

# **A Gilded Cage: A Feminist Analysis of Manor House Literature**

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**Abstract:**

This thesis focuses on women struggling with social rules and gender restrictions in Victorian and Edwardian English manor houses. The culture of the manor home had an incredibly powerful impact on the female protagonists of the literary texts I analyze, and in this thesis, I demonstrate how it stifled the growth and agency of women. With the end of the age of the British Great Houses in the twentieth century, there was the simultaneous rise of the New Woman, an emerging cultural icon that challenged conservative Victorian conventions.

With the values and ideologies surrounding the New Woman in mind, this thesis analyzes the protagonists of *Jane Eyre*, *Howards End* and *Rebecca* in order to present the infiltration of the New Woman in the Great House genre, and how she brought about its end. The progression of the texts is quite significant, as Daphne du Maurier drew heavily from the gothic tradition of the nineteenth century to write *Rebecca*, a ghostly retelling of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. E.M. Forster's *Howards End* is included in between these texts in order to present Margaret Schlegel, an Edwardian woman who confronts, and struggles with both images of Victorian and New Woman femininity.

Throughout the thesis there is a concern with gender, specifically in terms of performativity, gendered spaces within the Great Houses themselves, and in analyzing this, I seek to apply the image of the New Woman to the characters of *Jane Eyre*, Margaret Schlegel, Mrs. de Winter, and *Rebecca* so as to demonstrate the damaging and oppressive culture within the gilded cage of the Great House tradition.

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This thesis is dedicated to my Grandmother, Evelyn Tuttle.

*“Women like me don’t have a life. We choose clothes, and pay calls, and work for charity and do the season. But, really, we’re stuck in a waiting room, until we marry”*  
–Lady Mary Crawley, *Downton Abbey*, S1E1

An immediate modern classic, the PBS Masterpiece Theater Series *Downton Abbey* has captured the hearts, souls, and attentions of viewers all around the world. The series follows the wealthy Crawley family as they struggle to find an heir for their beloved Downton Abbey, a grand manor house. In the pilot episode, the audience is introduced to all of the major characters and family members, and is quickly made aware of the prominent class and gender distinctions of the house and its residents. Upon the tragic sinking of the Titanic, Downton has lost its presumptive heirs, Earl Grantham’s cousin James and his son, Patrick. The Earl of Grantham only has three daughters, Mary, Sybil, and Edith, and since the estate must go to a male heir, the family struggles to keep it in their immediate family. Mary and her sisters will lose all of their inheritance, and Robert, the Earl of Grantham, will lose his beloved Downton should Cousin Matthew, the next eligible heir, inherit the estate.

Through *Downton*, audiences are exposed to life within the grand manor houses of English aristocrats, complete with the gender politics, class struggles, and material culture. Mary and Sybil, the eldest and youngest daughters of the Earl of Grantham, provide some of the strongest commentary on women’s roles in English society, and how, even in a luxurious home such as Downton, they are still hindered in terms of agency, and equality. While Mary’s metaphor of a woman’s life being equal to that of a patient in a waiting room is indeed powerful, she still submits to this tradition of courtship, while her sister, Sybil, embraces a more independent lifestyle, eventually

choosing to marry a servant. The juxtaposition of these two sisters provides two differing portraits of femininity, one of tradition and convention, and the other, of a New Woman.

At the turn of the century, the Victorian woman's duties and rights in society were being questioned in the form of the bold, New Woman. The term 'New Woman' emerged in the 1890s, and as a cultural icon of sorts, she served to question the long-dominating patriarchal society through her characteristics of self-empowerment, independence, education, and radicalism. The term is used throughout this thesis, and is applied to the characters of Jane Eyre, Margaret Schlegel, and Rebecca, as these women all depict the legacy and influence of the ideas that surrounded the New Woman, each of them becoming more empowered and rejecting conventional Victorian femininity. The concept of Victorian femininity is also frequently addressed, and crucial to this thesis, as it has stifled feminine liberation for so long by encouraging female dependency, silence, and complete masculine control. As a result of this suppression, women had no identity of their own that was separate from their husbands', and as seen in the text analyses of this thesis, the New Woman came about and directly challenged this notion, departing from Victorian tradition through advocating for a self-empowered woman.

In the case of *Downton Abbey*, Sybil Crawley most certainly represents a New Woman character, as she is politically active in women's rights, challenges antiquated notions of gender, and even seeks a job beneath her social class as a nurse in the First World War. In one particularly memorable scene, Sybil joins her family at breakfast wearing a pair of harem pants. She greets them with a cheery and confident "Good morning, everyone," and strikes several poses, showing off her bold new outfit. Naturally, her family is shocked and stunned into mouth-gaping silence, as women,

especially upper class women, did not wear pants. Yet, the historical accuracy of Sybil's actions, as well as many other events in the series, should be questioned. Much of this series is a set of idealized nostalgic images that the creators have imagined, and in Sybil's case, the modern feminist movement can indeed skew an accurate depiction, as there is the privilege of being able to look back and comment on how women should have acted.

This background on *Downton Abbey* establishes a connection between the modern fascination with the Great House era, bringing into question why our society today is still so intrigued by such a time when women were encouraged to be submissive and abiding to their husbands. Modern feminists would love Sybil, as she challenges the patriarchal standards of early twentieth century society, regardless of what her conservative family thinks. She is boldly independent and confident, and much to the dismay of her father, she participates in political rallies, and even marries Branson, the family's chauffeur.

