

Jane Eyre, The Invisible Bisexual: Bisexual Erasure in Historical Literature

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reveal Charlotte Brontë's canonized heterosexual character Jane Eyre as bisexual and explain why critics unintentionally erase bisexuality in historical literature. Homosexuality emerged as a species in the 1800s, but the heterosexual-versus-homosexual binary scale overlooked bisexuality. Yet, bisexuality existed—and Victorian society encouraged it between women. Lesbianism and female “friendships” were promoted within female boarding schools and between women in heterosexual marriages; the precise relationships exemplified in *Jane Eyre*. Though Jane marries a man, her heterosexual “familial” marriage emerges only out of her bisexual nature, for she does not marry Rochester until he becomes effeminate. Despite the commonality of homoeroticism, Victorian marriage-plot novels with apparently queer characters like those in *Jane Eyre* tend to end with heteronormative resolutions. This habitual ending reflects the era's obsession with closure through the idealized stasis provided by the patriarchal bourgeois domestic sphere. This article argues how bisexuality's lack of recognition in the Victorian era, along with today's bisexual erasure, renders its historical literary representations invisible.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is one of the most beloved romances of all time, a classic taught and studied for over a century since its publication. Despite this care and attention, historians neglect one fundamental “Victorian” aspect of this proto-feminist novel: Jane is bisexual. As surprising as this claim might seem, we find homoerotic fixations like those detailed in this essay throughout Victorian literature. Yet, scholars are quick to dismiss homosexuality as a possibility in romance novels when they end in a heteronormative relationship such as *Jane Eyre*. How could Jane be sapphic if she accepts her gender roles and marries a man? In a time when it was illegal to be gay, it is hard to imagine why an author would write about something so taboo, but literature is often true history screaming behind a guise. We must remove the mask of an author's

self-preservation to understand the honesty buried beneath the surface understanding of a text. This essay argues why bisexual-leaning Victorian novels like *Jane Eyre* are often determined to be heteronormative romances, aims to reveal how frequently critics subconsciously ignore bisexual representation, and provides an explanation for why Victorian homoerotic stories end with heteronormative resolutions.

Before Jane's mutual attraction to both sexes is unveiled, it is imperative to understand why modern critics dismiss bisexuality in female literary characters such as Jane Eyre. Charlotte Brontë published the titular novel in 1847, 40 years before German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing defined the homosexual as a species in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Bisexuality, however, was not recognized as an identity until the mid-

twentieth century. Bisexuality certainly existed before then, but it was not recognized as a sexual orientation nor did the language exist to define it. In “Dare Not Speak Its Name: Bisexuality in Victorian Fin de Siècle Literature,” Canadian Sexuality and Gender researcher Nicholas Reid Denton clashes with the hetero/homosexual binary, declaring that the need to label all people as one type of monosexual erases the existence of bisexual representation in historical literature. If a character deviated from heteronormative behavior, they were/are classified as a homosexual. If they outgrew their homoerotic phase and married the opposite sex, they were/are classified as heterosexual. Because of this strict binary, critics and even Brontë, the architect of a bisexual, may not have even glimpsed its presence. Krafft-Ebing eventually recognized erotic, dual-sex feelings as a taxonomical class and christened it as “bisexual,” yet it was still believed to be a temporary phase, a “natural circumstance of the predevelopmental stage” (Denton, p. 465). He and other sexologists openly discussed homoeroticism in youth as a stepping stone often leading to heterosexuality and were not yet willing to let go of bisexuality as a form of intersex. Bisexuality was only seen as a psychological hermaphroditism of the soul that would eventually mature into one monosexuality on the binary scale. We see this philosophy addressed throughout Victorian literature, suggesting its wide acceptance. For instance, in the Victorian poet, Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, we find meditations on this topic in lines like “had the wild oat not been sown” and “outliving heats of youth” (p. 65). Accepting “wild oats” as having sexual connotations and considering that *In Memoriam* is dedicated to Tennyson’s childhood male best friend, we see Tennyson drawing conclusions about his adolescent, homoerotic passions extending into adulthood. This paper believes *Jane Eyre* sows such wild oats amidst her own *heats of youth*.

