

# Analysis of Charlotte Brontë's Religious Attitudes in *Jane Eyre*

Shisi Chen, Chengyao Jian \*

Department of English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, 312000, China

\* Corresponding author: Chengyao Jian

**Abstract:** The 19th-century British society witnessed the decline of strict traditional religious adherence, alongside the emergence of diverse beliefs, including Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism. *Jane Eyre*, a literary masterpiece, intricately portrays the multifaceted religious landscape of 19th-century Britain through its characters. Helen Burns embodies self-denial, St. John Rivers unwavering dedication, *Jane Eyre* relies on God, and Mr. Rochester undergoes redemption. Charlotte Brontë weaves these portrayals with her critique of the era's religious ideologies. Brontë passionately upholds core Christian tenets like love and forgiveness. She simultaneously denounces the hypocrisy often hiding behind Christianity's guise. Advocating for a harmonious blend of human virtues and divine transcendence, she offers a moral compass for a meaningful life. This nuanced view, fusing compassion with a reproach against inhumanity, is a central theme in the novel and reflects Brontë's spiritual perspective.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Brontë; *Jane Eyre*; Religious Attitudes.

## 1. Introduction

*Jane Eyre*, a timeless literary masterpiece penned by British author Charlotte Brontë, narrates the compelling odyssey of its titular heroine, *Jane Eyre*, an orphaned girl. The narrative meticulously chronicles her tribulations, encompassing the abuse endured at her aunt's domicile, the stringent education received at Lowood School, and her subsequent employment as a governess at Thornfield Hall, where she forges a deep emotional bond with Mr. Rochester. The plot reaches a climax as Jane discovers Rochester's secret marriage, prompting her to take a principled stand and depart. She later rejects the proposal of St. John Rivers before ultimately reuniting with and marrying Rochester.

*Jane Eyre* was set against the backdrop of the 19th-century England, an era when Christianity thrived and permeated every aspect of societal life. Religious convictions not only shaped individual moral compasses but also significantly influenced intellectual pursuits and personal growth. The Brontë sisters, including Charlotte, were deeply imbued with Christian ideals from their formative years. Their father, a devout Christian minister, assumed the responsibility of educating the children following their mother's early demise, guiding them in daily prayers and instilling in them a profound sense of faith. Throughout her life, Charlotte upheld a steadfast commitment to Christianity, harboring a profound respect for its divine dimensions while persistently engaging in introspective questioning of her beliefs. Consequently, *Jane Eyre* subtly yet deeply mirrors the religious fervor that gripped the nation during this period. This paper initiates with an exploration of the religious milieu of 19th-century British society, subsequently delving into a meticulous analysis of Charlotte Brontë's nuanced religious attitudes as they manifest in her magnum opus, *Jane Eyre*.

## 2. Religious Milieu in the 19th Century British Society

England's religious history is a tapestry interwoven with profound transformations, from ancient pagan roots to the

deep-seated embrace of Christianity. Early Christian echoes resonate from Roman times, yet it was the Anglo-Saxon period (5<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) that truly solidified Christendom in England, etching a pivotal chapter in its spiritual narrative. The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked a tectonic shift, as England broke away from Rome, giving rise to the Anglican Church. This schism left an indelible mark on the nation's religious and social fabric.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century ushered in an era of upheaval, with the Industrial Revolution and social changes leading to widespread poverty, unemployment, and disease. Amidst this turmoil, religion served as a beacon of solace and strength, fostering resilience and camaraderie within tightly-knit faith communities. Active participation in religious rituals and shared beliefs forged powerful bonds, nurturing a sense of identity and offering respite from the desolation and powerlessness prevalent in society. Thus, religion in England has been more than a belief system; it has been a lifeline for the soul, testament to humanity's enduring quest for meaning amid life's adversities.

### 2.1. Main Religious Doctrines Promoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Society

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century British society, religion was widely regarded as the cornerstone of morality and social order. During this period, religious beliefs were deeply rooted in everyday life, emphasizing self-denial, devotion, and reliance on God.

Self-denial is a core concept in 19th-century religious life, particularly emphasized in Christian doctrine. This idea requires believers to restrain personal desires and pleasures in order to achieve higher moral standards. Self-denial is reflected not only in individual moral choices but also influences many social customs and norms, allowing people to focus more on spiritual and moral elevation while pursuing material interests (Clark, 2014).