Just as the novels that will be analyzed in this thesis have conflicting images of femininity, so too does *Downton*, which is most prominently depicted in Violet Grantham, the Dowager Countess. Portrayed by Maggie Smith, Violet is Lord Grantham's mother, and abides by an aristocratic set of morals. Violet often shares her classist and sexist thoughts on how women ought to behave, claiming that a woman's place is 'eventually in the home,' a sentiment that echoes the strict Victorian 'angel of the house' stereotype. When asked what proper ladies are to do, Violet quips: "Put feathers in their hair and light gentlemen's cigars!" For Violet, the image of true and proper femininity is one which values a subjective standard of beauty and appearance, and that is also acquiescing and subservient to men. It is this Victorian belief that a woman is the angel of the house, whose only desire is to please her husband, that is extremely

damaging, as it convinced women that they should not strive to improve their social and economic status, or become anything more than a domesticated doll. This is why the New Woman was necessary: so women could finally be liberated, and empowered despite the restraints of the culture of the Great Houses.

I chose *Jane Eyre*, *Howards End*, and *Rebecca* for this thesis since all three portray women struggling with social rules and gender restrictions in a manor house. In selecting these novels, I was sure to choose texts that had a strong influence of place in them; the manor homes each had an incredibly powerful impact on each female protagonist's development. The gendered spaces of Thornfield, Howards End, Wickham Place, and Manderley all allowed for the New Woman to defy tradition and spark a proto-feminist revolution in society. The effect of the gothic mansions of Thornfield and Manderley on the protagonists of their respective novels is one that is regressive; both of the women of these texts are forcefully encouraged to perform a traditional, submissive, and most importantly, nonthreatening Victorian femininity. Through a manipulation of the angel/whore dichotomy of the nineteenth century, and gender performativity, the characters of Jane Eyre and Rebecca are able to challenge, and supersede the roles that are set for them inside these oppressive gendered spaces. Similarly, in *Howards End*, the country estate at Howards End so strongly imposes an 'angel of the house' stereotype onto Margaret Schlegel, that she is changed quite significantly into an obedient and unobjectionable wife under her husband, Henry Wilcox. Yet, Forster's novel also offers another setting in modern, developing London, named Wickham Place. The Schlegel sisters live primarily at Wickham Place, and when they are there, in the heart of a city of modernity and physical as well as intellectual improvement, Margaret is a markedly more

active and passionate individual, concerned with women's rights and what is considered 'proper' behavior. When she encounters the material culture of the upper class through the Wilcox family and their home at Howards End, Margaret regresses into a performance of Victorian femininity. Each of the protagonists of these novels struggles with the conflicting visions of femininity, but through their experiences in the oppressive homes, a New Woman is able to defy convention, and become a powerful threat to the misogynistic patriarchal society.

Since each of these texts is from a different time period, they provide crucial points in the overarching timeline of the decline of the grand manor home, and the simultaneous rise of the New Woman ideal. These texts each provide a touchstone for the next, demonstrating the progress of the New Woman as the houses fall. The progression of *Jane Eyre*, *Howards End*, and then *Rebecca* is quite important, as Daphne du Maurier drew heavily from the gothic tradition of *Jane Eyre* in order to write *Rebecca*, which therefore creates a circle, tying everything back to the beginning. On a more specific level, the beginning and ending texts of the thesis are connected through the symbolic presence of fires, which are responsible for burning down the manor houses in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. I include *Howards End* in between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* in order to display the passing of time and how it impacted the New Woman. I then move on to *Rebecca* and demonstrate how the manor house genre is being revisited in the 1940s, long after the 'Golden Era,' only to be burned to the ground, completing an ironic circle. This circle of development demonstrates that the manor house era, while beautiful and rich in material culture, had to be physically destroyed in order for the New Woman to be free from patriarchal confinement, and vie for social, political and economic equality.



The New Woman brought about the end of the manor house era, and the progression of the texts I analyze depicts this, in her slow, but pointed growth.

The central argument for the thesis is that the manor house tradition imposed certain societal expectations on women, limiting their potential, and enforcing a submissive gender role upon them. These impositions were further manifested in the decoration and architecture of the manor houses themselves, each establishing patriarchal dominance through structure. Through the embrace of the ideals of the New Woman, women were able to defy these traditions and create a stronger, proto-feminist role model, specifically through the denouncing of tradition and imposed femininity in exchange for autonomy. I analyze a woman from each text in order to demonstrate her realization of her own submission, and her subsequent transformation and embrace of a more radical and independent woman. As this New Woman became more popular, the manor houses declined, and this is exemplified in the eventual destruction of the houses altogether as shown by the great fire in du Maurier's *Rebecca*.

What also was crucial to the strength of the New Woman was the emergence of radical ideas and developments in technology, for they transformed the manor homes themselves, integrating modernity amidst the antique. These new ideas and furnishings made Victorian culture progressively more irrelevant. In *Downton*, staunchly traditional Cousin Violet expresses her fear over this invasive modernity on precious Downton. She exclaims, "First electricity, now telephones. I feel as if I were living in an H.G. Wells novel!" Modernity is encroaching upon Downton, just as it is abstractly encroaching upon the culture and ideas of the Victorian era that it physically embodies. With the help

of modernity, the New Woman was able to gain momentum, as the Victorian traditions were being increasingly undermined and abandoned in favor of progress.

*Downton* offers modern viewers a glimpse into life in the early 1900s in a lavish estate, but more importantly, it connects the issues of gender roles across a century, providing modern commentary on problems of the past. Inserting a voice of the twenty-first century into a series that depicts an early twentieth century family allows for a sort of cathartic release. Viewers, particularly females, identify with characters such as Sybil and Mary, because they too are experiencing similar gender role restrictions in today's society, and when *Downton* portrays an empowering female character, for instance, audiences empathize and root for them because they are acting out what the viewers want to see happen in their own lives. As a form of nostalgic entertainment, *Downton* goes beyond the confines of a typical historical drama and reenacts a history relevant to our own modern society, while also providing a modern critique on the problems of the past.

