

Feminist Theory and Feminist Literary Criticism:  
An Analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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### Summary

In this thesis, we analyse how women are portrayed in two novels penned over a century apart using mainly feminist theory and feminist literary criticism. By gathering a historical context regarding feminism and describing the ideas and theories by H el ene Cixous, Robin Lakoff, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, we have been able to analyse Charlotte Bront e's *Jane Eyre* from 1847 and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from 1985. In our comparative analysis of the two novels, we discovered that they had several similarities despite being written over a century apart. Both novels portray a society in which women are the inferior gender and religion plays a dominant part. Both main characters represent ordinary women in their respective societies, and they are both restricted in terms of opportunities, actions and even their language, which makes them feel imprisoned. Furthermore, by discussing the theorists' personal bias and reflecting on our choices, we identified the advantages and disadvantages of using newer theory on older works of literature and using different types of theories. We have been able to discuss the possibilities and limits of feminist literary criticism. As a result of this, we concluded that we are able to analyse older works thoroughly based on the terms, ideas, and methods introduced with newer theories. In addition, we concluded that using different types of theories can broaden your analysis, and it turns out that the theories are interwoven, which makes it evident to connect them in an analysis. However, we face the risk of over-analysing and applying theory and meaning that was not intended in the first place, which is why we must be cautious in our argumentation.

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## Introduction

Throughout history, a major focus within feminism has been on the inequality between the genders in their respective society. What are the reasons for this inequality and who is to blame? This is a question feminists and philosophers have attempted to answer since the early 1800s, after French philosopher Charles Fourier coined the term 'feminism' in 1837. Since then, feminism has developed into theory and to what is now known as feminist literary criticism. It is a literary criticism like any other, but its perspective is feminism. When applying feminist literary criticism to a text, one can discover a female narrative supported by its characters, themes, etc. It is through this specific literary criticism that one is able to deconstruct female characters and the way in which texts portray them. Furthermore, because of our contemporary knowledge regarding the history of feminism, we can apply the contemporary society and its social roles of the time in which a text was written.

One of the major works within feminism is the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847). The novel contains criticism regarding religion, society and social roles. While the novel was written before the term 'feminism' was coined, it is nevertheless considered a feminist novel. Another feminist work that recently attracted attention is the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985). Like *Jane Eyre*, *The Handmaid's Tale* contains criticism regarding religion, society and social roles. Despite being written 138 years apart, they share similarities within their criticism, which is one of the reasons for choosing these two novels.

In 1949, French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote her book *The Second Sex*, which discusses women's inferiority throughout history and how women are considered to be the *other*. In 1975, American feminist and linguistics professor Robin Lakoff wrote her book *Language and Woman's Place*, where she discusses and analyses the relationship between gender and language. Also in 1975, French feminist and philosopher

Hélène Cixous wrote her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in which she discusses ‘écriture feminine’ and encourages women to write themselves in order to reclaim their body. In 1990, American feminist and philosopher Judith Butler wrote her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, where she states that gender is socially constructed, and she introduces her term ‘gender performativity’. All four feminists and their theories share a common focus on women’s role within society.

This thesis focuses on feminist theory and feminist literary criticism, and the analysis takes up a dominant part of the thesis. Including an historical overview of feminism and an account of the prominent feminist theories, this thesis analyses how the two novels/authors portray women within their respective societies, and their conditions, role and place by primarily using feminist literary criticism. Thereafter, we discuss the similarities and differences between the two novels in a comparative analysis and discussion. We furthermore discuss how the portrayals of women in the novels compare to the periods in which they were written. Lastly, we examine the context in which the theories were written and discuss the significance thereof. We also discuss the possibilities and limits of feminist literary criticism, and the pros and cons of including different types of theories when analysing a literary work.

## Theory

### Feminism

The term ‘feminism’ is unfortunately associated with extremists and man-haters. We have observed this tendency in our personal lives and, to our surprise, men and women share this prejudice about feminism. We wondered when, how, and why the term ‘feminism’ achieved such negative associations, which is why we would like to examine the history of feminism, its origin and core values and principles. In Western culture, ”the core of feminism is the belief that women are subordinated to men [...] Feminism seeks to liberate women from this subordination and to reconstruct society in such a way that patriarchy is eliminated

and a culture created that is fully inclusive of women's desires and purposes" (Edgar & Sedgwick 124). Since its inception, the focus of feminism was the fight for women's political and economic equality (124). In the nineteenth century, feminism gained attention with the Suffragette movement, and "the twentieth century saw the proliferation of civil rights movements and groups campaigning for economic equality who focused on the issues of state welfare for mothers, equal education and equal pay" (124). As feminism developed and scholars began to pay attention, different areas within the term began to emerge, such as feminist theory and feminist literary criticism.

Historian Rosalind Delmar believes that both feminists and non-feminists have taken the meaning of the term 'feminism' for granted and that the meaning has been assumed because people regarded it as self-evident. Thus, "[...] the assumption that the meaning of feminism is 'obvious' needs to be challenged. It has become an obstacle to understanding feminism, in its diversity and in its differences, and in its specificity as well" (Kolmar & Bartkowski 27). As a society, we need to start defining feminism and be more specific in this definition because it is clear what happens when people have to assume the meaning – the negative associations grow and spread widely and the notion of feminism is misunderstood and misrepresented. Delmar suggests an example of how a basic definition of feminism could be constructed: "Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic, and political order" (27). She concedes that it becomes more complicated as there are different branches, approaches and focuses of feminism. Twenty-first century feminism is in constant development and the fourth wave of feminism is roaring ahead.

## Waves of Feminism

Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, both professors who study gender studies, have described the waves of feminism in their book *Feminist Theory: A Reader* (2005). They begin by defining the women's role at the end of the eighteenth century and how "most women in the United States and Great Britain had no public legal existence. They were either daughters identified by their fathers' status or wives identified by their husbands" (Kolmar & Bartkowski 62). At this point, the term 'feminist theory' was not used, and the call for women's rights were not taken seriously. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her groundbreaking book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she argues that women should be eligible for education in the same way that men are. Men should regard their wives as companions, not simply as their wives, and she calls for equality between the sexes. The main struggle of the nineteenth century for women was the Suffragette movement, which "began in the United States with the 1848 Seneca Falls meeting and continued through 1920, when the ratification of the 19th Amendment gave U.S. women the vote" (62). They fought for the right for women to own property, gain custody of their children, be able to file for divorce and be eligible for education (62). Nineteenth-century writing about women addressed how their situation "was shaped by urbanization and industrialization [...] For working-class women, urbanization meant factory or service work at low wages and in poor conditions, as well as the need to feed and care for a family under these circumstances" (62-63). Working-class women who arrived in the cities in search of work had to face the sad reality that the only work available for them was prostitution (63). This sparked much concern in the United States and Great Britain, but these concerns and arguments later evolved to become women "fighting for [...] access to birth control and their right to make decisions about their own sexuality" (63). By 1920, suffrage had brought about significant change for women. They were able to access better education and had more legal rights.



The time after the 1920s is considered the “doldrums” of American feminism (136).

The suffragettes

were disappointed to discover that the women’s vote did not radically alter the outcome of elections, that women voted in relatively small numbers and, for the most part, with their husbands, fathers, and brothers. At the same time, suffrage organizations were disbanding and their members dispersing into a variety of organizations. The image of the “flapper” suggests a 1920s woman who is socially and sexually freer but is not a political activist in the way her suffragist foremothers might have hoped (136).

After the Second World War, the organisation known as WILPF (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom) were able to help found the United Nations with the help of powerful women such as Eleanor Roosevelt (136). In the 1950s, “African-American women and a few white women became involved in the beginning of civil rights activism” (136). It is also around this time that women gained access to higher education and “academically trained women working in specific fields were beginning to produce substantial writing about women and feminism” (136); Simone de Beauvoir was one such writer. Overall, the mid twentieth century demonstrated how culture and ideology made the making of women (137). The 1960s were a defining decade

of social upheaval in the United States marked by the assassinations of President John Kennedy in 1963 and of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968. Movements for civil rights and gay rights and against the United States’ escalating military involvement in Vietnam strengthened as decade progressed [...] Many of the women who became active in the women's movement in this decade learned political activism in these other social justice movements, where they also experienced sexism firsthand (196).

In this decade, women of colour became active within the civil rights movement and started writing feminist theory. They also established organisations such as the National Black Feminist Organization (196). The work “of radical feminists and lesbian feminists was essential to development of feminist thought in this period [...] their analysis of the sex/gender system, and particularly of sexuality and reproduction as the root causes of women’s oppression [...] crystallized the notion that ‘the personal is political’” (196-197). In the 1970s, women were closer to equality, as “the first women’s studies programs were created in these years, as were rape crisis centers and hotlines, battered women’s shelters, women’s centers and women’s bookstores” (197). However, the most significant win for women in the 1970s was the legalisation of women’s right to abortion.

The mid 1970s is a defining period for feminist theory and its development. Groundbreaking work was published, such as Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”. This essay defines “the span of feminist thinking over the next decade” (290). In the 1980s, various rifts began to emerge within feminism and its development. These rifts focused on race, sexuality and activism, and “conflicts between lesbians and straight women over separatism, heterosexism, and the role of men in the feminist movement tore organizations apart” (291). Near the end of the 1980s,

feminism and women’s studies could reasonably be said to have made a substantial impact inside and outside the academy. Women could mark real increases in their access to most areas of education and employment. A large percentage of colleges and universities had women’s studies programs and some had begun to establish graduate degrees in the field (382).

The end of the 1980s also saw the emergence of the term ‘grrls’ in what is considered the third wave of feminism. These women regarded themselves as strong and independent. The end of the 1980s consisted of women continuing “to debate questions that have been

with us for more than a hundred years. Though new voices continued to enter its multilayered conversation, feminist theory & scholarship had clearly, by the end of this period, traced out a field of inquiry that has quite thoroughly permeated both *what* we know and *how* we know it” (383).

The dawn of a new millennium “brought feminist theory into dialogue with ideas and struggles that had been glimpsed in earlier decades but became visible in this period in ways that none [...] could have foreseen” (530). There is a significant debate concerning “questions of the relationship among sexuality, the body and the law surfaced repeatedly in debates about gay and lesbian unions and the ‘defense’ of marriage; reproductive rights and sexual abuse; social welfare and health care; a continuing worldwide traffic in women; and the fluidity or fixity of transgender and transsexual identities” (530).

At the beginning of the 2000s, there was a shift in the attention from women studies towards gender studies (530). The focus turned to embracing one’s individualism and accepting a diversity regarding gender and identity. The end of the 2010s is considered the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism, in which technology holds the power. Women promote their agendas and their feminism through social media and platforms. The major focuses of this wave are gender equality, sexual assault and sexual harassment. In 2014, the HeForShe campaign was established to promote gender equality. The #MeToo movement gained attention in 2017, when sexual-abuse allegations were made against Harvey Weinstein. The movement is opposed to sexual assault and sexual harassment, and these issues attracted attention by using social media and technology. Technology is a major tool in the fourth wave and through it, feminism can reach people in an unprecedented manner.

## Women's Writing

## Écriture féminine

Écriture féminine is regarded as the feminine style of writing and is the French term for 'women's writing'. Ann Rosalind Jones states in her article *Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'Écriture Feminine"* (1981) that French feminists "believe that Western thought has been based on a systematic repression of women's experience. Thus their assertion of a bedrock female nature makes sense as a point from which to deconstruct language, philosophy, psychoanalysis, the social practices, and direction of patriarchal culture as we live in and resist it" (Jones 247). The term originated in France during the feminist literary theory wave, and feminist French scholars Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva coined the term in their discussion on what makes literature feminine. The three scholars share "a common opponent, masculinist thinking; but they envision different modes of resisting and moving beyond it" (248). They share the same belief that man is the centre of the universe by their own accord. Women therefore need to write and reclaim their bodies.

Edgar and Sedgwick state in *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts* (2007) that écriture féminine, is

a form of writing and reading that resists being appropriated by the dominant patriarchal culture. It is argued, developing on the psychoanalysis of Lacan, that patriarchal culture privileges a hierarchical way of thinking, grounded in a series of oppositions (such as male/female; culture/nature; intelligible/sensitive; active/passive), with the male dominant over the female (Edgar & Sedgwick 102-103).

The fundamental ideas behind écriture féminine originate in psychoanalysis, and it questions old traditions and patterns of common society. According to biology, men are physically stronger than women are, and before écriture féminine, "the male is active and looks, in

comparison to the passive female who is merely observed. Femininity is therefore only present as it is observed by the male” (103). Femininity is only coherent in the language of men, and it is through men and their superiority in society that women and their femininity are passive and considered non-present to the women herself (103). The two fundamental ideas about *écriture féminine* is that woman must reclaim her body, because “the woman simply cannot make sense of herself in a language that is designed to articulate and conceptualise masculinity” (103).

Together, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva establish a common ground for feminine writing in terms of the language itself, the feminine body, feminine sexuality and motherhood. Cixous writes from a psychoanalytic perspective, Irigaray from a philosophy point of view and Kristeva from both a semiotic and psychoanalytical view. They agree that “resistance does take place in the form of *jouissance*” (Jones 248). ‘*Jouissance*’ being physical or intellectual enjoyment. However, only Cixous and Irigaray agree that women historically have been limited to being sexual objects for men, such as virgins, prostitutes, wives and mothers, and “they have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves” (248).

Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” marked the beginning of *écriture féminine* and deconstructed the feminine language within a male discourse. In her essay, she addresses the notion that women primarily are the inferior sex. Women are a self-love for the man, and she states that “They have made for woman an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what woman haven’t got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove” (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 878). Women are *other* to men, and their femininity is present through the eyes of men. However, “she is convinced that women’s unconscious is totally different from men’s, and that it is their psychosexual specificity that will empower women to overthrow masculinist ideologies and [...] create new female

discourses” (Jones 251). Irigaray, like Cixous, contends that women are other to men and states that a woman is “infinitely other in herself” (250). She argues that because women “have been caught in a world structured by man-centered concepts, have had no way of knowing or representing themselves. But she offers as the starting point for a female self-consciousness that facts for women’s bodies and women’s sexual pleasure, precisely because they have been so absent or so misrepresented in male discourse” (250). Because women have been denied their bodies and therefore access to their sexuality and femininity, they have a “problematic relationship to (masculine) logic and language” (250). Irigaray's ideas emphasise the physical and sexual aspects of the woman, and she believes that for the woman to regain her sexuality, she must proclaim her *jouissance* and break from the man-centred world. Kristeva “finds in psychoanalysis the concept of the bodily drives that survive cultural pressures towards sublimation and surface in what she calls “semiotic discourse”” (248). How do women fit into her semiotic discourse? According to Kristeva, women write as hysterics because they are outsiders to a male-dominated discourse (249). She contends that women are “likely to involve repatriate, spasmodic separations from the dominating discourse, which, more often, they are forced to imitate” (249). Therefore, Kristeva states that women should not “work out alternative discourses” (249) but should rather “persist in challenging the discourses that stand” (249). Women reclaiming their body and sexuality is something that Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva share common ground on but to different extents:

Kristeva does not privilege women as the only possessors of prephallogentric discourse, Irigaray and Cixous go further: if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality

begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men (252).

For women to create a new discourse and become independent from the discourse of men, they must write their bodies. The female body and its sexuality are the source of female writing (252).

The three French theorists are challenging “feminist theory and literary self-consciousness that goes far beyond the body and the unconscious” (260). Jones also makes the criticism that in order to understand their ideas and the fundamental aspects of *écriture féminine*, one must be familiar with “male figureheads of Western culture to recognize the intertextual games played by all these writers; their work shows that a resistance to culture is always built, at first, of bits and pieces of that culture, however they are disassembled, criticized and transcended” (260). *Écriture féminine* draws its ideas from psychoanalysis and from the likes of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, and without a clear understanding of psychoanalysis and the ideas of Freud and Lacan, it may be difficult to understand *écriture féminine*.

#### “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous

To understand and interpret Cixous’ critical feminist essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, it is important to be familiar with the Greek myth about Medusa; in many ways, she has become a symbol of feminism. Modern feminism has transformed Medusa from a rape victim into a heroine.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Medusa originally was the strong, beautiful guardian and protector in the house of Athena, and as such, she was expected to remain pure and to resist temptation. While at the Parthenon and in Athena’s care, Medusa attracts the attention of the god of the sea, Poseidon, who rapes Medusa at the house of Athena. However, Athena does not view it as rape but as Medusa breaking her purity vow that she made when she initially

became Athena's guardian. Athena therefore punishes Medusa, turns her hair into snakes and curses her. Every time a man would gaze upon Medusa, he would be frozen and turn to stone. Medusa flees Parthenon, never to return. Gradually, Medusa transforms into the monster that is her appearance. However, if she was stripped of her body and sexuality, why does Cixous suggest that Medusa has a reason to laugh when, according to old myths, she has every reason to cry? The myth introduces us to two different Medusas: the guardian and the monster. The Medusa who was admired as a strong, beautiful guardian and the Medusa who is feared by women and, especially, men. Like the feminists today, Cixous chose the Greek legend of Medusa because she wanted to revise the myth and write Medusa a new story – to help Medusa reclaim her body and sexuality.

Cixous is one of the first feminist theorists to analyse Medusa and her myth in a critical essay. By using the myth of Medusa, she makes a case against the narrative of men and blames it for transforming Medusa into a monster instead of celebrating the heroine that she was before Athena's curse. In her essay, she encourages women to reclaim their bodies through writing and to break with the patriarchy. Women need to write their own story and develop a female narrative – a narrative without bias or social stigma. She starts her essay with a paragraph that introduces her focus:

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 875).

"Woman must write woman" (877), says Cixous. She must write herself. With the female narrative, women can reclaim their bodies and sexuality. Cixous states that, with the



female narrative, women can break Western traditions and initiate a new feminist movement. Women should not look back at the myth of Medusa, but they should instead reinvent Medusa and help her reclaim her body. Cixous declares that “the future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative” (875). She is aware that for women to create a narrative, they cannot avoid using the male narrative along the way. Women should not dwell on the past, but they should not deny it either. The past historical happenings shaped Western culture and are also the reason for women’s inferiority within literature and the patriarchy (875). In her essay, Cixous addresses the woman who are “in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (875-876). According to Cixous, “women’s imaginary” is unlike any other (876). It is unrestricted and she compares it to art, such as music and painting. She wishes that women would use this imagination and reclaim their voice within literature and that “women would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs” (876).

Cixous herself knows that it may seem impossible for a woman to break from the patriarchy and find her voice. She remembers a time when, as a writer and woman, she was filled with turmoil and she wanted to “burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put in frames and sold for a stinking fortune” (876). Furthermore, as with any new female writer or woman who wants to make a change but is too afraid to, Cixous also lacked courage, as she describes in her essay: “And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn’t open my mouth, I didn’t repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear” (876). Cixous, however, felt a burning desire to witness

the demise of phallogentrism, and that, through literature and later, *écriture féminine*, she could make a difference. She therefore encourages women to write: “And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written. (And why I didn’t write before the age of twenty-seven). Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great – that is, for “great men”; and it’s “silly”” (876). Cixous points out that women may write a little, but in secrecy. She then compares their writing to their sexuality, more specifically masturbation. Like writing behind closed doors, women masturbate in secret, “not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty – so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time” (877). Writing in secret and masturbating behind closed doors is something women punish themselves for since they feel ashamed. Cixous believes that women need to change this perception. The ideas behind *écriture féminine* and Cixous’ personal narrative have strong ties to women’s sexuality. Women need to reclaim their sexuality, their body and their voice. Cixous began her critical writing at the age of 27 years, and she has continued unabated to make her voice heard. She contends that no woman should feel guilty for writing, or even for masturbating. Like Cixous, women should write women and “let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you” (877). She suggests that men are afraid of the female narrative and the evolving culture movement embodied in feminism, and that “smug-faced readers, managing editors and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them” (877). The female narrative can break old traditions and start new ones, and according to Cixous, men are afraid of this.

In addition to men being afraid of the female narrative, Cixous states that they also have “committed the greatest crime against women” (878). Men are the reason why women hate themselves and have become their own enemy. Women’s happiness and culture have

been omitted and they are therefore lacking both (878). Women will transform history through their writing and they will need to consider the inseparable levels at which they write:

a) Individually. By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the past companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time (880).

For their voices or “bodies” to be heard, women must write themselves. Only then will they be able to retrieve their *jouissance*, and “a woman without a body” cannot be a fighter (880).

The second level is:

b) An act that will also be marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression*. To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process (880).

Whenever women speak up, their words fall on the deaf male ear that “hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (881). Cixous states that the female narrative differs from the male narrative in music and song. Women write in white ink because of their mother’s milk. For Cixous, motherhood and the act of giving birth is an essential of women’s writing, and she regards it as a metaphor: “It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was “born” to her” (881). When she speaks of motherhood, she does not mean the overbearing and overprotecting type, but the one that supports you and “fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you;

the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable” (882). Cixous’ message to women is clear: women should be the mother in their writing. They must nourish their writing and stand up for it. It will always be impossible to define women’s writing because it can never truly be coded, but Cixous insists that feminine discourse will “surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (883).

Cixous revisits the idea that men fear the feminine narrative and what it may accomplish if strengthened: “Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. That’s because they need femininity to be associated with death; it’s the jitters that gives them a hard on! for themselves! They need to be afraid of us” (885). The only way women can challenge men and their superiority is to do so in their writing. The writing needs to be subversive, and women can broach subjects that men cannot. Cixous suggests that “almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity” (885), which includes subjects such as sexuality, discoveries, awakenings and general femininity. These have not yet been explored, because so few women have reclaimed their bodies, and “women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse” (886). *Écriture féminine* is subversive, explores feminine subjects and departs from the male narrative. Cixous states that by writing, women will reclaim their body and their “self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed” (889). “The Laugh of the Medusa” discusses women writing their own history, because they have been denied in the past. Men censoring the female narrative in the past is the same as censoring the female body. Women’s writing should be subversive, and they should write in

their own language. As Cixous repeatedly urges in her essay, “woman must write woman” (877).

*Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff

With the publication of Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), the beginning of sociolinguistics within women's language was created. It is considered “the beginning of the linguistic subfield of language and gender studies” (Bucholtz 3). In her book, Lakoff analyses how women differ from men in their speech pattern and how these differences can be distinguished on different levels. These are discussed in this section.

Lakoff states that “if a little girl ‘talks rough’ like a boy, she will normally be ostracized, scolded, or made fun of. In this way society, in the form of a child's parents and friends, keeps her in line, in her place” (Lakoff 40). This aspect is a normal socializing process while growing up and is therefore harmless. However, she points out that in terms of linguistics, this can be a concern:

If the little girl learns her lesson well, she is not rewarded with unquestioned acceptance on the part of society; rather, the acquisition of this special style of speech will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position to refuse or take her seriously as a human being. Because of the way she speaks, the little girl – now grown to womanhood – will be accused of being unable to speak precisely or to express herself forcefully (40-41).