When we accept *Jane Eyre*’s superficial heteronormative romance plot, we understand it to proceed as such: a neglected orphaned girl grows up to become the governess for a rich man’s (most likely but maybe not) daughter, falls in love with him (despite his erratic and conniving behavior), discovers a horrible secret in his attic (that tries to kill her), then marries him after the secret physically disables him. What gets ignored is the lesbian-like tension experienced at Lowood Institution that seemingly builds the foundations for what a romantic partnership should be like for Jane. Why does Jane look up to “so great a girl” as Helen Burns (Brontë, p. 62)? Why do they share a bed and kiss? Why is Jane so infatuated with Miss Temple? After Temple marries, why is Jane so troubled that her only solution to her “loss” is to seek employment elsewhere (Brontë, p. 98)? If these homoerotic behaviors are addressed at all, it is addressed as a phase of Jane’s life that eventually supports her heterosexual ever-after (a heterosexual marriage only offering safety once the dominant-male figure is maimed). Only through Jane’s sapphic relationships does she procure her eventual happiness—disproving that she is heterosexual. Her homoerotic sensations (not just explored, but fully accepted) at Lowood inarguably support her bisexual nature.

Lines from *Jane Eyre* that could be telling of Jane’s bisexuality include one where she speaks about the loss of a female friend: “[f]rom the day she left I was no longer the same: with her was gone every settled feeling, every association that had made Lowood in some degree a home to me... she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity... the reason for tranquility was no more” (Brontë, pp. 98-99). The untrained eye might pass over this swoon-worthy line, but despite the severely lacking language surrounding bisexuality, Victorians did not need medical terminology nor sexologists to pinpoint homoeroticism—it

was alive and well throughout the era, expressed freely and even encouraged, particularly between women. Homosexual relationships between women not only coexisted with women's heterosexual relationships with men but were seen to foster them. Sharon Marcus, American professor of English and Comparative Literature specializing in nineteenth-century British and French culture, discusses the range of lesbian-like friendships in *Between Women* and how they supported their heterosexual counterparts. It "reinforced femininity, but at the same time it licensed forms of agency women were discouraged from exercising with men" (p. 2). In other words, female friendships made heterosexual marriage tolerable and prevented promiscuity with other men. Just as female friendships supported heterosexual marriages, they also supported the heterosexual narrative plot in novels exemplified by *Jane Eyre*. The heteronormative plot structure will be discussed later on in this essay, but first, it is best to continue with our understanding of female/female homoerotic desire.

Close female friendship models were plentiful in Victorian literature and Victorians were aptly able to decipher "coded allusions" of love between women. They did not bat an eye at these romantic friendships because they were not considered "lesbian" (unlike the French phenomenon at the time) (Marcus, p. 15). Marcus illuminates the difference between these sapphic British relationships and why they were widely accepted: French lesbianism opposed heterosexual marriage whereas the British type eventually led to the woman finding a "beloved husband" (p. 15). The Victorian phenomenon of female homoerotic encouragement supported the ideals of hierarchy within heterosexual marriages. *Between Women* illuminates how fashion, doll worship, and female-on-female corporal punishment revolved around differences in class rank, power, domination, and submission. The Victorian world of femininity

constructed yearning and what Marcus calls "a deeply regulated hierarchical structure of longing" in which the minority desired her female superior (pp. 4-5). This social order was first established in a girl's childhood home, typically between a mother and her daughter or some other equal age gap. We see this represented in *Jane Eyre*. Jane's aunt (by marriage) exhaustively subjects her to physical and emotional abuse to remind her of her place, and Jane desperately longs for her aunt's acceptance and approval. We also see Miss Scatcherd humiliate Helen and Jane with regularity at Lowood Institution.

These hierarchical foundations were established in the domestic sphere and further engrained in the semi-public sphere of the boarding school. The power stratification within boarding schools facilitated power dynamics and these dynamics naturally reflected heteronormative family structures. In boarding schools, girls idolized older publicly successful women. Prominent professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies, Martha Vicinus's *Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships* explores lesbianism in Victorian boarding schools and institutional "mothering" (an older girl assigned to a younger one to familiarize her with the school, often leading to loyalty and worship by the younger girl). Families and school institutions promoted these adolescent crushes because they believed them to "educat[e] a girl emotionally" for heterosexual love (Vicinus, p. 609). The longing, emotional and physical withstanding, and dedication trained young girls for future marriages. Vicinus examines these relationships from the lesbian perspective, but it is integral to remember that Victorians did not view these relationships as "lesbian" because they did not inhibit heterosexual marriages. If anything, these homoerotic relationships were bisexual: the girls involved were hyperaware of the friendship's ephemeral existence—they knew, one day, the