Devotion refers to dedicating one's life and strength to serve God and others. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious groups encouraged believers to express their faith through participation in charitable activities, church services, and

community work. For example, many churches actively engaged in social services, assisting vulnerable groups and enhancing community cohesion (Iverson, 2011). This spirit of devotion not only strengthened the relationship between individuals and their faith but also promoted social harmony and stability.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many people viewed the challenges and difficulties in their lives as tests of faith, emphasizing that reliance on God was an important survival strategy. Religious belief provided individuals with a spiritual foundation to cope with life's stresses and uncertainties. Whether facing economic hardships or social changes, religious faith helped people find hope and solace. Reliance on God reinforced social networks among believers, enabling mutual support during difficult times.

## 2.2. The Social Impact of Religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, religious convictions and active participation in religious rituals were emblematic of one's standing within the community. Engaging in ecclesiastical functions, contributing financially to the church, and other acts of devotion served to enhance personal prestige and societal rank. Furthermore, religion played a crucial role in bridging societal divides, functioning as a mediator amidst varying social strata. Through its charitable endeavors, it offered aid to the less fortunate, including provision of sustenance, housing, and educational opportunities. These benevolent acts not only addressed issues stemming from economic disparity but also fostered an environment conducive to social cohesion and stability. The impact of religion is mainly displayed in the following three domains:

Firstly, church schools provided educational opportunities for people from different classes, especially for children from impoverished backgrounds, as church schools were a vital pathway for them to gain knowledge and skills. These schools not only imparted religious knowledge but also taught basic cultural subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, cultivating a large number of talents for society.

Secondly, religious doctrines provided moral principles and codes of conduct for people, emphasizing virtues such as honesty, kindness, humility, and tolerance. These moral values resonated deeply with individuals and became guiding principles for daily behavior. The spirit of charity advocated by religion inspired compassion and assistance towards society's vulnerable groups, encouraging active participation in social welfare efforts such as charitable donations and volunteer services, thereby contributing to the construction of a more harmonious and mutually supportive social environment and enhancing social cohesion.

Thirdly, religious festivals and rituals were important components of people's cultural lives at the time. Religion had a profound impact on artistic creation, with numerous artists drawing inspiration from religious subjects, producing a wealth of religiously themed paintings, sculptures, and architectural works. These creations not only showcased the sanctity and dignity of religion but also reflected the cultural characteristics and aesthetic concepts of the society at the time, becoming an important part of Britain's cultural heritage.

## 3. Religious Views Displayed in *Jane Eyre*

### 3.1. Helen Burns's Self-denial

Self-denial, a cornerstone of Christianity, involves enduring suffering, prioritizing spiritual needs over physical desires, practicing forgiveness and compassion, resigning oneself to fate, and sacrificing for higher principles. The essence of this philosophy is encapsulated in the religious value of tolerance. Helen Burns, a devout Christian in *Jane Eyre*, embodies these teachings profoundly. For example,

*Jane Eyre*: "And if I were in your place I should dislike her; I should resist her. If she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose."

Helen Burns: "Probably you would do nothing of the sort: but if you did, Mr. Brocklehurst would expel you from the school; that would be a great grief to your relations. It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you; and besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil."

*Jane Eyre*: "But then it seems disgraceful to be flogged, and to be sent to stand in the middle of a room full of people; and you are such a great girl: I am far younger than you, and I could not bear it."

Helen Burns: "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." (Charlotte Brontë, p.71)

At Lowood School, Helen neither complains nor seeks revenge but instead faces strict rules and unfair treatment with remarkable tolerance and patience. Helen believes in patiently enduring personal suffering rather than acting impulsively and causing pain to others connected to her. She follows the biblical injunction to turn the other cheek when wronged, viewing suffering as an inevitable part of life that must be accepted with patience and strength. Thus, when unjustly punished, she calmly accepts her lot, finding solace in her faith rather than harboring anger or dissatisfaction. Revenge, degradation, and injustice do not overwhelm her; instead, she finds peace in her convictions, looking forward to the afterlife. Helen's attitude mirrors the suffering and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, making her a profound role model for *Jane Eyre*. Through Helen Burns, Brontë illustrates the power of self-denial, tolerance, and unwavering faith in shaping a person's character and responses to adversity.