She makes an interesting statement when she says that, regardless of their gender, children are from an early age accustomed to the female language, since the mother is the dominant parent in the first five years of childhood (41). As they grow up, boys are more likely to “go through a stage of rough talk” (41). According to Lakoff, two distinct languages between boys and girls will be present at the age of ten. The result is that “the boys have unlearned their original form of expression, and adopted new forms of expression, while the girls retain

their old ways of speech” (41). From an early age, girls are suppressed by society into talking and behaving in a certain way, and if they do not follow the norm, they are reprimanded, whereas boys have the creativity and space to develop their communication and language. As Lakoff states, “a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense, as less than fully human” (41). A little girl faces two roads: she is too young to choose herself, so society chooses for her. Lakoff stresses that women find that their own language discriminates against them – a language that is supposed to be universal and without bias; but act as the opposite and “reflect a deep bias on the part of our culture [...] against women being accorded full status as rational creatures and individuals in their own right” (42).

Lakoff then mentions an example of how society discriminates the two genders. If a man and a woman are looking at a pinkish coloured wall and they both say, “The wall is mauve” (43), they will receive two different reactions to their observation. No one will bat an eyelid at the women’s observation, but the man will be told he was “imitating a woman sarcastically or was a homosexual or an interior decorator” (43). She notes that women can make more precise observations with colours and shades than men can (43). Women’s vocabulary is considered active with words such as beige and lavender, something that most men lack, and men regard such things as “irrelevant to the real world” (43). Lakoff uses this example to demonstrate how men disregard women in certain situations, simply because they view the situation as irrelevant. In the same way that women and men differ in their observations, they also differ in their language. She states that women and men use different particles, which “grammarians often describe as “meaningless”. There may be no referent for them, but they are far from meaningless: they define the social context of an utterance, indicate the relationship the speaker feels between himself and his addressee, between

himself and what he is talking about” (43-44). Lakoff also observes “that men’s language is increasingly being used by women, but women’s language is not being adopted by men, apart from those who reject the American masculine image [for example, homosexuals]” (44). Furthermore, she notes that women are increasingly challenging men’s jobs, but men are not fighting to become housewives (44). She furthermore notes that “the language of the favoured group, the group that holds the power, along with its nonlinguistic behaviour, is generally adopted by the other group, not vice versa. In any event, it is a truism to state that the “stronger” expletives are reserved for men, and the “weaker” ones for women” (44). These observations can be linked to Cixous and her ideas of women’s language. She states that for women’s language to distinguish itself from the men’s language, women will have to be subversive and challenge topics that only women know how to. However, she concludes that this cannot be done without using men’s language as a stepping-stone. Lakoff and Cixous agree that, in order for women’s language to break away from men’s language, women will have to reuse men’s language and from thereon reinvent women’s language.

From a very young age, girls are expected to act and sound like a lady. Mothers are bullied by society into raising their girls this way, and if they fail, they have neglected society and their child. If a man raises his voice and has an outburst of rage, it is not considered abnormal and it is accepted without question, but if a woman does the same, she is regarded as a madwoman, because “women are allowed to fuss and complain, but only a man can bellow in rage” (45). Speech patterns and particles are a learned trait, and for women, “the behavior a woman learns as “correct” prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered “correct” and necessary for a woman precisely because society does *not* consider her seriously as an individual” (45). Lakoff states that within the vocabulary of adjectives, most are considered to favour women’s language:

*Neutral*      *Women only*

Great	Adorable
Terrific	Charming
Cool	Sweet
Neat	Lovely, Divine (45).

It is increasingly common for women to use men's language in conversations. When using adjectives in conversations, women can choose between neutral language and women's language (46). Men do not have this choice – not without consequences because of society and its prejudices. Men who use the so-called female adjectives will either be considered homosexual by society or are seen as making fun of women and women's language. If they do use them, it is because they have rejected their masculinity and its language (44).

Gender: Women's role and conditions

*The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir

Beauvoir was a French philosopher, feminist theorist, feminist existentialist, “and though by no means lacking in first-hand acquaintance with the United States and other foreign countries, she naturally draws heavily upon French life and customs in her detailed account of woman's past and contemporary situation” (Beauvoir xiii). Apart from her work, she was also known for being in a relationship with French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Her most famous work is the book *The Second Sex* from 1949. The book is considered a fundamental work within feminism and it marks the start of second-wave feminism. Beauvoir states that

all agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one-half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not



necessarily a woman; to be considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity (xvii).

Beauvoir questions the relationship between being a woman and having femininity (xviii).

The main idea of her book “is that since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men” (xiii). Women are regarded as the second sex – the *other* – to men. Man is considered the primary, the default, and the superior sex, whereas the woman is considered the second, the other, and the inferior sex. Women are the second sex because they are defined in relation to men. She is nothing without him. To illustrate this, Beauvoir relates a story:

Some years ago a well-known woman writer refused to permit her portrait to appear in a series of photographs especially devoted to women writers; she wished to be counted among the men. But in order to gain this privilege she made use of her husband’s influence! Women who assert that they are men lay claim none the less to masculine consideration and respect (xviii-xix).

For a woman to be successful, she will have to use a man’s connections and relationships.

Beauvoir suggests that women are haunted by their own femininity and how society defines it. She asks the question: if being born female does not define a woman as a woman within a society, then what is a woman? (xix).

No man has ever written a book – nor will he ever write one – in which he defends his sex and gender as women have tried to do for centuries (xix). However, if a woman wishes to do so, she “must first [...] say, ‘I am a woman’; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man” (xix). In terms of masculine and feminine, they are not comparable to two electrical poles,

for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas women represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say, ‘You think thus and so because you are a woman’; but I know that my only defence is to reply, ‘I think thus and so because it is true,’ thereby removing my subjective self from the argument (xix-xx).

The man is right because he is a man, and woman is wrong because she is a woman (xx). The man is not questioned about his ways as the woman is, and to the man she is sex (xx). A woman is “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (xx-xxi). By regarding women as sexual objects and the ‘Other’, men deny them their humanity and deprive them of their own gender and sex.

Beauvoir contends that one is born with either the female or male gender, but one’s femininity and masculinity is shaped by society. Therefore, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female take on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine” (301). This is one of Beauvoir’s primary claims in *The Second Sex*. Being a woman is not defined by biology, religion etc.; it is defined by how society views women and femininity. Men and women are born equal, and therefore should have the same opportunities in childhood and adulthood. However, they do not, because of the way in which society defines femininity and masculinity. Beauvoir says, “the most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman’s concrete situation. And there is no reason to put much trust in the men when they rush to the defence of privileges whose full extent they can hardly measure” (xxxii). Women are not

born inferior and passive, but they are instead socialized by society into being so “in the bosom of the family, woman seems in the eyes of childhood and youth to be clothed in the same social dignity as the adult males” (xxxii). That is why Beauvoir suggests that, from an early age, boys and girls must be educated differently in school. To prevent women from becoming inferior and passive, society needs to change its perception of genders and how these are defined. The “‘woman question’ seems trivial, it is because masculine arrogance has made of it a ‘quarrel’; and when quarrelling, one no longer reasons well. People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man” (xxxiii). Beauvoir continues with a reference to Adam and Eve:

Some say that, having been created after Adam, she is evidently a secondary being; others say on the contrary that Adam was only a rough draft and that God succeeded in producing the human being in perfection when He created Eva. Woman’s brain is smaller; yes, but it is relatively larger. Christ was made a man; yes, but perhaps for his greater humility. Each argument at once suggests its opposite, and both are often fallacious. If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh (xxxiii).

Beauvoir argues that before society can change its perspective on genders and especially on femininity, it must change, disregard and forget all pre-perceived notions about superiority, inferiority and quality in order to start afresh.

#### *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler

Judith Butler is an American philosopher and theorist born in 1956. She is especially known for influencing gender theory. Her book *Gender Trouble*, originally published in 1990, is considered the founding text of queer theory (Kolmar & Bartkowski 496). Butler’s

interest in feminist theory began when she read Beauvoir's work. As mentioned previously, Beauvoir defines the man as the primary, default and superior sex, while the woman is the secondary and inferior sex. She explains:

I read Beauvoir who explained that to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be a source of mystery and unknowability for men, and this seemed confirmed somehow when I read Sartre for whom all desire, problematically presumed as heterosexual and masculine, was defined as trouble. For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position (Butler xxix-xxx).

While reading and studying the field, Butler began forming and constructing her own gender-focused theory. Her interest in gender led to her theory that gender is socially constructed. "Originally intended to dispute the biology-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (8). Butler focuses on the culture and environment as the major influences of gender instead of the biological sex that we are born with. She argues that we are born without a gender – or at least that our biological gender is irrelevant and has no real influence on our lives and gender. Instead, our gender is constructed and controlled by the social and cultural norms and influences that we encounter during our lives.

The idea that our identity and gender are culturally constructed did not originate with Butler, nor did the notion that gender and identity is fluid – meaning that it changes according to the influences it encounters. Prior to Butler, several theorists argued for this understanding. René Descartes, the French philosopher, led the orthodox European philosophy with his

theory 'Cognito ergo Sum', which translated means 'I think, therefore I am'. His theory, in short, argues that the self is stable and unchangeable (Edgar & Sedgwick 167). Several theorists have criticised and contradicted his view and Butler's theory. David Hume, a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, is one theorist who argues that, depending on the context and social circumstance, the self is constantly changing. Furthermore, his theory 'The Bundle Theory of the Self' proposes that "the self is nothing more than a bundle of sense impressions, that continually changed as the individual has new experiences or recalled old ones" (167). Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist, contradicts the liberal individualism that "presupposed the primacy of the individual, and thus that society was composed out of individuals (brought together, for example, in a social contract)" (167). Durkheim argues for the complete opposite – the individual is a product of society instead of society being a product of individuals. The American philosopher, sociologist and psychologist George Herbert Mead also contradicts the theory of an autonomous self. He contends that the self and the identity are constructed through relations with others, and he divides the self into two, distinguishing between the two by referring to them as the 'I' and the 'me'. "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of others; the 'me' is the organised set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (168). For Mead, "the development of the self therefore depends upon the others it encounters" (168). One of the most famous identity theories was proposed by Erving Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist and social psychologist, who based his ideas on, among others, Mead's theory. Goffman argues that "the self is a product of particular interactions, in so far as the individual's capacities, attitudes and ways of behaving (and possibly, of conceiving of him or herself) changes as the people around him or her change" (168). Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, and Erik Erikson, a German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, were both working within the field of psychoanalysis (of which Freud is the founder). They concur

with the other theorists that identity is fluid. Freud argues that the self is constructed by the trisection of the self, which he refers to as the ego, id and superego. He explains that the child's identity is determined by its 'assimilation of external identity'. Erikson adds to Freud's theory and suggests that identity is "a process between the identity of the individual and the identity of the communal cultural" (168). Jacques Lacan was a French psychiatrist also working within the field of psychoanalysis, and he proposed that the self-consciousness emerges at the 'mirror-stage', which occurs in early childhood at approximately 6 to 18 months (169). Lacan is known particularly for his "reformulation of Freud's concepts of the early stages of psychosexual development and the formation of the Oedipus complex into the distinction between a prelinguistic stage of development that he calls the imaginary and the stage after the acquisition of language that he calls the symbolic" (Abrams 252). In the first stage, there is "no clear distinction between the subject and an object, or between the self and other selves" (252). The latter of the two occurs when "the infant subject assimilates the inherited system of linguistic difference, hence is constituted by the symbolic, as it learns to accept its pre-determined 'position' in such linguistic oppositions as male/female, father/son, mother/daughter" (252). Between these two stages is what he calls the 'mirror stage'. This is "the moment when the infant learns to identify with his or her image in a mirror, and so begins to develop a sense of a separate self that is later enhanced by what is reflected back to it from encounters with other people" (252). These examples demonstrate that Butler did not originate the idea of a fluid and changeable identity.

She joins the group of theorists that believe that identity is constructed and controlled by the cultural and social influences that the person encounters and is involved in. However, she focuses on the gender identity and her theory differs from these theories with her notion of the 'performative gender'. She argues that our gender is produced through a 'stylized repetition of acts', which means that we perform our gender and therefore our behaviour and

actions define our gender. These actions are influenced and taught by society – driven and judged based on society's definition of feminine and masculine, and therefore, in most cases, involving stereotypes and prejudices.

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movement, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground as a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler 191-192).

This theory is termed performative gender, and it proposes that gender is constructed through repetitive behaviour and acts of gender, and therefore these performances determine the gender identity. Butler argues that our internal feelings about gender decide and control our external behaviour and acts, as described in the following: “The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts” (xv). The behaviour and actions can be conscious or unconscious, thus you can either choose to act in a certain way to make society perceive you as the gender you want to be perceived as, or you behave and act

according to the gender that you have – or define yourself as – based on the cultural influences controlling the subconscious mind.

### Analysis

#### *Jane Eyre*

#### Equality, Society and Gender

As mentioned in the introduction, Jane Eyre is an orphan, and her uncle and aunt take her in after her parents die. Her uncle passes away, and Jane is left in the care of her aunt, Mrs Reed, who feels and shows her no affection. When Jane visits her on her deathbed almost ten years after leaving Gateshead, she admits that she has longed for her love and she offers her full forgiveness:

‘My disposition is not so bad as you think: I am passionate, but not vindictive. Many a time, as a little child, I should have been glad to love you if you would have let me; and I long earnestly to be reconciled to you now: kiss me, aunt’.  
[...] ‘Love me, then, or hate me, as you will,’ I said at last; ‘you have my full and free forgiveness: ask now for God’s; and be at peace’ (Brontë 204).

Mrs Reed’s son, John Reed, often bullies, punishes, and torments her, but Mrs Reed is “blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence; more frequently, however, behind her back” (8). After an episode, she is ordered to the red-room, which she fears, as this is the room where her uncle had taken his last breath. Jane is held and tied down by servants obeying Mrs Reed’s orders. The lady’s maid shames her for misbehaving and for striking her benefactress’ son. She scolds Jane with “No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep” (9). Her position is degraded to even lower than that of a servant: “You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma 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 mamma's expense" (8). Jane is miserable because of her current circumstances. As a result, at the young age of 10, she considers allowing herself to die to escape her reality: "'Unjust! – Unjust!' said my reason, forced by the agonising stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (12). She wishes to escape the humiliation, self-doubt and despair (13). Jane's nursemaid, Bessie, is the one that is closest to being Jane's dearest relation during her childhood, and she explains to Jane, "You ought to be aware, Miss, that you are under obligations to Mrs Reed: she keeps you: if she were to turn you off, you would have to go the poorhouse" (10). Bessie reminds her that even though she finds her position unbearable, it is better than the poorhouse. Later, when Jane leaves Thornfield, she finds herself without money or a place to stay. She is forced to beg and try to exchange whatever she has, a handkerchief and gloves, for food and a roof over her head, which results in her staying at the Rivers at Moor House. She is initially turned away by Hannah, the servant, who thinks she is a beggar, and after being taken in by St. John and sleeping for a few days, Jane has a conversation with Hannah:

'But I do think hardly of you,' I said, 'and I'll tell you why – not so much because you refused to give me shelter, or regarded me as an imposter, as because you just now made it a species of reproach that I had no "brass," and no house. Some of the best people that ever lived have been as destitute as I am; and if you are a Christian, you ought not to consider poverty a crime (292).

Jane admits that she thinks less of Hannah due to her obvious conviction and prejudices about poverty. In this regard, we explore the fact that Jane seems happier to find relatives than

discovering that she has inherited a fortune (327-328). While she is undeniably happy to have inherited the money, she shares her inherited fortune equally with her new relatives by dividing the twenty thousand pounds in four, because she believes that would only be fair and that she does not need that much:

I am incapable of taking any other. I am not brutally selfish, blindly unjust, or fiendishly ungrateful. Besides, I am resolved I will have a home and connections. I like Moor House, and I will live at Moor House; I like Diana and Mary, and I will attach myself for life to Diana and Mary. It would please and benefit me to have five thousand pounds; it would torment and oppress me to have twenty thousand pounds; which, moreover, could never be mine in justice, though it might in law. I abandon to you, then, what is absolutely superfluous to me (329).

It says much about someone's character if they find greater joy in gaining relatives than fortune. She also will not accept more money than Mr Rochester owes her in wages (184). However, she does briefly consider how having a fortune might have changed things between her and Mr Rochester: "I will write to Madeira the moment I get home, and tell my uncle John I am going to be married, and to whom: if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now" (229).

Jane immediately notices how differently Hannah treats her when she is well rested and wearing her own, clean clothes: "Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones, Hannah had been cold and stiff, indeed, at the first: latterly she had begun to relent a little; and when she saw me come in tidy and well-dressed, she even smiled" (290). Similarly, the lady at the little shop in the village judges her based on her appearance and manner: "Seeing a respectably-dressed person, a lady as she supposed,

she comes forward with civility. How could she serve me? I was seized with shame: my tongue would not utter the request I had prepared. I dared not offer her the half-worn gloves, the creased handkerchief: besides, I felt it would be absurd” (278). The way these women judged her based on her appearance and manner confirms Butler’s theory of performative gender. They look at the way she behaves – her bodily gestures, movement and manner, and they assume her gender and station based on society’s definition of what is feminine and what is masculine.

Jane is eager and desperate to acquire a job and improve her present conditions. So she asks the lady in the store whether she knows of any available positions. She mentions that most inhabitants of the village work at Mr Oliver’s needle factory, but Jane learns that this job is not an option for her: “Did Mr. Oliver employ women?’ ‘Nay, it was men’s work.’ ‘And what do the women do?’ ‘I knawn’t,’ was the answer. ‘Some does one thing, and some another. Poor folk mun get on as they can’” (278). The lady is convinced that all the required dressmakers, plain-work-women and servants are already employed. Apparently, having women do nothing and accept to only “get on as they can’ because they are not fit for ‘men’s work’” is more important than having available and willing workers at the factory. Without giving up hope, Jane turns to St. John for assistance: “I will be a dressmaker: I will be a plain-work-woman; I will be a servant, a nurse-girl, if I can be not better” (297), declares Jane, willing to take any job that St. John can help her find. “And since I am myself poor and obscure, I can offer you but a service of poverty and obscurity. You may even think it degrading – for I see now your habits have been what the world calls refined: your tastes lean to the ideal; and your society has at least been amongst the educated – but I consider that no service degrades which can better our race” (302).

St. John offers her a job as the governess of a school he plans to open for girls in the village. She accepts after her considerations: “In truth it was humble – but then it was

sheltered, and I wanted a safe asylum: it was plodding – but then, compared with that of a governess in a rich house, it was independent; and the fear of servitude with strangers entered my soul like iron: it was not ignoble – not unworthy – not mentally degrading. I made my decision” (302). Even though the job might not have been the very best, Jane reminds herself that the children’s station and fortune ought not to be a barrier to learning and improving.

In the novel, we learn that Mr Rochester’s marriage to Bertha Mason is arranged by his father, who believes she will be a good match for him. However, Mr Rochester is not aware of the arrangement and some of the faulty details about her and her family are kept from him until it is too late and he has already married her. The reasons for arranging this marriage are political and economic (260). In the same way, Jane thought that Mr Rochester would marry Miss Ingram for family and political reasons – because her rank and connections suited him (158-159). Jane can never imagine marrying for anything but love. She rejects St. John’s proposal, stating that she can never be happy if she marries him because they do “not love each other as man and wife should” (345).

“The ease of the manner freed me from painful restraint; the friendly frankness, as correct as cordial, with which he treated me, drew me to him. I felt at times as if he were my relation, rather than my master” (125). Jane never intended to fall in love with Mr Rochester as he is her master (149). Mrs Fairfax thinks that Jane’s feelings are foolish as there is no possible future in which they can be happy together due to their station in society. “It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it; and, if discovered and responded to, must lead, ignis-fatuus-like, into miry wilds, whence there is no extrication” (136-137).

Jane cannot relinquish her feelings and they keep growing. She tries to explain her feelings: “I understood the language of his countenance and movements; though rank and

wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves that assimilates me mentally to him” (149). Mr Rochester has given up on love after his failed marriage to Bertha, but his opinion changes when he begins to develop feelings for Jane. Jane and Mr Rochester are, as previously mentioned, an unlikely couple because of their station in society. Social class determines that they are not equals and therefore a marriage between them and a happy future together will be “foolish” and “madness”, as Mrs Fairfax put it (136-137).

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! (215-216).

After Jane’s speech, he even admits how Jane, although inferior in station, is his equal: “‘My bride is here,’ he said, again drawing me to him, ‘because my equal is here, and my likeness. Jane, will you marry me?’” [...] “‘You – you strange – you almost unearthly thing! – I love as my own flesh. You – poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are – I entreat to accept me as a husband’” (217). He praises her for claiming her spot as his equal and not just accepting her position: “‘You glowed in the cool moonlight last night, when you mutinied against fate, and claimed your rank as my equal. Janet, by-the-by, it was you who made me

the offer” (224). In society they begin their relationship as master and servant – superior and inferior – and therefore not as equals, but they can be said to be spiritual equals. When Mr Rochester is looking at her drawings, he gives her orders about sitting down and answering his questions and

while he looks at her drawings, his response to the pictures reveals not only his own Byronic broodings, but his consciousness of hers. ‘Those eyes in the Evening Star you must have seen in a dream.... And who taught you to paint wind? ... Where did you see Latmos?’ (chat. 13). Though such talk would bewilder most of Rochester’s other dependents, it is a breath of life to Jane, who begins to fall in love with him, not because he is her master but in spite of the fact that he is, not because he is princely in manner, but because, being in some sense her equal, he is the only qualified critic of her art and soul (Gilbert & Gubar 352).

During their meetings, their relationship and their equality develop. After being rudely urged to entertain him, she smiled, “and not a very complacent or submissive smile either” (Brontë 113), which obliges Mr Rochester to explain: “The fact is, once for all, I don’t wish to treat you like an inferior: that is (correcting himself), I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years’ difference in age and a century’s advance in experience” (114). Mr Rochester is “despite critical suspicions that Rochester is seducing Jane in these scenes [...], on the contrary, solacing himself with her unsexable independence in a world of self-marketing Célines and Blanchés” (Gilbert & Gubar 353). He needs her parity and strength in many situations, including when Jane rescues him from the fire lit by Bertha when he was asleep and when Jane helps him save Mr Mason after he was attacked by Bertha. “And that these rescues are facilitated by Jane’s and Rochester’s mutual sense of equality is made clearest of all in the scene in which only Jane of all the ‘young ladies’ at Thornfield

fails to be deceived by Rochester in his gypsy costume” (353). The last point about the disguise is interesting because he could not act as a gypsy with her:

The implication is that he did not – or could not – because he respects ‘the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of’ Jane’s eyes as much as she herself does, and understands that just as he can see beyond her everyday disguise as plain Jane the governess, she can see beyond his temporary disguise as a gypsy fortune-teller – or his daily disguise as Rochester the master of Thornfield (353).

