

5-2018

# “A New Servitude”: Exploring Dominance and Submission in Jane Eyre through BDSM

Josephine Beyke  
josephinebeyke@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs\\_rp](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp)

---

## Recommended Citation

Beyke, Josephine. "A New Servitude": Exploring Dominance and Submission in Jane Eyre through BDSM." (May 2018).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Papers by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

“A NEW SERVITUDE”: EXPLORING DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION IN *JANE EYRE*  
THROUGH BDSM

by

Josephine G. Beyke

B.A., Kentucky Wesleyan College, 2013

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts

Department of English  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 2018

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

“A NEW SERVITUDE”: EXPLORING DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION IN *JANE EYRE*  
THROUGH BDSM

By  
Josephine G. Beyke

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the field of English Literature

Approved by:  
George Boulukos, Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
April 11, 2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
“A NEW SERVITUDE”.....	1
WORKS CITED .....	17
VITA .....	19

## “A New Servitude”: Exploring Dominance and Submission in *Jane Eyre* through BDSM

While considered by many to be a romantic<sup>1</sup> novel, Brontë’s most popular work is also commonly seen as a female Bildungsroman<sup>2</sup>, wherein the protagonist grows and develops, realizing her potential before the novel’s end. Like her comparative portraits of Blanche Ingram and herself, Jane is continually set against others of greater beauty, wealth, and place in society. These comparisons initiate the power struggles central to the novel. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call the novel “a story of enclosure and escape” wherein the protagonist struggles toward the “almost unthinkable” goal of freedom (339). I argue instead that Jane uses submission to fulfill her personal desires while remaining bound within society’s prescribed [?] role for her.

In the following pages, I examine Brontë’s novel in relation to sexual power struggles. Specifically, I argue that Jane and Rochester consensually partake in domination roleplay compatible with features of modern BDSM culture. Often referred to as “bondage,” BDSM actually encompasses numerous sexualized power dynamics. This is reflected in the term itself: BDSM, an intertwined acronym, stands for Bondage/Discipline, Domination/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism. While some participants limit themselves to one of these three aspects, overlap is common. In her novel, Brontë traces Jane’s development of a submissive nature and subtly indicates her subsequent decision to use her skills to attract and maintain affection from dominant Rochester. Furthermore, their subversion of contemporary gender roles allows Jane to fulfill her desire to submit while wielding power equal to, if not greater than, Rochester’s.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Tillotson, for example, famously says of the novel: “A love-story, a Cinderella fable, a Bluebeard mystery, an autobiography from forlorn childhood to happy marriage: this novel makes its appeal first and last to the ‘unchanging human heart’” (258).

<sup>2</sup> Violeta Craina calls *Jane Eyre* “a Bildungsroman within the framework of a moralistic/didacticist novel” (46). Gilbert and Gubar, among many others, also approach the novel as a Bildungsroman.

The BDSM community has already seen connections between Brontë's novel and their lifestyle. Several erotic retellings of *Jane Eyre* have been published. Some draw loosely from the story, but others merely add explicit material to the original text. The version of *Jane Eyre* published by Clandestine Classics claims to add 30,000 words of original, erotic text to Brontë's work, including several BDSM scenes. While such works do their own part in uniting classic literature and alternative sexuality, with this paper I hope to move the study of BDSM into the realm of literary criticism. Like queer studies before it, BDSM studies (and the examination of alternative sexuality in general) explore a character's deviations from the norm and how such behavior effects his or her position in society.

After a brief description of BDSM and its role in the Brontë juvenilia, I provide evidence for the development of Jane's submissive nature, including both inherent traits and conscious decisions to choose the lifestyle after outright rebellion against opposing forces does not work. Passages from the novel identify traits of BDSM in the relationship and acknowledgment by the characters of their roles and their vows to each other. Finally, I argue for Jane's use of her BDSM role to assert her equality with Rochester and—in some ways—her power over him.

