

Providence: Interpreting Charlotte Brontë's Depiction of God in *Jane Eyre*

Opatrzność: interpretacja obrazu Boga w Dziwnych losach Jane Eyre Charlotte Brontë

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ABSTRACT

When *Jane Eyre* was first published in 1847, it was interpreted by many readers as an anti-Christian text. While this interpretation is less popular in today's scholarship it has not been entirely abandoned. Far from being actively opposed to Christianity, however, *Jane Eyre* is a fundamentally Christian work that explores the nature of God's love for human beings. Charlotte Brontë was a woman plagued all her life by fears of sinfulness and damnation, but she ultimately believed not in an exacting God of cruelty but in a loving God who wills the happiness of all people. Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* in order to persuade her readers, and to some degree herself, to adopt this view of God.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë; *Jane Eyre*; religion; God; gothic novel

ABSTRAKT

Kiedy powieść *Dziwne losy Jane Eyre* została opublikowana po raz pierwszy w 1847 roku, wielu czytelników odczytywało ją jako utwór antychrześcijański. Choć we współczesnych badaniach literackich interpretacja ta jest znacznie mniej rozpowszechniona, nie została całkowicie zarzucona. W rzeczywistości jednak *Jane Eyre* nie jest dziełem wymierzonym przeciw chrześcijaństwu, lecz utworem głęboko zakorzenionym w chrześcijańskiej wizji świata, podejmującym refleksję nad naturą Bożej miłości do człowieka. Charlotte Brontë przez całe życie zmagала się z lękiem przed grzesznością i potępieniem, ostatecznie jednak wierzyła nie w surowego i okrutnego Boga, lecz w Boga kochającego, który pragnie szczęścia wszystkich ludzi. Pisząc *Jane Eyre*, Brontë starała się przekonać swoich czytelników – a do pewnego stopnia także samą siebie – do przyjęcia takiego właśnie obrazu Boga.

Słowa kluczowe: Charlotte Brontë; *Jane Eyre*; religia; Bóg; powieść gotycka

Since its original publication in 1847, Charlotte Brontë's master work, *Jane Eyre*, has been the subject of much scholarship. One popular reading of the novel, which under close scrutiny proves to be immensely problematic, is that *Jane Eyre* is an anti-Christian manifesto. While Brontë certainly criticized certain types of Christians throughout her novel, *Jane Eyre*, far from being a wholesale rejection of Christianity, is actually a fundamentally Christian text. In writing *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë depicted a very specific view of God as a loving deity who actively desires the happiness of humans. This interpretation of the text is complicated, though not invalidated, by primary sources that indicate Brontë was obsessed with sin and viewed God as cold and merciless. The solution to the seeming contradiction is to recognize that Brontë feared that God was vengeful but did not actually believe Him to be so. If this is true, it implies that *Jane Eyre* was an immensely personal work for Brontë. Additionally, while the biographical details do support the reading of *Jane Eyre* as a Christian depiction of a loving God, it is even more important to consider the textual evidence, which overwhelmingly supports this thesis.

In order to explore the role that God plays in *Jane Eyre*, it is important to first address the theory that the novel was intended by Brontë to be a rejection of Christianity. Andrew Weiler puts it succinctly when he says that "[i]t has been argued that *Jane Eyre* is naught but rebellion and rage."¹ The strongest textual evidence for an anti-Christian reading of *Jane Eyre* can be found in the character of Mr. Brocklehurst and in Lowood, the all-girls school that he runs. When Jane first meets Mr. Brocklehurst, she describes him as "a black pillar... the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape standing erect on the rug; the grim face at the top was like a carved mask."² Brontë clearly depicts Brocklehurst as a grim figure, a specter of judgement and unhappiness. He does nothing to endear himself to the reader when he tells Jane that there is "no sight so sad as that of a naughty child... especially a naughty little girl" and explains that he "buried a little child of five years old only a day or two since – a good little child, whose soul is now in heaven. It is to be feared the same could not be said of you, were you to be called hence."³ Brocklehurst is clearly not interested at all in helping Jane find happiness or fulfillment in this life or in the next. He is more interested in using the fear of damnation as a means of control. This is a scathing depiction of religious hypocrisy amongst the clergy, and as Marianne Thormahlen notes, "[a]ny criticism against the conduct of clergymen... expressed in the Brontë novels has always been interpreted as a more or less covert

¹ Andrew J. Weiler, "An Orphan's Dissent: Charlotte Brontë's Spiritual Vision in *Jane Eyre*," *Brontë Studies* 47, no. 4 (2022): 224, EBSCOhost.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847. Penguin Classics, 2006), 38.