This quote confirms that Jane and Mr Rochester are equals on a spiritual level and therefore their bodies and social station in which they are superior and inferior are of minor relevance. “Though she loves Rochester the man, Jane has doubts about Rochester the husband even before she learns about Bertha” (Gilbert & Gubar 356), because “in her world, she senses, even the equality of love between true minds leads to the inequalities and minor despotisms of marriage. [...] Jane’s whole life-pilgrimage has, of course, prepared her to be angry in this way at Rochester’s, and society’s, concept of marriage” (356-357). She unwillingly but symbolically recalls her past. When she finally returns to Mr Rochester at Ferndean, they can at last be equals. She had wanted to “strengthen herself, to make herself an equal of the world Rochester represents” (368), but now reunited at Ferndean, they are truly equals: “When both were physically whole they could not, in a sense, *see* each other because of the social disguises - master/servant, prince/Cinderella - blinding them, but now that those disguises have been shed, now that they are equals, they can (though one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh” (368). This again confirms that their equality previously was restricted by society and their station therein, but now, since Jane has inherited money, Mr Rochester is ‘damaged’ and Bertha is dead, they can be true equals and they are free to love each other. It is important to include that even though Brontë portrays an optimistic

egalitarian relationship, she makes them live in a deep, dark forest: “As a dramatic setting, moreover, Ferndean is notably stripped and asocial, so that in a world where such egalitarian marriages as theirs are rare, if not impossible. True minds, Charlotte Brontë seems to be saying, must withdraw into a remote forest, a wilderness even, in order to circumvent the structures of a hierarchal society” (369).

After Jane learns the truth and decides to leave Thornfield, she explains to Mr Rochester how delightful and refreshing it had been to live there, because she was treated as an equal and she was allowed to participate in conversations and activities that she otherwise would have been excluded from: “I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds, and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what is bright and energetic, and high” (Brontë 215).

In the Victorian age, governesses could be said to have an ambiguous status and, “[a]s M. Jeanne Peterson points out, every Victorian governess received strikingly conflicting messages (she was and was not a member of the family, was and was not a servant)” (Gilbert & Gubar 349). Thus, Jane as a governess could just as well have been treated as a servant and excluded from all the conversations and activities that Mr Rochester included her in. Mrs Fairfax struggles to believe that Mr Rochester intends to marry Jane: “But no doubt it is true since you say so. How it will answer, I cannot tell: I really don’t know. Equality of position and fortune is often advisable in such cases; and there are twenty years of difference in your ages. He might almost be your father” (Brontë 225). She warns Jane: “But believe me, you cannot be too careful. Try and keep Mr. Rochester at a distance: distrust yourself as well as him. Gentlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses” (226). They also discuss how money and station are often more important than beauty: “Mr. Rochester is so talented and so lively in society, that I believe he is a general favourite – the ladies are very fond of him – though you would not think his appearance calculated to recommend him



particularly in their eyes, but I suppose his acquirements and abilities, perhaps his wealth and good blood, make amends for any little fault of look” (135).

While Mr Rochester is not considered handsome, he is still very popular among the ladies. We wonder whether the situation would have been the same if he were the woman and not the man. Does outward appearance matter more to women than to men, or is fortune the main determinant – the deciding factor of whether or not you are good enough? In relation to this, it is interesting to note that when Mrs Fairfax tells Jane about the Ingram daughters, she primarily describes them as being beautiful – as if this is the only trait worth mentioning about women (135): “I never saw a more splendid scene: the ladies were magnificently dressed; most of them – at least most of the younger ones – looked handsome, but Miss Ingram was certainly the queen” (135). She does mention that Miss Ingram is admired not only for her obvious beauty but also for her accomplishments – her singing (136). Mrs Fairfax suggests that the reason Mr Rochester has not married Miss Ingram is due to the age difference between them as he is almost forty and she is only twenty-five, to which Jane appears to be defensive: “What of that? More unequal matches are made every day!” (136). She does not think that the age gap should be a deciding factor whether they love each other. Considering her own age and feelings towards him, this might be the reason she wants to defend the age difference as insignificant. However, we learn later in the novel that he never really intended to marry Miss Ingram, but instead used their assumptions to make Jane jealous.

Mr Rochester wants to give Jane jewels and fancy, expensive clothes. However, Jane will not accept these and would not feel right taking them: “Oh, sir! – never mind jewels! I don’t like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them” (220). If he dresses her up with fine jewellery and clothes, she will no longer be Jane Eyre. She does not want him to change her. “And then you won’t know me,

sir, and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket, - a jay in borrowed plumes" (221). Jane will be unable to recognise and feel like herself if she is dressed up with fine clothes and jewellery, as this has never been a part of her life. By confirming that she does not marry him for his money, she is not interested in the materialistic privileges that he is offering her: "Now, king Ahasuerus! What do I want with half your estate? Do you think I am a Jew-usurer, seeking good investment in land? I would much rather have all your confidence. You will not exclude me from your confidence, if you admit me to your heart?" (223).

She argues that if this is what he wanted, she is not the right one for him:

I had myself prepared as a covering for my low-born head, and ask if that was not good enough for a woman who could bring her husband neither fortune, beauty, nor connections. I saw plainly how you would look; and heard your impetuous republican answers, and your haughty disavowal of any necessity on your part to augment your wealth, or elevate your standing, by marrying either a purse or a coronet (239-240).

Mr Rochester wants to share everything he has with her – including his fortune and estate.

After the discovery of Mr Rochester's secret, which is of course his wife, Bertha, Jane is heartbroken and decides that she must leave him Thornfield, and she is free to do so. "I am no bird: and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you" (216). She shows exactly how independent, determined and strong she is as a woman – as a human: "For having left Rochester, having torn off the crown of thorns he offered and repudiated the unequal charade of marriage he proposed, Jane has now gained the strength to begin to discover her real place in the world" (Gilbert & Gubar 364).

In the following quotes, she expresses these characteristics and feelings: "But I was not afraid: not in the least. I felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me"

(Brontë 258) and “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself” (270). Nevertheless, she does demonstrate some insecurities: “I had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self-respect. I had injured – wounded – left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes. Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step” (274). Mr Rochester is aware of just how stubborn and opinionated Jane is, which is why he does not confide in her before they are to be married: ““I was wrong to attempt to deceive you; but I feared a stubbornness that exists in your character. I feared early instilled prejudice: I wanted to have you safe before hazarding confidences” (269). He was afraid of how she would react and deal with his secret, which is why he kept it from her. He admits that it was wrong but argues that he wanted her ‘safe’ first. How does he want her ‘safe’? Did he want to make sure that she could not leave him by ensuring that they were married first? If so, it appears to be a trap that he wants her caught in. He is surprised by her reaction after the discovery of Bertha:

So, you shun me? – You shut yourself up and grieve alone! I would rather you had come and upbraided me with vehemence. You are passionate: I expected a scene of some kind. I was prepared for the hot rain of tears; only I wanted them to be shed on my breast: now a senseless floor has received them, or you drenched handkerchief. But I err: you have not wept at all! I see a white cheek and a faded eye, but no trace of tears. I suppose, then, your heart has been weeping blood? (254).

Women are stereotypically softer than men, thus he expects her to cry and grieve so that he can be the one to comfort her. He is disappointed with her not ‘making a scene’ as she is characteristically passionate. However, with Jane’s incredible stubbornness and strong will, she does not play the role of the sad, soft woman from his stereotypical fantasy – the role that society expects her to play.

The feeling of self is something that Jane has worked on her entire life. From childhood, when she was miserable to the extent of considering starving herself and feeling unjustly mistreated, to a young woman who had to assume responsibilities and grow up too rapidly. She has established an inner strength and feels stronger each day that passes: “I still felt as a wanderer on the face of the earth; but I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression. The gaping wound of my wrongs, too, was now quite healed; and the flame of resentment extinguished” (194).

She was once a very hateful child, full of spite, but she has transformed into a young woman capable of love and forgiveness, and she has a strong and passionate mind: “It is a happy thing that time quells the longings of vengeance, and hushes the promptings of rage and aversion: I had left this woman in bitterness and hate, and I came back to her now with no other emotion than a sort of ruth for her great sufferings, and a strong yearning to forget and forgive all injuries – to be reconciled and clasp hands in amity” (196). This quote is an extract from the scene in which she travels back to Gateshead to see her aunt, Mrs Reed, before she dies. During this time, her personal development and progress is apparent. As mentioned, Jane is stubborn, independent, strong and has a temper. Jane’s expression of anger is uncharacteristic of women at that time and especially for women in her position and station. Thus, the audience was approving of this aspect of her personality, as they could not identify with this trait and considered it too far from reality (Gilbert & Gubar 336-337). We elaborate on this aspect in the comparative analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the difference in social class – Jane’s and Mr Rochester’s station – prevent them from loving each other because they are not considered equals. This inequality is not exclusively due to their jobs and rank but also their gender, according to Beauvoir. Her theory explained in *The Second Sex*, which we consider in the theoretical section of the thesis, is that women are the inferior sex to men. She describes how women are

considered the second sex – the other sex, as women are always described and defined in relation to men. The woman cannot be defined as her own sex – as an entirety – an equal sex to men. Woman is nothing without the man to compare her to and define her from (Beauvoir 5-6). We have found some examples of this in Brontë’s novel, for example, “Though you have a man’s vigorous brain [...]” (Brontë 348). In this quote, Jane is described as having a ‘man’s brain’, confirming that women are defined in relation to men: She is not merely described as intellectual or clever but as having a ‘man’s brain’. She cannot just be defined as a woman – it must be in relation to men. Beauvoir was once told by Sartre that she had “a man’s intelligence”, which she initially considered a positive observation. “And there is no evidence that he changed his mind about a patronizing slight that she, too, accepted as a compliment until she began to consider what it implied” (Beauvoir xii). This intended and supposed compliment is a perfect example of how women are regarded as the ‘other’ to men. As mentioned previously, “the humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself” (xii).

Another example of how men are superior to women in society is that St. John is very dominant and tolerated only certain behaviour.

By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind: his praise and notice were more restraining than his indifference. I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. I was so fully aware that only serious moods and occupations were acceptable, that in his presence every effort to sustain or follow any other became vain: I fell under a freezing spell (Brontë 339).

And he is also not a man to be “lightly refused” (339). Jane feels herself wanting to please him, but she also feels that she has to disown half of her nature to do so. (339). Jane was

afraid of St. John because she could not understand him. She had thought of him as superior, but she discovers that he is more of an equal and believes that she can therefore argue with him (346). She ultimately refused his proposal, which she is able to only because she is no longer afraid of him, and she agrees to accompany him to India, but not as his wife. She will gladly go as his sister, if he will agree to allow her to “go free” (345). Throughout the novel, it is apparent that men are superior to women and it is portrayed in many ways. For example, when Jane is a child living at Gateshead, she has an outburst in which she speaks up and tells Mrs Reed what she thinks of her. We would like to include a comment about how this is rather unrealistic behaviour for a Victorian child, as they were never supposed to be capable of such extraordinarily self-assertive acts (Gilbert & Gubar 343). With regard to gender, Jane’s outburst is intended to remind Mrs Reed that “she, too, is surrounded by patriarchal limits” (343). She does this by asking her what her uncle, Mr Reed, would have said to her if he were alive (Brontë 22). “My uncle Reed is in heaven, and he can see all you do and think; and so can papa and mamma: they know how you shut me up all day long, and how you wish me dead” (23). The statement demonstrates that Jane is extraordinarily self-assertive and is standing up to her, but she uses a man to do so. The uncle is mentioned to make Mrs Reed remember her place as the inferior, in case she had forgotten during her time as a ‘substitute patriarch’. This term is used by Gilbert and Gubar when referring to Mrs Reed, as she appears to hold the position of power in the family by replacing her husband after he passed away (Gilbert & Gubar 342). Thus, even though Jane shows real courage and tries to appear powerful, she still uses the power of a man to endorse and increase her own almost non-existent power, not only as a female but also as a female child. In reality, Mrs Reed is not the only one who holds a position typically held by men. She is, indeed, a surrogate patriarch as the head of the family, as there is no longer a man to take this responsibility until John Reed was old enough. Other examples of women functioning as male surrogates include Miss

Temple at Lowood Institution who is taking care of the girls and running the institute when Mr Brocklehurst is absent, which is most of the time. Jane initially believes that Mrs Fairfax owns Thornhill, until she learns that she is only the housekeeper looking after the estate when Mr Rochester is away, travelling, on social calls or conducting business. This means that even though it may seem as though a number of women hold positions of power in the novel, in reality they are merely substituting for men (348).

According to Butler, gender is socially constructed, as we explained in the theoretical section of this thesis. Gender is controlled and constructed by the cultural and social influences in society. Thus, stereotypes and prejudices are often important when discussing the notion of gender. An example of a stereotypical view of the male and female gender is that women must be beautiful and men must have money. This is clearly also the case in the novel, as the women's most important quality is their beauty, and the men are judged according to their fortune. Men select the women and arrange the marriages – Mr Rochester's father and Bertha Mason's father arrange their marriage, even though they barely know each other. Often, the women do not have much to say but, in this case, Mr Rochester is unaware of Bertha's secret characteristics and of the setup. Another example that demonstrates how society defines the genders with stereotypical traits is found in the following quote: "And for the rest, though you have a man's vigorous brain, you have a woman's heart, and – it would not do" (348). Butler's theory on performative gender explains how we act our gender. Our behaviour and actions define our gender. This is again related to the stereotypes and prejudices and what society defines as feminine and masculine. An example of this in the novel is the stereotype that men are tough and independent and women are soft and dependent. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane does not conform to this stereotype. She is stubborn, tough, passionate, independent, determined and has a temper. "But I apprised you that I was a hard man," said he; 'difficult to persuade.' 'And I am a hard woman, - impossible to put off'"

(327). In this quote, Jane and St. John quarrel and they are both stubborn and hard – Jane even more so than St. John. She does not act as society expects her to. Another example of this is demonstrated when Jane does not play the role that Mr Rochester expects when she discovers the truth about Bertha. He expects her to be the soft and dependent woman who will grieve and cry on his shoulder so that he can be the one to comfort her, but she does not do this at all (254). The lady in the village shop judges her according to her appearance and manner, as mentioned previously in the analysis. She assumes that she is of higher social class – a fine, wealthy lady – due to her behaviour and the way she is dressed, which perfectly demonstrates the way in which society assumes your gender and your social class based on your appearance and manner. They judge you according to these assumptions and expect you to act accordingly.

If we examine the women presented in the novel and what they mean to and symbolise for Jane, it is quite clear that two kinds of women are present: the positive and the negative role models for Jane. The positive role models are Helen Burns and Miss Temple. They present “different but equally impossible ideals to Jane” (Gilbert & Gubar 345). Jane admires the noble Miss Temple: “Angelic Miss Temple, for instance, with her marble pallor, is a shrine of ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy - and repression. [...] She dispenses food to the hungry, visits the sick, encourages the worthy, and averts her glance from the unworthy” (344). This selfless and caring person is clearly a positive role model or ideal for Jane. The other positive yet impossible ideal presented is, as mentioned, Helen. Jane also admires her, but she represents “the ideal - defined by Goethe’s Makarie – of self-renunciation, of all-consuming (and consumptive) spirituality” (345-346). Helen believes that even though she has a home and is not an orphan, but actually has a living father and a home that she longs for, her true home waits for her in heaven. However, Jane is sceptical and therefore incapable of allowing such a comfort. Helen’s faith and belief are strong and she



says to Jane, “yet it would be your duty to bear it, if you could not avoid it: it is weak and silly to say you *cannot bear* what it is your fate to be required to bear” (Brontë 47). Helen accepts her fate: “I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day, and the illness which is removing me is not painful; it is gentle and gradual: my mind is at rest” (69).

We want to include a brief comment about Diana and Mary Rivers, who both represent ideal female strength, and thus also are positive role models. “As well as through their independent, learned, benevolent personalities, they suggest the ideal of female strength for which Jane has been searching” (Gilbert & Gubar 365). The negative role models presented to Jane include Adèle Varens, Blanche Ingram and Grace Poole. Adèle is young, hardly a woman, but she is already “cunning and doll-like. [...] She longs for fashionable gowns rather than for love or freedom, and, the way her mother Céline did, sings and dances for her supper as if she were a clockwork temptress invented by E. T. A. Hoffman” (350). They describe further: “where Miss Temple’s was the way of the lady and Helen’s that of the saint, hers and her mother’s are the ways of Vanity Fair, ways which have troubled Jane since her days at Gateshead. For how is the poor, plain governess to contend with a society that rewards beauty and style?” (350).

Blanche Ingram shows Jane a female image similar to the one presented by Adèle and Céline, that of “denizen of Vanity Fair” (350), although slightly different, because Ingram is high-born and “she has a respectable place in the world” (350). As mentioned previously in the analysis, Miss Ingram is admired for her beauty and her singing talent. In relation to Miss Ingram, we would like to include a comment about Jane’s cousins, Giorgina and Eliza Reed. Both are high-born and respectable women, but they are very different in appearance and manner:

Georgina, a more vain and absurd animal than you, was certainly never allowed to cumber the earth. You had no right to be born: for you make no use of life. Instead of living for, in, and with yourself, as a reasonable being ought, you seek only to fasten your feebleness on some other person's strength: if no one can be found willing to burden her or himself with such a fat, weak, puffy, useless thing, you cry out that you are ill-treated, neglected, miserable. Then, too, existence for you must be a scene of continual change and excitement, or else the world is a dungeon: you must be admired, you must be courted, you must be flattered – you must have music, dancing, and society – or you languish, you die away. Have you no sense to devise a system which will make you independent of all efforts, and all wills, but your own? (Brontë 201).

Eliza is slaying her sister with words, confirming Jane's observation of their contrasting personalities and lives. With the same background, the two young women have become complete opposites and differ in, as mentioned, both appearance and manner. Clearly, Georgina is the worst role model for Jane, but neither of the sisters present a positive role model for her, and they both end up with very stereotypical fates. Rosamond Oliver is another high-born young woman:

She had been indulged from her birth, but was not absolutely spoilt. She was hasty, but good-humoured; vain (she could not help it, when every glance in the glass showed her such a flush of loveliness), but not affected; liberal-handed; innocent of the pride of wealth; ingenuous; sufficiently intelligent; gay, lively and unthinking: she was very charming, in short, even to a cool observer of her own sex like me; but she was not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive (313-314).

More so than the others mentioned, she was good-hearted, innocent and not affected by wealth, although, apart from this, she is not particularly interesting. Therefore, she is not a negative nor a positive role model to Jane, because she does not really mean much to her. She does, however, present another aspect of the higher social class – a less haughty one. She demonstrates no pride of wealth, her father still cares about and wants to approve whom she marries – she is not free of that aspect: “It appeared, then, that her father would throw no obstacle in the way of Rosamond’s union with St. John. Mr. Oliver evidently regarded the young clergyman’s good birth, old name, and sacred profession as sufficient compensation for the want of fortune” (315). Grace Poole is the last of the three negative role models mentioned in Gilbert and Gubar’s book. Miss Poole is blamed for everything related to Bertha Mason. She is “the most enigmatic of the women Jane meets at Thornfield - ‘that mystery of mysteries, as I considered her’ - is obviously associated with Bertha, almost as if, with her pint of porter, her ‘staid and taciturn’ demeanor, she were the madwoman’s public representative” (Gilbert & Gubar 350). She spends most of her time alone on the third-storey of Thornfield. Even though, Grace Poole holds a position in which she has power over Bertha by being her keeper, she is only able to withhold this much power, because she is substituting for Mr Rochester – a man. “Women in Jane’s world, acting as agents for men, may be the keepers of other women. But both keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains. In a sense, then, the mystery of mysteries which Grace Poole suggests to Jane is the mystery of her own life, so that to question Grace’s position at Thornfield is to question her own” (351). The last woman that we would like to discuss is, of course, Bertha Mason – the madwoman. Bertha is described as something between human and animal the first time Jane is taken to meet her:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first

sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (Brontë 250).

Gilbert and Gubar argue that “on a figurative and psychological level it seems suspiciously clear that the specter of Bertha is still another – indeed the most threatening – avatar of Jane. What Bertha now *does*, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the ‘vapoury veil’ of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her (Gilbert & Gubar 359).

Jane “wishes to be his equal in size and strength, so that she can battle him in the contest of their marriage” (359), and Bertha is described as “a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest - more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was” (Brontë 250). These examples mean that

Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead. For, as Claire Rosenfeld points out, ‘the novelist who consciously or unconsciously exploits psychological Doubles’ frequently juxtaposes ‘two characters, the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited, often criminal self’ (Gilbert & Gubar 360).

As this quote explains, Jane and Bertha are contrasts, and Bertha represents Jane’s inner and suppressed feelings. Bertha’s presence and appearances are linked to Jane’s anger. When Jane secretly dislikes the veil that represents Jane Rochester, Bertha appears and tears it apart.

Specifically, every one of Bertha’s appearances - or, more accurately, her manifestations - has been associated with an experience (or repression) of

anger on Jane's part. Jane's feelings of 'hunger, rebellion, and rage' on the battlements, for instance, were accompanied by Bertha's "low, slow ha! Ha!" and 'eccentric murmurs'. Jane's apparently secure response to Mr. Rochester's apparently egalitarian sexual confidences was followed by Bertha's attempt to incinerate the mater in his bed (360)

There are further examples. It is also mentioned in Gilbert and Gubar's book that the "literal and symbolic death of Bertha frees her from the furies that torment her and makes possible a marriage of equality - makes possible, that is, wholeness within herself" (362). A final comment proposes that Jane is the ice, whereas Bertha is the fire.

Many critics have indicated how Brontë uses fire and ice to characterise Jane and her experiences (339). While discussing the opening passages of the novel, they explain the way in which the opposed properties of fire and ice are used:

For while the world outside Gateshead is almost unbearably wintry, the world within is claustrophobic, fiery, like ten-year-old Jane's own mind. Excluded from the Reed family group in the drawing room because *she* is not a 'contented, happy, little child' – excluded, that is, from 'normal' society – Jane takes refuge in a scarlet-draped window seat where she alternately stares out at the 'drear November day' and reads of polar regions in Bewick's *History of British Birds*. The 'death-white realms' of the Arctic fascinate her; she broods upon 'the multiplied rigors of extreme cold' as if brooding upon her own dilemma: whether to stay in, behind the oppressively scarlet curtain, or to go out into the cold of a loveless world (339-340).