Several of Charlotte Brontë's works incorporate elements of BDSM. The juvenilia are rife with sexual power struggles, many featuring the Duke of Zamorna, Rochester's precursor and a domineering rogue. After describing a scene from *The Secret* that "borders on sadism", Christine Alexander describes the "strangely alluring" effect male power has on young Brontë: "Charlotte's early heroines are all submissive, adoring, deriving pleasure from the pain of their relationships with the opposite sex" (164) These women ultimately become victims of Zamorna and his ilk because they lack the "moral identity" that will allow Jane's relationships more success (164).

### Jane as Submissive

Brontë continues to examine BDSM in her later work; in *Jane Eyre*, however, her protagonist is not a victim, but an active participant in a consensual struggle for power. The Domination/submission (D/s) dynamic involves the negotiated appointment of power to one individual—the submissive agrees to obey the commands of the dominant, who in turn pledges to act in the submissive's best interest. While firmly rooted in sexuality, those who engage in D/s often expand their role beyond the bedroom. Most "lifestylers", in whose relationships BDSM plays a leading role, consider their identity as dominant or submissive an integral part of their nature.

One of the greatest difficulties of examining *Jane Eyre* in the context of BDSM is drawing a clear line between consensual submission and forced compliance with society. Before she chooses submission with Rochester, Jane is forced into a submissive role at Gateshead. Unloved and mistreated by her aunt and cousins, she behaves meekly and obediently until she is too far provoked. When Abbot admonishes her for striking out at young Master Reed, Jane responds strongly: "Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?" (15). She rejects any sense of ownership, even though Mrs. Reed demands "perfect submission and stillness" from Jane (21). Imprisoned in the red room after lashing out, she compares herself to the classic image of "the revolted slave" (18). Even here, her submissive nature develops. Outright rebellion through violence and speech has not won her freedom or better treatment, so Jane contemplates more subversive ways of escaping the Reeds' control, like running away or starving herself. So too does she learn to wield power in her relationship with Rochester. At this point, however, Jane does not fully understand how to work within the boundaries placed upon her. When Brocklehurst asks young Jane how she intends to escape hellfire, she responds, "I must keep in

good health, and not die” (39). As a child, she does not know the rules of the game she must play—she has to learn how to work within the boundaries of society.

In Helen Burns, Lowood provides Jane a study of total submission. Helen struggles to please her superiors, but her slatternly habits often get her in trouble. When the basin freezes over and she cannot clean her nails, she stoically endures a beating instead of pleading her case. A “hardened girl,” she accepts all that comes her way (64). When Jane claims she “could not bear” such embarrassment, Helen admonishes her: “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” (66). Here she reveals a sense of inevitability in her submission. Unlike Jane, who withholds the right to reject or undermine unwanted dominance, Helen sees no choice but to “bear it.” She keeps close record of her faults and is quick to reject praise. Terry Eagleton says that in Brontë’s exploration of how far one should submit, Helen’s “resigned endurance of life” turns her into both a martyr and a warning (15). Jane later denies the role of martyr when she refuses to accompany St. John to India; instead of Helen’s “passive renunciation” of life, Jane chooses the material world and what love she can find there (Eagleton 16). Jane may not go to Helen’s length, but she does begin to show signs of a submissive nature. At Lowood, she shows an extreme willingness to submit to torture in the pursuit of affection: “to gain some real affection from [Helen], or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest” (82). As a child, she is willing to accept pain if it pleases those she loves.

Years later, she leaves the institution in search of a “new servitude”, making service her mission instead of the lofty goals of liberty or stimulus (102). While Jane remains young, poor,

and single, freedom remains unavailable to her. She can still find contentment, however, through submission. An argument for a submissive-identifying Jane fulfills what Eagleton calls Brontë's "impulse to negotiate passionate self-fulfillment on terms which preserve the social and moral conventions intact, and so preserve intact the submissive, enduring, everyday self which adheres to them" (16). Through her decision to serve, Jane is able to pay lip service to society's expectations while maintaining a passionate, submissive life.