**Chapter One:**  
**An Unconventional Femininity in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre***

*"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" –Jane Eyre<sup>1</sup>*

A classic and timeless novel, *Jane Eyre* follows the life of the titular character as she navigates mid-Victorian society, moving from a scorned dependent child to a

knowledgeable and empowered governess. The transformation that Jane undergoes classifies her narrative within the bildungsroman genre, a German phrase for a coming-of-age novel. Jane fits this genre, since she evolves socially, mentally, and emotionally over the course of her narrative. Crucial to her transformation is Jane's adoption of a mindset that is characteristic of the New Woman, a set of beliefs for a more independent woman that would come at the end of the nineteenth century. The New Woman contradicted the submissive and oppressed Victorian woman, choosing to advocate for improved women's rights and equality in the political, social, and economic spheres. Jane's character anticipates the emergence of the New Woman, as she rejects the conventional submissive portrait of femininity, and presents the opposite: a more independent and empowered woman. Jane's own transformation is dependent on her adoption of the nontraditional characteristics that a New Woman would have, such as a strong free will, determination and dedication to the equality of the sexes, and a louder political voice, bringing attention to the overall demeaning treatment of women in Victorian society.

In order to assess exactly how Jane anticipates the emergence of the New Woman, I will be analyzing how her narrative interacts with the legislation and historical context of the mid-Victorian era, as she often speaks against conventions that were established in order to subjugate women. The work of Sandra M. Gilbert, Mary Poovey, and Kate Washington are referenced in this chapter. Poovey's work provides necessary historical context for the chapter, particularly concerning the specific legislation that attempts to improve the condition of women in mid-Victorian society. Gilbert and Washington both debate Jane's role as a feminist figure, addressing the sexual and economic limitations

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imposed upon nineteenth-century women, and how Jane both adheres to and defies such conventions. Both Gilbert and Washington will prove helpful in addressing Jane's transition into a woman with New Woman characteristics, as the transformation is dependent on her defiance of economic and social norms, topics that both critics heavily analyze in their work. The critics analyzed in this chapter offer crucial awareness of Jane and her status as an Other in many senses; however, a discussion of the various homes that Jane inhabits is left out of the crucial conversation. My work in this chapter will analyze Jane's character as well as the spaces that influence the development of her character. The new analysis that my work will bring into the conversation will challenge and build upon the claims of others such as Washington and Adams, to argue that Jane's character anticipates the emergence of the New Woman, and that Jane herself challenges social norms and gender roles through her portrayal of such New Woman traits.

Brontë uses Jane's Bildungsroman and rebellious rhetoric to comment on women's positions in society. Jane experiences hardships as a result of her gender and her economic status, but is able to rise above and gain her independence. She eventually reverses marital gender roles and has more influence than her husband. Many critics, such as Adams, have compared Jane's narrative to the classic fairytale of Cinderella, arguing that Brontë's novel is a retelling of the story with Jane as an improved and evolved Cinderella (Adams). While there is certainly a background theme of Cinderella's tale in *Jane Eyre*, Jane is a stronger and more evolved protagonist, because of her transition into an empowered and independent woman. Though she does work hard in her stepmother's home, Cinderella exhibits traits of the submissive Victorian woman, relying on her prince to rescue her. In contrast, Jane separates herself from Cinderella through

her bold actions, setting her outside the innocent and helpless Cinderella image. Jane rescues herself by becoming more independent and outspoken, ultimately having more power in her marriage with Rochester. Adams does not categorize Jane as a helpless Cinderella, arguing that Jane is instead a stronger retelling of the classic heroine. Though I agree with Adams, I contend that it is Jane's adoption of New Woman characteristics that alienate her from the mythical story, as Jane saves herself and her love through becoming independent economically and socially. Brontë also places Jane in contrast with a satirical portrait of Victorian femininity, Blanche Ingram. Blanche performs an over-the-top display of conventional Victorian femininity, demonstrating to Jane that an aristocratic woman was one who identified with materialism and superficiality. Jane is separated from the Cinderella myth as well as the typical portrayal of Victorian femininity because of her rebellious rhetoric, nonconforming behavior, and desire to be an independent woman, equal to any man.

The various homes that Jane inhabits throughout her narrative also play an important role in her transformation, as each exposes a new sort of inequality and teaches a subsequent lesson. Each of these homes, Gateshead, Lowood, and Thornfield, provides evidence for Jane's transformation, as each establishment imposes a certain performance of femininity onto Jane. Gateshead awakens Jane to the social class conflict of her society, when she is mistreated because she is a social Other, a dependent. Then, at Lowood, she is beaten into Christian submission, in an attempt to transform her into the abstemious ideal Christian woman. Finally, Thornfield is where all of the big changes in Jane's transformation take place. Everything Jane is faced with leads her to Thornfield, the place of the climax of Jane's bildungsroman transformation, when she finally realizes

that she is a changed woman with new opinions and mindsets. When Jane confronts each version of femininity, she opposes them, finding them to be wrong, oppressive, and unfair. Thus, the major themes of the chapter can all be found within the institutions and homes that Jane lives in throughout the novel. The various forms of inequality that Jane experiences mingle with the subsequently different versions of femininity, and all are influenced by the architectural space that encompasses them. Jane's development over the course of the novel moves in specific stages according to which home she is in, and a discussion of the influences and imposed feminine images of these spaces will reveal how the architecture of the novel was a catalyst for her self-reliance.

