that to happen.

Jane’s modernity is evident and it is especially powerful when she expresses her deepest thoughts and longings shortly after she arrives at Thornfield Hall:

Anybody may blame me who likes, when I add further that…I longed for a power of vision which might…reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen; that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach…it is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot…Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do. (Brontë 110-111)

Jane’s way of thinking is clearly very modern and the fact that Charlotte Brontë wrote this in the Victorian era only demonstrates how frustrated women were becoming with society’s gender roles. They were becoming restless and ready for a change. Jane continues describing the absurdity of the confinement women were experiencing:

[I]t is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 111)

Jane’s wishes can be seen as a foreshadowing of what was to come. Women would gradually gain more rights and the gap between the genders would narrow. Jane Eyre helped pave the way for women who were fighting for equal rights. Another role model for women fighting against inequality and injustice is *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*’s Sarah Woodruff.
Sarah Woodruff Against Society

Sarah Woodruff is an outcast in the town where she lives. Her fellow townsfolk refer to her as “Tragedy” and “The French Lieutenant’s Whore,” because they believe her to have slept with a French lieutenant outside of marriage. This is what Sarah wants them to believe, as she prefers to be an outcast and live in disgrace rather than to live the Victorian way, where society forces women to behave in a certain way. She is a complete opposite to “the Angel in the House,” as she is independent and strong. She refuses to follow society’s traditions and rules and she rejects the idea of gender roles. She aspires for freedom and is not afraid to use unconventional methods in her mission to get what she wants. For example, she uses her sexuality to get Charles, which completely goes against Victorian virtues and values. He is what she wants and therefore she does everything in her power to get him.

The way Sarah seduces Charles emphasises her modernity and cleverness, as every step she takes is essential in order for him to fall for her. For example, she remains very mysterious when it comes to her affair with the French lieutenant and she keeps on changing the story in order to keep Charles intrigued and curious. Then, after Mrs Poulteney forbids her to walk in the Undercliff, she makes sure she gets caught doing exactly that in order for her to get expelled from Mrs Poulteney’s house. She knows that by doing that, she will certainly be able to receive help from Charles, who gives her money to go to Exeter. When he then visits her to Exeter, she feigns a sprained ankle so he would definitely need to come to her room to see her. There, she gets what she wants and they have sex. Even though Charles might think he has everything under control and knows what he is doing during all of this, it is really Sarah who has the upper hand, as she has orchestrated all of this from the start.

However, it would have been easy for Sarah to lose her ground after the seduction, as Charles wants to marry her and attempts to send her a letter telling her so. He even breaks off his engagement to his fiancée, Ernestina Freeman. That decision of his demonstrates how vital Sarah is, as she pushes Charles from the past and into the future. In a way, Charles choosing Sarah over Ernestina can be seen as an allegory for how the times were changing. She challenges Charles, which results in him following his heart instead of caring about conventions. However, Charles’ letter never reaches Sarah and she leaves Exeter without him knowing.

This course of events is crucial in order for Sarah and Charles to be together in the end. What Charles really wants after their encounter in Exeter is to marry her, take her
to Paris, Florence and Rome and buy her clothes (Fowles 317), much like what
Rochester wants to do for Jane. He even thinks about how she must be “suitably
installed in London” and how “they should go abroad as soon as his affairs could be
settled” (Fowles 343). Thus, by getting married this way, they would become like every
other Victorian husband and wife, unequal: exactly like Jane feared she and Rochester
would become. That could never work for the modern woman that Sarah is, so the fact
that Charles does not find her until two years later, where she is living in London with
the Rossettis, is essential in order for them to be together as equals.

What is notable in Sarah’s seduction of Charles is the way she uses her sexuality.
The fact that she is so open about sex is very unusual seeing that she is a woman living
in the Victorian era. During that time, the recognised attitude towards sex was very
repressed and strict. However, the nineteenth century was characterised by double
standards. The narrator of The French Lieutenant’s Woman summarises the hypocrisy
of the era perfectly in the following paragraph:

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was
sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds—a
few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches
were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in
sixty houses in London was a brothel (the modern ratio would be nearer one in
six thousand). Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was
proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance;
and where never—or hardly ever—have so many great figures, from the future
king down, led scandalous private lives. (Fowles 276-277)