### 3.2. St. John's Devotion

Devotion entails dedicating one's life and strength to serve both God and others. As a staunch Calvinist missionary, St. John Rivers is deeply committed to his divine calling. He actively engages in social services and assists vulnerable groups, which is indirectly reflected through Jane's narration:

"To this neighborhood, then, I came, quite destitute. I slept two nights in the open air, and wandered about two days without crossing a threshold: but twice in that space of time did I taste food; and it was when brought by hunger, exhaustion, and despair almost to the last gasp, that you, Mr. Rivers, forbade me to perish of want at your door, and took me under the shelter of your roof. I know all your sisters have done for me since — for I have not been insensible during my seeming torpor — and I owe to their spontaneous, genuine,

genial compassion as large a debt as to your evangelical charity.” (Charlotte Brontë, pp. 489-490)

Furthermore, St. John Rivers represents a religious view of mission and asceticism. He believes that his duty is to spread the Gospel of God, even if it means sacrificing personal happiness and family life. For example:

St. John Rivers: “While something in me,” he went on, “is acutely sensible to her charms, something else is as deeply impressed with her defects: they are such that she could sympathise in nothing I aspired to — cooperate in nothing I undertook. Rosamond a sufferer, a labourer, a female apostle? Rosamond a missionary’s wife? No!”

*Jane Eyre*: “But you need not be a missionary. You might relinquish that scheme.”

St. John Rivers: “Relinquish! What! my vocation? My great work? My foundation laid on earth for a mansion in heaven? My hopes of being numbered in the band who have merged all ambitions in the glorious one of bettering their race — of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance — of substituting peace for war — freedom for bondage — religion for superstition — the hope of heaven for the fear of hell? Must I relinquish that? It is dearer than the blood in my veins. It is what I have to look forward to, and to live for.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.528)

Saint John’s actions demonstrate his absolute loyalty to his religious calling. He is willing to forgo personal feelings and family happiness for the sake of his mission. In response to Jane’s questioning of his true feelings toward Rosamond, St. John replied: “When I colour, and when I shade before Miss Oliver, I do not pity myself. I scorn the weakness. I know it is ignoble: a mere fever of the flesh: not, I declare, the convulsion of the soul. THAT is just as fixed as a rock, firm set in the depths of a restless sea. Know me to be what I am — a cold hard man.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.529)

St. John Rivers’s character in *Jane Eyre* serves as a powerful critique of the extreme forms of religious devotion and asceticism. His unwavering commitment to his mission, at the expense of personal happiness and human emotion, is contrasted with Jane’s more balanced and humanistic approach to life and religion. Through this contrast, Charlotte Brontë explores the complexities of religious belief and the importance of maintaining one’s personal integrity and happiness in the face of societal and religious expectations.

### 3.3. *Jane Eyre*’s Reliance on God

When Jane discovers that Rochester is already married to Bertha Mason, she faces a profound moral dilemma. She reflects on her own weakness and the temptation to succumb to her love for Rochester, but ultimately, she seeks strength from a higher power:

“To agitate him thus deeply, by a resistance he so abhorred, was cruel: to yield was out of the question. I did what human beings do instinctively when they are driven to utter extremity — looked for aid to one higher than man: the words “God help me!” burst involuntarily from my lips.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.428)

In response to Mr. Rochester’s plaintive questions “What shall I do, Jane? Where turn for a companion and for some hope?”, Jane replies “Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven. Hope to meet again there.” (Charlotte Brontë, pp.444-445) Jane’s reliance on God guides her to

leave Thornfield, despite the immense pain it causes her.

Furthermore, when St. John pressures her to enter a loveless marriage and join him in his mission, Jane feels reluctant but struggles to find a way to reject St. John since she still deeply loves Rochester. At this moment of indecision, she turns to God once more for guidance:

“I mounted to my chamber; locked myself in; fell on my knees; and prayed in my way — a different way to St. John’s, but effective in its own fashion. I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit; and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet. I rose from the thanksgiving—took a resolve—and lay down, unscared, enlightened.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.594)

This moment reaffirms her reliance on God, as she sees the voice as both Rochester’s call and a message from a higher power.