### **Hello From the Outside: How Economic and Social Otherness Empowers Jane**

Throughout the novel, Jane encounters versions of inequality that all involve the element of social class. Jane quickly learns that being a dependent, that is, not having a family or a means of supporting yourself, was looked down upon in Victorian society. As a dependent child, Jane experiences this animosity towards social others and chooses to rebel against it, resolving to challenge the social stereotype set for her. When Jane takes the governess position at Thornfield Hall later on in the novel, she is exposed again to the same classist issues from the privileged upper class. Yet now, Jane is aware of how her gender also plays into her unequal treatment. In this time period, women were dependent upon their husbands for money, legal representation, and, essentially, an identity. Being the independent rebel she is, Jane does not want a life like this, and she frequently comments on the traditions and conventions that oppress her, and women in general. It is clear from her transformation from a young dependent girl at Gateshead to a strong-

willed governess at Thornfield that Jane adapts to her environment of inequality, and uses it to develop into a New Woman.

From the beginning of the story, Brontë uses Jane's identity as a dependent to introduce and comment on classist issues of the mid-Victorian era. Though Jane is only ten, she is exposed to the strong and malicious opinions surrounding social class at Gateshead Hall, the home she has with her cousins. An orphan, Jane is sent to live with her Uncle Reed and his family at Gateshead Hall. Her uncle passes away and Jane comes to be under the sole care of his wife, Mrs. Reed, a cruel and cold woman who antagonizes Jane throughout her childhood. When asked how she likes living at Gateshead, Jane illuminates the discussion on social class, and states, "It is not my house, sir; and Abbot says I have less right to be here than a servant" (35). Though Jane is not a servant, she is a dependent with no closer relatives or known inheritance of her own. For this pathetic vulnerability, dependents were looked down upon, as seen in how John Reed torments Jane because of her dependent status. Jane analyzes the justification of her mistreatment, stating, "I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there," (28). Since Jane is a dependent, she is categorized as a social Other, and punished as such; no one in Gateshead is like her, she is completely alone. She is seen as less than the other children because of her inability to provide for herself.

Jane's mistreatment at the hands of the Reeds is because of her status as a social Other, and it is this abuse that motivates Jane to rebel against it, sparking her transformation and illuminating a discussion on class inequity. On one occasion, Mrs. Reed keeps Jane locked away in a red room when she gets into a fight with her cousin, John, who throws a book at her head and knocks her to the ground. This red room



signifies the place for dependents, and social Others, as it is gloomy and quite separated from the other classes. Jane's captivity in the red room represents the separation of dependents and social others from the rest of society, and how the upper classes expressed such disdain towards them, that they ought to be locked away and removed from society. She also refers to herself, in their language, as "a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities; a useless thing, incapable of serving their interest, or adding to their pleasure; a noxious thing" (28). The strong wording here demonstrates the incredible contempt and pain that Jane has experienced at the hands of the Reeds. They have treated her so poorly that she considers herself a "noxious thing," not even worthy of being called a 'child,' or a 'girl.' This cruel definition depicts the harsh animosity between the classes, so strong and fervent that not even a dependent child was spared.

After her traumatic experience in the red room, Jane finally musters the courage to defend herself to her aunt, proclaiming that she will tell everyone the truth about her life at Gateshead. Jane accuses her aunt of being a deceitful and hard-hearted woman, and then feels elated. She explains, "Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph I had ever felt" (48). This is the first of several instances in which Jane defends herself to others, beginning her development into a more confident and mature woman. Jane refuses to be beaten by her society, and by her environment, and in this section, she begins speaking in revolutionary rhetoric, referring to herself as a "rebel slave" (24). In rebelling against Mrs. Reed's treatment of her, Jane feels the spirit of revolution instilled within her. She is motivated

throughout the novel to challenge authority and convention from this childhood moment of victory.

In the nineteenth century, a governess was not a well-respected position, since it still involved a woman working for wages, which was considered significantly unfeminine. Many families would treat their governess like a family member, providing a home and pseudo-family for her. For middle class women such as Jane, becoming a governess was the last option, and marriage was the first. Failure to find a husband could result in women pursuing governess positions, or joining a convent of nuns.

Representations of governesses in literature and society often alluded to the Victorian woman's sexual aggression, according to Sandra M. Gilbert. A governess was an anomalous position for a woman, as she was "not a mother, [but she] nevertheless performed the mother's tasks; not a prostitute, she was nevertheless suspiciously close to other sexualized women; not a lunatic, she was nevertheless deviant simply because she was a middle-class woman who had to work and because she was always in danger of losing her middle-class status and her 'natural' morality" (Gilbert 14). The complexities of the governess position that Gilbert mentions all imply that she is a social Other, unable to fit in with a homogenous social class, setting her outside the social order she observes. Governesses were categorized as social Others because in the eyes of society, the fact that they worked to earn a living disqualified them from being able to be defined as traditional women. Resembling dependents, governesses were treated with similar disdain and disrespect from their societies. In the party scene at Thornfield, the haughty aristocrat Blanche Ingram demonstrates this contempt for governesses when she repeatedly insults Jane. Both Blanche and her mother discuss the stupidity of

governesses, referring to the ones of their past as “half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi” (179). The Ingrams continue, and recall the supposed incompetency and caprice of their past governesses, and though it is brought to their attention that Jane, “one of the anathematized race” is listening, they do not care and even talk more on the subject (180). Since, to the upper class Ingrams, governesses are not in an identifiable class, they are therefore unworthy of basic respect.