These double standards did not only manifest in this atmosphere where people said one
thing and did another but it is also prominent when looking at gender inequality. Men
got away with doing things women would never recover from if they got caught. For
example, if a man was unfaithful, it was “defined as the indulgence of natural urges”
(Nead 49). Although it was frowned upon, it was regarded as unavoidable. However, for
a woman, unchastity was seen as “unnatural and irrevocable…There could be no
movement from one category to another; a fall from virtue was final” (Nead 49). It
violated her femininity and when caught in an act of adultery, she would be considered
a fallen woman forever. Female adultery is “represented as a consequence of abnormal
and excessive sexual feelings; desires which are defined as commonplace in man are treated as a form of madness in woman” (Nead 50). Therefore, Sarah’s behaviour is considered indecent and Charles is shocked when she tells him she has had sex. That is a perfect example of the double standards of the Victorian era, as Charles does not lack sexual experience himself even though he is not a married man. While he maintains his title as a respectable gentleman, Sarah is excluded from society, merely because of her gender.
Jane and Sarah as Outsiders

It is clear that neither Jane Eyre nor Sarah Woodruff are conventional women of their time. However, the fact that they are both outsiders is merely society’s fault, as its primal reaction to their unconventional behaviour is to reject and exclude them.

Although Jane is raised “among the middle class with the Reeds,” they make it clear to her that she does not belong to their class (Godfrey 856). John Reed tells young Jane: “[Y]ou are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma’s expense” (Brontë 13). He feels she is beneath him, as he has been raised to believe so by his mother, who does not want her children associating with her. When Jane questions how John Reed could be her master and asks whether she is a servant, she is told, “No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep” (14).

Moreover, Jane becomes a governess, which according to Godfrey is significant:

[It is] an important development in the text’s subversion of gender, since governesses served as a hole in the invisible wall between working-class and middle-class gender identities. As governess, Jane bridges the gap between the dangerous androgyny of working-class homogeneity and the fragile stability of middle-class separate spheres. (857)

However, while the governess “had the responsibility of educating the young in the moral and social behaviour of their class,” her employer’s family or other servants had little respect for her (Macpherson 2). Elizabeth Rigby, a contemporary of Charlotte Brontë displays her views on governesses in a review of Jane Eyre. She states that women of that profession have “no equals, and therefore can have no sympathy” (507). According to her, a governess is a woman with no place in society:

She is a burden and restraint in society,...She is a bore to almost any gentleman, as a tabooed woman, to whom he is interdicted from granting the usual privileges of the sex, and yet who is perpetually crossing his path. She is a bore to most ladies by the same rule, and a reproach too—for her dull, fagging, bread-and-water life is perpetually putting their pampered listlessness to shame. The servants invariably detest her, for she is a dependent like themselves, and yet,
for all that, as much their superior in other respects as the family they both serve.

(507-508)

According to this description, being a governess only isolates Jane further and therefore, it is not only her personality and character that make her an outsider but also her profession. This is one of the reasons why Jane’s attitude and behaviour is so important for all women. If it were not for her strong character, she would not have been able to prove society wrong: no honest person should be rejected from society strictly because of his or her rank or gender. People should treat each other with respect no matter who they are or where they come from. It is foolish and unnecessary to go through life pleasing society and not oneself. Jane and Rochester love each other and long to be together and they should be able to do that as equals.

While Jane Eyre is quite innocent and pure, Sarah can be seen as the opposite. She is a disgraced woman in her society so she can be seen as “impure.” She does not find it difficult to talk to Charles about her relationship with the French lieutenant, which demonstrates how open she is about her sexuality. When she and Charles witness Sam and Mary out “exploring each other” (Fowles 161), Charles looks at Sarah and sees that she is smiling at him for the first time. He describes it as being “something as strange, as shocking, as if she had thrown off her clothes...He felt she had almost been waiting for such a moment to unleash it upon him” and he knew that if he would reach out to her and touch her, she would not show any resistance, “only a passionate reciprocity of feeling” (161-162). This “invitation” on Sarah’s behalf is one of the reasons why she is the stereotypical Victorian “fallen woman” and it further shows how far ahead of society she is. Ernestina, for example, would never behave in such a manner.

