

---

# An Analysis of the Relationship between Jane and Helen in *Jane Eyre*

Lourdes Salgado

*Jane Eyre*, written in 1847, is one of the most famous Victorian novels. As many other novels of the time, *Jane Eyre* concludes with a typical heterosexual marriage. However, one of the differences between this story and its contemporaries lies in its homosexual undertones. These are not too overt for everyone to see, which is logical, considering the time period of the narrative. In England, where the book was written and set, male homosexuality could be punished by death at that time. Female homosexuality, on the other hand, was not even considered, as women were not allowed to explore sexuality. Therefore, subtle clues of homosexual undertones can only be found in certain aspects of the novel, as in the relationship between Helen Burns and Jane Eyre, which we will analyse in the present work.

Ever since the two characters meet, Jane sees Helen as someone wiser than her, as some sort of “elevated soul”, which causes Jane to develop a certain admiration towards the girl, an admiration of a strong and unusual kind for a friendship. Jane puts Helen on a pedestal; she becomes a goddess whom Jane looks up to. This is reflected in many of their conversations, where Helen seems to be the provider of all the right answers to our main character’s questions. In the introduction of the character, Helen already acts as an enlightened being: while Jane knows nothing about the place, Helen knows and guides her through the uncertain path of Lowood. Without her friend, Jane would have been lost in that institution, not knowing anyone nor understanding how the place worked.

As their friendship progresses, there are other scenes where Helen acts as a source of wisdom, teaching Jane valuable lessons. One of them takes place when Jane finds out that one particular teacher treats Helen quite cruelly, and the girl accepts her punishments in silence. When Jane asks her why she does not complain, Helen answers that were she to do so, they would expel her. She adds that it is better to accept the punishment that only she feels, than to do something that has consequences for others, and then proceeds to reference the Bible by saying that “it bids us return good for evil”. The wisdom in Helen’s words captivates Jane and, even though she disagrees with her friend, she is fascinated by her vision of the world: “Still I felt that Helen Burns considered things by a light invisible to my eyes. I suspected she might be right and I wrong; but I would not ponder the matter deeply” (Brontë, 2019, p. 64). This shows the feelings that Jane harbours towards Helen: she admires and idolises her, believing that she is always right no matter what. Later on, there is a moment in which the girls stare at each other, and Jane describes the gaze by saying that “it was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim” (Brontë, 2019, p. 76). This description definitely proves the point: Jane perceives her friend as a hero, while she sees herself as just a slave.

Another aspect that shows the singularity of the connection between the girls is the way they stare at each other. They experience a certain pleasure in looking at each other, a concept that has been analysed by Sigmund Freud under the name of “scopophilia”. One of the scenes that illustrate this happens when Jane is enduring her punishment for breaking her slate. While she is

standing on the stool, she feels embarrassed and sad. However, when Helen stares at her, she gains strength. Her eyes are described as being inspired with a “strange light” and the feelings that arise in Jane are expressed with exclamations: “What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me! How the feeling bore me up!” (Brontë, 2019, p. 76). This reaction to Helen’s gaze is too romantic to be friendly; Jane clearly sees something else in Helen’s eyes than what a simple friend would see. In that same scene, Helen smiles at her. That moment is expressed once again by the use of an exclamation: “What a smile!” Then, the smile itself is described as being “the effluence of fine intellect, of true courage” and “like a reflection from the aspect of an angel” (Brontë, 2019, p. 76). The language used in this whole scene is full of romantic hues, no one would describe a friend’s look or smile in the way that Jane describes Helen’s; instead, they seem like a lover’s descriptions. Furthermore, the feelings that overflow Jane at that moment are purely romantic ones, and there is a certain homoeroticism in the way she fixates her gaze in Helen’s lips and eyes, two attributes often used with erotic connotations.

After Jane’s punishment, there is another scene in which this scopophilia is evident. Jane and Helen go to Miss Temple’s room, where Jane hears a conversation between the two. Strong feelings arise in Jane while listening to Helen talking, in fact, there is a whole paragraph dedicated to a thorough description of how she feels, a description full of romantic connotations. The conversation “rouses” Helen’s “powers within her” (Brontë, 2019, p. 83). These powers “glowed in the bright tint of her cheek” and “shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes” (Brontë, 2019, p. 83). Such poetic phrases add romanticism to the whole description, as they are not words often used to describe a friend. Then, Jane fixates on Helen’s eyes, which she describes as having acquired a beauty “of meaning, of movement, of radiance”; and mouth, saying that “her soul sat on her lips” (Brontë, 2019, p. 83). In these descriptions, it is evident how beautiful Jane perceives Helen to be and, once again, the eroticism of her interest in Helen’s eyes and mouth is perceivable: “There is something intimate regarding Jane’s obsession with Helen’s smile and eyes: they are characteristics of the face often associated with romantic desire.” (Fanourgakis, 2019, p. 14)

After the conversation, Helen proceeds to read a book and Jane expresses that, at that moment, her “amazement reached its climax” (Brontë, 2019, p. 83). She says that, while hearing her read, she felt her “organ of veneration expanding at every sounding line” (Brontë, 2019, p. 83) These phrases evoke extremely strong feelings, which can be interpreted in different ways: “The word “organ” specifically calls to mind two meanings, one bodily and the other cerebral. The bodily connotation of “organ” reflects the concept of a physical sexual orgasm, but the brain as an organ also presents a very emotional and intellectual aspect to Jane’s climax. Helen induces not only an implied physical climax in Jane but an emotional and intellectual one as well.” (Hasty, 2014, p. 30-31)

The feelings involved in the relationship between Jane and Helen are clearly stronger than those of a usual friendship. Even though the romantic desire is never consolidated, it obviously plays a strong role in their connection. In my opinion, the ambiguity in the girls’ relationship makes the narrative richer in content, opening the door for a variety of interpretations. I believe this is the most interesting thing about art of any kind: when it is well done, each person sees in it something beautifully unique.

## References

- Brontë, C. (2019). *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Editions. (Original work published 1847)
- Fanourgakis, M. (2019). A Norm Critical Approach to Teaching Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*: Exploring Gender, Heteronormativity & Ableism [Master’s Dissertation, Stockholm

University]. Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet. Retrieved from <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1326596/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Freud, S. (1949). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (J. Strachey, Trans.). Imago Publishing. (Original work published 1905)

Hasty, S. (2014). *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name: Queer Language and Female Homoeroticism in Oroonoko, Jane Eyre, and Aurora Leigh* [Master's thesis, University of Georgia]. UGA Electronic Theses and Dissertations Database. Retrieved from [https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/hasty\\_sayler\\_m\\_201405\\_ma.pdf](https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/hasty_sayler_m_201405_ma.pdf)