Jane is shortly hereafter found by John Reed and after their confrontation, she is taken to the red-room in which she is not just literally but also figuratively imprisoned. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the red-room represents society with her as its prisoner – not only literally in the

room but also figuratively, because she feels trapped and with no means of escape: “For the red-room, stately, chilly, swathed in rich crimson, with a great white bed and an easy chair ‘like a pale throne’ looming out of the scarlet darkness, perfectly represents her vision of the society in which she is trapped, an uneasy and elfin dependent” (340).

When locked in the red-room, Jane is angry and frustrated, which drives her to consider all escape options. She considers fleeing, which is unlikely, and then she considers starving herself to death; it is brutal and extreme to wish to die in order to escape. The situation intensifies somewhat when Jane collapses in the red-room. She chooses, willingly or unwillingly, to escape the red-room through madness. She claims to have seen a ghost that she believes to be Mr Reed.

For the little drama enacted on ‘that day’ which opens *Jane Eyre* is in itself a paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book: Jane’s anomalous, orphaned position in society, her enclosure in stultifying roles and houses, and her attempts to escape through flight, starvation, and - in a sense which will be explained - madness. And that Charlotte Brontë quite consciously intended the incident of the red-room to serve as a paradigm for the larger plot of her novel is clear not only from its position in the narrative but also from Jane’s own recollection of the experience at crucial moments throughout the book (341).

They describe the way in which “Jane’s pilgrimage consists of a series of experiences which are, in one way or another, variations on the central, red-room motif of enclosure and escape” (341). Jane is compared to Cinderella, as she starts her journey with a family not her own, but mean and selfish ‘siblings’ and a wicked and unloving ‘stepmother’. This life renders her “immorally rebellious against the hierarchy that oppress her” (342). Thereafter, her journey progresses and she encounters a few happy and unhappy experiences in her life that she needs to deal with.

## Religion

In *Jane Eyre*, religion and morality play an important role with regard to Jane and her development. In terms of Jane's faith and religion, three characters in the novel help to shape Jane's religion and morality: Mr Brocklehurst, Helen and St. John. *Jane Eyre* is told in a first-person narrative, so the account of religion and morality in the novel is through the observations of Jane herself. Jane struggles to find a balance between her devotion to God and her own personal pleasures. In Jane's childhood, her relationship with God is somewhat complex. The servants would use religion and God to terrify her. When John Reed hit Jane across the face with a book, Jane is scolded. Miss Abbot uses religion and God when she scolds Jane and locks her in the red-room:

‘Besides,’ said Miss Abbot, ‘God will punish her: He might strike her dead in the midst of her tantrums, and then where would she go? Come, Bessie, we will leave her: I wouldn't have her heart for anything. Say your prayers, Miss Eyre, when you are by yourself; for if you don't repent, something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney, and fetch you away’ (Brontë 10).

Before locking Jane in the red-room, Miss Abbot tells Jane to say her prayers, because only her prayers and God can save her. If she does not say her prayers, something from hell will come down the chimney and take her away. From an early age, Jane is confronted with religion and morality, and when she is in the red-room, terrified and traumatised by the situation, her common reason is still able to shine through her emotions: “‘Unjust – unjust!’ said my reason, forced by the agonising stimulus into precocious though transitory power: and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or, if that could not be effected never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (12).

Despite being weakened by her emotions, her morality and her devotion to God are able to withstand the situation. Jane, however, is also presented with a different view on religion and God from the servant Bessie. Jane hears Bessie's song from the days she went gypsying, and a stanza in the song goes as follows:

There is a thought that for strength should avail me,  
 Though both of shelter and kindred despoiled;  
 Heaven is a home, and a rest will not fail me;  
 God is a friend to the poor orphan child (18).

Jane is presented with the view of God as the friend and saviour of the orphan child. God is the friend and saviour of Jane if she allows him to be.

At Lowood Institution, Jane meets two of the three characters who help shape her view on religion and morality: Mr Brocklehurst, the supervisor of the institute, and Jane's friend, Helen. Mr Brocklehurst and Helen share two opposing views on religion and God. Mr Brocklehurst uses his to gain power and strike fear in little girls, whereas Helen uses hers to create compassion in even the unfairest of times. When Jane arrives at Lowood Institution, she is interrogated by Mr Brocklehurst about her faith, and when she tells him that she does not find Psalms interesting, he is shocked and scolds her: "That proves you have a wicked heart; and you must pray to God to change it: to give you a new and clean one: to take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (27). Before that, Jane admitted to Mr Brocklehurst that she indeed reads the Bible, but according to Mr Brocklehurst, that does not make her a true believer. Jane must devote herself to every aspect of the Bible, and if Jane does not enjoy Psalms, she is a bad person and a non-believer without a heart. Furthermore, if she does not change her ways, she will to go hell for this sin. Mr Brocklehurst thrives on creating fear in the girls at the orphanage and by starving them and reminding them how God has left their side because of their sins – the sin of being an orphan. It is revealed that



Lowood Institution was founded by Mr Brocklehurst's family and his family are living a comfortable life:

three other visitors, ladies, now entered the room [...] The two younger of the trio [...] had grey beaver hats, then in fashion, shaded with ostrich plumes, and from under the brim of this graceful headdress fell a profusion of light tresses, elaborately curled; the elder lady was enveloped in a costly velvet shawl, trimmed with ermine, and she wore a false front of French curls (54-55).

Mr Brocklehurst's family is rich and he does not mind having them show off their fortune, which is a very un-Christian thing to do. Furthermore, his actions towards the girls at the institute are also regarded by Jane as un-Christian. For instance, he orders one of the girls at the institute to cut off her curls, because curls cannot be worn by a child of Grace: "Yes, but we are not to conform to nature: I wish these girls to be the children of Grace: and why that abundance? I have again and again intimated that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly. Miss Temple, that girl's hair must be cut off entirely" (54). His own daughter parades around with French curls. Mr Brocklehurst does not strike fear in Jane as he intends, and she sees him for what he really is – a hypocrite.

At the institute, Jane also meets Helen. In many ways, she is the opposite of Jane with regard to character and morals. Compared to Jane, Helen is passive and calm. She too is devoted to God, but she sees the world differently. Helen is a firm believer in turning the other cheek to those who have wronged you, something that Jane cannot understand. Helen is not the rebellious child that Jane is, but she, like Jane, is extremely intelligent and mature beyond her years. Jane is especially frustrated by how Helen does not seem bothered by the way she is treated at the institute. Helen is particularly terrorized by one teacher named Miss Scatcherd. Instead of responding with opposition, as Jane would, Helen tries to understand Miss Scatcherd and why she bullies her the way she does, because according to Helen, there

must be a reason for it. Jane thinks Helen is too passive, and Helen responds as follows: “Hush, Jane! you think too much of the love of human beings, you are too impulsive, too vehement: the sovereign hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you” (59). Helen too thinks Jane is too impulsive and rebellious; however, she does not scold her for it – she simply tells her not to overthink people and their actions. Instead of scolding Jane, she shows her compassion and tries to help her. To Jane, Helen’s views on religion and morality are too passive but they are admirable, though Jane does come to share one of Helen’s beliefs – that God shows mercy to those who have wronged him, as should Jane to those who have wronged her: “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you” (49).

When Jane arrives at Thornfield, it becomes clear that Jane and Mr Rochester’s different views on religion and God are the most significant obstacle in their relationship. Jane wants, more than anything, be in a marriage founded upon equality and mutual affection, and when Jane first reveals her romantic feelings towards him, she states: “I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart! [...] 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 passes through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal, - as we are!” (216).

Mr Rochester is Jane’s greatest weakness and temptation, but even when she is about to give into the temptation, she remembers that agreeing to be Mr Rochester’s mistress will be adultery in the eyes of God; Mr Rochester and Jane will therefore never be equals. She will become the inferior and Mr Rochester the superior. Jane becomes blinded by love, and instead of being devoted to God and his words, she turns her back on him and becomes devoted to Mr Rochester. Jane comes to terms with this, and even calls Mr Rochester her

idol: “My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol” (234). Falling in love with Mr Rochester makes her neglect her religion and morality and instead idolise Mr Rochester, a man who has neglected his own morals countless times. Ultimately, Jane leaves Mr Rochester, and as she leaves, she regains her belief and resists the temptation that is Mr Rochester. When he asks how he will survive her leaving, Jane tells Mr Rochester to turn to God: “Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven. Hope to meet again there.” (270).

The third character that helps shape Jane’s religion and morality is her cousin St. John. He wants to be a missionary in India, and he needs a wife to accomplish this. St. John is in love with Miss Rosamond Oliver. They are both deeply in love and both families agree to the marriage. According to St. John, she is not fit to be a missionary’s wife. He places his religion and dream of being a missionary in India above love and happiness: “While I love Rosamond Oliver so wildly - with all the intensity, indeed, of a first passion, the object of which is exquisitely beautiful, graceful, fascinating - I experience at the same time a calm, unwarped consciousness that she would not make me a good wife; that she is not the partner suited to me” (318). St. John’s proposal to Jane appals her: “God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary’s wife you must – shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service” (343).

Being a missionary’s wife may be a way to fulfil God’s work on earth, but by agreeing to marry St. John, Jane will have to neglect her morals and be disloyal to herself and her beliefs. She will be in a marriage without love, a marriage where principle is valued above passion. She will be the inferior and St. John will be the superior. St. John tells Jane

that she will be his because he has claimed her. Even though she will be doing God's work, she will merely be an object doing the job of the missionary's wife, living in a marriage without equality and love. In that moment, Jane realises that in order to achieve independence and freedom, one must be in a relationship founded upon equality and mutual affection.

The beliefs of Mr Brocklehurst, Helen and St. John help Jane find her own religious path and common ground. Jane sees through Mr Brocklehurst's hypocrisy and does not allow herself to be tricked into his sermons about hellfire and how one can be a sinner just for being an orphan. From Helen, Jane learns the act of forgiveness and how to forgive those who have wronged her and, as a result, she is able to take back Mr Rochester and return to Thornfield in her own time. Additionally, she is able to forgive Mrs Reed when she goes to see her on her deathbed at Gateshead. When Jane rejects St. John's proposal, she realises that she cannot be in a marriage that does not consist of love and equality, and she will not sacrifice passion for principle.

### Women's Writing

Our protagonist, Jane, is a headstrong and straightforward heroine, and she does exactly what Cixous wishes of women and women's writing. Jane writes herself and puts herself into her text. She is aware of the reader and even addresses the reader directly. She addresses the reader in different ways, but they all have the same thing in common – it is to converse with the reader. Because of the first-person narrative in *Jane Eyre*, it is important to consider her reliability as a narrator. Overall, Jane can be considered a reliable narrator, since she is extremely particular with her details when observing places, people and situations around her. For instance, Jane describes the small act of drawing up a curtain in immense detail:

A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play: and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy you see a room in the

‘George Inn’ at Millcote, with such large figured papering on the walls as inn rooms have: such a carpet, such furniture, such ornaments on the mantelpiece, such prints; including a portrait of George the Third, and another of the Prince of Wales, and a representation of the death of Wolfe (Brontë 79).

Providing the reader with such a detailed description of such a small act shows how Jane is unapologetic and how she engages the reader fully. At times, Jane also asks the reader a question to keep the reader on his/her toes: “This is a gentle delineation, is it not, reader?” (294), “Reader, do you know, as I do, what terror those cold people can put into the ice of their questions?” (351) and “You have not quite forgotten little Adèle, have you, reader?” (383). One question that is important is when Jane asks the reader about their opinion of her: “And, reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity? – if you do, you little know me” (367). This shows that Jane is fully aware at this point in the novel that the reader will have formed an opinion of her and she intends to set the reader straight. She also ensures that the reader does not have the wrong impression with regard to the people she cares for. An example of this is with her student Adèle: “You are not to suppose, reader, that Adèle has all this time been sitting, motionless, on the stool at my feet: no; when the ladies entered, she rose, advanced to meet them, made a stately reverence, and said; with gravity – ‘Bon jour, mesdames’ (147). Furthermore, when Jane feels that her emotions are not expressed clearly or coming across the way she intends, she reminds the reader and elaborates on them: “I have told you, reader, that I had learnt to love Mr. Rochester; I could not unlove him now, merely because I found that he had ceased to notice me” (158) and “I will not swear, reader, that there was not something of repressed sarcasm both in the tone in which I uttered this sentence, and in the feeling that accompanied it” (346).

The most memorable and discussed reference towards the reader in *Jane Eyre* is “Reader, I married him” (382). It is the end and beginning of a long and complicated love

story filled with obstacles. Interestingly, Jane proclaims that she married him and not that he married her, because it was her choice to do so. She had a choice whether to marry Mr Rochester or not, which simply was not a choice that women like Jane had in the Victorian age. Ultimately, Jane takes charge of her own life, future and story. She lives for herself and writes for herself. She is in charge of her body, mind, soul and she marries for love. She is in charge of her own story and narrative. Jane embodies Cixous' so-called 'New Woman'. Jane is in many ways ahead of the Victorian woman, and she is a female who rewrites the Old Woman and resurfaces as the New Woman. Jane is part of the New Woman and their movement, and she can reclaim her body through her choices in life, love, marriage, profession and wealth. However, it is also important to remember that Jane inherits a large fortune from her uncle, making her rich and she automatically advances up the social ladder. Previously, Jane was no match for Mr Rochester in terms of fortune and social class. Now with Jane's fortune, she becomes a match for Mr Rochester, not only in character but also in social class. Her inheritance defines her, whether Jane likes it or not.

In terms of Cixous and the reclaiming of sexuality, *Jane Eyre* consists of a few quick kisses and some sexual tension, but in terms of Jane reclaiming her sexuality, it is complex. Jane's sexual awakening occurs when she moves to Thornfield and meets Mr Rochester. Jane learns of Mr Rochester's past life and how he kept mistresses:

The first I chose was Céline Varens – another of those steps which make a man spurn himself when he recalls them. You already know what she was, and how my liaison with her terminated. She had two successors: an Italian, Giacinta, and a German, Clara; both considered singularly handsome. What was their beauty to me in a few weeks? Giacinta was unprincipled and violent: I tired of her in a few weeks? Clara was honest and quiet; but heavy, mindless, unimpressible: not one whit to my taste (265-266).

Additionally, as with these girls, Mr Rochester wants to commit adultery with Jane against his wife Bertha. He offers for him and Jane to leave for the south of France, where they can be Mr and Mrs Rochester. Jane rejects his proposal: “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 sophistical – is false” (259). Jane will not give herself and her body to Mr Rochester, just for her to be his mistress. Jane might be young, but she is not without feelings and reason. She is aware of her emotions and her sexual awakening, and she is fully aware of her sexual attraction towards Mr Rochester, but she treats them for what they are – a sexual temptation that should not be acted on. In relation to Cixous and sexuality, Jane denies Mr Rochester her sexuality and body and therefore reclaims it for herself. She places herself above Mr Rochester’s wife and old mistresses by denying him her sexuality and body. She is the New Woman who is above the Old Woman.

With regard to Lakoff and her views on women and their language, the character of Jane is an interesting case. Jane grows up an orphan without any mother- or father figure. She has not grown up around a female dependent character, and her speech is therefore not familiar with what Lakoff’s calls ‘the female language’ (Lakoff 41). Instead, Jane finds comfort in books, and not books intended for a girl her age. When she gets into a fight with her cousin John Reed, and he hits her across the face with a book, she shouts back at him:

‘Wicked and cruel boy!’ I said. ‘You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors’’. I had read Goldsmith’s ‘History of Rome,’ and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud. ‘What! what! he cried. ‘Did she say that to me? Did you hear her, Eliza and Georgiana? Won’t I tell mamma?’ (Brontë 8-9).

At this point in the book, Jane is 10 years old and her cousin is 14 years. Someday her cousin will inherit the family estate, and much is expected of him. Nothing is expected of Jane. At the age of 10, Jane is teaching herself a vast array of knowledge and forming opinions on topics that are meant to be read and discussed by adults. Her male cousin, on the other hand, is running around bullying Jane and making her life difficult. Lakoff states that when a little girl acts like a little boy, she will be ostracised and scolded, which is exactly what happens to Jane after she shouts back at her cousin. When Mrs Reed and Bessie arrive in the room, Bessie cries out, “Dear! dear! What a fury to fly at Master John! Did ever anybody see such a picture of passion!” (9). Mrs Reed continues: “Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there” (9). Jane is then dragged to the fearsome red-room and is ostracised. As Lakoff suggests, Bessie immediately scolds Jane because she does not act like a little lady. Mrs Reed locks Jane away for the same reason. They do not scold Jane’s cousin for hitting her with a book and giving her a cut in the process.

If we revisit the statement Lakoff makes about normal socialising in early childhood and how it is harmless, we note that this is not the case with Jane. It is quite different in her case because of her relationship with the red-room; this is not harmless socialising – it is a traumatic event. From an early age, instead of acting and talking like a lady, Jane shows resistance and defiance, which are masculine characteristics according to her society. She also demonstrates maturity far beyond her years. Jane’s family is unable to suppress her and so they send her to Lowood Institution. Jane is denied choosing her own path early in life, but at the institute, she utilises her vast knowledge and becomes a teacher and later a governess.

As Lakoff states, women’s vocabulary is considered active and detailed in a way men’s vocabulary is not. Thus, women find certain circumstances relevant that men would regard as irrelevant. Their observations are different – as is their language. This statement can be applied to Jane and her observations. For instance, when she is admiring Thornfield:



I liked the hush, the gloom, the quaintness of these retreats in the day; but I by no means coveted a night's repose on one of those wide and heavy beds: shut in, some of them, with doors of oak; shaded, others, with wrought old-English hangings crusted with thick work, portraying effigies of strange flowers, and stranger birds, and strangest human beings,- all which would have looked strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight (90).

When Jane describes the hall at Thornfield, she observes every detail, even the crusting on the old wooden doors that might not be visible to the ordinary eye. She pays attention to how the gleam of moonlight can change the artwork on the doors. This situation can be one of those mentioned by Lakoff. The crusting on the door and how the moonlight changes it may be fascinating and relevant for Jane, but to somebody like Mr Rochester this would simply be irrelevant and a waste of thought. Throughout the novel, the reader is introduced to observations around Jane that are described in active adjectives and what is considered a feminine language. For example, when she describes Rosalind Oliver and her dad, Mr Oliver: "She made such a report of me to her father that Mr. Oliver himself accompanied her next evening - a tall, massive-featured, middle-aged, and grey-headed man, at whose side his lovely daughter looked like a bright flower near a hoary turret" (314). Jane also uses other adjectives that Lakoff considers feminine, examples of these are: "Sweet" (17), "delightful" (215) and "charming" (313).

Jane's childhood is the reason for her character and how she expresses herself. She is a strong-willed girl who has vast knowledge beyond her years. Because of her time at Lowood Institution, she is taught how to act like a lady, but her determined mind cannot be suppressed by the institute, and therefore Jane's mind is in many ways fluid and consists of both feminine and male characteristics; an ambiguous mind. Throughout the novel, Jane's responses in certain situations angers the people around her and they scold her for not acting

like a lady. They judge her as a rebellious child and punish her for it. On one occasion she is accused of using unfeminine language. This is when she refuses St. John's proposal of marriage:

'One more, why this refusal?' he asked. 'Formerly,' I answered, 'because you did not love me; now, I reply, because you almost hate me. If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now.' His lips and cheeks turned white – quite white. 'I *should kill you – I am killing you?*' Your words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue' (351).

St. John is clearly surprised with Jane's response, and he therefore calls her violent and unfeminine. It is one thing to refuse the proposal, but to offend and disrespect him, who she in many ways is indebted to, is considered by not just him but society to be masculine characteristics. Jane's choice of words can also be considered unfeminine. Marriage is supposed to be a happy reunion of two people, and the respectful and lady-like thing to do is to refuse him with kind and feminine words, but instead she uses words like 'hate' and 'killing'. These are aggressive and negative words, and no lady should use them. St. John scolds Jane out of embarrassment, but also because she does not act like a lady and is behaving out of the ordinary.

### *The Handmaid's Tale*

#### Equality, Society and Gender

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* the narrator and protagonist of the novel is Offred whose real name is never revealed. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. [...] I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried" (Atwood 94). Her new name is given to her to represent the Commander she is currently stationed with and since her current Commander's name is Fred, she becomes

Offred. This is just the first of many examples as to how her – and many others – are oppressed and controlled to the point of ownership of an object. Atwood explains how she chose Offred's name because "within this name is concealed another possibility: 'offered,' denoting a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice" (xi). Her name symbolises her fate as handmaid. We learn about her former life from fragments throughout the novel, including flashbacks and Offred reminiscing the past. We learn that she had a husband named Luke and that they had a daughter. The plot takes place in the United States of America and it has suffered a coup that had transformed and changed society drastically from what they used to know. The society in which they now live is referred to as the Republic of Gilead (x). "Such freedom now seems almost weightless" (33), Offred complains. She, women, and society are not the same as before and the time of freedom to make important life decisions like these was over. "That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances" (18) Offred considers their new role in society in which they undeniably have lost some of their prior opportunities and rights. She had taken all the freedoms and opportunities that she once had for granted and now, when they are no longer, she finally acknowledges how much they meant to society. All the rights, possibilities and freedoms that feminism has fought for through the years were gone, but clearly not forgotten by the ones who were now longing for them. "We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?" (61). She never appreciated what she had until she lost it, as cliché as it sounds.

The new society requires them to show where and with whom they belong by wearing specific colours and acting in a certain way. Each 'role' in society has its own colour. By dividing them into groups with a specific colour, it is easy to distinguish them from each other and to easily recognise and place everyone in the 'right' position of society. Both the handmaids' and the marthas' clothes have a more concealing and unflattering form to hide

their female forms because they should not be considered sexual (19). The handmaids wear red, the Commanders wear black, their wives wear blue and the Marthas' colour is green as seen in these quotes:

“There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red” (19) [...]

“she's in her usual Martha's dress, which is dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before. This dress is much like mine in shape, long and concealing, but with a bib apron over it and without the white wings and the veil. She puts the veil on to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha” (19).