Victorian society divided women into four main stereotypes: “the angel, the demon, the old maid, and the fallen woman” (Auerbach 63). Ernestina can be seen as “the angel.” She is terrified of sex, “it was not only her profound ignorance of the reality of copulation that frightened her; it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require, and which seemed to deny all that gentleness of gesture and discreetness of permitted cares that so attracted her in Charles” (Fowles 30). Ernestina can be seen as representing the Victorian convention while Sarah represents the coming modernity, as she is ahead of her contemporaries when it comes to sex and gender roles (“The French Lieutenant’s Woman: Essay Q&A”). Ernestina tries to suppress every
sexual thought, unlike Sarah, who is “the fallen woman.” As Gretchen Braun states, “maidenly demise is preferable to sexual fall, and should physical chastity be compromised before marriage, an outcast state---from respectable society and perhaps even from God’s grace---is inevitable” for a female Victorian literary character (342). A woman’s right to participate in society was revoked if she did not follow the conventions. She then became an outcast, which is what Sarah is.

Sarah is a ploughman’s daughter who was educated above her status, which resulted in her not belonging to any particular class. She is too poor for possible suitors from the class above her and too educated for suitors of her own class. By being in between classes, she clearly sees the absurdity of these social constructions. Her decision to be an outsider is her way of rejecting society’s restrictions and idea of gender roles. It is clear that both Sarah and Jane have fallen between the cracks, as they do not belong anywhere. Their attitude towards society’s traditions and rules foreshadow the new times ahead.
Notions of Sexuality

During the Victorian era, it was universally accepted as a biological fact that women did not have any sexual passion and “to assume otherwise was indecent” (Altick 54). Therefore, after *Jane Eyre* was published and “it became known that a woman had written such a passionate novel and seemed so knowing sexually,” the reviews became quite negative (“Contemporary Response to Jane Eyre”). “[T]he presentation of female sexuality and human passion disturbed and amazed readers” (Showalter 92). Showalter states that the passion Jane feels towards her married employer and the relationship between them could not be accepted and the readers could not imagine what kind of woman the author of such a novel might be (92). Even though Charlotte Brontë did not write bluntly about sex, *Jane Eyre* is layered with sexual tension, which Brontë created with her masterful use of “language, mystery, and sensuous details” (Stone 1). Jane and Rochester are constantly teasing each other in their conversations. They are blunt and honest with each other and they never really know whether the other person will answer them in a kind or cruel manner. An example of Jane’s forwardness towards Rochester is when he asks her whether she finds him handsome. Her reply is simple: “No, sir” (Brontë 132). She realises she should “have replied to this question by something conventionally vague and polite” (Brontë 132), but being vague and not speaking her mind is simply not the way she is. Rochester in turn behaves the same way towards her.

According to Carla Kaplan, “Jane sums up the erotic quality of their teasing, poetic, mock-combative repartee when she states, ‘I knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns; it was one I chiefly delighted in…on the extreme brink I liked well to try my skill’” (Kaplan 82; Brontë 158). Kaplan then continues:

Indeed, Rochester and Jane are so bound up in seductive discourse, in the seductiveness of discourse, that it is hardly hyperbolic for Rochester to proclaim, as he does toward the end of the novel, that everything that matters to him in the world is ‘concentrated in my Jane’s tongue to my ear.’ (Kaplan 82-83; Brontë 440)

Their seductive discourse is essential in order to create the tension between them. Ruth Bernard Yeazell states that by teasing and mocking one another, Jane and Rochester are preserving both self and passion (142). According to her, “the banter in which she [Jane] delights serves to attract as well as to repel; if it keeps the lovers at arm’s length,
it also intensifies their mutual desire. The tension generated by the lovers’ verbal play thus reflects the dialectic of the entire novel” (141-142).

However, it is not merely Jane and Rochester’s seductive discourse that creates the novel’s sexual tension, as the suspense of what is left unsaid and undone is also a big part of it. A good example of this is when Rochester says to Jane: “Good-night, my –,” then bites his lip and leaves her abruptly (Brontë 181). Without really saying anything, Rochester expresses so much with this incident. It is clear he has deep feelings for Jane. Another example of this is when Jane saves Rochester’s life after Bertha Mason sets his bed curtains on fire. After Jane has put out the fire and woken Rochester up, he does not want her to leave him. He takes her hand in both his hands and Jane feels that there is a strange energy in his voice and “strange fire in his look” (Brontë 152). There is obviously something he wants to tell her and he is visibly holding back his feelings. “He paused; gazed at me: words almost visible trembled on his lips – but his voice was checked” (Brontë 152). He even has difficulty letting go of her hand after he tells her to go back to her room.