obsessive emotions would transfer to a man. Because of bisexual invisibility at the time, most girls were unaware of how sexual these “crushes” were (Vicinus, p. 602). These passionate emotions could not have been marked as homosexual or even bisexual because the sexual source itself was not identified. However, they certainly recognized the depths of these relationships and often spoke of them like heterosexual romances. There was no threat of it being a disease until it crossed over into sexual intercourse, but even that argument was weak as most Victorians could not fathom how two women could perform intercourse. School heads with broader imaginations, such as Rachel Davis, felt the need to forewarn against sexual touching from the “clumsy fingers of the unloving,” which only heightened desire (Vicinus, p. 610). Repression of passionate emotions was promoted and deemed a noble feat. It is this very distance between girls that fueled unrequited love and intensified homoerotic fantasies.

Such female idolization and homoerotic desires are exemplified in *Jane Eyre* between Jane and an older student, Helen Burns, and between Jane and a teacher, Maria Temple. Upon arrival, Jane immediately expresses attraction to this teacher; she notes how Temple’s “voice,” “look,” and “air” impressed her, which contrasts with another teacher, Miss Miller, who was “more ordinary,” “ruddy,” and “hurried” (Brontë, p. 53). Instantaneously, Jane contrasts Miss Temple against another teacher she finds physically repellent. Shortly after, Jane and Helen share in their adoration of Miss Temple. Jane expresses to Helen, “Miss Temple is the best—isn’t she?” to which Helen agrees, “Miss Temple is very good, and very clever; she is above the rest because she knows far more than they do” (Brontë, p. 61). Here, both Jane and Helen are placing Miss Temple at the top of the hierarchy, but their hierarchy is founded on merit rather than institutional rank order—a more intimate

interpretation of the young teacher. On several occasions, Jane marks the feminine beauty of her “beloved instructress,” like her “shining curls” and “beaming dark eyes” (Brontë, pp. 84–85). Helen, too, becomes an object of Jane’s affection:

As to Helen Burns, I was struck with wonder... something in her own unique mind, had roused her powers within her... they shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes, which had suddenly acquired a beauty more singular than that of Miss Temple’s... of meaning, of movement, of radiance. Then her soul sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell: has a girl of fourteen a heart large enough, vigorous enough to hold the swelling spring of pure, full, fervid eloquence? (Brontë, p. 85).

Here, Helen supersedes even Miss Temple in her beauty, and her mind is likened to erotic, phallic adjectives like “vigorous” and “swelling.” Not to be ignored is Jane’s need to address Helen’s lips. This is not the only occasion when Jane expresses erotic sensations; recall the previously mentioned quote where Jane longs over Ms. Temple’s abandonment: “She had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity” (Brontë, pp. 98–99). An ode such as this is romantic enough for even the most untrained eye to decipher as deep affection for a lover. The loss of “home” and “tranquility” imbues in us the character’s distraught. The shared “breaths” suggests an intimacy so close that as one person breathes out, the other breathes them in.

Returning to Helen, it is interesting that she consistently possesses masculine qualities, particularly in the section where she accepts punishment from Miss Scatcherd like a man: she “neither wept nor blushed” but rather stood “composed” and bore it “firmly” (Brontë, p. 62). Overall, up until her untimely death, Helen serves

as the male role during the first part of Jane's stay at Lowood, primarily with her Christian influence. As the husband is the head of the wife like Christ is the head of the church, Helen leads Jane in God's word. For example, regarding the abusive Miss Scatcherd, Helen teaches Jane to "distinguish between the criminal and his crime," or to hate the sin, but love the sinner (Brontë, p. 70). Helen's relationship with Miss Scatcherd bears a striking resemblance to Jane's relationship with her aunt, one in which the punished desires the love of the punisher. Helen and Miss Temple juxtapose the only adult male figure in book one of *Jane Eyre*. Mr. Brocklehurst, the man responsible for the malnutrition of the girls at Lowood, is described as a "black pillar... straight, narrow... erect" (Brontë, p. 40). This contrasts with how Jane describes the supple attributes of her female lovers. He also has contrasting Christian values to Jane, unlike Helen who seems to provide Jane with her first connections to religion. This difference suggests Jane's preference for feminine superiority.