### **Rochester and Jane**

Brontë's protagonists have become a famous name in romance, yet their relationship is characterized by a constant struggle for power. Shuttleworth argues that in this "erotic power play," Jane and Rochester fight to maintain their autonomy; through phrenology and disguise, each attempts to read the other while remaining unread (170). When she encounters Rochester on the road to Thornfield, his "roughness" comforts her and convinces her to stay and offer further assistance (134). At their first official meeting at Thornfield, Rochester greets Jane with a brusque request to be seated. Jane reacts not with offense but with calculation: "Harsh caprice laid me under no obligation; on the contrary, a decent quiescence, under the freak of manner, gave me the advantage" (141-142). This sets the stage for the rest of their relationship.

Describing the trip to Millcote to buy fabric, the narrator Jane summarizes the repartee between Rochester and herself: "obliged" to a particular store, Jane is "ordered" to buy herself six dresses. Her plea for referral is denied. "By dint of entreaties expressed in energetic whispers," Jane agrees to two dresses. Rochester acquiesces on the condition that he picks out the dresses. Jane eventually persuades him to buy black and grey, and Rochester vows to have his way next time (309). In such skirmishes, Jane utilizes her skills in subversion to counteract her master's commanding nature. Moreover, the passage in question reveals Jane's awareness of their power

struggle. Looking back on their conversation, Jane uses words like “obliged,” “ordered,” “begged leave,” “entreaties,” “vowed,” and “persuaded” (309). Each step of the fabric-buying process reveals the power struggle inherent in their relationship.

The relationship between Jane and Rochester has several of the traits found in BDSM: commands/obedience, pleasure through service, idolatry/worship, and a sense of ownership. From the beginning, commands are a part of their relationship. After falling from his horse, Rochester’s first words to Jane are an order: “You must just stand to one side” (133). From there, he guides her through aiding him. When he tells her to bring his horse, she admits that despite her fear, she is “disposed to obey,” illustrating the confidence found in submission (135). This inclination towards obedience continues at Thornfield. In their first real conversation, Rochester is already issuing her brusque commands, merely adding a brief “if you please” at one point. He asks her to excuse his “tone of command”; he is used to giving orders and won’t change for her (145). his questionable civility—or perhaps because of it—Jane is quick to oblige him. It is his “direct way of giving orders,” after all, that makes it a “matter of course” for Jane to obey him (153).

Jane not only obeys Rochester; she genuinely enjoys serving him. After their initial meeting, Jane reflects on the pleasure the incident brought her. Tired of her “passive” existence, aiding Rochester is an accomplishment of action (136). Later in the novel, she envies Blanche for her future as “the very happiest woman the sun shines on” because, as Rochester’s wife, she will be able to serve him (217). As a dominant, Rochester finds pleasure in granting his lover’s requests. Giddy at the prospect of their upcoming marriage, Rochester imperiously orders his fiancée to ask him favors. “It is my delight to be entreated, and to yield” (304). If Jane’s pleasure is to serve, Rochester’s is to grant.

Upon hearing of her dislike for Brocklehurst, Rochester expresses shock at the “blasphemous” novice not worshipping her priest (145). While this comment is made in jest, when we consider Rochester as a dominant, such acceptance of idolatry is understandable. A submissive often worships his or her dominant. Moreover, the marriage ceremony in the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer* includes the husband’s vow to worship his wife with his body, an idea familiar to modern dominants and submissives. Jane is no different. While she is initially harsh in her assessment of Rochester—he is ungenerous, moody, and unattractive—by the time Blanche Ingram enters the picture, Jane admits she sees no bad in her beloved. His negative traits have become “keen condiments in a choice dish”—saving his personality from blandness—and she describes an “abyss” within him that inspires great passion, if not fear (218). This brooding darkness within Rochester—“sinister or sorrowful”—used to frighten her, but now it enraptures her (218). By their engagement, Jane has become openly idolatrous: “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” (316). Rochester role as earthly master threatens to overshadow God’s as heavenly master. Jane, on the other hand, rejects any attempt to elevate her to celestial status. She objects to his calling her an angel and assures him that she shall not be angelic. In fact, only after provoking him to “less than civil” behavior can she become comfortable again. She would “rather be a *thing* than an angel,” and prefers coarseness to flattery (302).