Furthermore, it is a known fact that Rochester is a sexual man. As Caroline Stone puts it, “he spent his youth tromping through Europe bedding every courtesan and opera singer he could find” (2). That makes the scenario of Jane finding his bed on fire at night when she is all alone quite erotic (Stone 3). She is the only one who can extinguish the flames after “the very sheets were kindling” (Brontë 149). The fire represents the sexual side of Rochester and as Caroline Stone notes, when Rochester orders Jane to “come to the fire” (Brontë 123), what he really is asking is for her to come to him (Stone 3). In The French Lieutenant’s Woman, fire also represents passion. However, Charles believes he himself has lit fire in Sarah and that it is his job to put it out:

He had thought by his brief gesture and assurance to take the first step towards putting out the fire the doctor had told him he had lit; but when one is oneself the fuel, firefighting is a hopeless task. Sarah was all flame. Her eyes were all flame as she threw a passionate look back at Charles. He withdrew his hand, but she caught it and before he could stop her raised it towards her lips. He snatched it away in alarm then; and she reacted as if he had struck her across the face. (Fowles 259)
At first, Charles tries to hold back and do what he believes is right, which is to reject Sarah. He asks her to control herself, but when she whispers: “I cannot” (Fowles 259), he loses all self-control and takes her into his arms and kisses her.

Unsurprisingly, Brontë and Fowles use very different methods when portraying sex in the two novels, as the times had changed immensely from the Victorian era when *Jane Eyre* was written and to the 1960s when *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was written. Fowles wrote his novel at a time when women were finally becoming sexually free, which is foreshadowed by Sarah Woodruff and her view towards sex. The fact that *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* takes place during the Victorian era is the reason why Sarah’s sexuality is so important. Her behaviour has consequences because she lives during these times where women’s sexuality is deemed improper and it “disturbs and challenges Victorian propriety” (Fletcher 33). She deliberately does “improper” things. She for example frequently walks through Ware Commons, a large wood “where people could go and not be spied on” (Fowles 98), which made it the perfect place to have affairs. She also talks about sex and seduces Charles. She rebels against the restrictions society puts on women and does what she wants to do, when she wants to do it. Both *Jane Eyre* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* are full of passion and sexual tension, although it is displayed in different ways. It is interesting how very similar Sarah and Jane really are when it comes to their visions and longings, seeing that the two novels were written in such different time periods. Despite that, the two heroines share the same values and are very much alike as human beings. While Sarah and Jane both represent what is to come for women later on, Jane’s behaviour marked the beginning of something new and remarkable for the women of the Victorian era.
The New Woman

During the last two decades of the Victorian era, The New Woman fiction came into existence: a genre, which can be seen as having originated because of *Jane Eyre*. Macpherson states:

Though novels themselves were about female transgression in their hundred-year history before Charlotte Brontë’s moment of writing *Jane Eyre* in 1847, convention had largely limited the plot to courtship, the heroine to beauty and innocence, the temptation to transgression of the rules of propriety in courtship, and the outcome to either reward or punishment. (8)

Macpherson continues: “Jane Eyre as heroine and Charlotte Brontë as writer rewrite Victorian Woman into a whole, to include intellect and feeling, passion and reason, rebellion and propriety, transgressive desire and virtue (9). According to Andrzej Diniejko, The New Woman fiction manifested during these times of change “in social attitudes regarding gender relations, which is marked by a steady move away from the pattern of patriarchal male supremacy and female dependence towards the modern pattern of gender equality.” The New Woman became everything Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff were striving for women to become: “intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting,” leaving the stereotypical Victorian woman behind. Gender roles were redefined with the declining of patriarchy, as women became more empowered (Diniejko).

The theme of The New Woman novels is familiar, as they deal with female heroines fighting “against the traditional Victorian male perception of woman as ‘angel in the house’” and these heroines go against society’s conventions and morality (Diniejko) just like Jane and Sarah do. *Jane Eyre*, being the first novel to “represent the modern view of women’s position in society” (Gao 926), clearly had a great influence on future writers and Jane Eyre as a character inspired women to take action and fight for their rights. *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* on the other hand is quite different, seeing that John Fowles knew what was to come at the end of the nineteenth century when he was writing the novel. Women’s position in society was about to improve in many ways and examples of the important changes that took place are, “divorce law reform (1857), the right to vote in local government elections (1869), improved rights over the custody of children (1873), and the raising of the age of consent to 16 (1885)”
 (“Women’s Rights”). Therefore, knowing how times were about to change for the better for women, Sarah Woodruff can be seen as a prognostic for these improvements regarding gender equality.