³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 39–40.

repudiation of the Christian faith.”⁴ Thormahlen’s claim that this is “always” the case is inaccurate, but it is certainly sometimes the case. For instance, Elizabeth Rigby, a contemporary of Brontë, complained in a review that “*Jane Eyre* is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition.”⁵ The idea is that if Brontë believes the leaders of the church are corrupt, she must also believe that the church they lead is corrupt.

Young Jane’s reaction to Mr. Brocklehurst provides some justification for this theory. A fierce and independent youngster, she rebels against Brocklehurst’s attempts to subjugate her, and his warnings about sin and hell prove to be counterproductive. Jane lashes out in anger against Mrs. Reed, her abusive aunt who has charge of her, declaring that she loves neither her nor her children. This is a very anti-Christian sentiment, of course, and when Jane explains that “[i]t was the hardest battle I had fought, and the first victory I had gained... I smiled to myself and felt elate,”⁶ her rejection of Christian teaching is framed as a triumph rather than a moral failure. In fact, Jane consciously rejects Christianity as a whole shortly after arriving at Lowood. A girl around her age named Helen Burns encourages her to accept the teachings of Jesus and to love her enemies, and Jane responds by saying, “[t]hen I should love Mrs. Reed, which I cannot do: I should bless her son John, which is impossible.”⁷ Jane is not interested in a religion which would fetter her and force her to forgive her aunt, and when the reader considers the many abuses she suffered at the hands of the Reeds, including but not limited to being physically battered and called “less than a servant,”⁸ her decision seems justified. In young Jane’s mind, Christianity is nothing more than a tool for control and a justification for abuse, and Charlotte Brontë certainly saw this side of Christianity in her own life. John Maynard argues that Brontë was disturbed by her father’s “use of hell as a threat to sinners” and the fact that he sent his four eldest daughters “to the school for clergymen’s daughters at Cowan Bridge” where “the two eldest died from fever and, Charlotte clearly felt, mismanagement and Christian sadism.”⁹ It is possible that Brontë chose to depict in Jane the same frustrations that she herself had with Christianity, and perhaps critics like Rigby were right to regard *Jane Eyre* as an anti-Christian text.

⁴ Marianne Thormählen, “Clergymen in the Brontë Novels,” in *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

⁵ Quoted in John Peters, “‘We Stood at God’s Feet, Equal’: Equality, Subversion, and Religion in *Jane Eyre*,” *Brontë Studies* 29, no. 1 (2013): 53, EBSCOhost.

⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 45.

⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 69.

⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 13, 15.

⁹ John Maynard, “The Brontës and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 196.

Jane's initial rejection of Christianity cannot be interpreted in a vacuum, however, and careful readers will recognize that her rebellion against religion is short-lived. Mr. Brocklehurst is removed from his station at Lowood, and Jane benefits from Miss Temple's tutelage, which allows her to grow into a Christian adult. This change of heart is exemplified by her attempt to reconcile with Mrs. Reeds. As a child, it was her hatred of the Reeds that led her to reject Christianity, but when Mrs. Reeds is on her death bed, Jane goes to be with her. Mrs. Reeds hates Jane as much as ever, but Jane finds that she no longer hates the old woman. Instead of repaying her aunt's hatred with more hatred as she would have when she was a child, Jane says to her, "Love me, then, or hate me, as you will... you have my full forgiveness: ask now for God's, and be at peace."¹⁰ Jane embraces Christianity, but of course the protagonist of a story does not always adhere perfectly to the views promoted by the author. Perhaps by forgiving a woman undeserving of forgiveness, Jane was simply bowing under the pressure of an oppressive religion exemplified by the character of Mr. Brocklehurst. Such a view can be disproven by looking at Brontë's direct address in the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to those who feel that Mr. Brocklehurst is meant to be interpreted as a proof that Christianity is evil:

I would suggest to such doubters certain obvious distinctions; I would remind them of certain simple truths. Conventionality 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.¹¹

What Brontë means by this is that Mr. Brocklehurst represents a specific kind of hypocritical Christian, not Christianity in its entirety. She agrees that Christianity can be used to justify certain oppressive practices, but in her view, the individual should be condemned, not the religion. Jane's decision to forgive Mrs. Reed is an explicit acceptance of Christianity in its purest form rather than of Christianity as it is conceived of by Mr. Brocklehurst.