The concept of possession is also central to BDSM. The control awarded to the dominant often leads to a dynamic where the submissive is considered owned in some sense, as a ward, a pet, or as property. Rochester holds a strong sense of ownership over Jane. He endows her with

numerous diminutives, from the magical (“imp,” “fairy,” and “sprite”) to the endearing (“my darling,” “my little wife,” and “little English girl”). After Mason is attacked, Rochester calls himself a “shepherd” and Jane his “pet lamb” (250). He considers himself her protector and guardian, and as their bond grows, so does his sense of responsibility. The morning after their engagement, he informs Jane, “I mean shortly to claim you—your thoughts, conversation, and company—for life” (307). Even Mrs. Fairfax comments on their dynamic: “I have always noticed you were a sort of pet of his,” she admits to Jane when she learns of her engagement (305). When Jane finally returns to Rochester at Ferndean, it is dusk; nevertheless, she easily identifies him: “it was my master, Edward Fairfax Rochester, and no other” (497). In fact, of the ninety-nine instances in *Jane Eyre* of the word “master,” Jane calls Rochester her master thirty-two times, even after she has left her job at Thornfield (Matsuoka). Her role as Rochester’s employee is long over; his title is now entirely personal. By this time, according to Politi, the term has become one of “sexual, feminine sweetness and submissiveness” (81). No longer is “master” tied to the enforced submission demanded by John Reed; it is now a title willingly bestowed.

### **Role-Playing Acknowledged**

Such titles, when shared, help develop an important aspect of the BDSM relationship: the acknowledgement of the role being played. Here there is not the level of explicitness found in modern discussions of BDSM; the roles adopted in *Jane Eyre* are negotiated in a more understated way. Davis argues that negotiation takes place in Jane and Rochester’s early conversations. The couple differentiates between their employer/governess dynamic and the D/s dynamic through Jane’s consent to Rochester’s command, but not on the grounds of his age or experience. Rochester states his desires plainly: “you must still agree to receive my orders now

and then, without being piqued or hurt by the tone of command” (157). “Will you?” he asks, and Jane agrees because he cares about her comfort and forgot her status as a paid subordinate.

During these conversations, “Jane is able to give her assent or to clarify his meanings, to counter with her own reasoning, to qualify the sort of yielding she would offer” (Davis 130). Rochester continues his lack of convention with Jane’s agreement. Later, when Jane threatens to utilize her submissive wiles to extract information from Rochester he does not want to give, he shuts down her efforts. “Encroach, presume, and the game is up” he announces (302). He will not consent to a power struggle beyond this line.

Jane and Rochester also reference their dynamic through the vows they make each other. When Rochester reacts strongly to Mason’s appearance, Jane offers her submission: “Can I help you sir?—I’d give my life to serve you.” In turn, Rochester promises to seek help at her hand if needed. After this agreement, Jane brings Rochester wine at his request, and he alone drinks to the health his “ministrant spirit” (236). While Jane’s passive role prevents this episode from being a communion, the wine service and toast maintain an air of ritual appropriate for an exchange of vows. Upon their engagement, Rochester offers more explicit vows. He claims he will “have” and “hold” her, words which reference not only traditional marriage vows, but within the established context, also Rochester’s ownership; he also includes a promise to “guard and cherish” his intended, emphasizing his protective nature (295).

### **Selective Submission**

Without a sense of equality between the participants, healthy BDSM cannot exist. Despite the divides of gender, class, and age that separate them Rochester and Jane consider each other equals. When threatened with separation, Jane reaches out beyond the limits of convention: “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!” (292). Their unconventional relationship provides the means to cross boundaries of custom. Rochester calls her his “equal” and “likeness” when he proposes, acknowledging their true status, outside of roles established by themselves or society.