The guardians wear a different shade of green to the marthas. “There are two men, in the green uniforms of the Guardians of the Faith, with the crests on their shoulders and berets: two swords, crossed, above a white triangle” (30). Sometimes a woman will wear black, but only if she is a widow. There are also “some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything if they can” (34). The colours that they are required to wear every day represent their position, rank and role in society, which means that the colours do not only help categorise them for others to see but it actually also divides them. It creates a natural distance between the different positions, as they are required to keep up the appearance of their expected roles and act the part. They are not to divert from what is expected of them based on their position in society. Therefore, dividing them and forcing them to always wear their representative colour highlights and reinforces the gap that is already between the different social classes. It is akin to wearing a sign saying that you are inferior or superior out into public. Highlighting and displaying the inequality in this way divides people even further and distances them. It is

important in the society to keep them from interacting with others – not just from other positions in society but also from their own. (21). “We aren’t supposed to form friendships, loyalties, among one another” (295). The handmaids were only allowed to take walks in twos and only certain subjects were approved for discussion. Offred would sometimes talk with the marthas of the house, and they would discuss their aches and pains. They knew that they had to be quiet because they were not allowed to discuss their misery (20). Offred also enjoyed gossiping with the marthas because they often knew many unofficial things. The marthas were, mostly, ignored in society and left to work and do their thing in peace. This means that they often had access to unofficial news because they would listen at doors and see things and not be caught doing so. Additionally, the marthas liked to talk amongst themselves and share what they have learned. Offred liked hearing all the stories, but they had to be careful because they were not supposed to socialise with each other. “But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Martha saree not supposed to fraternize with us” (21). The martha, Rita, is initially not too friendly towards Offred. Offred is certain that her contempt is for the society and not her personally. “But the frown isn’t personal: it’s the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for” (19-20).

“A sitting room in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only” (18). Offred is inferior in society but certainly also in the household. She is not a part of the family and she is not allowed to participate and behave like an equal member of the household. For instance, it is only at the very beginning of a posting that the handmaid is permitted to use the front entrance of the house. Thereafter, they have to use the back. The position of handmaids in society is fairly new, hence there are concerns and speculations about their status (23). Thus, it could be a struggle to determine how people would expect you to act on some occasions. Some examples of this are: “Don’t call me Ma’am, she said irritably. You’re not a Martha”

(25), says Serena. Aunt Lydia wants handmaids to use the front door as she claims that “yours is a position of honour” (23). The guardians have a special salute dedicated to handmaids where they “raise three fingers to the rims of their berets. Such tokens are accorded to us. They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service” (31). However, not everyone thought so. The Commander’s wife ignores Offred most of the time. “She doesn’t speak to me, unless she can’t avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity” (23). When she first arrived, she had been the one waiting behind the front door. “So, you’re the new one, she said. She didn’t step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so. There is push and shove, these days, over such toeholds” (23). The wives were often cold and sometimes directly mean towards the handmaids – probably due to jealousy and self-hatred. If only they could give the Commander a child, they would not need the handmaid. Thus, many of the wives were defensive and tried to establish dominance, as Serena does in the quote before and in this one: “As for my husband, she said, he’s just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It’s final” (26). “I want to see as little of you as possible” (25), she had commanded her upon her arrival. If she was barely visible, she would not think about her too much and why they needed her.

The Commander’s driver, Nick, wears the uniform of the guardians. “He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn’t been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn’t rate: some defect, lack of connections. But he acts as if he doesn’t know this, or care. He’s too casual, he’s not servile enough. It may be stupidity, but I don’t think so” (27-28). Offred explains how Nick is in the same position as her and the marthas, and they are not an actual part of the household in spite of living there. His status is even too low to be ‘given’ a wife. Marriages are arranged by the society and you would have to have a certain status or rank to be assigned a wife (230-231). Initially, Offred suspects that he might be an ‘eye’,

whose job is to observe and report any violations of the new laws. She suspects this partly because he winks at her when he sees her looking at him.

I drop my head and turn so that the white wings hide my face, and keep walking. He's just taken a risk, but for what? What if I were to report him? Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette. Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye (28).

Especially the guardians were often 'eyes'. "The Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito" (30). Making guardians 'eyes' is smart, because their job is to stay near the handmaids and marthas to 'protect them' and uphold the law and peace.

Each handmaid has a 'partner' handmaid with whom they would take walks and go shopping. Even with their partner, they were restricted in conversation as mentioned previously. Only certain topics were allowed and these were mostly shallow and common small talk. They would greet each other with the accepted greeting among them: "Blessed be the fruit" (29) to which the other would respond with the accepted response: "May the Lord open" (29). They were only allowed to the central part of town when shopping and doing so in twos. "This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable" (29).

Giving them this responsibility and function prevents them from wanting to interact too much and expose themselves. This results in this short and polite small talk, often about

the weather. Offred makes sure to keep to the accepted rules of conversation among them, because she is afraid of what could happen if she opened up about her concerns and rebellious thoughts. “During these walks she has never said anything that was not strictly orthodox, but then, neither have I. She may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can’t take the risk” (29). She cannot be sure whether Ofglen is a true believer in the society and would report her, or if she was actually feeling and thinking the same way and things that she did. This is a perfect example of how they have constructed the rules in society to contain and control them.

Even though they are still working on the establishing the status of handmaids in society, some rules are already in place. “She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there’s Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands” (26). Offred realises that she recognises Serena’s role when she says, “It’s one of the things we fought for” (26). She has played a part in creating this new society, which we will elaborate on later in the analysis. The inequality even goes to the point where some foods and drinks were limited and available for only a restricted part of society. An example hereof is real coffee, which was now only available in the houses of the Commanders (20). Another time is when Offred is goes shopping, and Rita gives her the tokens to have things exchanged for and she says, “‘Tell them fresh, for the eggs,’ she says. ‘Not like that last time. And a chicken, tell them, not a hen. Tell them who it’s for and then they won’t mess around’” (21). Clearly, she expects differential treatment because of the Commander’s position in society. Even the guardians who are supposed to check every car reaching a checkpoint, will wave a black van through without a pause. “The Guardians would not want to take the risk of looking inside, searching, doubting their authority” (32).

“This garden is the domain of the Commander’s Wife” (22). The garden functions as a ‘free’ space for the wives where they can be ‘in charge’. Men usually do not go there or



bother with it, and therefore many wives like to spend time here. “A Guardian detailed to the Commander does the heavy digging; the Commander’s Wife directs, pointing with her stick. Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (22). This is most likely the only place where the wives can feel and be in charge. The wives do not have much to do, and apart from their gardens, they do not have much purpose or tasks to do. Many of them knit scarves that they believe are sent to “the Angels at the front lines” (22). However, Offred believes otherwise: “these scarves aren’t sent to the Angels at all, but unravelled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn. Maybe it’s just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose” (23). However, she does envy the wives for their knitting. “It’s good to have small goals that can be easily attained” (23).

“There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (34) But Offred considers that “a rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze” (174). Therefore, Offred does not consider their supposed and limited freedom to be real freedom. In this case, even though they are allowed to vary from their route when walking to the shops in the centre of Gilead, they still have to remain within the barriers, and so she compares them and their amount of freedom with rats (174). The handmaids are trained by the aunts in what used to be a gymnasium. The facility, however, had changed and now conveyed a feeling of imprisonment. “The guards weren’t allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire” (14). The gymnasium was adapted and restructured to accommodate the fitting facilities to train the handmaids, and the aunts were in control of teaching them their responsibilities and discipline. One might say that the aunts were in a

position of power. “Mind you, some of their ideas were sound enough, she went on, with the smug authority in her voice of one in a position to judge” (128). It is interesting that even while the aunts have a superior and dominant role in training and controlling the handmaids, they are still women, and thus, even they cannot be trusted with weapons as this is a task and a role for men only (14). Hence, guards were stationed outside the gymnasium to prevent them from escaping and to keep them in check. Beauvoir’s theory explains, as we have accounted for previously, that women are inferior to men, and that women are considered the ‘other’ sex. The handmaids are inferior to men but also to the Commanders’ wives. The Commanders’ wives hold a position that is superior to both the handmaids and the marthas: “The transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone” (170). While the wives and the aunts seem to have a higher status in society than the handmaids and the marthas, they are still inferior to their husbands – to men. Women are not allowed to read and write (129). This rule regards all women including the wives. They are also stripped of some of the privileges they had previously possessed and taken for granted. However, the only exception is the aunts who were allowed to read and write, mainly to document their work and limit the time needed for men to become involved (139).

“Think of it as being in the army, said Aunt Lydia” (17). The handmaids have to follow a specific schedule and are taught their new role, how, what it is expected, and required of them to act and wear. They dreamed about escaping by using their bodies to make a deal with the guards. Even though they did not have much and they were imprisoned, they felt that they could have done something to escape if only they could talk with the guards. “If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy” (14). There appears to be a focus on the body, and whenever a body or a body part is described it is

always specific and detailed, as in this quote where Serena and her features are described:

“Her blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckly finger filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger; like something mocking her” (24).

Women have only one job – to procreate, and if a woman of status is unable to, a handmaid is brought in to help with this issue and afterwards the wife will take over the role of motherhood for the child and raise it and the handmaid will move on to be stationed at another household. “She’ll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother’s milk. After that she’ll be transferred to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she’ll never be sent to the Colonies, she’ll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward” (137). Offred explains Janine’s fate after giving birth and she explains how by successfully delivering a baby, she had secured her own future even though she will never see the baby again after a few months, and she will have to continue working as a handmaid if her body is able to. Offred is sharing the excitement of a new baby with the rest of the handmaids: “Nevertheless we are jubilant, it’s a victory, for all of us. We’ve done it” (137). This confirms that the handmaids have some kind of collective goal – reproducing, and they are happy when they succeed. “We smile too, we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy” (136). In the Birthmobile, which is the van or small bus driving them to the house of the newly delivered baby and back to their own households again, the excitement of the new baby is over, and they are all

without emotion now, almost without feeling, we might be bundles of red cloth. We ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What confronts us, now the excitement’s over, is our own failure. Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture.

Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies (137).

The visit with the new baby resonates with the other handmaids and afterwards, on the way back to their respective households, the handmaids are all remembering and feeling the pressure of their own failure to fall pregnant.

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me completely (72-73).

In this quote, Offred explains how her body determines her with which she means that her role in society is based upon the fact that she is fertile. This makes her valuable and enables her to be a handmaid. She is exploited for her fertility and if she loses it, her situation will change drastically, and she might end up at the colonies.

Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own. I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. [...] Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (83-84).

When Offred returns from the 'Birth Day' with Ofwarren, Cora is excited to hear about the baby. "These are the moments that must make what she is doing seem worthwhile to her" (145). Offred considers how these moments help Cora cope with her current circumstances.

Her voice is almost wistful, and I think: of course. She would have liked to have been there. It's like a party she couldn't go to. 'Maybe we have one, soon,' she says, shyly. By *we* she means me. It's up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs. Rita may disapprove of me, but Cora does not. Instead she depends on me. She hopes, and I am the vehicle for her hope. [...]. I am to provide these joys for her. I would rather have the disapproval, I feel more worthy of it (145).

Offred feels the pressure from all sides for her to fulfil her role as a handmaid.

While Offred is valued for her fertility – her body, and this is the most significant thing about her and the only thing giving her a purpose in this society, we would like to include that the Commander actually appreciates her for her mind too, which stands out in this society. "The Commander likes it when I distinguish myself, show precocity, like an attentive pet, prick-eared and eager to perform" (193). He allows her to play Scrabble with him, which includes both reading and some sort of writing, and he also lets her read magazines and novels, even though reading is not allowed for women (194). As their relationship evolves, she learns and start to recognise his facial expressions and behaviour: "He leans back, fingertips together, a gesture familiar to me now. We have built up a repertoire of such gestures, such familiarities, between us. He is looking at me, not unbenevolently, but with curiosity, as if I am a puzzle to be solved" (194). He is the one that tells her what the writing on her wall in her closet means, even though she never tells him where it is written.

I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next (62).

The words are scratched into the wall near the floor in the closet in her room which means that it is written by someone in her position before her – the writing is intended for her, and until she discovers the meaning, she wonders several times about its meaning and author: “It sounds in my head now less like a prayer, more like a command; but to do what? Useless to me in any case, an ancient hieroglyph to which the key's been lost. Why did she write it, why did she bother? There's no way out of here” (156). The Commander tells her that it means “Don't let the bastards grind you down” (197), and he explains how it is a saying from his past school boy days. He shows her that it is written in one of his books.

I force a smile, but it's all before me now. I can see why she wrote that, on the wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it, here, in this room. Where else? She was never a schoolboy. With him, during some previous period of boyhood reminiscence, of confidences exchanged. I have not been the first then. To enter his silence, play children's word games with him (197).

She risks everything asking him what it means and afterwards, she is bold enough to ask him about the girl before her, the previous Offred, and she learns the truth about her predecessor; she hung herself in what is now Offred's room. She takes advantage of the situation and tries to make a deal for information now that “things have changed. I have something on him,

now. What I have on him is the possibility of my own death. What I have on him is his guilt. At last” (198). She tries to make use of any possibilities to better her position and conditions.

As we have mentioned previously, Butler’s theory is about acting your gender and that gender is culturally constructed. We have also pointed out that this means that stereotypes play a significant part in people’s prejudices, assumptions and expectations of others. An example of a stereotype in the novel is Offred is playing scrabble with the Commander and he is the one keeping the score, because he says that women cannot add (195). It is a stereotype, but it does originate from the actual gender gap that exists in mathematics. There are statistically more men than women in mathematics, and the stereotype that women cannot do complex math is very much still in existence. “The belief women were not capable of doing serious mathematics proved extremely hard to shift” (Barrow-Green). However, in this case, it is far from the truth, as Offred is intelligent and very capable. She is an intelligent, perceptive and kind woman, as are others. She has a dark sense of humour, which we think adds to the enjoyment of the descriptions she provides during the novel as the narrator. We argue that Offred is supposed to represent an ordinary woman with just enough faults and just enough humanity to make her a sympathetic figure so that as many women as possible can recognize and reflect themselves in her, thereby making the plot more believable and probable. She is mostly passive as she never really does anything to rebel against the society. She only ever considers it. “I’ve crossed no boundaries, I’ve given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It’s the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation” (Brontë 71). Sometimes she will sing to herself, but only in her head, because she would sing “lugubrious, mournful, Presbyterian” (64) songs with lyrics such as:

*“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound*

*Could save a wretch like me,*

*Who once was lost, but now am found,*

*Was bound, but now am free.” (64)*

These songs are not allowed anymore. They are never sung in public and they are considered dangerous because of words such as ‘free’. Offred mentions that outlawed sects sometimes used these. Thus, Offred dared not sing them aloud, but she did enjoy them in her head and tried to remember the lyrics. This is an example of how she is a rebel on the inside and passive on the outside. This is also quite interesting in regards to Butler and her theory on performative. “You can’t help what you feel, Moira said once, but you can help how you behave” (202). In this quote, Offred’s friend, Moira, explains how she believes that you can control the way you act but not the way you feel. She mentions that you are judged based on the way you act, which is in agreement with Butler’s theory. Moira tells her this to let her know that she is not judged on the inside of her mind, which is where Offred keeps all of her rebellious thoughts about society. It does add an interesting point to Butler’s theory – that how we feel and think on the inside does not necessarily have to correspond with the actions and behaviour that we are showing on the outside. If these actions and this behaviour are controlled consciously, how reliable are the results of our judgement? Butler’s theory proposes that some of the acts we perform are unconscious, and therefore, it may be difficult to control and decide what people could observe and judge from. However, it is worth considering how much we can influence and control these actions.

Offred, like most others, despises her life as a handmaid and considers all the ways in which she and others can and have escaped this life. “But that’s where I am, there’s no escaping it. Time’s a trap, I’m caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live. Live in the present, make the most of it, it’s all you’ve got” (153) and



this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here -. Let's stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn't last forever. Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had (144).

She tries to be an optimist in order to cope with and get through her current circumstances, as she believes changes will come and she must survive for now. Therefore, she will not take her own life as many others before her have tried to do. "They removed anything you could tie a rope to" (17). They feared that they would commit suicide as a way of escaping the reality of their current situation and they took every possible action to prevent them from doing so. "I know why there is no glass, in front of the water-colour picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge" (17-18). Although, kept 'imprisoned' and stripped of rights, Offred is glad to be alive: "But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight. Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" (18).

In the following quote Offred describes her appearance briefly: "I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance. But something has changed now, tonight. Circumstances have altered" (153). She explains how Aunt Lydia had taught the girls that they had to learn to manipulate men and exploit their sexual desires and lust to control them: "Men are sex machines, said Aunt Lydia, and not much more. They only

want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is a metaphor. It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are. Aunt Lydia did not actually say this, but it was implicit in everything she did say" (153-154).

Offred tries to take advantage of her private meetings with the Commander and manipulate him and his feelings. "[...] wanted me to play Scrabble with him, and kiss him as if I meant it" (154). This encounter made her feel like a mistress, and she tells how she learned what mistresses are in a flashback to her childhood and a conversation with her mother about a television interview with the mistress of a Nazi concentration camp guard. She remembers that she claimed that he was not a monster. "He was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, off key, in the shower, he had a yen for truffles, he called his dog Liebchen and made it sit up for little pieces of raw steak" (155). Offred compares her situation with the mistress', because she, too, had begun to inscribe the Commander with characteristics and humanities and slowly forgot him as a monster because she had come to know him. "How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation" (155). While it might be tempting to ascribe him humane characteristics to make him less of a monster, he is, nevertheless, still a monster. No matter how friendly and kind he is in their meetings and how many rules he bends for her, he is simultaneously the agent of her oppression. He is co-responsible for her current circumstances and the Republic of Gilead as a Commander. Offred promises herself to never forget it. When she first arrives at the house, one of the first things that Serena tells her is that she will not be the mistress, that Fred is her husband and that she needs to remember her place. However, he is now interested in a relationship that goes deeper than her duties as a handmaid, and she considers how this might help her or ruin her. "I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall. I need to be earnest about it, I need

to ponder it” (154). Later, as their relationship develops, and their meetings continue, Offred says:

The fact is that I’m his mistress. Men at the top have always had mistresses, why should things be any different now? The arrangements aren’t quite the same, granted. The mistress used to be kept in a minor house or apartment of her own, and now they’ve amalgamated things. But underneath it’s the same. More or less. *Outside woman*, they used to be called, in some countries. I am the outside woman. It’s my job to provide what is otherwise lacking. Even the Scrabble. It’s an absurd as well as an ignominious position (172).

Although Serena has told her not to become his mistress, she is now finding herself in that situation. “Once I’d mererly hated her, for her part in what was being done to me; and because she hated me too and resented my presence, and because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all” (170). While Offred still hates her, she explains that her hatred is not only caused by these pure and simple facts, but also by jealousy. “Partly I was jealous of her; But how could I be jealous of a woman so obviously dried-up and unhappy? You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself. Nevertheless I was jealous” (170). Could this mean that she was falling in love with the Commander? Their relationship has definitely changed and she has come to know him on a personal level. She feels as though she is taking something away from Serena what is supposed to be hers. This makes her feel guilty and as an intruder. “Now that I was seeing the Commander on the sly, if only to play his games and listen to him talk, our functions were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory” (170). Thus, even though she hates Serena, she still feels guilty and perhaps even sorry for her, but she is conflicted and tries to defend her actions, yet she still seems to consider Serena’s side of things.

I was taking something away from her, although she didn't know it. I was filching. Never mind that it was something she apparently didn't want or had no use for, had rejected even; still, it was hers, and if I took it away, this mysterious 'it' I couldn't quite define – for the Commander wasn't in love with me, I refused to believe he felt anything for me as extreme as that – what would be left for her? (170).

Offred treasures moments such as when she has with a young guardian and they look in each other's eyes and he blushes. "It's an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child, at the back of a drawer. Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes" (31). These instances are too minor to attract trouble, but they are big enough to represent some kind of hope for her. Offred appears to enjoy the slight feeling of power she gets when she teases the young guardians.

As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young. Then I find, I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone; passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow,

walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes (32).

Moments such as this one, in which she teases the guardians, her relationship with Nick and even the Commander, show how Offred holds some kind of power over the men who are considered more powerful than her and superior in society. However, she does consider that the Commander might think that he is actually the one taking advantage of and exploiting her. He finds it sexual to watch her doing the things that are illegal such as reading. “This watching is a curiously sexual act, and I feel undressed while he does it. I wish he would turn his back, stroll around the room, read something himself. Then perhaps I could relax more, take my time. As it is, this illicit reading of mine seems a kind of performance” (194). She enjoys the feeling of power, and these situations and relationships might be considered acts of rebellion. However, they are small and only provide her with some sort of satisfaction for feeling in control when everything seems beyond her control. While she indulges in these small rebellious acts and thus is not completely submissive, we still consider her to be quite passive, as she never does any crucial or groundbreaking thing to change her situation and is not outspoken about it. When she is involved in something illegal, it is because Serena or the Commander has ordered her to, and she obeys them because of authority and obligation but also because of desire; the Commander requires her to have private meetings with him and Serena wants her to fall pregnant with Nick’s baby because she suggests that the Commander is infertile.

The most significant other women presented in the novel are Serena, Moira, Ofglen, Janine, Offred’s mother, the aunts, and particularly Aunt Lydia, and the marthas – Cora and Rita. Serena is, of course, the Commander’s wife. Offred gets an inkling of hope when she sees Serena smoking: “The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope. Even now that there is no real money any more, there’s still a black

market. There's always a black market, there's always something that can be exchanged. She then was a woman who might bend the rules. But what did I have, to trade?" (24). She hopes that this means that she is willing to bend the rules and improve her circumstances. Offred remembers that she recognises her from a religious television program (26). However, she moves on and becomes an anti-feminist activist and an advocate for what they would refer to as 'traditional values', which makes her co-responsible for the Republic of Gilead. "She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home" (55). Offred considers how ironic it is that "she has now become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (56). The new circumstances, even though Serena helped create them, make her unhappy.

Offred's mother is a radical feminist. She is involved in demonstrations (129), and Offred recognises her mother as a young woman on a film they show at the Red Centre, which is the former gymnasium where they are trained to be handmaids. The film is of an old demonstration held by radical feminists to try to convince the girls that they are better off now. They also show them old, hardcore porn videos where women are treated violently, where women are objectified, treated violently and hurt to contrast to the 'respectful' way they are treated and the sexual actions that occur now (129). Offred's mother is strong-minded and determined. "I remember her like that, her chin jutted out, a drink in front of her on the kitchen table; not young and earnest and pretty the way she was in the movie, but wiry, spunky, the kind of old woman who won't let anyone butt in front of her in a supermarket line" (130). She is very outspoken and has strong beliefs about men – almost a hatred towards men. In the following quote, she rants about men when talking with Offred about not wanting to dye her hair that has gone grey:

Anyway what do I need it for, I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making another woman. Not that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off. [...] They aren't a patch on a woman except they're better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right? (130-131).