Additionally, Brontë’s satirical portrayal of this ideal Victorian woman provides a comical commentary on the drastic differences between the social classes. The upper class often looked down upon the bourgeoisie and poorer classes with strong disdain, and Blanche’s overdramatic hatred for Jane and her social class is a caricature of this sentiment. Both she and her mother strongly speak against governesses, informing Jane, and everyone at the little party, that they follow the unspoken rules of their social class, and have contempt for the classes below them. Blanche insists that “the whole tribe” of governesses is “a nuisance” and her mother agrees, claiming she has “suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice” (179). This melodramatic conversation is exemplary of the disdain the upper classes had for the lower classes, and how rude they were towards them. When told that Jane is listening, and that they ought to keep their voices down, Lady Ingram scoffs at the idea of hiding her disdain. She proudly states, “I noticed her; I am a judge of physiognomy, and in hers I see all the faults of her class” (180). Blanche and her mother are playing the part of the rich and condescending woman quite well, as they are condescending and patronizing towards Jane, the social Other, proudly setting themselves above her with stories of her ‘race’s’ incompetency. The ‘faults’ that Lady Ingram speaks of are subjective faults, insignificant and assigned to the

governess 'tribe' in order to keep them in a lower social position. The Ingram women are so wrapped up in their image and class status they feel it necessary to speak on subjects in a manner that justifies their social standing. They are displaying their status (above Jane) as plainly as they can, just so it is certain that Jane will know that her place will always be below them.

Despite being a social Other as a governess, Jane uses the position as a means of increasing her power and agency, particularly in her relationships with Rochester and Adele. She has never had power over someone, and as Adele's governess, she is responsible for teaching and taking care of her, adding a maternal aspect to the role. Jane's adoption of maternal characteristics does not weaken her agency, as the Victorian society would have liked; rather it affords her more power. As a governess, Jane is granted a specific kind of authority over Adèle, as well as Rochester. This authority is a maternal kind, which, according to Poovey, "[conferred] upon [women] extraordinary power over men" (Poovey 8). Rather than obeying social convention and taking the governess position as a lowly one, Jane challenges the stereotype of governess and uses her position to gain agency over a man, granting her more economic, and sexual power. Jane's development from Gateshead to Thornfield has resulted in a creation of a stronger agency; her adoption of maternal characteristics in the governess position affords her more power over her employer, and finally gives her the control, and the voice she was deprived of as a child. She acknowledges this change, declaring, "all is changed about me" (296). All has certainly changed about Jane; in being exposed to the inequality of society, she came to be more outspoken about the oppression, and aware of the rights

women deserved. Jane's embrace of New Woman characteristics such as self-empowerment and outspokenness, increase her agency as a governess and as a woman.

Though she was more empowered as a governess, women of the mid-Victorian era were quite limited in their agency and social abilities, due to the laws of coverture. The time of publication of *Jane Eyre* was a period of reform, specifically in terms of women's roles in society. The legalization of the Matrimonial Causes Act finally gave women a legal identity and the ability to file for divorce. Specifically, the laws of coverture identified which subjects could own property, and since women were considered 'nonsubjects,' they could not own land. As nonsubjects, women could not possess themselves or their labor, barring them from working: they were the property of their husband. Thus, when a woman married, she surrendered all money, land, and agency to her husband, becoming completely dependent on men. According to Mary Poovey, the Act was the first major legislation that addressed the "anomalous position" of married women under the laws of coverture (Poovey 51). Poovey describes the laws of coverture as dictating that "married women were legally represented or 'covered' by their husbands because the interests of husband and wife were assumed to be the same; as a consequence, married women were not 'bound' as individual subjects by contracts, debts, or some criminal laws" (Poovey 51). The laws of coverture clearly put women in a paradox; while they did have legal representation, they did not have their own legal representation, because they were nothing more than their husband's property, an extension of him. Though the Matrimonial Causes Act gave women more of a voice, they were still subservient to their husbands according to social protocol. Under these

restrictive laws, the wife is not separate from the husband, something that Jane refuses to accept when she marries Rochester.

In having Jane object to the demeaning marital tradition of Victorian society, Brontë offers a strong argument against such a submissive convention. Marriage in the Victorian era is a sort of commodification of women, as they were more or less bought and sold to their husbands on account of their dowries, properties, and social class privilege. Since women were considered a man's property, they had no independence of their own and were completely dependent on their husbands for economic stability, political and legal representation, and a social identity. For Jane, this commodification of women is seen in the frequent description of marriage in terms similar to harems, whorehouses, and slavery. Jane frequently compares being a mistress of Thornfield to being a slave; she feels that by accepting Rochester's marriage proposal, she will become an equivalent of a girl in a seraglio, and will then be like a Victorian prostitute, essentially being paid to be a mistress/wife. When shopping for wedding dresses, Jane states that Rochester's smile "was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (267). Here, Jane identifies with the slave, and Rochester with the sultan, implying that if he is to control their marriage, she will lose her agency and become his slave. Jane boldly informs him that if he wants a slave for a wife, he should "[away to] the bazaars of Stamboul without delay, and lay out in extensive slave-purchases," for she "will not stand [him] an inch in the stead of a seraglio, so don't consider [her] an equivalent for one" (267). Here, Jane is quite certain of who she is and what she wants, and is not afraid to stand up to her fiancée and inform him of how she wants their marriage to be. This is radical, as the wife would not have a

say, and yet, Brontë is purposefully giving Jane a strong voice in order to convey to her audience how the unequal condition of women in Victorian society should be improved.