### 3.4. Mr. Rochester’s Sin and Redemption

Mr. Rochester represents the religious views of sin and redemption. His unfortunate marriage in early life and subsequent reckless behavior filled him with a spirit of paganism. However, as the story unfolds, Rochester gradually becomes aware of his sins and begins to develop a sense of reverence for God, which is reflected in his recollection of his past dissipated life:

*Jane Eyre*: “I don’t like you so well as I have done sometimes, indeed, sir. Did it not seem to you in the least wrong to live in that way, first with one mistress and then another? You talk of it as a mere matter of course.”

Mr. Rochester: “It was with me; and I did not like it. It was a grovelling fashion of existence: I should never like to return to it. Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading. I now hate the recollection of the time I passed with Celine, Giacinta, and Clara.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.438)

After being punished in the fire, he feels immense gratitude and praise for God, ultimately becoming a Christian.

“Jane! you think me, I daresay, an irreligious dog: but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. He sees not as man sees, but far clearer: judges not as man judges, but far more wisely. I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flower — breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me. I, in my stiff-necked rebellion, almost cursed the dispensation: instead of bending to the decree, I defied it. Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. HIS chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me forever. You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does its weakness? Of late, Jane — only — 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. (Charlotte Brontë, pp.633-634)

The relationship between Jane and Rochester is largely based on their shared faith and reverence for God. Their love is not merely a secular union but is brought together through divine arrangement and guidance. Jane’s return to Thornfield after leaving symbolizes the choice of humanity and the fusion of divinity, while Rochester’s rebirth from the fire

foreshadows his inevitable redemption with Jane's help.

Rochester's spiritual journey from a flawed sinner to a humbled penitent, influenced by his interactions with Jane, reflects Brontë's exploration of the transformative power of faith and love. After the fire at Thornfield, Rochester is humbled and becomes more aware of his own faults. He acknowledges his past mistakes and expresses a desire for redemption.

## 4. Charlotte Brontë's Religious Attitudes in *Jane Eyre*

### 4.1. Upholding the Spirit of Love and Forgiveness

In *Jane Eyre*, the Christian virtues of love and forgiveness are extolled throughout the narrative. A quintessential example of this is *Jane Eyre's* transformation under the influence of her friend Helen Burns, who helps her overcome a desire for vengeance against Mrs. Reed.

Helen Burns, Jane's close companion at Lowood School, embodies the ideals of Christian love and forgiveness. Despite enduring cruel treatment from the school's authorities, Helen harbors no resentment. When Jane expresses indignation toward Mrs. Reed, Helen advises her with these words: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you." Jane initially responds with skepticism: "Then I should love Mrs. Reed, which I cannot do; I should bless her son John, which is impossible." (Charlotte Brontë, p.74). Unbeknownst to Helen, her message of love would eventually quell the flames of revenge in Jane's heart.

Nine years later, Jane is summoned to Mrs. Reed's deathbed. Upon seeing her aunt, Jane experiences a tumult of emotions: "Well did I remember Mrs. Reed's face, and I eagerly sought the familiar image. 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." (Charlotte Brontë, p.320) This act of forgiveness not only underscores Jane's personal growth but also resonates with the novel's broader moral and ethical themes.

### 4.2. Critique of the Suppression of Human Spirit

While Charlotte Brontë acknowledges the positive aspects of religious virtues, she also critiques the inhumane religious atmosphere depicted in the novel. Beneath the guise of Christianity lies hypocrisy and selfishness, evident in Mr. Brocklehurst's management of Lowood School and St. John Rivers's feverish pursuit of missionary work.

Lowood School is notorious for its harsh living condition and perverted rules, which heavily harm students' physical and mental health. Once Mr. Brocklehurst expressed his dissatisfaction on dealing with a spoiled meal: " 'If ye suffer hunger or thirst for My sake, happy are ye.' Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!" (Charlotte Brontë, p.82) Then he continued to make a lecture on students' dress:

"I have a Master to serve whose kingdom is not of this

world: my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young persons before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven; these, I repeat, must be cut off; think of the time wasted, of —"(Charlotte Brontë, pp.83-84)

No sooner had he made the above speech, three ladies splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs came in, proving to be Mrs. Brocklehurst and her two young daughters. These examples fully exemplify the hypocrisy and inhumanity of the religious institution.