Moira is Offred's friend from before Gilead. She is, like Offred's mother, a radical feminist, which means that Offred's closest female relations before this were both radical and outspoken feminists. Moira is a lesbian because she has decided she wants to avoid men altogether. She is outspoken, smart and independent, which means that she does not just accept her new role in this society. She is constantly indulging in rebellious acts – unlike Offred, as she is constructing weapons and attempting to escape. However, in one of her attempts to escape she is captured and because she is unfit to manage the task as a handmaid as she is not fertile, she is forced to choose between going to the colonies or becoming a Jezebel, which is basically Gilead's prostitutes allowing men of high status to pleasure and satisfaction outside of the household. However, it is run by the new government. There are aunts there keeping the women in check: “‘Rest break once an hour,’ says the Aunt. ‘You know the rules’” (253). Moira behaves very dominantly and she is very direct, which are considered masculine traits. “‘Shove over.’ This she says to the two women on the sofa, her usual peremptory rough-cut slapdash manner, and as usual she gets away with it” (254). Other women tend to oblige to her demands. She is witty and often uses a foul language. “‘Godawful,’ she says. She grins at me. ‘You look like the Whore of Babylon’” (254). She is tough and deals with everything and everyone directly. When Janine is in some kind of a trance in the Red Centre, she wants to handle it differently than the rest of the girls – and so

she does. “Moira took Janine by the shoulders and shook her. Snap out of it, Janine, she said roughly. And don’t use that *word*. Janine smiled. You have a nice day, now, she said. Moira slapped her across the face, twice, back and forth. Get back here, she said. Get right back here! You can’t stay *there*, you aren’t *there* any more. That’s all gone” (228). By ‘word’ she means her name, as she had used right before in a part of her trance or imagination. Even though, the two women are best friends from the time before all of this, we would argue that they are opposites based on their character traits. Where Moira is outspoken and does numerous rebellious acts, Offred keeps it all inside and she never initiates any illegal behaviour by herself, although she wants to – she is always ordered to or asked to as we mentioned earlier. Moira is a strong, independent and resourceful which she shows in her defiant and rebellious behaviour. She does not just accept her fate but instead tries to escape several times. However, when Offred finds her working as a Jezebel, it seems that even she has given up on escaping and ever getting out. She has accepted her fate as a Jezebel, which suggests that even the strongest and most independent women can be grinded down and crushed by the totalitarian society of Gilead. ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down’ is unfortunately just an optimistic and empowering slogan hard to live by in reality.

Elaborating on our analysis from earlier of how the aunts hold a position of power as their job is to train the handmaids at the Red Centre, they also control the Jezebel girls, so we know that they have even more responsibilities than just the re-education of the handmaids. As mentioned, they are not allowed weapons and they, too, are inferior in society, even though they are one step above the ones they train and control. The same can be observed with Serena and the wives; they are superior to marthas and handmaids, and to the guardians they can order around in the garden but they are still inferior to their husbands and the other Commanders. Aunt Lydia is responsible for indoctrinating the new handmaids with the beliefs and expectations of Gilead and to help, or rather force, them to accept their new fates



as the fertile women they are. Offred only mentions Aunt Lydia in flashbacks to her time at the Red Centre, but she thinks about that time and her many times, confirming just how traumatising the experience was for her and the importance of Aunt Lydia in her transformation to a handmaid. The slogans and beliefs of the new ideology in the new society are repeated and branded into their souls to the point of brainwashing, which results in Aunt Lydia's voice echoing in Offred's head even long after leaving the Red Centre. Thus, their strategy of indoctrinating the new beliefs in the handmaids actually works, as even the handmaids who do not truly believe in the new society – including Offred, also are affected by the training and the aunts' slogans, advice and orders. We have also already covered the marthas, Cora and Rita, who are of course also inferior in society and who work as cooks and cleaners – housemaids. They are domestic servants. They were given this task because they did not qualify to become wives and they were infertile therefore unfit to become handmaids. However, we never really learn much about how the marthas are trained or selected as the novel is written from Offred's point of view and, obviously, she was never involved in the managing of the marthas. We imagine that their training would be similar to the handmaids' training with the same goal – to indoctrinate them into the new role and teaching them the new rules, expectations and responsibilities that follows it. Cora appears to accept her role and the new society more than Rita does, as she hopes Offred will fall pregnant as mentioned earlier. She also seems to try to diminish the casualties – almost defending the system (30-31).

The last two significant female characters are Ofglen and Ofwarren, and they are both handmaids as their names indicate. Ofglen is Offred's shopping partner, until suddenly another handmaid has replaced her, and Offred learns that the old Ofglen has hung herself to avoid telling the secrets and revealing the members that she knew of after being caught as a member of Mayday (297). The Ofglen that impacts Offred the most is the first one. At first,

Offred is cautious around Ofglen as the way society is constructed forces them to be cautious, suspicious, and hostile towards each other because they cannot be certain who are true believers and who are not. As previously mentioned, Offred explains how they never exchanged any personal information during their walks together as partners. She believed that she might be a true believer of the new ideology. She could not risk asking questions, but she wonders how Ofglen always knows about the unofficial things (227), until she finally learns that she has been a member of the underground network – a resistance movement called Mayday. Ofglen actually tested her before on one of their walks, hinting at the secret Mayday organisation to discover whether and how much Offred knew about it and them: “‘It’s a beautiful May day,’ Ofglen says. I feel rather than see her head turn towards me, waiting for a reply” (53). She, too, could not be sure whether Offred was a true believer or not. Ofglen says to Offred when she finally learns the truth: “It isn’t good for us to know about too many of the others, in the network. In case you get caught” (212), which is exactly what happens, and she hangs herself to avoid revealing the secrets of Mayday.

Ofwarren, who Offred knows is called Janine, is with her at the Red Centre, and she never liked her and referred to her as one of Aunt Lydia’s pets (37). Janine actually helped Aunt Lydia spy on the other girls after Moira had escaped to try to find any accomplices (142). She was so desperate to fall pregnant and fulfil her purpose as a handmaid that she has had two pregnancies with the doctor instead of the Commander. The first was a late miscarriage and the second died shortly after birth (226-227). Janine blames herself and thinks that their terrible fate was because of her being sinful in using the doctor instead. “It’s like Janine though to take it upon herself, to decide the baby’s flaws were due to her alone. But people will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot” (227). Offred dislikes Janine and holds her in contempt for being a conformist, who goes along with everything and accepts the new ideology. She does everything in her

power to endear herself with anyone in an authority position especially the aunts. In spite of as much as Offred hates Janine for taking the easy way out by conforming, she still shows empathy and sympathy towards her especially during the birth of her baby. Janine only performs a small act of rebellion and we would not consider it active nor intentional. This refers to the incident at the Red Centre, where Janine is in some kind of a trance on the bed and she whispers greetings like a waitress, and Moira has to slap her to bring her back and keep her in the reality of the present (227-228).

As a last comment on the women represented in the novel, we argue that Offred is the middle ground between Janine and Moira. She is not a conformist on the same level as Janine being passive and accepting, yet she is not as outspoken, independent and rebellious as Moira. These two women represent the two extremes and Offred is somewhere in between them with her passive yet, in some cases, rebellious behaviour and actions. She questions and challenges her situation more than Janine ever does. However, she never actively tries to escape on her own like Moira does. She eventually does attempt to escape when it is arranged for her, and the novel ends without the reader knowing whether she ever made it out or was caught.

Atwood acknowledges how difficult it must be for the reader to believe that society could ever change so drastically (x), which we analyse and discuss in the comparative discussion. We argue that the following quote is added to convince the reader of the outrageous and almost unbelievable transformation of society and to increase the reliability of the plot:

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending.

Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can

pick up where I left off. It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one. You can mean thousands. I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you. I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't (49-50).

Offred addresses how outrageous it all must seem, and how much she feels and wants it to be just a story, but regardless, it is her reality. Atwood has tried to explain the reason behind the drastic changes in the novel by making the professor holding a lecture on it explain it to his students:

Need I remind you that this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic, which once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool? Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdown, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands both legal and illegal – in some instances these materials were simply dumped into the sewage system –

and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays (316-317).

Atwood has created the most logical and probable reasoning behind the reasoning involved in why society would have had to react and change before becoming extinct due to no babies being born. “What male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, so highly prized?” (323). This explains how the procreation central and has first priority, but also why it is only men of high status in society that are assigned handmaids. Because it was so rare to have children, having one entailed even greater status in society.

### Religion

When analysing religion in *The Handmaid's Tale*, one cannot avoid the term ‘dystopia’. The society in the novel is what you would call a dystopian society (Dolitsky 113). It is a dystopian society that consists of a hegemonic power – that being the word of God and the Bible. At the beginning of the novel, Offred’s day and schedule is dictated by a bell that Offred compares to a nunnery bell: “The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries. As in nunnery too, there are few mirrors” (Atwood 18). Offred lets the reader know what she is wearing, and it becomes clear that it is more of a uniform than regular clothes:

The red gloves are lying on the bed [...] Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red, it’s not my colour (18).

The handmaid's uniform is similar to the uniform the nuns wear, and their daily lives and circumstance can be compared to that of living in a nunnery. Their everyday lives are controlled, and they are required to live their life according to the Bible. They wear loose-fitting, red long dresses that leave nothing to the imagination. They are defined by the colour red, which symbolises their fertility and their menstrual blood. They wear wings so that their eyes will not stray and so they themselves cannot be seen. The wings are white, which symbolise purity and innocence. It is also interesting to note that the colour of red can also symbolise sexuality, rebellion and rage, and in relation to Offred and her development, this can be considered a foreshadowing about what is to come.

The first obvious reference to the Bible in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the name of the society itself – Gilead, which is the name of a region in the Bible. We also discover the biblical background of the Gilead society – Genesis's story of Jacob and Rachel. Before Offred's first Ceremony, the Commander reads the story of the Genesis: "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. [...] Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*" (99). According to Aunt Lydia, the handmaids are in the best position regardless of the circumstances, and that they are indeed spoiled to be able to be a handmaid. The handmaids had the Genesis read to them at breakfast every day by Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre, which also so happens to be called the 'Rachel and Leah Center'. The fragmented quote in the novel is a reference to the verse in Genesis:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

And she gave him Bilhah, their Handmaid, to wife, and Jacob went unto her (Genesis 30: 1-3).

In this passage in Genesis, Rachel is not able to give Jacob any children, and she therefore wants her maid, Bilhah, to fall pregnant in her place. Then, once the baby is born, Rachel will claim the child as her own. To Rachel, having a child is the sole purpose of life, and if she cannot have children, she will rather die. In relation to Offred and her situation, Offred is Bilhah, Serena is Rachel and the Commander is Jacob. It is interesting to note that this is considered adultery, and it is a sin in the eyes of God for the Commander to have sexual intercourse with Offred. Therefore, on paper, he himself has sinned. However, because the question about infertility is avoided, the marriages within Gilead consist of accepted adultery. It is accepted and not questioned, because in the eyes of Gilead, it is the only way for Gilead to grow in numbers; therefore, even the question of survival can bend the words of God.

Religion and the Bible play a dominant role in the Gileadean society, and it becomes very clear that Gilead controls the handmaids and others through religion – in many ways. The Gileadean government uses religion to strike fear within the society and its citizens. For instance, at a meeting, Janine relates how she was gang-raped at the age of fourteen and then has an abortion. According to the aunts, Gilead, and the bible, abortion is sin, and Aunt Helena consequently makes an example of Janine: “But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. *Her fault, her fault, her fault*, we chant in unison. *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. *She did. She did. She did.* Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*” (Atwood 81-82). Janine is to blame for being gang-raped at the age of fourteen; not the men who committed the act. The aunts suggest that Janine must have sinned in order for that to

have happened to her. Therefore, according to the aunts, God teaches her a lesson by having her raped and the handmaids must agree on this and scold her. Another example is shown when Offred is out on her shopping walk with Ofglen and they pass by the Wall:

Only two hanging on it today: one Catholic, not a priest though, placarded with an upside-down cross, and some other sect I don't recognize. The body is marked only with a J, in red. It doesn't mean Jewish, those would be yellow stars. Anyway there haven't been many of them. Because they were declared Sons of Jacob and therefore special, they were given a choice. They could convert, or emigrate to Israel. [...] So the J isn't for Jew. What could it be? Jehovah's Witness? Jesuit? Whatever it meant, he's just as dead (210-211).

The reader is told that many of them decided to immigrate to Israel, and some people took a risk by dressing up and pretending to be Jewish. According to Ofglen, many people managed to escape until Gilead realised what was happening and made the tests more difficult to prove you were a Jew. Gilead was not only opposed to Jewish people, as Offred stated: "only two hanging on it today: one Catholic, not a priest though [...]" (210) Gilead would even hang up a man of God, a priest, on the Wall if he acted out of the norm. Offred elaborates on this: "You don't get hanged only for being a Jew though. You get hanged for being a noisy Jew who won't make the choice. Or pretending to convert. That's been on the TV too: raids at night, secret hoards of Jewish things dragged out from under the beds, Torahs, talliths, Mogen Davids" (211). Gilead hangs people on the Wall to strike fear in those watching them. If you do not convert, you are hanged. If you do convert but do not follow the rules set by the Gileadean government, you will be hanged. The Wall is also a symbol of the hegemonic power within the society, and the display of the bodies on the Wall is a way to strike enough fear in people to prevent a potential rebellion and uproar. They have been made into an example: "These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they



did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities, and must be made into examples, for the rest” (43). Gilead might be based upon the Bible and God’s words, but the government also manipulates its citizens with it.

Throughout the novel, the reader can develop an opinion on Offred’s views on religion, though it is a bit complex, since Offred does not provide any clear answer to this. At the Red Centre, Offred recalls how they show a documentary called “Unwoman documentary”. It is a documentary about women, pre-Gilead feminists who believed in equality between the sexes. In the documentary, Offred catches banners with statements such as, “TAKE BACK THE NIGHT. [...] FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN’S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?” (129-130). The aunts and the Gileadean government regarded these women as Godless. They were sinners and therefore were exiled to the Colonies, an area that consisted of deadly pollution, and they were sent there to clean away nuclear waste. More so, women are sent there to do hard labour while the pollution slowly kills them. The documentary is shown to the handmaids at the Red Centre to strike fear within them and to show what happens to women who are outspoken and identify as feminists, lesbians, etc. The documentary is basically propaganda and it manipulates the handmaids into fearing becoming an ‘Unwoman’. For Offred to see this documentary early on while becoming a handmaid can shape her opinion on whether or not God exists within Gilead, simply out of fear and the fact that Offred wants to stay alive despite her circumstances. Throughout the novel, there are a few situations where Offred seeks comfort in a higher power:

I pray where I am, sitting by the window, looking out through the curtain at the empty garden. I don’t even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it’s an equal darkness. Or light. [...] I wish I knew what You were up to. But

whatever it is, help me to get through it, please. Though maybe it's not Your doing; I don't believe for an instant that what's going on out there is what You meant (204).

Offred does not close her eyes while praying, as it does not matter. Whether it is out there or inside her head, there is an equal darkness. Offred finds herself being detached from her body and society, but she prays for a higher power to guide her out of the darkness. Offred trusts God and has faith in the fact that what is taking place in Gilead is not the work of her God. She continues to pray: "If I were You I'd be fed up. I'd really be sick of it. I guess that's the difference between us. I feel very unreal, talking to You like this. I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish You'd answer. I feel so alone. All alone by telephone. Except I can't use the telephone. And if I could, who would I call? Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God Oh God. How can I keep on living?" (205). As with society and her body, Offred feels detached from God and feels as though she is talking to a wall. She complains about how she cannot use the telephone to call God, which in truth is a reference to the Gileadean society and how Offred is suppressed and restricted with regard to speaking her truth and being true to her beliefs. And if she one day was able to use the telephone, which would symbolise her freedom, who would she call? Everybody she knows or once knew is dead, as far as she knows at that point. When Offred and Ofglen are on their shopping walk, they pass the church where machines are printing prayers, and Ofglen sparks Offred's rebellion:

"Do you think God listens," she says, "to these machines?" She's whispering: our habit at the Centre. In the past this would have been a trivial enough remark, a kind of scholarly speculation. Right now it's treason. I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won't tolerate this kind of talk in my presence. Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one. I steel myself. "No," I say." (173).

Offred believes in a higher power, and from that she seeks comfort in the most difficult of times. She believes that her God did not intend for Gilead to overtake the government and eventually take control of the country. She still has faith, but feels that God is out of reach and what stands between the two is a wall of hegemonic power.

### Women's Writing

In Offred's case in relation to Cixous and writing one's body, it is complex since she simply was not able to do so. She was not allowed to read or write, and if she had done so, there would have been consequences. When Offred escapes from Gilead she writes herself, tells her narrative about Gilead and reclaims her body in doing so. She records her story onto cassette tapes, which are later found in the state Maine after the fall of Gilead. Her story is edited and verified by a Professor Pieixoto who specialises in Gilead. Thus, for Offred's story to be heard and written into a manuscript, it has to go through a male professor. Professor Pieixoto tells Offred's story at a conference, but at the same conference, he advises the audience to not hold any bias against Gilead and to be compassionate towards the people and their hardship:

“If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (*Applause.*)” (310-311).

For the reader to learn that Professor Pieixoto is asking for his audience to not be biased against Gilead, their culture and actions is alarming, and it questions whether the society after

Gilead has learned anything from Gilead's time of rule. Furthermore, Professor Pieixoto's statement at the conference is received with applause, which makes it even more alarming for the reader, because they will never know what percentage of the audience is male. It places a question mark on the morals of Professor Pieixoto and the audience, and how the post-Gilead society can feel empathy towards a tyrannical society and in doing so, belittling Offred's story and what Gilead did to her and hundreds of other handmaids. It is also important to point out that even though Professor Pieixoto ends his statement by saying that he and the audience's job is to understand and not to censure, you cannot help but question how biased Professor Pieixoto is towards Offred's story. Furthermore, is the manuscript truthfully authentic or has it been somewhat edited prior to its release? The reader will never know, but if it is the case, it exemplifies what Cixous means when she states that men are afraid of the female narrative and how much power it can hold.

In terms of *écriture féminine*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a good example of its technique and female narrative. Cixous states that one of the differences between the male narrative and the female narrative is how the male narrative consists of straightforward and to-the-point writing, whereas the female narrative keeps on developing throughout a text, while being subversive and ping-ponging from one subject to another. In the novel, the reader is made aware of Offred's life prior to Gilead through a series of flashbacks. Every now and again, Offred opens up to the reader and allows them into her past, and just as quickly she shuts the reader out again. Offred jumps from one subject to another, from pre-Gilead to present Gilead. These subjects are mainly connected to her memories of her husband and daughter. In one instance, she remembers them at a supermarket, where a stranger stole Offred's daughter out of their supermarket cart. She relates this memory: "She fades, I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now. Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl, a little girl who died when she was five" (73-74). She then recalls a drawer she had,

in which she kept things of sentimental value: “sitting beside an open drawer, or a trunk, in the cellar, where the baby clothes are folded away, a lock of hair, cut when she was two, in an envelope, white blonde. It later got darker. I don’t have those things any more, the clothes and hair. I wonder what happened to all our things. Looted, dumped out, carried away. Confiscated” (70). She then returns to reality, and she remembers Aunt Lydia’s words about sentimental things: “I’ve learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of spirit. Blessed are the meek” (74). Another example is a memory of her husband when Offred recalls standing in their bedroom of their first apartment: “Luke is there, behind me, I turn to see him. He won’t look at me, he looks down at the floor, where the cat is rubbing itself against his legs, mewing and mewing plaintively. It wants food, but how can there be any food with the apartment so empty? *Luke*, I say. He doesn’t answer. Maybe he doesn’t hear me. It occurs to me that he may not be alive” (80). Throughout the novel, numerous flashbacks occur about her past life, but every time the memory becomes too painful, she quickly strays from it, thus ending the memory with either an antidote she has learned from Gilead or by coming to the terms with how her past is gone and how her husband and daughter are dead to her.

By Gileadean standards, sexuality for Offred is in many ways non-existent, since the Gileadean patriarchy is stripping her of her sexuality, and the odds of Offred reclaiming her body and sexuality should be impossible – and illegal – according to her society. Throughout the novel, Offred is aware of her sexuality and the power it can have if she uses it to her benefit. As Offred passes through a checkout point, two young guards watch her, and she does not think twice about moving her hips, feeling her skirt sway around her and knowing what power she holds:

It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young. Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds (32).

Offred is fully aware of her effect on men and how, by using her sexuality, it can give her a few seconds of superiority in a male-dominated society. She also relishes the fact that her acting on her sexuality for a few seconds will bring pain to the two guards for more than a few seconds. Offred might be too passive to act on her sexuality, but through her body language, she shows small signs of rebellion.

From the opening of the novel, readers gain an insight into how Offred feels about her own body and sexuality. When Offred is lying in the gymnasium with the other handmaids, she tries to formulate an escape plan and her only thoughts are the angels keeping guard outside the gymnasium: "The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy" (14). Offred sees her body and sexuality as objects to be traded for the possibility of freedom. She is valuable to society because of her healthy body and fertility. Her only value is her ovaries and she is aware of it: "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will [...] Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (83-84). Gilead deprives women of their sexuality and their own bodies. Offred feels like a cloud and, moreover, she feels detached

from her body. Within Gilead and its patriarchy, it is impossible for Offred to reclaim her body and sexuality. The ceremony Offred has to go through is beyond depriving Offred of her body and sexuality – it is rape. As mentioned previously, Cixous states that a woman's sexuality connects to her body and to her genital and libidinal differences from men. These are violated at the ceremony, during which Offred once again feels detached from her body: “What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose” (104-105). Offred states that she has signed up for what is taking place, which partially is true. Despite showing small signs of rebellion, Offred is too passive and has allowed Gilead to deprive her of her sexuality and body. She is too afraid to reclaim her body and, for that, she has lost not only her sexuality but also her individuality.

We first heard about Offred and her time within Gilead when it is revealed that she recorded her story onto cassette tapes, which are later discovered at a safe house. Cixous said that by telling their story and writing their body, women will be able to transform history. The process comprises two inseparable levels that a woman cannot separate – writing herself and seizing the occasion to speak (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 880). After escaping Gilead and its regime, Offred does exactly what Cixous wishes. By writing her story and recording the cassette tapes, Offred has returned to her body and reclaimed her sexuality, which was once confiscated by Gilead. Offred is no longer censored; neither is her body and narrative. In writing herself, Offred receives her *jouissance* again and is now a fighter. She seizes the occasion to speak up, and “hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (880). She is no longer the inferior and, through her writing, she can gain superiority and reclaim her body.

In terms of Lakoff and her ideas on the female speech pattern, Offred within the Gileadean society is restricted in her speech pattern. The handmaids are expected to keep to the same greeting and a set of responses. It is a given that Offred would be restricted when conversing with the Commander and his wife because of the social ladder, but she is just as restricted when she converses with other handmaids. This becomes evident when Offred meets her shopping partner Ofglen for the first time:

‘Blessed be the fruit,’ she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. ‘May the Lord open,’ I answer, the accepted response [...] This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable (Atwood 29).

