

A refutation of gilbert and gubars anti- christian perspective of jane eyre

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* is the seminal analysis of *Jane Eyre*, particularly with regards to feminism. The two assert that somehow Jane intentionally subverts not only social norms, but fundamental tenets of Christian morality, as though Christianity were by nature at odds with feminism, or even women themselves. This opinion is far from a recent development, seeing as Gilbert and Gubar cite several contemporary critics of Brontë, which call the novel anti-Christian.

In truth, Jane is a highly virtuous and principled character. These are the qualities which in actuality make her a feminist role model, rather than mere rebellion against the status quo. Jane is morally and ethically superior to all but St. John, who she more than holds her own against. Jane's Christianity is the foundation of her character, and Gilbert and Gubar's analysis rests on uneven ground because of it.

Since its publication in the mid-nineteenth century, *Jane Eyre* has been the subject of much controversy so far as Christian ethics are concerned. Jane herself was described by contemporary critic Elizabeth Rigby as being undisciplined and unregenerate (or unsaved), with the novel itself being preeminently anti-Christian (Gilbert and Gubar 1). This supposedly heathenesque bent, according to Gilbert and Gubar, comes from a refusal to accept the forms and standards of society in short rebellious feminism (1). The two waste no time linking their own analyses with these. They readily agree, Perhaps they were correct in their response to the book (Gilbert and Gubar 1). Charlotte Brontë herself however, defended her writing passionately and authoritatively, admitting an intentional subversion of gender-norms, but

declaring in the second edition of *Jane Eyre* that Conventuality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns (Griesinger 5). In short, Bront was a Christian, through and through, as is her titular heroine Jane Eyre.

Virtue being essential to discussions of faithfulness, it seems appropriate to me that Jane Eyres Christianity ought to be validated by an analysis of her moral character; something which contemporary critics, as well as Gilbert and Gubar, not only failed to acknowledge, but adamantly rejected. Gilbert and Gubar in particular connect Jane on a symbolic level with Bertha Mason, a character motivated by unbridled passion, governed by madness and violence. Marriage is one example used by Gilbert and Gubar as an analogy for principle, which, according to them Jane rejects. They state that St. John wants to imprison the ‘ resolute wild thing that is [Janes] soul in the ultimate cell’, the ‘ iron shroud of principle’ (Gilbert and Gubar 11). Here they take things wildly out of context, forgetting the fact that Jane only finds herself in this predicament because she herself is a woman of principle in the first place. Jane leaves Rochester against her own will, on the grounds of principle and Christian decency. She refuses to play mistress to a married man (Bront Ch. 27). Janes virtue and faith both are evident throughout the entirety of the novel, as much as her feminist desires for equality. While Jane may temperately rebel against the status quo, she does not rebel against principle. It is not a prison to her.

Gilbert and Gubars presumption of an incompatibility between faith and feminism is based upon a flawed understanding of Christian ideals of submission. This is why I bring up their comparison of marriage with prison. To Gilbert and Gubar, as well as contemporaries of Brontë, marriage equals female subservience, and equality of the sexes is therefore incompatible with Christianity. The conclusion treats neither religion nor feminism with the proper modicum of respect and understanding. Gilbert and Gubar contend that Jane's whole life-pilgrimage has, of course, prepared her to be angry... at Rochester's and society's, [lovingly tyrannical] concept of marriage (Gilbert and Gubar 7). But who is to say that Rochester's and Christianity's are one in the same?

The most striking, audaciously eloquent line in all of Brontë's novel is when Jane challenges Rochester, just prior to his proposal, exclaiming it is my spirit that addresses your spirit as if we stood at God's feet, equal, as we are! (Brontë Ch. 23). To certain nineteenth century critics, this would have been seen as a grievous theological error, if not outright heresy. Gilbert and Gubar see it as a virtuous triumph of feminism, but still as anti-Christian. They rightly contend that Though in one sense Jane and Rochester begin their relationship as master and servant... in another they begin as spiritual equals (Gilbert and Gubar 5). What they fail to recognize, is that spiritual equality is the Christian state of men and women. Such an analysis is hardly at odds with Christian values, or suggests any sort of innate rebelliousness. Long before Charlotte Brontë's brand of feminism, Matthew Henry wrote in his Commentary on the Whole Bible That the woman was made of a rib out

of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him (Henry 7).