Jane's time at Lowood is a more direct rebuttal of Mr. Brocklehurst's style of Christianity. Mr. Brocklehurst's vision of the school is very austere and devoid of opportunity for sin. He describes his plan in detail while reprimanding Miss Temple, the woman in charge of the school, for serving the girls bread and cheese for lunch in place of horribly burned porridge:

¹⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 276.

¹¹ Quoted in Emily Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion: Faith, Feminism, and *Jane Eyre*," *Christianity & Literature* 58, no. 1 (2008): 33, EBSCOhost.

[My] plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or the over dressing of a dish, the incident ought not be neutralized by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under the temporary privation.¹²

This paragraph is particularly important to consider because there is biographical evidence suggesting that Brontë actually favors this strict asceticism. Mr. Brocklehurst is clearly depicted as cruel and hypocritical, and while that indicates that the reader is supposed to be suspicious of his personal views, it does not guarantee that Brontë intended for them to be rejected wholesale. Brontë was obsessed with sin, and she once wrote to a friend, stating that she hoped to “become better... than my evil wandering thoughts, my corrupt heart, cold to the spirit, and warm to the flesh will now permit me to be.”¹³ No existing evidence suggests that Brontë was a particularly sinful person, and this quote indicates a severe level of self-loathing. It is thus reasonable to assume that she saw God as a cold figure, quick to punish the smallest of sins and hesitant to offer any mercy. Emily Griesinger supports this theory, stating that “the evidence suggests that Brontë spent an unhealthy amount of time obsessing over her sins and hardly any time enjoying God’s forgiveness, love, and grace.”¹⁴ Based on these details, it seems Brontë would approve of the rejection of earthly pleasures as described by Brocklehurst. After all, the more austere a person’s lifestyle, the less opportunity a “corrupt heart, cold to the spirit, and warm to the flesh” has to commit sins.¹⁵ But Brontë does not approve of Mr. Brocklehurst’s form of asceticism. Instead, the meal of porridge is described as “abominable” and “disgusting,”¹⁶ language that makes clear the food is more harmful than beneficial. What is more, the meal of bread and cheese that replaces the porridge causes a “high delight and refreshment of the whole school.”¹⁷ The meal is not a fleeting and corrupt pleasure but rather a generous gift that restores the souls of the tired and hungry girls of Lowood. Not only does Brontë not condemn earthly pleasures, but she also shows that they can sometimes be good for the soul.

¹² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 74–75.

¹³ Quoted in Griesinger, *Charlotte Brontë’s Religion*, 33.

¹⁴ Griesinger, *Charlotte Brontë’s Religion*, 42.

¹⁵ Griesinger, *Charlotte Brontë’s Religion*, 42.

¹⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 54–55.

¹⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 57.

A certain dichotomy is developing between the Charlotte Brontë who writes to her friend about her intense fears of the sins of the flesh and the Charlotte Brontë who celebrates simple pleasures as a spiritual good. There is no reason to believe that they were literally different people, that the authorship of either the letters or *Jane Eyre* was misattributed, so there must be some way to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory views of sin and pleasure held by Brontë. It seems possible that Brontë suffered from scrupulosity, which can be defined as follows:

Scrupulosity is a psychological disorder primarily characterized by pathological guilt or obsession associated with moral or religious issues that is often accompanied by compulsive moral or religious observance and is highly distressing and maladaptive.¹⁸

Scrupulosity, a mental illness, is not the same thing as a religious conviction. Brontë could have suffered from a pathological fear that God hated her for her sins while also believing rationally that God is merciful and loving. This theory gains even more credence when one considers how difficult it is for someone with a mental illness to distinguish between fears spawned by a psychological condition and beliefs based on a genuine understanding of reality. She could have oscillated between a crippling fear of damnation and faith in God's mercy without realizing why. While it can be difficult and at times misleading to try and diagnose historical figures with mental illnesses, and this theory of a literary critic should not be conflated with the professional opinion of a trained psychologist, it seems likely that Brontë's fears and beliefs were meaningfully distinct.