The feminists of the Victorian era fought hard to achieve the rights Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff foreshadowed. They for example urged women “to obtain a proper education and profession in order to make themselves financially independent” (Diniejko). Charlotte Brontë herself “criticised social marginalisation of women” and women began to make their voices heard and demand rights for themselves. Their demands included “the right to higher education, property, employment and suffrage” (Diniejko). These rights were a matter of course for men but for women, it was but a distant dream, for which they had to fight hard.

Gradually, the campaign for women’s rights began to show results and the slow path towards gender equality began. In 1870, The Married Women’s Property Acts “allowed married women to retain and control their earned income, and in 1882 they gained the right to own and control their property.” In 1891, an act was passed, which “denied men conjugal rights to their wives’ bodies without their wives’ consent” (Diniejko). With these acts, women progressively became less dependent on men and started to gain their independence. At last, Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff’s vision was coming true and England’s journey towards gender equality had begun. However, the journey would be a slow one and the fight for equal rights is still ongoing. For example, when John Fowles was writing The French Lieutenant’s Woman, he had recently witnessed the great changes that came with the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s.

John Fowles, being a man in the middle of the Sexual Revolution of the sixties, was able to write freely about sex, unlike Charlotte Brontë. He had witnessed how society’s attitude towards women and their sexuality had gradually been changing. It is not necessary to go further back than one decade to see how women’s rights were moving forward. In the 1960s, the role of women went through “deep cultural changes,” with the coming of the second-wave feminism. The transition from the 1950s was great, as women were evolving from housewives into feminists who worked away from home (Walsh).

The sixties saw the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill, which meant that single women could have sex without having to worry about pregnancy while married women could control the size of their family. Therefore, women could now have sex for pleasure (S. Pendergast and T. Pendergast). Fowles uses Sarah Woodruff as a
foreshadowing for all of these changes that were to come for women in real life, from the beginning of the fight for equal rights to the day he finished writing *The French Lieutenant’s Woman.*
Conclusion

Women in the Victorian era were suppressed by socially constructed gender roles. They were completely dependent on their husband and their role was to be “the Angel in the House.” If they received any education, it was strictly in order to mould them into better wives and mothers. Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff both go against society’s conventions. Jane speaks her mind and longs for gender equality. She dislikes the idea that women should behave in a certain way and she believes there is not much difference between men and women. Sarah would rather live in disgrace and be an outcast than to follow society’s traditions. She is not afraid to talk about sex and does everything she can to achieve her goals. Because of Jane and Sarah’s attitude and behaviour, they become outsiders. Their social status adds to their isolation as well, as Jane is an orphan who becomes a governess and Sarah is a ploughman’s daughter who is educated above her status. Therefore, they do not belong anywhere.

Furthermore, Jane and Sarah’s passion is yet another example of how different they are from the norm, as the people of the Victorian era believed that women did not have any sexual passion. *Jane Eyre*, being written in the repressed time of the Victorian era, does not deal with the topic of sex in a blunt manner. However, Jane and Rochester’s seductive discourse and everything that is left unsaid and undone creates suspense and as a result, the novel becomes full of passionate atmosphere and sexual tension. Sarah on the other hand is very open about her sexuality and she has sex. The difference between the two characters’ notions of sexuality is the result of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* being written in the 1960s, when the times had changed immensely since the publication of *Jane Eyre*.

The last two decades of the Victorian era saw a new literature genre, the New Woman fiction, which originated because of *Jane Eyre* and marked the ending of the stereotypical Victorian woman. The New Woman was “intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting” (Diniejko), which is everything Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff wanted women to become. Therefore, these two characters represent the changes that are gradually beginning to take place at the end of the Victorian era. Women were becoming restless and ready for a change. The feminists of the Victorian era could not let the patriarchy and oppression persist any longer and began speaking up and fighting for women’s rights louder and harder than ever before. Their fight was not in vain and gradually more and more acts were passed in their favour.
When *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* was published, the fight for gender equality had come a long way. John Fowles used his knowledge of how society’s attitude towards women and their sexuality had changed since the Victorian era and Sarah Woodruff can be seen as an indication for these changes. In fact, gender equality and feminism have seen a great deal of improvement and many things have changed for the better since the setting of the two novels. Therefore, the two heroines, Jane Eyre and Sarah Woodruff, foreshadowed the new and better times ahead for women in real life.
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