As for St. John Rivers, he is willing to sacrifice personal happiness and human emotions for what he perceives as a higher religious duty. When Jane attempts to push St. John to admit his feelings towards Rosamond, St. John replies "When I colour, and when I shade before Miss Oliver, I do not pity myself. I scorn the weakness. I know it is ignoble: a mere fever of the flesh: not, I declare, the convulsion of the soul. THAT is just as fixed as a rock, firm set in the depths of a restless sea. Know me to be what I am—a cold hard man." (Charlotte Brontë, p.529) Seeing that Jane didn't believe his words, St. John added that "I am simply, in my original state—stripped of that blood bleached robe with which Christianity covers human deformity—a cold, hard, ambitious man. Natural affection only, of all the sentiments, has permanent power over me. Reason, and not feeling, is my guide; my ambition is unlimited: my desire to rise higher, to do more than others, insatiable. I honour endurance, perseverance, industry, talent; because these are the means by which men achieve great ends and mount to lofty eminence." (Charlotte Brontë, pp.529-530) Thus, through the portrayal of St. John Rivers, Charlotte Brontë critiques an extreme and inhumane interpretation of religious devotion.

### 4.3. Advocating for the Unity of Humanity and Divinity

*Jane Eyre* primarily revolves around the love between *Jane Eyre* and Mr. Rochester, with their eventual union symbolizing Charlotte Brontë's religious perspective: the harmonious blend of humanity and divinity.

In response to St. John's fervent plea, *Jane Eyre* listens to her inner voice and returns to Mr. Rochester, her genuine love: "My spirit," I answered mentally, "is willing to do what is right; and my flesh, I hope, is strong enough to accomplish the will of Heaven, when once that will is distinctly known to me. At any rate, it shall be strong enough to search — inquire — to grope an outlet from this cloud of doubt, and find the open day of certainty." (Charlotte Brontë, p.595) Their union proves to be a perfect one:

"I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest — blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together." (Charlotte Brontë, p. 639)

Jane's resolution to reunite with Rochester after his repentance and spiritual purification through adversity marks a pivotal point in the narrative. It underscores her conviction in the significance of personal happiness and the liberty to

pursue one's own path in life. This choice reinforces her adherence to an ethical framework that respects both human dignity and divine principles.”

The religious perspectives of Helen Burns, St. John Rivers, and Mr. Rochester play a crucial role in shaping *Jane Eyre*'s moral beliefs and code of conduct. Helen's tolerance and patience teach Jane the value of enduring suffering with grace and finding peace within one's conscience. St. John's sense of mission and indifference to worldly pleasures introduce Jane to the concept of dedicating oneself to a higher cause, although she ultimately rejects his extreme approach. Mr. Rochester's journey of sin and redemption helps Jane aware of personal happiness and spiritual independence. Under the influence of these characters and their religious views, Jane evolves from a young girl who perceives religion as a lifeless existence into a woman who embraces her faith as a source of strength and guidance. Jane's journey reflects Charlotte Brontë's advocacy for a religion that harmoniously blends the virtues of humanity with the transcendent qualities of divinity, offering a moral compass for individuals in their pursuit of a meaningful and fulfilling life.

## 5. Conclusion

*Jane Eyre*, a literary masterpiece imbued with profound religious undertones, intricately depicts the multifaceted religious landscape of 19th-century Britain. This is achieved through Helen Burns's self-denial, St. John Rivers's unwavering dedication, *Jane Eyre*'s reliance on God, and Mr. Rochester's journey from sin to redemption. Through these character portrayals, Charlotte Brontë artfully interweaves her critique and contemplation of the era's religious ideologies.

Brontë ardently embraces and uplifts the core Christian tenets of love and forgiveness. Concurrently, she fearlessly exposes and denounces the hypocrisy and self-interest that often masqueraded behind the guise of Christianity. She advocates for a religion that harmoniously marries human virtues with divine transcendence, thereby offering individuals a moral compass to navigate their quest for a purposeful and gratifying existence. This nuanced perspective on faith, which fuses compassion and forgiveness with a reproach against inhumane practices, constitutes a pivotal theme in *Jane Eyre* and encapsulates Brontë's own spiritual outlook.

In today's society, the essence of religious education should lie in fostering empathy, comprehension, and tolerance. It necessitates a reevaluation of religious education's role and the pursuit of an educational ethos rooted in love, understanding, and respect, as opposed to blind adherence to doctrine.

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