In their establishment of a power dynamic, Jane accepts her submissive role, but she is still not a martyr like Helen Burns. There are frequent instances of her refusal to submit on grounds she considers inappropriate. In an early conversation, Rochester orders Jane to speak. The governess, however, refuses talk for the sake of “showing off”, and only smiles, “and not a very complacent or submissive smile either” (156). Her employer calls her stubborn and annoyed before apologizing for his command’s “absurd, almost insolent form” (156). Apology accepted, Jane submits to talk if Rochester will choose the subject. Her initial refusal to obey his command reinforces her terms of submission—informality she will gladly accept, but not insolence (157). Davis argues that distinctions between when Jane will and will not submit make for a “more nuanced approach to power dynamics than is usually acknowledged” (128).

The engagement scene provides another example of Jane’s selective submission. Flustered by Rochester’s seeming betrothal to Blanche Ingram and her own upcoming exile to Ireland, Jane rebels against their dynamic. When Rochester compares her to a bird wounding itself in struggle, Jane retorts, “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” (293). She is no longer interested in playing their game now that she is being replaced. Anderson and Lawrence explain that the “tenacious autonomy” Jane expresses in the face of abandonment dissipates as soon as the threat

of Blanche Ingram is removed; at that point the “passionate imprisonment” of the birdcage becomes desirable once again (246).

Rochester appreciates Jane’s stubborn streak. He swears to be “tender and true” to the character who bends without breaking (300). In fact, he goes out of his way to reject obedience that does not suit her. After Mrs. Fairfax reveals her concerns regarding Jane’s relationship with Rochester, doubt and uncertainty cloud Jane’s mind. When her request for Adele to accompany the couple is denied, she submits easily, admitting that she has “half lost the sense of power over him” (306). Upon seeing her subdued expression as she “mechanically” obeys, however, Rochester changes his mind and grants Jane’s request (306). In this instance, her need for Adele’s distraction outweighs the pleasure she feels in submitting; as a dominant, Rochester acts in her best interest.

### **Jane’s Power over Rochester**

In some ways, Jane’s submission allows her a measure of power over Rochester. She enjoys “vexing and soothing him by turns,” switching between witty rebuttals and obedience (301). She considers this a skill useful for arguing with him, drawing him to the brink of aggression without fearing for her safety. According to Davis, it is the “verge” that entices Jane and Rochester—not outright rejection of propriety, but playing with its boundaries; moreover, “Jane is the one who wields this pleasure, controlling its ebb and flow, vexing and soothing ‘by turns,’ while also reflecting on strategies for preserving this dynamic” (132). Rochester may be the dominant in the relationship, but Jane controls the dynamic through her submission. She enjoys “genuine contentment” in serving Rochester “in all that is right” (250). Rochester acknowledges this condition. He admits that if he were to ask Jane to anything she considered

wrong, she would not obey but be as “immutable as a fixed star” (251). Rochester confesses that she has power over him and, if he is not careful, the ability to hurt him.

Jane utilizes this power over Rochester in part to keep each interested in the relationship. From the first, Rochester’s contrary nature draws her in: “the eccentricity of the proceeding was piquant: I felt interested to see how he would go on” (142). Later, however, it is Rochester’s attention that concerns her. Watching Blanche and Rochester flirt, Jane admits she would have accepted the union and admired the lady, if only she had “managed the victory at once” (216). Instead, she suffers watching someone fail where she could succeed. Jane describes Blanche’s attempts at wooing Rochester as misfired “arrows” which, “shot by a surer hand”, could win him over—“or, better still, without weapons a silent conquest might have been won” (217). Her submissive skills will see better results than the brash, commanding Blanche. Eagleton argues, however, that Jane must evoke Blanche at times, revealing “repressed, Blanche-like ‘spirit’ beneath her puritan exterior to stimulate and cajole [Rochester]”; this she does by “blending flashes of flirtatious self-assertion with her habitual meek passivity” (18). To Eagleton, Jane is a shrewd calculator who works to keep Rochester and herself dependent on each other.