This taboo notion of marriage as a form of economic prostitution is interesting, as women had two options in Victorian society, to be the angel or the whore, a dichotomy which would categorize Jane as moving towards being labeled a whore, of sorts, on account of her sexualized speech. Kate Washington addresses these notions of prostitution within the Victorian marriage, and criticizes “the intersection of women's sexuality with their economic dependency” (Washington). Jane’s unique autonomy is most certainly, as Washington states, the “solution to the seemingly insoluble problem of female economic dependence, and the resultant parallel between prostitution and marriage” (Washington). Washington notes that Jane is an exception to the conventional portrayal of women, as they are either depicted as the ‘whore’ or the ‘angel of the household.’ However, the combination of Jane’s romantic, often sexualized rhetoric would actually categorize her as a whore rather than an angel, for she does not obey the patriarchy in an angelic way. Jane frequently speaks of her feelings for Rochester in growing and swelling terms, similar to sexual arousal, and their witty repartee can also be interpreted as sexual foreplay. Jane declares outright, “I am not an angel...and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself,” blatantly acknowledging the standards placed on her by society, and then rejecting them (258). As she is not an angel, and does not wish to play the role of a “celestial” and virtuous being, Jane is therefore categorized as the whore, and has the language to prove it. When Rochester sings her a love song, Jane responds with an impassioned few sentences that depict her sexual arousal. She states,

He rose and came towards me, and I saw his face all kindled, and his full falcon-eye flashing, and tenderness and passion in every lineament. I quailed

momentarily—then I rallied. Soft scene, daring demonstration, I would not have; and I stood in peril of both: a weapon of defence must be prepared—I whetted my tongue as he reached me. (271)

These few lines depict Jane's arousal and embrace of her sexuality. She is excited by Rochester's 'kindled' face, full of sexual 'passion,' and as she decides to act upon her arousal, she sharpens her tongue, preparing to engage again in their conversational foreplay. The use of 'whet' in this sentence notes Jane's sharpening of her tongue, readying herself for the repartee; yet the word's homophone, 'wet,' implies that Jane is preparing her mouth so she may kiss Rochester. This interesting word play demonstrates that while Jane recognizes her attraction to Rochester, she will not be dominated so easily, as she is no angel waiting for a man to own her. Jane's weapon of defense against Rochester's dominating masculine sexuality is the embrace and utilization of her own, something that categorizes her as the whore, but empowers her as a New Woman. Since she is explicit in her sexual desire for Rochester, Jane demonstrates that she most certainly is no angel, but that she is also no whore either, as she does not allow herself to fully give in to Rochester. This indistinct categorization is what is empowering for Jane, as she cannot be easily sorted into the binary of femininities for women.

Jane's objection to becoming subservient to Rochester in their marriage is noteworthy, as it defies the image of woman set forth by the laws of coverture at the time. If she is to continue as Adèle's governess, Jane retains her autonomy; if she does not, she would become Rochester's property once they wed, losing her ability to support herself. In arguing for her economic independence, Jane compares herself to Rochester's former lover, Céline Varens, who demanded material representations of Rochester's affections, such as cashmeres and diamonds. Jane declares, "I will not be your English Céline



Varens. I shall continue to act as Adèle's governess: by that I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money, and you shall give me nothing but (...) your regard" (268). Jane's demand to be considered differently from Céline demonstrates her strong beliefs against the type of femininity that Céline exemplified. Jane criticizes and distances herself from the vapid aristocratic standard of feminine behavior, as seen in Céline and Blanche. This demonstrates her desire to be a different woman, which anticipates the emergence of a truly revolutionary model for women, specifically, the New Woman. Céline represents the 'whore' stereotype, but Jane cannot be categorized as the 'angel,' because that would imply that she obeys most social conventions regarding gender, which she does not.

Both Washington and Maurianna Adams take issue with Jane's marriage, arguing that the social conventions hinder her independence, yet it is the significance of her objection to Rochester's ownership of her that marks the marriage as unique and equal. Washington remarks that Jane's request for equality in her marriage is "deeply ironic, for she could not be paid by Rochester if she were his wife because he would, by law of coverture, be paying himself. Still, she seems to think that the symbolic act of working for her keep would protect her from dependency and mistresshood in marriage" (Washington). This notion does not take into account the principle of Jane's actions—even if Jane's actions are 'ironic,' the fact that she demands that she still be allowed to work and earn a living separate from her husband is significant. If she were adhering to social conventions, Jane would have accepted Rochester's gifts and supremacy, along with the position of dependency that they impose. However, Adams argues "the degradation of a dependent marriage to a social superior would alienate Jane from her

better self” (Adams 155). Certainly, if Jane were to submit herself to this marital loss of autonomy, she would be alienated from her best self—the self that adopts the radical characteristics of the New Woman. Thus, Jane does not submit herself to Rochester, for as seen in her rejection of his gifts and discomfort at the position they assign her, she refuses to be bought, and will only accept an equal marriage between them.

Though she initially rejects and negotiates Rochester’s marriage proposal, when she chooses to accept, he begins doting upon Jane, essentially buying her as a wife, claiming his ownership of her through his gifts. If he clothes and cares for her, he exerts his dominance. Jane is quite alienated by this, revealing, “the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation” (267). The purchasing of her exterior is equivalent to the purchase of her inner soul, and that frightens and frustrates Jane. Jane does not want to be underneath anyone, especially her husband, as she would lose her autonomy completely. Rochester would therefore dominate Jane not only economically, but sexually as well. Jane’s objection to being purchased is her objection to being Rochester’s angel, stating that if she is forced to be “dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester,” she will instead “wear nothing but [her] old Lowood frocks” (267). This moment of Jane bantering with Rochester not only provides a moment of comic relief, but also depicts Jane in a moment of rebellion. Jane is rebelling against the marital tradition of the commodification of women, and in doing so she is asserting her political beliefs about the equality of women. A woman should not be purchased through clothing or material goods, or dressed like their husband’s doll.

Through Jane, Brontë offers a social commentary on the woman’s place, displaying an exemplary alternative to the traditional ‘angel of the house’ archetype.