Brontë does not merely ignore her overactive fear of sin in writing *Jane Eyre*, but actively rejects it. This can be seen clearly in the way that she depicts the character of St. John Rivers. In her essay on *Jane Eyre*, Kristi Sexton describes the young man as "cold" and "aloof," and she explains that "Jane associates his religion with the same dogma as Mr. Brocklehurst."¹⁹ Like Brocklehurst, St. John has a harsh and constricting religion which he uses to try and control Jane. In an attempt to convince her to become his missionary wife, he all but tells her that she will go to hell if she refuses him:

'[D]o not forget that if you reject it, it is not me you deny, but God. Through my means, He opens to you a noble career; as my wife only can you enter upon it. Refuse to be my wife, and you limit yourself for ever to a track of selfish ease and barren obscurity. Tremble

¹⁸ Chris H. Miller and Dawson W. Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 22, no. 6 (2008): 1042, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janx-dis.2007.11.004>.

¹⁹ Kristi Sexton, "Jane Eyre: Jane's Spiritual Coming of Age," *Brontë Studies* 39, no. 3 (2014): 184, EBSCOhost.

lest in that case you should be numbered with those who have denied the faith, and are worse than infidels!’²⁰

St. John truly believes that this is the best if not the only way for Jane to get to heaven, and that if she rejects his offer to be his wife, she will be gravely sinning. In the face of this threat of hell, the scrupulous person would crumble under the weight of fear, and while Jane is indeed tempted to accept him, she ultimately refuses to become his wife. Through the character of Jane, Charlotte Brontë consciously rejects the rigid and morally exacting view of religion held by St. John Rivers. Whether or not she understood why she was plagued by religious fears, Charlotte Brontë seems to recognize that they are disordered. *Jane Eyre* may have been more than simply another book for Brontë and could have been in part a therapeutic project for her.

Charlotte Brontë rejects the idea that God is a vicious taskmaster, but she does not go so far as to say that He has no plan for His children. In fact, she reveals that she believes firmly in Providence, “the idea that God has a purpose and plan, that God rewards obedience, if not in this life then in the next.”²¹ Throughout the text, both Jane and Rochester explicitly express their belief in Providence. When Jane discovers Bertha, Rochester’s mad wife, her belief is shaken, though not necessarily shattered. She explains:

Yesterday I trusted well in Providence, and believed that events were working together for your good and mine: it was a fine day, if you recollect – the calmness of the air and sky forbade apprehensions respecting your safety or comfort on your journey.²²

Later in the novel, however, even after all the tragedies both characters experience, Rochester speaks of a plan that God seems to have had for their lives:

Of late, Jane – only of late – I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere.²³

While both the characters struggle to believe that God has a plan, they ultimately come to match Brontë’s faith in divine Providence. Regardless of what the characters do or do not believe, clearly supernatural events throughout the course of the novel indicate God’s active participation in the happenings of the world. The clearest

²⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 471.

²¹ Griesinger, *Charlotte Brontë’s Religion*, 46.

²² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 323.

²³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 514–515.

example of this is the moment Rochester and Jane hear each other's voices, despite being nowhere near each other. Just as Jane is about to accept St. John's proposal against her better judgment, she hears "a known, loved, well-remembered voice... that of Edward Fairfax Rochester" cry out, "Jane! Jane! Jane!"²⁴ She goes out immediately and finds Rochester, and he tells her that the night she heard his voice, he had "supplicated God, that, if it seemed good to Him, I might soon be taken from this life, and admitted to that world to come, where there was still hope of rejoining Jane."²⁵ It is clear that it did not seem good to God to do this, because His plan was for Jane and Rochester to be rejoined in this world.

Brontë does not depict God's plan as an easy road towards happiness, and she shows that it can be difficult and even painful to follow. When Jane discovers that the man she loves is secretly married to a woman he has been hiding in his attic, she has no easy choices. Emily Griesinger explains that "it would have been impossible at the time of the novel for Rochester to divorce his mad wife under any circumstances... So for Jane (and Victorian readers) the only alternative is bigamy and / or adultery."²⁶ For Jane, who recognizes that the pleasure of sin "stings" and "tastes bitter,"²⁷ neither of these options is acceptable, but the alternative, leaving Rochester, is also undesirable. According to Sexton, "Jane knows her decision to leave is the morally right one; however, she has no desire to leave, and she is consumed with grief over hurting Rochester."²⁸ Caught between a rock and a hard place, Jane has to make a decision, and her choice is to leave Rochester. The decision is difficult, but she finds the strength to follow through with it only because she believes it is God's will. Jane recollects her immediate reaction after discovering the existence of Bertha, saying, "[o]ne idea only still throbbed life-like within me – a remembrance of God: it begot an unuttered prayer: these words went wandering up and down in my rayless mind... 'Be not far from me, for trouble is near: there is none to help.'"²⁹ While her faith in God and His will does not make her decision any less painful, it does give her the strength to do what she knows to be right.