Shuttleworth argues on the same line, explaining Jane’s “sexually elusive conduct” as a way to extend Rochester’s passion for her as long as possible (168). She distinguishes the sexual “love” Jane foresees dying out after six months from the “liking” she might rekindle later in the relationship (Shuttleworth 168). Even then, however, Jane must act according to her submissive nature. She can keep Rochester in check with her conversation, but she admits she “rather have pleased than teased him” (316). After an upsetting night and day without her beloved, Jane abandons her month-long endeavor to keep Rochester at a distance. He notices the difference immediately: “This is you, who have been as slippery as an eel this last month, and as thorny as a

brier rose? I could not lay a finger anywhere but I was pricked; and now I seem to have gathered up a stray lamb in my arms. You wandered out of the fold to seek your shepherd, did you, Jane?" (321). In explanation of her sudden submission, Jane can only express her want for Rochester.

During their engagement, Rochester attempts to explain the hold Jane has over him: "Jane, you please me, and you master me—you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart; and while I am twining the soft, silken skein round my finger; it sends a thrill up my arm to my heart. I am influenced—conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express; and the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph I can win" (301). Note that it is Jane who holds mastery over Rochester here. Not only does Jane have power over Rochester, but she has earned that power through her submission. The pleasure Rochester feels at Jane's "pliancy" binds him to her and gives her control over him. Rochester compares this power to witchcraft—Jane's skills are subtle, subversive, and work like magic on her dominant lover. Her powers are "beyond" Rochester's more direct wins in their power struggle.

Submission might grant Jane her power, but when she needs to, she can take control. After discovering Rochester's bigamous plot, Jane refuses to accompany him to the continent. When her beloved threatens violence, she focuses on the moment at hand:

I saw that in another moment, and with one impetus of frenzy more, I should be able to do nothing with him. The present—the passing second of time—was all I had in which to control and restrain him: a movement of repulsion, flight, fear would have sealed my doom—and his. But I was not afraid: not in the least. I felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me. The crisis was perilous; but not without its charm: such as the Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe (349).

She enjoys the power struggle with Rochester, especially toying with the boundaries of propriety and safety. Her sense of “inward power” reveals itself in her actions as well. After examining the moment, Jane takes Rochester’s clenched hand and issues her own command. She tells him to sit and promises to listen to all he has to say “reasonable or unreasonable” (349). Even in her dominance, she offers service. Once his anger is under control, Jane decides to let her tears fall: “If the flood annoyed him, so much the better” (349). She constantly tailors her behavior to give herself the advantage. Rochester knows of her power. When Jane seems to hesitate in fear, he responds, “If I storm, you have the art of weeping” (350). He knows how much she can control him and calm him down. At this point in the novel, with her dominant asking her to leave the country with him and live as his mistress, Jane refuses to continue the dynamic. Rochester asks her to repeat a simple vow of ownership: “I will be yours, Mr. Rochester”; Jane rejects his request: “Mr. Rochester, I will *not* be yours” (363). She will not submit under these conditions, and she chooses to end the relationship.

A sudden power shift occurs at the novel’s end with her dominant master now blind and lame. Faced with a leadership position, Jane adopts the role of service-oriented guiding angel: “I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion—to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master; you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live” (502). With these vows, she offers her service and companionship.

This shift in power dynamic has drawn the attention of numerous scholars. Eagleton sees this “kind of leadership” as a blend of submission and control; there is more ambiguity in the power dynamic now (30). Jane and Rochester are playing roles, but the roles are shifting; Jane submits to Rochester through her service, but the power she holds over him now includes his physical

care. Politi argues that at this point, the term “master” completes its transformation from despot’s title to equal’s; at Ferndean, Jane welcomes her “dear master” as she finally becomes “mistress” to the home (82). With Jane’s inheritance, she is now Rochester’s equal in society’s eyes; the couple is now on even footing to continue their relationship. Azim disagrees. She denies the resolution of Jane and Rochester’s relationship as between “two autonomous individuals” (296). Rochester is maimed and helpless; his reliance on Jane’s service symbolizes a “danger” to which men are vulnerable. Jane’s passion, in the meantime, has been “pruned and brought under control” (296). Torrell, however, claims Rochester’s disability merely provides an appropriate outlet for the couple’s desire. At Ferndean, Rochester is described as rugged, shaggy, and physical. Jane cannot keep away from him, constantly kissing and touching him. Torrell explains that Jane and Rochester have taken advantage of the caregiver role to sanction—that is, make “proper and presumably asexual”—physical touch, while maintaining its erotic charge (87). This recalls their first meeting, where Jane lets Rochester lean on her without any introduction because she is helping an injured person. At that point, Jane was interested by the coarse stranger; now she has devoted her life to him.