Jane's desire to be her husband's equal as opposed to his property was innovative. A successful Victorian marriage was thought to be contingent upon women being forced to forfeit their property rights, and complete independence. For Jane, this is not the case as she inherits (and keeps) money from her relatives only at the very end of the novel, and also rejects the practice of 'prostitution,' as Washington describes, since she refuses to allow Rochester to buy her. As a result of this steadfast commitment to her independence, Jane and Rochester end the novel as equals. Jane herself even states, "I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (439). The unified partnership of Jane and Rochester is Brontë's example for women, as she is imploring them to abandon the traditions of submissive femininity in pursuit of equality. Jane also passionately cries, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (252). What should be noted is that here, Jane does not refer to herself as a woman, or a female, but as a human, which implies that she and Rochester are already equals because they are both human. The net that cannot ensnare her is the net of the patriarchal society, seeking to trap women in confining gender roles and limit their independence. This equality starts within the home, within the confines of marriage. From these statements, it is evident that Jane does not fit the 'angel' stereotype; rather she denounces it for enslaving her.

### **Pretty in Pink<sup>2</sup>: Challenging Victorian Femininity**

Brontë's commentary on women's roles in high society prompts the reader to question Victorian conventions through a comparison of Jane to several other characters, including Blanche Ingram, Adèle Varens, and Georgiana Reed. An analysis of these female characters in relation to Jane's own reveals her nontraditional performance of

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<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the title of 'Pretty in Pink,' written by John Hughes. (1986).

femininity. Brontë posits the questions of what femininity is, and what the proper performance of femininity is. Which is the ideal woman, Blanche or Jane? One performs an artificial masquerade, while the other critiques it as an empty charade.

In addition to the issue of class being introduced early in the novel, Brontë also addresses the question of feminine beauty and how the influence of social class allowed for a subjective and exclusive definition of femininity. Wealth was equated with beauty, and as seen in Blanche, a physical portrayal of one's wealth, through jewels and regal fashions, was the norm for upper class women. Plain attire was expected for poorer women, as they could not afford the lavish and ornate fashions of the wealthier women. From a young age, Jane is exposed to this discrepancy, which notes how early the ideal image of Victorian femininity was imposed upon young girls. Jane is nothing like her cousin, Georgiana Reed, who is described by Jane as being a captivatingly pretty girl. She compares herself to Georgiana, noting that her cousin is the one who gets what she wants just because of her looks: "[Georgiana's] beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault" (27). This establishes an early point of comparison for Jane, as her cousin is the conventional portrayal of Victorian beauty, and she is not. Jane's abuse at Gateshead Hall is not only attributed to her dependent status, but also to her plain appearance. Bessie and Miss Abbot sympathize with Jane, but comment on her looks nonetheless. They too come to the conclusion that if she were prettier like Georgiana, it would be easier to be kind to her:

'If she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that.'

'Not a great deal, to be sure,' agreed Bessie: 'at any rate a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition.' (38)

Here, Bessie and Miss Abbot demonstrate the superficial treatment of women, reflecting the sentiments of the Reeds and the rest of Victorian society. The fact that the importance of conventional Victorian beauty is emphasized at such a young age is crucial, as it shapes Jane and her reactions towards her later experiences. If polite and kind treatment is synonymous with beauty, and poor treatment with a lack thereof, Jane can easily justify her mistreatment on the basis of her appearance. Through this distorted mindset, Brontë offers a critique of Victorian society and its notions of femininity, implying that a woman is worth much more than her appearance.

Through Blanche, Brontë satirizes and critiques the Victorian perception of beauty. Her exaggerated performance of an aristocratic woman is an empty charade, as she is only acting how she believes the perfect woman in the upper class would act. Her haughty and classist attitude towards lower classes and governesses in particular directly antagonizes Jane. Brontë's contrast between the two female characters begs the reader to question conventional femininity and its implications. The juxtaposition of Blanche's exaggerated, self-conscious performance with Jane's kind and modest personality, physically portrayed in her "Quakerlike" plain dress, highlights Brontë's criticism of women like Blanche.

Physically, Blanche is the picture of aristocratic perfection, yet her dramatic performance of Victorian perfection has a satirical function. Blanche serves as a foil to Jane, with her almost comically dramatic appearance contrasting Jane's plain and honest features. This juxtaposition can be interpreted as a commentary on the appearance of the ideal aristocratic woman, and Victorian femininity. Upon their first meeting, Jane describes Blanche as riding on her horse with her "raven ringlets" gleaming through the

“veil streaming behind,” as she controls her horse with “her purple riding habit,” creating the image of “imperial dignity” and “the very type of majesty” indeed (169-176). The words that Brontë uses to describe Blanche are very elegant, creating an image of elite royalty, down to the minute detail of her purple riding habit. The color purple is often associated with royalty, and the combined effect of the habit, the “diamond rings,” “gold bracelet” and shining hair creates an image of a queen. This overdramatic depiction of wealth begs the audience to question its sincerity. The thematic function of Blanche’s physical beauty is to contrast Jane’s plain countenance, and question which is the more attractive feminine presentation. She wears her jewels and regal adornments, presenting a glimpse of all of her material wealth, the only thing that matters to her. Sandra Gilbert addresses Blanche’s glittering exterior, asserting that she is literally offering herself as “a sexual trophy on the marriage market” to Rochester (Gilbert 360). Gilbert’s statement here presents Blanche as a Victorian version of the modern-day ‘trophy wife,’ since her portrayal of material wealth demonstrates her significance as a material object herself, as a prize to be won, glittering like a human trophy. This materialistic nature is Brontë’s caricature of the Victorian aristocrats; she emphasizes Blanche’s physical description in order to present an embodiment of the class’s one obsession, wealth.