Complimenting Jane's physical and emotional reverence for her two female superiors are the cases in which she kisses and shares a sleeping space with them. Vicinus's research on lesbianism in Victorian boarding schools illuminated cases in which teachers were permitted to kiss students: the "goodnight kiss" incorporated an aspect of domestic life into the institutions and "encouraged a family atmosphere" (p. 609). Mostly the kiss had no meaning, but for the student who admired her superior, the kiss gained substance. After Mr. Brocklehurst publicly shames Jane, Miss Temple invites Jane up to her private room, then kisses her before sharing a rare, hearty meal. After the kiss, Jane remains in a state of elation despite having been publicly humiliated. Jane kisses Helen, too, on the night they share a bed, clasp each other close, and whisper sweet nothings into each other's ears:

"don't leave me, I like to have you near me" and "are you warm, darling?" (Brontë, p. 95). During the night, Helen passes away. Her grave was, for many years, "only covered by a grassy mound; but now a grey marble tablet marks the spot" (Brontë, p. 98). This suggests that Jane, after she inherits her fortune, returns to the site and purchases a headstone—a literal marker of Jane's loyalty and love for Helen.

Most telling of Jane's homoerotic passions is her dramatic decision to leave Lowood after Miss Temple marries. After Helen's death, Miss Temple becomes the object of Jane's undivided attention: "She has stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and... companion... she married... and consequently was lost to me" (Brontë, p. 98). This leads us to aforementioned homoerotic quotation in which Jane describes her troubled soul left in the wake of Temple's abandonment. After which, Jane suddenly remembers that the "real world was wide" and she has the "courage to go forth... and seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils" (Brontë, p. 99). What is this "real knowledge amidst perils?" Judging by the plot of the book, real knowledge is heterosexual love. It seems that when Jane has no female object on which to project her homosexual tendencies, she searches for a heteronormative relationship to establish a sense of closure.

Jane's search for the "real world" leads to her employment at Thornfield Hall and infatuation with its proprietor, Mr. Rochester. Upon entering the home, Jane immediately remarks on the grandeur and imposing features of the home, how she is so small in comparison, and how unaccustomed she is to it. Yet, despite her unfamiliarity with it all and earlier preferences for female-centered spaces, she feels "hopeful" and "calm" upon the secluded grounds (Brontë, pp. 113-15). Already, we're seeing a heteronormative hierarchical structure with the "small" Jane compared to the "imposing" Mr. Rochester

and he has not yet been introduced. When Jane is made aware of his existence, she peppers the housekeeper with questions, intruding on her whether she likes him. Jane is especially concerned with his demeanor. Will he be another Brocklehurst? Jane seems titillated when the housekeeper ensures that, yes, she likes him, but he is “peculiar” in character despite being a good master (Brontë, p. 120.) Jane and Rochester finally meet nearly halfway through the book. It’s a bit odd that the perceived love interest doesn’t arrive until this late in the story. It is also telling that Rochester is merely one love interest among many, considering Helen and Maria Temple are given their fair share of the story’s investment. Mr. Rochester is no attractive man, but it is his unattractiveness that unleashes Jane’s passions, permits her to “[feel] no fear of him,” and to form a new romantic fantasy (Brontë, 130). Jane explains their unconventional and unforgettable meeting as so:

It *was* an incident of no moment, no romance, no interest in a sense; yet it marked with change in one single hour of a monotonous life... The new face, too, was like a new picture introduced to the gallery of memory; and it was dissimilar to all the others hanging there; firstly, because it was masculine; and secondly, because it was dark, strong, and stern (Brontë, p. 132).

When focusing on the italicization of “was” at the start of this passage, it is important to note that italics contrast the afflicted word against the rest, giving it a special weight that the others do not carry. Had Brontë simply said “it was an incident of no moment,” the reader would understand the statement as a given fact. However, the italics emphasize Jane’s need to understand the moment as non-romantic. She is denying her feelings—feelings indicated in everything else

she expresses after this initial denial. Rochester provided a momentary excitement in her “monotonous” life and drama she will further crave throughout the rest of the story. In the next line, she sets his “masculine” face apart from all the rest (which are female). Here we see what is the most obvious signifier of Jane’s bisexuality: the readers can only imagine that these female faces Jane hangs in her “gallery of memory” are Helen and Miss Temple. By juxtaposing Rochester against these women, Jane inadvertently makes them parallel—an equal among the cherished lovers of her past.