Offred is restricted by society to one accepted greeting and one accepted response. If Offred is caught using another greeting or response, there will be consequences. Lakoff states that from an early age, girls are being suppressed by society into talking and behaving in a certain way. If the girls act or talk outside of the accepted norm, they are castigated. This is an interesting statement in relation to Offred and her situation, because Offred is not a girl growing up. She is a grown woman, one who is being suppressed by her society into talking and acting a certain way, and if she were to act and talk out of the norm, she – like the girl growing up – will be put into her place. In Offred’s situation, she would either lose an eye, arm, or be tortured. Offred acting out of the norm would be considered a sin by Gilead. Offred’s speech pattern and freedom of speech is taken away by Gilead, and Offred has therefore become accustomed to the same conversations with the same set of lines:

‘The war is going well, I hear,’ she says.

‘Praise be,’ I reply.



‘We’ve been sent good weather.’

‘Which I receive with joy.’

‘They’ve defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.’

‘Praise be,’ I say. I don’t ask her how she knows.

‘What were they?’

‘Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them out.’

‘Praise be.’ (29).

Out of fear, Offred does not satisfy her curiosity about where Ofglen received her information, so she falls back into her place set by Gilead and keeps to the set of responses she is allowed to use. Lakoff also states that, despite the girls being suppressed by society, the boys have the creativity and space to develop their communication and language. This can be applied to the men within the Gileadean society, and how they have freedom of speech. They are the ones in power and even though their wives have more freedom than the handmaids do, they too are restricted and if they act out of the norm, they too will be punished. Offred finds herself discriminated by her own language.

It is important to mention that Offred does have freedom of thoughts, and this enable her gain power within herself and fuel her rebellious fire. She may not have the freedom to say whatever is on her mind, but she has the freedom to think whatever is on her mind. It is also Offred’s freedom of thought that offers the reader an insight into Offred’s true feelings towards Gilead and its patriarchy, the other characters in the novel. Furthermore, Offred’s thoughts reveal her past life in the form of flashbacks. Gilead restricts Offred and denies her freedom of speech, but Gilead cannot deny her freedom of thought, and this facilitates the slow growth of Offred’s resistance throughout the novel.

## Comparative Analysis and Discussion

By addressing the themes, characteristics and details that are common to or different between the two novels, we create a comparative overview of the two novels. Firstly, we examine how the two main characters are finding themselves in an inferior and oppressed role in each of their societies: Jane as a governess and Offred as a handmaid. They are similar in many ways, for example, how they both keep much of their feelings and thoughts to themselves and only show ‘rebellion’ on the inside, but they also differ from each other. In this comparative analysis, we will examine the similarities and differences between the two novels.

We argue that both Jane and Offred are supposed to represent an ordinary woman of the time, and Jane was not perceived to be so by the contemporary audience, as we have mentioned. *Jane Eyre* is written in 1847, and the society that Brontë portrays in her novels is similar to her contemporary society but with an added twist of early feminist ideas. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is written in 1985, and the contemporary society is quite unlike the one Atwood portrays in her novel.

Back in 1984, the main premise seemed – even to me – fairly outrageous. Would I be able to persuade readers that the United States of America had suffered a coup that had transformed an erstwhile liberal democracy into a liberal-minded theocratic dictatorship? In the book, the Constitution and Congress are no longer: the Republic of Gilead is built on a foundation of the seventeenth-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day American we thought we knew (Atwood x).

Atwood lived in West Berlin when she wrote what turned into *The Handmaid’s Tale*. She was inspired by the countries behind the iron curtain that she had visited: “I experienced

the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing” (ix). The contemporary audience and critics were not fond of Brontë’s writing and *Jane Eyre* was no exception (Gilbert & Gubar 336-338). Brontë had intended to portray the conditions of real women: “The young novelist seems here definitively to have opened her eyes to female realities within her and around her: confinement, orphanhood, starvation, rage even to madness” (336). Jane’s character possesses these qualities and faces many of the experiences that real women do:

Nevertheless, we would argue that this is the vision she worked out in most of her novels, a vision of an indeterminate, usually female figure (who has often come ‘from the kitchen or some such place’) trapped - even buried - in the architecture of a patriarchal society, and imagining, dreaming, or actually devising escape routes, roads past walls, lawns, antlers, to the glittering town outside. In this respect, Brontë’s career provides a paradigm of the ways in which, as we have suggested, many nineteenth-century women wrote obsessively, often in what could be (metaphorically) called a state of ‘trance,’ about their feelings of enclosure in ‘feminine’ roles and patriarchal houses, and wrote, too, about their passionate desire to flee such roles or houses (313).

We later elaborate on the women’s desire to flee in the comparative analysis. In spite of Brontë’s intentions to portray women and society, the contemporary audience were not approving of her writing or Jane’s character. They regarded it as too far removed from the reality of society (369-370). The audience especially found Jane’s anger outrageous – that Jane as a 10-year-old is so self-assertive and speaks up to Mrs Reed, which no Victorian child was ever supposed to be capable of (343). Gilbert and Gubar explain the anger and how it might reflect the feelings of Brontë herself:

A sensitive, outcast orphan girl; two inexplicably hostile brothers - one tyrannical, the other quietly revolutionary; a sinister and manipulative 'stepmother'; and a Byronic ironist whose comments on the action often appear to reflect not just his own Romantic disaffection but also the narrator's - and the author's - secret, ungovernable rage, a rage which asserts itself the minute the novelist closes her eyes and feels again the 'heavy weight' of her gender laid across her (315).

It was not just Jane's anger that the audience disliked. Mr Rochester's relationship with Jane "struck many Victorian readers as totally improper, coming from a dissipated older man to a virginal young governess – emphasizes at least superficially, not his superiority to Jane but his sense of equality with her" (352). They do include that "both Jane and Charlotte Brontë correctly recognize this point, which subverts those Victorian charges: 'The ease of his manner,' Jane comments, 'freed me from painful restraint; the friendly frankness ... with which he treated me, drew me to him. I felt at [these] times as if he were my relation rather than my master'" (352-353). Offred, however, causes frustration for the reader by being too passive. She is, indeed, an intelligent and capable woman, which makes it rather unlikely that she would not try actively to change her circumstances. However, we argue that it might be easier said than done, and that it is always easy to judge others. We wonder if and how others would react, cope and rebel in her situation.

Imprisonment and the urge to escape is present in both *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. The women in both novels are considering escaping from their current circumstances, to the extent of taking their own lives. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is not the one thinking about taking such drastic actions to escape, but it is the other women in the same situation that she tells and learns about. However, Offred is miserable about her life, and she tries to stay positive and deal with everything because she has faith that all of this

cannot last forever. As a child, Jane was ready to starve herself to escape her reality, but she appears to find her place and deals with every situation she encounters later in life. Both Jane and Offred feels imprisoned and they are both kept in a room in which they are uncomfortable: Jane in the red-room and Offred in 'her' bedroom.

Both novels portray a society in which arranged marriages are the norm. In both these societies, women are inferior and oppressed. Even the women who are in a position of power are only regarded as substitutes for men. In *Jane Eyre*, Mrs Reed, Miss Temple and Mrs Fairfax only holds their positions as a substitute for a man. They only function in a position of power if, truly, it is a man's position and they are simply representing him in his absence. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the aunts have a position of power over the handmaids, the marthas and the jezebels, and the wives are also superior to the handmaids and the marthas. In addition, in this case, the women are only in these positions to look after them so that the men can focus on other things. Thus, they are functioning merely as substitutes. They cannot be fully trusted and have enough authority to hold the position as the woman they are, which confirms Beauvoir's theory. This also means that, even though the women are in a position of power, their power is still restricted and there are limits to what they are allowed to do and be responsible for.

In relation to the main characters being inferior, both Jane and Offred are not part of the household with whom they live. They are treated differently – as inferiors – and they are not allowed to participate and act like equal members of the household. There are rooms, activities and behaviour not accepted and allowed for them. There are specific rules and expectations established for them. However, both women eventually undermine these rules and expectations in opposition to the man of the house. Jane is socialising with Mr Rochester in a, unacceptable way that is very much frowned upon in society, and Offred is doing the same with the Commander. Nevertheless, one is out in the open and turns into a proposal and

the other kept in secret and is never whole-heartedly serious from Offred's point of view – but it is rather a strategy for her to better her situation. In both novels, they discuss how their relationships with these men, would make them some sort of mistresses, which they both dislike. Jane considers this as adultery in the eyes of God, and therefore she will not accept the role of Mr Rochester's mistress, which is technically what she would be if became involved with him after she found out about his marriage to Bertha. Offred compares herself to the mistress of a Nazi officer from an old documentary that she had seen, and she became very aware of how becoming acquainted with a person would make anyone want to humanise them, and she was worried about if and how much she would do that with the Commander. She wanted to remember him as the monster co-responsible for her current circumstances.

In *Jane Eyre*, they judge and assume your gender and position in society based on your appearance and manner, whereas in *The Handmaid's Tale*, each position in society has its own colour to distinguish and characterise their place in society. Thus, this again results in appearance and manner being used when assigning roles. This confirms Butler's theory that we act and judge people's gender and position based on the cultural stereotypes and norms existing at the time.

One female character contrasts the personality and behaviour of both Jane and Offred. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha clearly represents Jane's opposite or inner feelings. Jane feels anger, sorrow, or jealousy when Bertha is acting up. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, two female characters form opposite counterpoints to Offred's character: Janine is a conformist who accepts and goes along with everything that the new ideology and society demand of her, and she tries her best to endear herself with all authority figures. Then there is Moira, who represents the other end of the continuum as she is a lesbian and an outspoken, independent and rebellious woman, who tries several clever acts to escape her circumstances. However, we do learn that even she finally is worn down and has given up on escaping and now lives her life as a

Jezebel. Offred is the middle ground between the two extremes, which is what makes her relatable as a conflicted, ordinary woman.

Another very interesting comparison between the two novels is the fact that Jane is valued for her brain and Offred is valued for her body. Jane works as a governess, which means she literally works as a teacher passing on her knowledge to children. Offred is not allowed to use her brain but instead is required to use her body to produce babies for a society with severe procreational struggles. Jane uses her mind to bond with Mr Rochester and this is what makes them equals and able to fall in love. However, Offred is restricted from most things regarding and needing her mind. The Commander does appear to appreciate Offred's brain when he is playing games with her, allows her to read and even allows her to write when she asks him about the meaning of the Latin sentence that she found scratched into the wall in her closet. This means that in the specific case of Offred, her mind is also helping her, but the way society sees her, she is only a uterus with viable ovaries. Both novels have included characters that contrast the main characters in terms of emotions, actions and appearance to emphasise the characteristics of Jane and Offred.

Jane's religious faith is shaped by three characters: Mr Brocklehurst, Helen and St. John. They all show Jane different perspectives and views on religion and faith. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Gilead is a dystopian society and there is a dominant hegemonic power. The hegemonic power being the word of God and the Bible. Religion plays a major part in both novels but in two different ways. Jane from a young age is a believer and is devoted to God. Growing up she was scolded with religion and told how she was a sinner for being an orphan, and how God had left her side and did not love her. But despite all of this, Jane does not relinquish her faith, and is able to shape her own religion and faith. Jane has the choice to decide for herself, which aspects of religion she wants to apply to her faith and which she wants to dismiss. This is a freedom Offred does not have. Offred is told, to either share the

same faith of Gilead or be killed. Both Offred and Jane lives in societies where religion plays a major part, but Jane's society does not consist of a hegemonic power and hang people to make an example of them. Offred's every little movement is controlled by the Gilead society, and she is not free to shape her own religion and develop from it. Jane has the freedom to shape her own religion and grow from it.

In terms of the female language in *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, both Jane and Offred is able to write themselves and write their own body. Both novels consists of first-person point-of-views and both have a female narrator. They are both able to reclaim their sexuality and body, but they do this in different ways. Jane is able to write herself and her own body within her society, something that Offred is not able to do within her society. Jane may be frowned upon and scolded by society, if her writing was discovered, but nevertheless, she is allowed to write down her story. Offred is not allowed to read or write. She is not allowed to hold paper or a pen, and if she is caught writing down her thoughts, as Jane did, she would either lose an eye or a finger as a punishment – or something worse. Jane's society may want to control Jane and her writing, but she does not allow herself to be controlled by it. Offred's society controls Offred and her every action, and she allows herself to be controlled by it out of fear. In terms of reclaiming one's sexuality, Jane is able to do so. She refuses Mr Rochester's proposal of becoming his mistress and, thus, sexual pleasure, which indicates that she is reclaiming her sexuality and body. Offred cannot do this. If she were to refuse the Commander at the monthly Ceremony, there would be consequences. Within Gilead, she is unable to regain her sexuality and body, but post-Gilead, Offred is able to do so. Gilead also restricts Offred's freedom of speech. Jane, from a very young age, was scolded if she did not speak like a little lady. Society may want Jane to behave and speak a certain way, but she does not allow society to scare her into doing so. Offred, on the other



hand, remains passive and allows society to decide how she acts and talks, purely out of fear of what might happen if she disobeys.

### Discussion

#### Personal Bias

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was born into “a world of propriety and ‘cultivated distinction’; an artificial politeness and taste that regulated every aspect of her family’s lives and set them apart from the great body of French society” (Bair 22). When attending private school at the Cours Adeline Désir, “she was not allowed to speak to the little girls who were enrolled with her unless this strict formal etiquette had first been followed” (21). Despite this, Beauvoir grew up stubborn while throwing “tantrums with total disregard for others” (38). Her father supervised her education growing up, and he compiled poems and stories that all stressed fervent Catholicism (59). She grew up a devoted Catholic, even considering devoting her life to a nunnery, as she grew up, she lost her faith and rejected Catholicism: “the young Simone who thought ‘like a man’ had no trouble rejecting her mother’s ‘womanly’ attitude. Like her father, she became an unbeliever” (62). So growing up, she was introduced to social injustice at a young age.

When writing *The Second Sex*, she was inspired to try out “a free-form way of writing about her memories, basing them around the theme of what it had meant to her to grow up as a girl” (Bakewell). The fundamental ideas of the book is a combination of “elements of her own experience with stories gathered from other women she knew, and with extensive studies in history, sociology, biology and psychology” (Bakewell). While writing her book, “French women had only just gained the right to vote (with Liberation in 1944), and continued to lack many other basic rights; a married woman could not open her own bank account until 1965” (Bakewell).

Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* was written during the first wave of feminism, though, it is important to point out that she is also thought to have laid the groundwork for a somewhat radical second wave of feminism (Kroløkke & Sørensen 6). First wave feminism “arose in the context of industrial society and liberal politics but is connected to both the liberal women’s movement and early socialist feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States and Europe” (1). As we already know, she was able to receive an education while growing up. Compared to many women at that time, she was well-educated, and she was a part of the minority of the first wave, which “consisted largely of white, middle-class, well-educated women” (4). This also suggests that she was able to write her book and publish it, despite French women continuing to lack basic rights, because of her being part of the white, middle-class, well-educated women minority. She was therefore privileged compared to other women in her contemporary society, a fact that she does not discuss in her book and ignores entirely. This privilege afforded her the opportunity to write and even to publish her writings, while other women were still silent for many reasons – one being illiteracy. The first wave was also a time, where

suffragists confronted stereotypes of women, and in particular, claims of proper female behavior and talk [...] when a woman spoke in public, she was, by definition, displaying masculine behaviors. She was even ignoring her biological weaknesses – a smaller brain and a more fragile physique – which was supposed to protect in order to ensure her reproductive abilities (5).

In her book, Beauvoir confronted society’s stereotypes about women, so did that make her a suffragette? In her case no. It is important to note that she wrote *The Second Sex* purely from a theoretical perspective. The fact that it went on to inspire a radical second wave of feminism delighted her, but it was never her intent. Her “notion of women’s radical otherness or, rather, the cognitive and social process of ‘othering’ women as the second sex in patriarchal

societies. We would say that she thereby produced an authoritative definition of patriarchy” (6). In *The Second Sex*, she challenges the stereotypes society has of women, when she introduced her idea that the reason why men and women were considered different, were not because of women’s smaller brains and more fragile physiques, but instead how they were socially raised. Beauvoir, herself, and women at her time were taught how to act and talk. This was something that the suffragettes confronted by protesting publicly, and how does this imply to her, even though she herself was not one? She went even further than that, when she made the statement that women’s role was socially constructed, meaning defying both biology and stereotypes. This also puts Beauvoir’s view on suffrage into yet another perspective, since she defies and questions biology, something that the suffragettes did not do.

Robin Lakoff (1942-) and her book “has long been heralded as the beginning of the linguistic subfield of language and gender studies, as well as ushering in the study of language and gender in related disciplines such as anthropology, communication studies, education, psychology and sociology” (Bucholtz 3). It was “one of the earliest and most forceful calls for linguists to use their professional knowledge and abilities to effect political change. Furthermore, it emerged in an academic climate in which political and intellectual endeavours remained largely separated and in which feminism in particular was regularly trivialized or ignored” (13). The book inspired research regarding gender and language, and in search of answers regarding question such as: “What linguistic practices and ideologies are associated with women’s speech? How are gender ideologies made manifest in the ways women are spoken of?” (3). The book was first published in 1975, and because feminism and the role of women had dramatically changed since then, the book was revised and expanded in 2004 (4). On the revised version Lakoff states: “Rereading the book, I am struck equally by how much has changed and how much remains essentially the same. While the knowledge

available to me (as a linguist and a feminist) back then was much sparser than what we have at our disposal today, work done then still has bearing on the ways we think now” (15). It is only right then, to ask why she found it relevant to write her book, when her knowledge as a linguist and feminist was limited. Surely, this would result in a weak book? She simply was inspired by her surroundings. Lakoff states that her book was written at a revolutionary moment in history – both in regards to linguistics but also women’s history: “there was the youth revolution against the Vietnam War and the pieties of the ‘Establishment’. There was women’s liberation, born out of the civil rights and anti-war movements, but by about 1968 taking off on its own” (15). All of which was a contribution to her book. It was published in a time, where women revolutionised feminist theory, exploded taboos and speaking about the unspeakable (17). She states that her “interest in the intersection of language and gender arose on two fronts: my political involvement in the women’s movement and my academic engagement in the transformational dispute” (18).

Lakoff and *Language and Woman’s Place* are considered to be a part of the second wave of feminism. One of the major events of the waves is the Miss America Pageants protests in 1968 and 1969 (Kroløkke & Sørensen 8). The Redstockings protested against the pageant, and how it showed “how women in pageant competitions were paraded like cattle, highlighting the underlying assumption that the way women look is more important than what they do, what they think, or even whatever they think at all” (8). Feminists of the second wave stated that “women were victims of a patriarchal, commercialized, oppressive beauty culture” (8). And how do beauty pageants have relevance to Lakoff’s theory? There is no source stating whether she was inspired especially by the two protests, but as we have established, she was aware of women’s liberation while writing her book. And there is cause to believe that she was aware of the protests, since a major focus in her book is on how society suppress girls from a young age into acting and talking a certain way. In her book, she

states that women are taught to act and speak like a lady from early childhood. In doing so, she also discusses the notion of an underlying assumption that women's outer appearance is more important than their inner character. Thus, just like the Redstockings, Lakoff questioned the social injustice within the patriarchy and was outspoken thereof. Women were not supposed to speak out of turn; instead, they should behave like a lady, or as the Redstockings would say – they should act like a pageant queen.

Hélène Cixous (1937-) grew up in the former French colony Algeria. She, in her own words, began her writing career late – at the age of 27 years (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 877). She grew tired of women being ashamed of writing, herself included, and penned her famous work “The Laugh of the Medusa” as a result. In her essay, she

introduces her controversial idea of an insurgent, feminine-defined writing practice, which would subvert the dominant patriarchal system of exchange. In this system, she says, women are systematically deprived of their own cultural, psychic and sexual goods, while other forms of oppression based on, say, ethnicity, class, or race, thrive on women's expropriation. The entrance of women's “chaosmos of the personal” into the public sphere thus extends towards a larger model of social change (Hilfrich).

Cixous states that her “circumstances of her genealogy, birth and life story, or, more precisely, the psychological and political conflicts inherent in these circumstances, were the seeds of her work: “My own writing was born in Algeria out of a lost country of the dead father and the foreign mother” (Hilfrich). She never felt Algeria was her country, nor did she feel French (Hilfrich). So it can be established that growing up, she felt no sense of nationality and in many aspects – no sense of identity. However, she did “realize that the logic of nationality was usually accompanied by such ‘unbearable behaviors’ as colonialism or antisemitism” (Hilfrich). During her secondary education in Paris, she “began to feel her

foreignness in terms of a solitude brought about by political and institutional rather than existential reasons. She became keenly aware of the mechanism of exclusion and interdiction based on cultural and sexual difference, and of their specific interactions with the logic of nationality” (Hilfrich). At this point in time, she herself have felt excluded in terms of identity, and her interest concerning cultural and sexual difference heightened. Here it can be questioned, how an interest in cultural and sexual difference turned into her ground-breaking work within feminist theory. This happened in early 1970s. In the early 1970s, she was introduced to Antoinette Fouque and her psycho-political perspective, and she found herself actively engaging in women’s movement and women’s history for the first time (Hilfrich). She founded in 1974 the Centre d’Etudes Féminines at the University of Paris VIII (Cixous, “Guardian of Language”). It was not an easy achievement, as it was opposed by the government. Of her teaching she states that she is “someone who taught, with passion by the way, a restricted literature, that is to say English and masculine literature [...] So I tried to get out of the enclosure of the unisex, unilanguage, etc., [...] Very quickly I began to work with a general thematic: *The poetics of sexual difference*, which had never happened before in France” (Cixous, “Guardian of Language”). She was tired of teaching a restricted language and wanted to start teaching a language without any bias. But alas, the government questioned why there should be Women’s Studies when there was no Men’s Studies (“Guardian of Language”). Why did this came to be? According to Cixous, “this speaks to the ideological backwardness of France. France is fifteenth in Europe with respect to all the problematics concerning women, and fifteenth also with respect to the development of the equality and the recognition of women in society, equally placed with Greece” (“Guardian of Language”). This situation may also have had a big influence on her, since she in her essay discusses how men are afraid of women and the female language, and what power it can hold.

Cixous and “The Laugh of the Medusa” is considered to be a part of the second wave of feminism. The second wave was radical, and “was theoretically based on a combination of neo-Marxism and psychoanalysis” (Kroløkke & Sørensen 9). The female scholars within this wave, “claimed that patriarchy is inherent to bourgeois society and that sexual difference is more fundamental than class and race differences” (9). Psychoanalysis played a part in shaping the feminist theory within the second wave, and “the Freudian theory of women’s ‘natural’ dependency and sexual frigidity was at first denounced, then later rearticulated as a mimicry of the unholy alliance between capitalism and patriarchy that designates sexism as the particular character of women’s oppression” (9). Thus, how does this fit onto Cixous and her writing? It is evident that her essay was heavily influenced by her surroundings, as she discusses how sexual difference is more fundamental than class and race, and how psychoanalysis plays a big part in her ideas. The female scholars within the second wave were also more acknowledged and better educated than the female scholars within the first wave, but the social inequality was not that different. Thus, if she believed that the sexual difference was more fundamental than class and race, does this mean that she found class and race to be insignificant and unimportant within female writing? Definitely not. It was just not her focus in “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Instead of complaining about women’s inferiority, she challenges female writers to write themselves and regain their body and sexuality while doing so. No matter what race or class you are – just write. She encourages women to write without any bias and to write about everything there is to write about the sexual difference – whether it is the difference between the two genders, or the aspects of femininity and masculinity. Her encouragement assumes, similar to Beauvoir, that every woman is privileged enough to write and be heard, which is not realistic.