### **Conclusion**

Reading *Jane Eyre* in a BDSM context has provided much inspiration for those looking to retell a classic story with an erotic twist. Recently, however, scholars have delved more deeply. By inspecting Brontë’s novel through the lens of BDSM, I have focused on the sexual power dynamic between Jane and Rochester. Throughout the novel, Jane develops a submissive nature, decides to engage in a romantic power struggle with Rochester, and obeys him when his orders are right. Close reading provides evidence aligning the couple’s actions with common practices in BDSM relationships, such as obeying commands and idolatry. As a submissive, Jane

is able to wield power over Rochester. “Vexing and soothing” him by turns, Jane uses tactics she has been developing since her forced submission in the Reed household (183). In this relationship, however, she chooses when to submit and when to refuse.

Jane’s alternating use of submission and witty repartee continually renegotiates the terms of the power dynamic. She keeps Rochester and herself entertained by never settling for the unquestioning submission of the likes of Helen Burns. By the time they reunite at Ferndean, Jane’s role has expanded from simple service to caregiving, a development that allows for more physical affection and a strong sense of equality between the roles. Her submissive nature allows her a position as leader in the relationship, with blind Rochester in the role of obedient patient. At the novel’s close, Jane and Rochester continue negotiations in the power struggle that encompasses their relationship. This selective submission reinforces one of BDSM’s primary tenets: it is the submissive who holds the true power in the relationship because she offers herself up willingly and can revoke the agreement at any time.

## Works Cited

- Alexander, Christine. "Autobiography and Juvenilia: The Fractured Self in Charlotte Brontë's Early Manuscripts." *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*, edited by Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster, Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 154-172.
- Anderson, Kathleen and Heather R. Lawrence. "'No Net Ensnares Me: Bird Imagery and the Dynamics of Dominance and Submission in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.'" *Bronte Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3, September 2015, pp. 240-251.
- Azim, Firdous. "Rereading Feminism's Texts: *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*." *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 172-197.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin, 2006.
- Craina, Violeta. "What *Jane Eyre* Taught: The 'Autobiographer' in *Jane Eyre* and Women's Education." *British & American Studies*, Vol. 21, Romanian Society of English & American Studies, 2015, pp. 49-47.
- Davis, Mary Ann. "'On the Extreme Brink' with Charlotte Brontë: Revisiting *Jane Eyre*'s Erotics of Power." *Papers on Language & Literature*, Vol. 52, No. 2, SIUE, Spring 2016, pp. 115-148, MasterFILE Premier.
- Eagleton, Terry. "*Jane Eyre*." *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, MacMillan, 1988, pp. 15-32.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress." *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2nd ed., Yale UP, 1984, pp. 336-371.
- Matsuoka, Mitsu. *The Victorian Literary Studies Archive: Hyper-Concordance*. Nagoya U, 26 Dec. 2003, [victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance/](http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance/)
- Politi, Jina. "*Jane Eyre* Class-ified." *New Casebooks: Jane Eyre*, edited by Heather Glen, St.

Martin's Press, 1997, pp. 78-91.

Shuttleworth, Sally. "Jane Eyre: Lurid Hieroglyphics." *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Society*, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 148-182.

Tillotson, Kathleen. "Jane Eyre." *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Oxford UP, 1983, pp. 257-313.

Torrell, Margaret Rose. "From India-Rubber back to Flesh: A Reevaluation of Male Embodiment in *Jane Eyre*." *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, Ohio State UP, 2012, pp. 71-90.

VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Josephine G. Beyke

josephinebeyke@yahoo.com

Kentucky Wesleyan College  
Bachelor of Arts, English, May 2013

Research Paper Title:

“A New Servitude”: Exploring Dominance and Submission in *Jane Eyre* through BDSM