Over the course of the next several months, Jane and Rochester bond over their shared “peculiar cleverness,” but this equality of mind is not enough for Jane to feel comfortable marrying him. Because he is rich and male, she feels their hierarchal differences are far too imbalanced, posing a danger to her agency. A gentleman desiring a working woman signifies a proto-feminist novel all on its own, but Brontë pushes proto-feminist representation in the Victorian novel closer to modern feminism. She promotes not just that working women deserve happiness in marriage, but equality in marriage. Jane wants to be Rochester’s equal, much like two women in a lesbian relationship where the hierarchy is more balanced. In the Victorian era, marriage for love was falling out of fashion. Women were realizing the consequences of marriage based on such fantastical notions—love did not provide safety or equality—and we see that mindset represented in *Jane Eyre*. Talia Schaffer, author, and professor of English specializing in Victorian studies, discusses familial marriages and disabled marriages in her book, *Refamiliarizing Victorian Marriage*: “familiar marriage is a literary structure in which marriage is driven by comradeship, not motivated by romantic love or financial interest” (p. 2). These familial marriages were frequently between cousins or close family friends where

the financial circumstances were well known. Often, the marriage eventually curated love, but sometimes it did not. However, the marriage offered security and an active occupation on the female's part when she typically gained duties in her husband's business. Disabled marriages offered a version of familial marriage in that the wife would gain all financial responsibilities. If love was absent, agency and happiness were not. Mr. Rochester, in his current state, does not offer a familial marriage. However, it would explain the reason for his coming blindness. Before his detrimental affliction, Mr. Rochester only offered a threatening, though charismatic, sexual adventure. Once he is maimed, he offers a safe, familial marriage. Only when Rochester becomes effeminate in his dependency and a marriage to him is based on "mutual indebtedness and a perfect balance of power," (much like a lesbian relationship) does Jane consider him an equal match (Marcus, p. 4). Along with Jane's sudden inheritance, she goes forth to marry Mr. Rochester, culminating in their wrongfully perceived heteronormative marriage plot.

If Jane is bisexual, why does she not consider marriage to Miss Temple before Miss Temple chooses a man? Preconceived notions of Victorian values would assume that conjugal arrangements between women were not permitted, but history proves otherwise. Marcus exemplifies one such relationship in Frances Cobbe Power's autobiography in which she lives with her lover, Mary Lloyd, shares their finances, travels the world, and refers to Lloyd as both her "husband" and her "wife" (p. 2). There was no wedding, nor contracts to signify a marriage, but their relationship was certainly a marriage. If such arrangements were possible, why did Brontë settle with a heterosexual union? Professor of English and Gender Studies, Joseph Allen Boone's work, *Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond: Closure and the Victorian Marriage Ideal* unveils the need for a

heteronormative resolution in novels during the Victorian era. Marriage represented the idealized stasis provided by the bourgeois, patriarchal domestic sphere. Boone illuminates how the Puritans formed this ideology of stability centered around domesticity and the "angel of the home figure" (stay-at-home wife) that continued to dominate the Victorian middle class (p. 68). In an increasingly unsettled world, Victorians desperately sought stability based on patriarchal match pairings established by the Puritan mold. Even the most feminist of novels, whether consciously or unconsciously, fell prey to this plot convention because marriage represented the social well-being of bourgeois materialism. Success and stasis could not exist outside of a marriage's sexual polarity that reflected the larger stratification of a stable society. Brontë adhered to this standard heterosexual plot ending, giving both Jane and the novel a sense of "closure" even though Jane Eyre was a feminist, bisexual character.

While Brontë and the critics who followed her may not have been able to place their finger on what Jane represented, it is hoped that this essay reveals her bisexuality and the reasons for its invisibility. To understand and accept bisexual culture, we must reexamine historical characters like Jane Eyre as such. Bisexuality's lack of recognition in the Victorian era, along with today's bisexual erasure, renders its historical literary representations invisible. Heteronormative marriage plots cause critics to ignore Jane's (and others like her) obvious bisexuality and force her into a heterosexual identity. As with most Victorian novels that end in heteronormative marriages, *Jane Eyre's* homoerotic female friendships serve as plot devices that lead to her eventual heterosexual wedded bliss with an effeminate man. Jane's homoeroticism was not a phase that matured into heterosexuality—just because Jane married Rochester does not mean she loved Helen Burns or Maria Temple any less

than she did him. It should not be forgotten after Jane inherits her riches and finds closure in a marriage to Mr. Rochester, it is Helen's grave that

she enshrines, inscribing on the gray marble tablet "Resurgam" (I shall rise again).

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