Judith Butler (1956-) grew up in a Jewish household, and at the age of fourteen she was introduced to philosophical thinking by her local rabbi, and her philosophical training

had a deep root in German idealism and poststructuralism (“faculty”). Butler is best known for her book *Gender Trouble* published in 1990, “which caused an unexpected stir as it unearthed foundational assumptions both in philosophy and in feminist theory, namely the facticity of sex [...] Butler’s academic rigor is pursued through innovative and critical readings of wide range of texts in philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature, challenging the confines of disciplinary thinking” (“faculty”). Her work in *Gender Trouble* made for what is known as one of the fundamental works within queer theory, and introduced the term ‘gender performativity’.

In the preface of the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that “I did not know that the text would have as wide an audience as it has had, nor did I know that it would constitute a provocative ‘invention’ in feminist theory or be cited as one of the founding texts of queer theory” (Butler vii). Thus, like Beauvoir, Butler did expect her book to become a fundamental work within feminist theory. So why did she write it? She was embattled by certain aspects of feminism, and she was “most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory” (viii). Thus, Butler saw herself as a feminist within a flawed feminism. She proposes that “any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences” (viii). Butler drew her ideas from French feminism and its poststructuralism (ix). She did not want “to ‘apply’ poststructuralism to feminism, but to subject those theories to a specifically feminist reformulation” (ix). Butler herself

grew up understanding something of the violence of gender norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body, deprived of family and friends, living out his days in an “institute” in the Kansas prairies; gay cousins forced to leave their homes because of their sexuality, real and imagined; my



own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes (xx).

Therefore, it is important to point out that Butler was facing her own personal struggle at the time, and as she states, gender was somewhat taken for granted – even “violently policed” (xx). Then how did *Gender Trouble* come about? She penned it because she had

a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. What would the world have to be like for my uncle to live in the company of family, friends, or extended kinship of some other kind? How must we rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to a death within life (xxi).

Butler wanted to introduce the possibility that masculinity and femininity can be constructed instead of being a question of biology.

Butler and her *Gender Trouble* are considered a part of the third wave of feminism. The third wave emerged “from the mid-1990s onward, springing from the emergence of a new postcolonial and postsocialist world order, in the context of information society and neoliberal, global politics. Third-wave feminism manifests itself in ‘grrl’ rhetoric, which seeks to overcome the theoretical question of equity or difference” (Kroløkke & Sørensen 1-2). Different labels and perspectives of feminism was coined during the third wave, such as “lipstick feminism, girlie feminism, riot grrl feminism, cybergrrl feminism, transfeminism, or just grrl feminism” (15). Girls reclaimed “the term ‘girl’ in a bid to attract another generation, while engaging in a new, more self-assertive – even aggressive – but also more playful and less pompous kind of feminism” (15). Third wave feminism thus consisted of a somewhat grey area because of deconstruction and different terms being coined. One can question whether this inspired Butler and her term ‘gender performativity’? There is no source that elucidates whether this was the case, but it can have helped for Butler’s term to be accepted

quickly by feminists because of the ongoing grey area in terms of labels and identities. In addition, her theory did not seem too alien or unlikely as it was based on prior identity theories, which proposed that identity was fluid and influenced by society. Another major focus within the third wave is a need for women to develop theory within feminism and to deconstruct prior thinking (16). Female scholars of the wave would “honor the work of earlier feminists while criticizing earlier feminisms, and they strive to bridge contradictions that they experience in their own lives. They embrace ambiguity rather than certainty, engage in multiple positions, and practice a strategy of inclusion and exploration” (16). Women started labelling themselves within the branches of feminism, and like the scholars of the third wave, Butler develops new theory and deconstructs prior thinking within feminism. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler honours work of earlier feminists while criticizing past feminisms such as Beauvoir. Queer and transgender feminists within the third wave called “for recognition of queers: not only gays and lesbians but also drag queens, drag kings, transsexuals, masculine woman, and feminine men” (19). Furthermore, “transfeminists believe that individuals should be given the freedom to construct their own gender identities as they see fit and that neither the medical establishment nor cultural institutions at large should intervene. Finally, they resist essentialist notions of identity in particular” (20). And how does this apply to Butler? Similar to transfeminists, Butler was also of the opinion that people should be given the freedom to construct their gender identity.

All the feminist theories have limits. Beauvoir is the earliest one, and can therefore be assumed to be the one who had the least prior feminist influences, since not much had been written. Her main influence stems from psychology and the ideas of Freud, which today is considered outdated in terms of feminist theory. Even psychologists today have dismissed some of his claims, so in terms of Beauvoir and her ideas, you can say they are somewhat founded on outdated, questionable, and outright wrong fundamentals. But, we cannot dismiss

the fact that she was correct in claiming that women were inferior and the *other* compared to men, because that is historically true. Her main idea is that gender is socially constructed, but she dismisses gender in relation to important factors like genetics and biology. She introduces all her claims regarding social construction in her book, but she neglects to discuss how women then should view factors such as genetics and biology when they are told their gender is socially constructed. Beauvoir provides no answer to this, which can be construed as her dismissing it entirely. Another criticism of her ideas relates to her views on women within the patriarchy. Yes, she calls for a change for the woman's role and her inferiority, but she discusses how women and their social role can change within the current patriarchy. She somewhat accepts patriarchy as it is and tries to change the woman's role within it and does not see or believe in a change with patriarchy itself.

Lakoff stated that when she wrote her book on gender and language, her knowledge as a linguist and a feminist was limited. This is also evident in her book, since her ideas primarily stem from pure speculations regarding gender and language. There is no empirical evidence to back up her claims, which is the most significant criticism of her book. Therefore, her sociolinguistic ideas are speculative and without empirical research. When reading and using her theory, one must be cognizant of this fact.

In the case of Cixous, one cannot avoid questioning her own personal bias within her essay. She states that it is important for women to not allow the future to be determined by what happened in the past. Neither should they allow the past to be forgotten or dismissed. With that in mind, it can be said that she herself does not quite listen to her own advice. Her evaluation of men and the male language are black and white without any room for grey areas. Her ideas are nevertheless justified, which is why "The Laugh of the Medusa" is seen as fundamental work within feminist literary criticism. However, her essay casts a long shadow in the area where she herself allowed the future to be determined by the past. She

states how men have committed a great crime against women in the past; women were stripped of their own happiness and opinions. She encourages women to write about certain subjects -- subjects that men simply cannot describe the same way women can; these being maternity and childbirth. Yes, men are not able to physically and psychologically describe childbirth, but with her statement about the so-called 'women's subjects', does she not herself commit a crime against men, when she dismisses them as storytellers? By doing so, she disregards the storytelling, gender and feelings of the writer/man/father. Therefore, her bias is something that needs to be taken into an account.

Butler herself said that her book may be somewhat difficult for some to read and understand, which can lead to misunderstandings among its readers. Instead of being firm and addressing most of her points concisely, she engages the reader in long and complicated explanations, and she loses the reader along the way, especially if the reader is not familiar with subjects such as psychology, feminism etc. Her evidence supporting her ideas consists of confusing jargon and one loses the thread. The intended audience of her book is those who are educated, since it consists of academic and technical words. The language is complex and without any prior knowledge of gender theory and psychology, her audience cannot extend beyond the well-educated. In terms of Butler and her 'gender performativity', she forgets, whether intentionally or not, that biologically, only women can give birth. This is not something one can 'perform', and not something you can explain using gender performativity; something that the likes of Cixous puts as a major focus regarding her ideas about the female language, and how women can change the male discourse by writing their bodies with 'white ink' (breast milk). Thus, like Beauvoir, Butler dismisses an aspect or a contradiction that may bring her ideas into question. When reading Butler's theory, one must consider that, despite Butler's ground-breaking theory about 'gender performativity', there still is a biological difference between the sexes that one cannot deny.

### Reflection and Critical View on the Theories

We have chosen the above theorists and their theories because we wanted to analyse the feminist literary criticism within the two novels, but especially because we always wanted to analyse the novel from a psychological and social perspective. Both perspectives have generated ideas and have shaped our analysis. It is now important to take into account that all of our applied theories are penned years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë wrote her novel while inspired by her surroundings. She knew nothing of feminist literary criticism. When she wrote her novel, feminism was in the very early stages, therefore, she most likely did not intentionally write her novel from a feminist point of view, although her intention of portraying the conditions and realities of the women in her society suggests that her writing was ‘feminist’ (Gilbert & Gubar 336). When using newer theory on older texts, a few things need to be considered. Let us first examine the advantages of using newer theories on an old text like *Jane Eyre*. Concerning our thesis and research question, we can acquire a broader knowledge within the text and its themes, characters etc. Furthermore, we are able to analyse research questions regarding Brontë’s contemporary time, which may play a crucial role in the novel and its development. One might discover aspects of the text that were not essential to the story during Brontë’s time, but that we today will deem essential. The analysis we are able to do today is far more thorough than what could have been conducted during Brontë’s time. There are also disadvantages in terms of applying newer theories to *Jane Eyre*. When using any theories on a text, you study them, research the focus and then apply it to a text. Our theories all share a feminist perspective, so when analysing *Jane Eyre*, we do so from a feminist perspective. Thus, with that in mind, we risk over-analysing certain aspects of *Jane Eyre*, such as identifying certain aspects of the plot, characters, themes etc. to be feminist, which may not have been intended in the first place. This also relates to how we today can find certain aspects essential to the novel that they may not have regarded as

essential. We now have more knowledge, and because of this, we must be careful not to over-analyse old texts such as *Jane Eyre*. In regards to *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is written after our theories, except for Butler's theory that was written a few years later. This means that Atwood would have had access to these theories when writing her novel and therefore, it is more reasonable to consider it feminist. However, over-analysing and adding meanings that were never intended remain a risk during analysis.

In terms of the thesis, it is also imperative to determine what literary theory is and how it is used. Literary theory is a system of analysis that examines and studies different literary works. As mentioned, the theories that we have chosen to use in this thesis are all forms of literary criticism. Literary criticism is a way of looking at literature; examining literature from different perspectives and angles. Literary criticism views a literary work from different perspectives and can focus on different aspects. The word criticism does not imply a negative critique of something by pointing out its flaws; instead, it is intended as an approach wherein you pay close attention to detail. Not necessarily criticising and highlighting the flaws, although this might also occur, it points out details that are important and successful. Therefore, literary criticism is not just picking apart a literary work to diminish and criticise its flaws, value and meaning, but instead one might discover a plethora of details and aspects that were otherwise veiled, and it bestows the literary work with a more profound level of greatness. Regardless of the outcome, literary criticism analyses a literary work from different perspectives and angles, and it focuses on different aspects while paying close attention to detail. Whether meaning can be found in the text depends on the type of criticism. Some propose that meaning lies with the author and the author's intent, in the text itself, or with the reader, while others believe that there is no 'deeper' meaning to be found.

The early forms of the approach known as feminist criticism emerged in the 1960s, and by the close of the decade, it had flourished into a significant factor (Barry 32). In

feminist criticism, the focuses are gender and language. They often include historical and psychological approaches. Psychological criticism is the general term for applying principles and methods of psychology to literature. Psychology is about human motivation, and it seeks to understand the way we think, feel and react/act. Psychological criticism can take two different approaches: the author and the characters. The first addresses what the text reveals about the author. Examining the author's motivation can be problematic, because in many cases, there is no evidence to support the claims one would like to make regarding the author's intention, and it will also tend to have and require a more historical aspect and approach than literary theory normally demands. The second approach studies the actual characters in the literary work and analyses their motivation, thoughts, behaviour and the overall presentation. When using psychological criticism, one can use psychological theories and apply them directly, which requires pre-existing knowledge of these psychological theories and theorists. Another approach entails asking psychological questions such as: Why are these characters feeling this? Why did the characters react in this way? What caused the characters to do this? How have the characters' previous experiences in life influenced their current self and actions? Asking all these questions is considered a part of the psychological approach.

In order to understand any genres, it is essentially indispensable to catch up on literary criticism because it is considered as a first step toward developing an understanding of some rather difficult and at times provocative concepts, principles, and methodologies for textual analysis. Of all the critical approaches to literature, the psychological has been one of the most controversial for many readers. Yet, for all the difficulties involved in its proper application to interpretive analysis, the psychological approach can be fascinating and rewarding (Rezaei & Seyyedrezaei).

This quote explains that psychological criticism is considered the most controversial approach. Regardless, the authors suggest that the approach can be both fascinating and rewarding to use. “Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders ‘by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind’ (as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* puts it)” (Barry 92). It is based on the analysis of literature from a psychological perspective. Psychoanalytic theory is based on Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and it applies theories and concepts from psychology to literary works. Briefly explained, Freud’s psychoanalysis analyses mental issues, and it proposes that psychological problems originate from the unconscious part of the individual. Freudian and Lacanian critics “give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind” (100). While both types of critics “pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings” (110), they differ in the sense that Freudian critics excavate for the motives and feelings of the author or characters, and Lacanian critics “search out those of the text itself, uncovering contradictory undercurrents of meaning, which lie like subconscious beneath the ‘conscious’ of the text” (110). They refer to this as another way of defining ‘deconstruction’. As mentioned, psychoanalysis played a part in shaping the feminist theory within the second wave of feminism.

This thesis focuses on literary criticism in the forms of literary theory and feminist criticism, both of which are heavily influenced by psychological criticism, and more specifically, psychoanalytic criticism. Lakoff’s theories belong to linguistics in literary theory and she focuses on language and gender. Her field of study, linguistics, is a form of literary criticism that pays close attention to the use of language. Adding to this perspective of literary criticism, we have chosen three theorists in the field of feminist criticism. As



mentioned, Beauvoir has significantly influenced feminist theory and feminist existentialism focusing on gender and the relation between and position of the two sexes compared to each other. Cixous is one of the main theorists behind the ‘French’ feminism that emanated from literary feminist criticism and its specific focus on language. Finally yet importantly, Butler also discourses feminist criticism, and she has particularly developed, influenced and impacted gender theory and queer theory. Gilbert and Gubar, who feature in the analysis of *Jane Eyre*, are also feminist critics. We have used feminist theory, which aims to address women and society in reality, and feminist criticism, which transfers these theories onto literature. In addition, we have used Lakoff’s linguistic criticism.

But why have we selected these theories? To ensure the best possible output of our analysis, we included different perspectives of literary criticism to cover the aspects that we had decided to focus on. To gain the broadest and most inclusive outcome, we included two theories intended for literature and criticism thereof, as well as theories that went beyond the meaning of the text itself, and we more closely examined the author and the characters on a psychological level, which called for the theories of psychological criticism.

How does our analysis benefit from including theories from psychological criticism? To fully grasp the nature of a piece of literature, you must consider if and how the ideas connect to your own experience – for that is how the meaning of a literary text is derived. This is a process that Rogers calls intersubjective verification (Rezaei & Seyyedrezaei). Rezaei and Seyyedrezaei, both Iranian professors working in the Department of English Language at universities in Iran, argue that including the psychological approach in literary theory furthers the understanding of the literary work:

Having surveyed the psychological theories and literary criticism, we come to the point that these are interwoven and abundantly clear. Psychological theories said in this paper by the eminent psychologists are very powerful for

understanding the literary texts. They also enable us to have a meaningful comprehension of human being's development and the world. The better that people come through the literary texts, the better they will tend to deal with what psychological theories are reflected in a genre of literature (Rezaei & Seyyedrezaei).

In this quote, they confirm that psychological theory and literary criticism are undeniably connected and therefore, it makes sense to address them together to gain the broadest and most accurate result of the analysis.

By revisiting the role and aims of feminist critics, we can determine how we have used feminine criticism, what we have accomplished and why, and what this has added to our analysis. In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Barry lists what feminist critics do:

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.
2. Revalue women's experience.
3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.
4. Challenge representations of women as 'Other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature'.
5. Examine power relations which obtain in the texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and 'natural'.
7. Raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.

8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *écriture féminine*, and whether this is also available to men.
9. 'Re-read' psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.
10. Question the popular notion of death of the author, asking whether there are only 'subject positions ... constructed in discourse', or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g. of a black and lesbian writer is central).
11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly 'neutral' or 'mainstream' literary interpretations. (Barry 128-129)

Examination of this list clearly indicates that we have definitely addressed the numbers 3, 4, 5, and 8. Number 3 is the analysis of the representations of the women in both novels. Number 4 is the analysis of the societies in the books and how women's positions are lower than men solely based on their gender. This number is lined to number 5, which is the analysis of the power relations in the novels. Again, here we analysed the societies and the relations between the genders within them. Number 8 is our analysis of the language in the novel, in which we analysed according to Cixious' theory but furthermore included Lakoff's linguistic analysis. We did briefly engage with number 7 when including Beauvoir and Butler's theories on sex and gender. However, due to the restricted number of pages and time, we limited this aspect, which certainly warrants further study. "The distinction, so crucial to feminism, between sex and gender, the former being a matter of biology, the latter a construct, something learned or acquired, rather than 'natural'" (125).

Because feminist criticism uses and is influenced significantly by psychological theories, we would not have been able to analyse the novels and ask the relevant questions without it. It enabled us to analyse the representation of women by examining their appearance, actions, feelings and thoughts. Additionally, we could consider the author and

their personal influence on the novel's themes. On the other hand, inherent in this method is the risk of over-analysing; crossing the line between thorough, reasoned interpretation and fictitious imaginings that can never be confirmed nor denied. While we can assume the intent of the author, we cannot confirm it – only argue for it – and they can never disclaim our assumptions. Nevertheless, that is fundamentally what analysis is: well-argued interpretations of a text. We can assume, assign, and add feelings, thoughts and meanings that we can never confirm were intended by the author; but we can carefully interpret the sign in the text and what is written between the lines based on our knowledge and personal bias. That is exactly what analysis is all about and also why interpretations can vary from reader to reader.

### Conclusion

In summary, *Jane Eyre* and *The Handmaid's Tale* offer evidence of feminist criticism regarding religion, society and social roles. In *Jane Eyre*, it is through the strong-willed and independent main character, Jane, that Brontë shocked the contemporary audience, since according to them, her writing did not reflect reality. However, Brontë's work would later be regarded as one of the key works within feminist and social criticism. One-hundred thirty-eight years later, the dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* was written. Despite being set in what Atwood describes as a 'literal-minded theocratic dictatorship', it does not lose its credibility. The main character, Offred, lives in a society that does not allow her to be strong-willed and independent – as is the case with Jane – but that does not stop her from developing rebellious thoughts.

Through our historical overview of feminism and examination of the prominent feminist theories, we have been able to analyse how the two novels portray women and equality within their respective societies. Both novels portray a society in which women are suppressed and considered the inferior sex, which supports Beauvoir's theory regarding the relations between the sexes. There is an inequality presented in the novels to the extent that

women contemplate – and some succeed in – taking their own lives to escape the reality of their present circumstances. They feel imprisoned and desire to flee in any way possible. Even the few women that hold a position of power in both novels function as substitutes for men, as the women in the societies are unable to hold that much power without a man who is ‘behind the scenes’ supporting and strengthening her claim to power. Both novels have characters contrasting Jane and Offred in terms of emotions, actions, and appearance to emphasise their characteristics. They both keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves and rebel within their minds. However, Jane acts on her thoughts and feelings, but Offred does not without being asked or ordered to. They are also both intended to represent the ordinary woman, but they are criticised – Jane for her anger and Offred for being too passive. Both women are distanced and excluded from the households within which they live. They are not allowed to participate as equal members of these households as they hold inferior positions there. Nevertheless, they both eventually have private meetings with their superior; Jane with her master, Mr Rochester, and Offred with her Commander, Fred. We find that one of the most interesting comparisons of the two novels is that both women are suppressed and exploited by society, but in two very different ways; Jane is used for her brain, whereas Offred is used for her body.

In both societies, religion plays a dominant part, but in two dissimilar ways. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is able to choose her own religious path and the extent to which it will influence her choices in life, whereas in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is not allowed freedom within her religion and choices in life. Her society is controlled by a hegemonic power –the word of God. There is only one acknowledged religion, which she is forced into following through fear; if she does not convert to the one acknowledged religion, she will either be punished or killed. However, Jane and Offred, in accordance with Cixous’ guidelines, are able to break free from their suppressive societies and reclaim their bodies and identities. Jane is able to

write her own story. As she grows up, she makes choices and through them, she reclaims her sexuality, which is something Offred is initially not able to do. Offred's body and sexuality are stripped away by her society, and she is unable to reclaim them. Only when she escapes Gilead is she able to reclaim both. Both Jane and Offred find themselves being restricted by society regarding their language, which aligns with Lakoff's theories, but it is at different times in their lives. While growing up, Jane is scolded every time she does not behave like the 'little lady' society wants her to be, and she comes to reject this stereotype and grows into an independent woman. Offred, on the other hand, grew up with freedom of speech, even attending feminist protests as a young girl, but finds herself being stripped of her freedom of speech in adulthood. Both novels portray a society in which they judge and assume your gender and position based on your appearance, manner and actions, which corresponds with Butler's theory. These assumptions are based on the cultural stereotypes and prejudices that exist in the society, and they judge you if you fail to act according to your gender and the role that is expected and required from you. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, everyone must wear specific clothing of a specified colour – a uniform of sorts – to represent their role in society.

In conclusion of the reflections we offer regarding the theory, we can reiterate that we wanted to focus on feminist theory and feminist literary criticism. In order to examine the strengths and weaknesses of each selected theory, we examined the theorist's background and contemporary world. We discovered that most of the theorists were influenced by the social changes occurring within their societies. It also became evident that all four theorists were privileged in terms of education and the opportunity to write. Most of the theory that we have included in this thesis is feminist theory and literary feminist criticism, and we propose that these are closely connected. By using theory – both literary and psychology – we were able to analyse the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the women portrayed in the novels, and we were able to consider the authors' intentions. However, this process raises the risk of over-

analysing and adding or assigning meanings that were never intended to be there. This risk is also inherent when applying newer theories to older literary works, as these modern theories did not even exist when the authors were penning their novels. Many of the aspects we have analysed can never be confirmed or denied, which opens wide the opportunity for thoughtful argumentation, which is the fundamental of analysis.

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