Jane's flight from Thornfield seems to be the end of her life and the worst thing to have ever happened to her, and if the story ended here, it would not invalidate the claim that the God of *Jane Eyre* has a plan for humans, but it would certainly invalidate the claim that it is His plan for them to be happy. Gradually, though, it becomes clear that this tribulation was necessary for Jane as well as for Rochester to be truly happy together. For one thing, it removes both Jane and Rochester from

²⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 483.

²⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 515.

²⁶ Griesinger, *Charlotte Brontë's Religion*, 48.

²⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 160.

²⁸ Sexton, *Jane's Spiritual Coming of Age*, 183.

²⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 342.

great temptations to sin long enough for them to grow in virtue. For Jane, her temptation is to worship Rochester as a strange idol in place of God. During her engagement to Rochester, Jane notes:

My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: 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.³⁰

The language implies that in some manner she has forgotten about God, which is why it is so significant that when her marriage to Rochester becomes impossible, she states that she has the “remembrance” of God.³¹ Rochester’s temptation is to rely on Jane’s faith and purity rather than on God’s love and mercy, as evidenced by his claim that, as a result of his engagement to her, he is “healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter.”³² Once Jane leaves him, Rochester is forced to eventually turn to God and develop a personal relationship with Him. After Jane returns to Rochester, he prays directly to God, saying, “I humbly entreat my Redeemer to give me strength to lead henceforth a purer life than I have done hitherto!”³³ This conversion would have been impossible had Jane remained in his life. Brontë uses symbolism to further make clear this point. During Jane’s absence from Thornfield, a terrible fire destroys one of Rochester’s hands and one of his eyes. Andrew Weiler connects this directly to a passage from the Sermon on the Mount:³⁴

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.³⁵

Brontë shows how Rochester losing Jane is the spiritual equivalent of him losing his hand and eye, which while temporarily painful lead ultimately to his

³⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 316.

³¹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 342.

³² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 300.

³³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 516.

³⁴ Weiler, *An Orphan’s Dissent*, 225.

³⁵ Matthew 18:8–9 (NIV), in *The Bible*. New International Version (Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978).

betterment. If Jane is not in his life, he cannot substitute her holiness for an actual relationship with God.

While a reader might be tempted to think that Rochester and Jane could have overcome their personal temptations without needing to first part from each other or even that it is selfish of God to make them suffer simply so that they will love Him more, there are a great many other things that happen as a result of their separation that make the two much happier individuals and eventually a happier couple. Jane learns a great deal about herself as well as about God that brings her much joy. After leaving Rochester, she is left destitute and without family, so her only option is to throw herself upon the mercy of others. This eventually brings her to the doorstep of St. John Rivers. She is initially turned away by the housekeeper, but when St. John finds her, he welcomes her into the house that soon becomes her home. St. John has two sisters, Diana and Mary, whom Jane immediately recognizes as kindred spirits:

The more I knew of the inmates of Moor House, the better I liked them. In a few days I had so far recovered my health that I could sit up all day, and walk out sometimes. I could join with Diana and Mary in all their occupations; converse with them as much as they wished, and aid them when and where they would allow me. There was a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time – the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles.³⁶

The three women develop a deep friendship like nothing Jane has ever experienced, and it brings her great happiness. She never would have met these women had God allowed her marriage to Rochester to proceed unhindered. This could be interpreted as a mere happy coincidence rather than the result of divine Providence, but there is evidence to the contrary. During her time at Moor House, Jane learns that she is both a rich heiress and that she is related closely to the Rivers. She is pleased to learn of the fortune, but even more pleased to learn that her closest friends are in fact her family. Jane tells St. John that “[i]t may be of no moment to you; you have sisters and don’t care for a cousin; but I had nobody; and now three relations... are born into my world full-grown. I say again, I am glad!”³⁷ The likelihood that Jane would accidentally stumble upon her family while wondering aimlessly, and, furthermore, that they would welcome her despite her status as a stranger and not turn her away like the housekeeper tried to do are far too low to be the result of mere chance. Brontë is not so heavy-handed as to say directly that this is the result of Providence, but it seems clear that God allowed

³⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 402.

³⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 445.

Jane to be separated from Rochester and then led her to the doorstep of St. John so that she might know the joy of having blood relations.

Jane and Rochester's relationship is improved by the spiritual growth they both undergo while apart from each other. During their first engagement, both characters have unhealthy expectations that put a strain on their relationship. Rochester's image of what married life will be like is overly erotic, which does not sit well with Jane. In one passage, Rochester explains that he would "not exchange this one little English girl for the Grand Turk's whole seraglio – gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!"³⁸ Jane's response to this is not favorable:

The Eastern allusion bit me again. 'I'll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio,' I said; 'so don't consider me an equivalent for one. If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay, and lay out in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here.'³⁹

Rochester alienates Jane by viewing his relationship with her in terms of sinful lust rather than in mutual, self-giving love. For her part, Jane struggles to commit herself completely to her relationship with Rochester, always holding her heart just out of his reach for fear that their love will hurt her in some way. When he says to her that she is "[s]oon to be Jane Rochester," she startles, telling him that "It can never be, sir... Human beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world."⁴⁰ Her fears that she and Rochester will be unhappy together, which seem to stem at least in some degree from a distrust in God's Providence, are self-fulfilling. In order to be content with each other, both characters need to experience growth. The suffering that Rochester endures while apart from Jane sobers and humbles him, and when he speaks to her, his tenderness for her is no longer tainted by selfish desires. He says to her, "I did not like to put my hand into a hireling's fingers, but it is pleasant to feel it circled by Jane's little fingers... Jane's soft ministry will be a perpetual joy."⁴¹ This is much more pleasing to Jane than his comparison of her to a harem, and she gladly tells him that he suits her "[t]o the finest fibre of my nature."⁴² For Jane, she has come to realize that God wants her to be happy in this life, which allows her to write the beautiful words, "Reader, I married him."⁴³ There is no more indication of fear and of doubt. She has fully accepted Rochester because she has fully accepted God's Providence. Symbolically, Brontë shows that their relationship

³⁸ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 310.

³⁹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 310.

⁴⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 298.

⁴¹ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 513.

⁴² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 513.

⁴³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 517.

is experiencing rebirth by having Rochester declare that “[t]he third day from this must be our wedding-day.”⁴⁴ This is clearly a biblical allusion to the resurrection of Christ. On account of the separation that the two characters endured, they have both become healthier and therefore happier together, proving that God’s plan all along was for them to be as happy as they would allow themselves to be.

While there is some textual evidence that *Jane Eyre* is anti-Christian, such as Brontë’s clear disdain for Mr. Brocklehurst, careful reading reveals that she was rejecting religious hypocrisy rather than Christianity as a whole. This reading is supported by Jane’s eventual acceptance of Christianity, and it is held by a variety of contemporary scholars, including Emily Greisinger and Andrew Weiler.⁴⁵ A more serious source of tension in attempting to understand *Jane Eyre* lies in the dichotomy between Brontë’s obsession with sin and the depiction in her novel of a loving and merciful God. It is difficult to understand why Brontë would have written an entire novel promoting the idea that God actively works to bring humans towards happiness if she was also deathly afraid that any little mistake would cause God to send her to eternal damnation. While it is impossible to know for certain what was in her heart and mind, one possible solution to this problem is that she suffered from scrupulosity, a mental illness that burdens a person with irrational fears of sin that may not align with that person’s actual beliefs about God. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë rebels against these scrupulous tendencies. By showing the way that God uses suffering to bring Jane and Rochester greater happiness, Brontë proves that she believes more deeply in a God of love than of vengeance. Brontë has a nuanced view of Christianity and recognizes the existence of hypocrisy and abuse, but anyone who regards *Jane Eyre* as a rejection of Christianity is missing the point. The novel is a deeply personal struggle between two different views of Christianity and of God. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë decides that God is not “a black pillar”⁴⁶ like Mr. Brocklehurst but more like the kindhearted Miss Temple who gave Jane bread and cheese in place of burned porridge.

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⁴⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 514.

⁴⁵ See Greisinger, *Charlotte Brontë’s Religion*, 33–34 and Weiler, *An Orphan’s Dissent*, 232.

⁴⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 38.

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