While one can readily see through an examination of scripture that equality of the sexes has never been anti-Christian, it stands to reason that Jane Eyres brand of emerging biblical feminism as Emily Griesinger calls it, contains a great deal of theological and cultural complexity (19). This is made evident by Janes relationship with her cousin St. John, his proposal, her rejection, and ultimately the supernatural events which occur bringing Jane and Rochester back together. When St. John makes his final proposal, Jane prays earnestly for guidance and direction. She pleads with the Almighty for some sort of intervention. She cries to heaven, Show me, show me the path! and indeed He does (Bront Ch. 36). Jane hears the voice of Rochester, and she speaks to him in kind, across miles and miles of space. Its a miraculous answer to prayer, and one for which Jane immediately gives worship and thanksgiving, contrary to assertions made by Bronts critics.

Gilbert and Gubar admit as that Christian morality is a focus of the novel, but contend that Janes inward sense of morality is superior to the external one, the Christian one. They see St. John as symbolic of this supposedly inferior morality, and Janes hearing Rochester as her inward moral compass. The conclusion of the novel refutes this however. Whereas Gilbert and Gubar see the climaxs miraculous intervention as being somehow tied to Janes subconscious, Bront makes it abundantly clear that Providence makes the final decision. Jerome Beaty points out, the notion that the voice is only the

product of her excitement is almost immediately denied (Beaty 4). Janes love for Rochester was never rebellious. It was always part of Gods plan, which Jane chooses to accept. Beaty uses these events in his own rejection of the anti-Christian labels applied to the novel. He points out that [Jane] does not depart from the religious, certainly not the Providentialist tenets, and the novel does not force her to choose between religion and life or love (Beaty 4). Frankly, critics are wrong to assert as much. Janes final decision is not one of rebellion, but of submission; submission to God. Hardly anti-Christian, rebellious sentiment, Jane readily submits to the will of God the moment she is certain of it. Jane ends her story, not independent, but wholly dependent on the hand of God. She learns the truth of the proverb; In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (Authorized King James Version, Prov. 3. 6).

In conclusion, Emily Griesinger asserts that Jane Eyres Christianity is far more reminiscent of evangelicalism, which has since taken much of Christianity by storm. She writes that Evangelical religion opposed formalism, a type of spirituality that favored outward forms, decent and orderly, over inward “ heart faith” where “ the Spirit” could not be easily contained and often spilled over (Griesinger 8). The fact that Jane Eyre is a woman directly led by the Holy Ghost and not by the church is likely what her critics found so offensive. Jane Eyres Christianity is not an anti-biblical one, but rather one ahead of its time. It is Janes ability to discern the voice of God for herself, suggests Griesinger, that makes her a Christian feminist icon. She needs no man, namely St. John, to explain the will of God for her

life. She prays, and she finds it. Maria LaMonaca writes that because of this, Jane demonstrates that women... must experience God directly (LaMonaca 8).

Near the novels end, Jane refers to Paul and Silas miraculous escape from prison as not unlike her own experience. In the story, Paul and Silas, in an evening of prayer and praise, are loosed from jail by a miraculous earthquake. Jane herself, through prayer, is loosed from the prison of her own indecision. Like with Paul and Silas, Janes escape came by divine intervention in the midst of principled submission, not human rebelliousness. In such, she is exemplary of Christian virtue. Jane Eyre is at once a God fearing woman of principle and a feminist icon. Gilbert and Gubar may get a great deal right in their analysis, but theyre wrong to connect feminism with Brontes critics. They unnecessarily place themselves at odds with an ideology which has done more for the cause of equality than any other, seeing as it was the Apostle Paul who proclaimed There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus (Authorized King James Version, Gal. 3. 23, emphasis mine).

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