However, Blanche’s performance of femininity is empty, and demonstrates her insecurities about her class, and her role as a woman. Jane describes Blanche as being the epitome of ‘majestic’ Victorian beauty, comparing her to the Roman goddess Diana, yet she also notes that there is a self-conscious air about her, which concerns Jane. Why would a woman who seemingly has everything need to be self-conscious? Perhaps because her performance of this ideal Victorian woman is fictitious. The overt

extravagance of Blanche's dress and performance of upper class luxury is quite 'showy,' as Jane observes, and this show is Blanche's performance of typical Victorian femininity. Immediately, Jane states that Blanche was "very showy, but she was not genuine" (188). In performing this way, Blanche is attempting to convince Mr. Rochester that she is the ideal Victorian woman that he wants to marry. Of course, in order to achieve this, Blanche must also convince the other guests that she is this ideal aristocratic woman. Jane observes this, noting that Blanche "appeared to be on her high horse to-night; both her words and her air seemed intended to excite not only the admiration, but the amazement of her auditors, she was evidently bent on striking them as something very dashing and daring indeed" (182). Jane's description of Blanche being determined to impress her company further demonstrates her inauthenticity. Her attempts at captivating the entire party are lost on Jane, who is able to see right through her performance.

In addition to creating an insecure performance of femininity, Blanche also struggles in performing according to her aristocratic social class. The essential Victorian woman, who was an embodiment of all upper class ideals, was thought to be a beautiful lady, dressed in rich clothes, displaying her luxury, and captivating everyone around her just with her appearance. Blanche is desperate to fit this image, adorned in "diamond rings," "gold bracelets," "glistening satin"—all part of her costume as "an accomplished lady of rank" (187). She is, as Jane states, "remarkably self-conscious," for if she does not win Rochester's hand in marriage, her performance of femininity has failed her. Jane, and the reader, is easily able to see through Blanche, and conclude that her charade will certainly fail her. Observing the performance, Jane realizes, "This was where the fever was sustained and fed: she could not charm him" (189). Blanche is desperate to portray

her wealth and economic value to Rochester, but her performance is unsuccessful, and both Rochester and Jane see right through her. Both Blanche and her mother are “magnified puppets,” which emphasizes the aspect of performing conventional Victorian aristocratic femininity (191). The Ingrams are inauthentic, as their femininity is constructed and controlled by their society. The patriarchy holds the puppetry strings, and the Ingrams dance accordingly. Jane is not jealous of Blanche, since she knows that this haughty and false display of femininity will not win Rochester: “Her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness” (189). Clearly, Blanche is an unoriginal person, unable to ‘bloom spontaneously,’ because she is blooming according to the aristocracy’s gender restrictions. She is not “original,” as Jane describes, “ she never offered, nor had an opinion of her own” (189). Indeed, Blanche’s lack of authenticity does not give her the advantage she desires; it instead hinders her. She is only a puppet repeating the opinions of the aristocrats she so desperately wishes to emulate. Blanche’s vapid charade is a criticism of the aristocratic Victorian woman, arguing that women who perform similarly to Blanche will be similarly unhappy.

A similar, and yet different portrayal of femininity, Adèle Varens, offers insight into how young an age women were trained to perform their femininity according to society’s standards. An analysis of Adèle demonstrates how the conventions of womanhood were imposed upon girls at such a young age that they became second nature to them, practically synonymous with their characters. Adèle is an impressionable young girl, and because of this, she is a blank canvas ready to be shaped and molded by society’s impositions. As a result of this, Gilbert suggests that Adèle is a doll, able to



perform her femininity exactly as society wants, just as an actual doll is exactly what her owner wants her to be. Gilbert describes Adèle as a “living doll, plainly in training for the career of polished coquetry” (Gilbert 359). She wears “rose-colored satin” dresses, a crown of rosebuds, “silk stockings” and “white satin sandals,” all creating an image of a perfect little Victorian girl doll, dressed in her pretty little pink dress. Society has imposed an image of femininity that values coquetry, frills, the color pink, everything that is associated with a hyper-feminized image of girlhood. In describing Adèle, Rochester says, “coquetry runs in her blood, blends with her brains, and seasons the marrow of her bones” (145). The conventions of Victorian femininity have been so imposed and engrained in Adèle that they have now been integrated into her personality. She is synonymous with the pink silk frocks and girly chassées, as they are the signifiers of girlish femininity. With these clothes and adornments, Adèle is being prepared to enter Victorian society as a ‘proper’ and ‘polished’ lady, with the imposed image of the coquette along with it.

Though she is confronted with these explicit manifestations of Victorian femininity, Jane remains steadfast in her beliefs, rejecting convention and defining femininity for herself. Jane declares, “Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel” (116). Here, Jane rejects the notion that men and women are unequal, specifically in terms of emotional capacities. This is a very strong statement from Brontë advocating for women’s equality. Jane proclaims,

It is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that [women] ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (117)

Perhaps the strongest statement vouching for women's rights, Jane's declaration solidifies her position as a New Woman figure. Jane boldly denounces the subjected position of women in society, but she also criticizes men for condemning and laughing at women who seek to improve their social, economic, and political positions. The one major hindrance to women's equality is the men who continue to champion misogyny by undermining women's efforts to 'do more' and 'learn more' than society deems is acceptable. This bold critique of the patriarchal society strongly places Jane in line as anticipatory of the New Woman. Just as the New Woman would, Jane criticizes the men of society for assigning women to a dependent and domestic state, and in doing so, she is arguing for a woman that defies such a role, and for men to allow women to rebel against it, too. She is boldly critiquing the patriarchy, and subtly demanding change on the accounts of both sexes.

Though often labeled as a retelling of the classic Cinderella fairytale, Jane is a feminist re-interpretation of Cinderella, much stronger and bolder than the classically feminine protagonist, and most certainly not a damsel in distress. Rather than the passive Cinderella, Adams argues that, "we have in Jane a Cinderella reimagined, unsubmissive, and unrelenting on the issues of paying her own way and of being loved for her better moral and personal qualities" (Adams 155). As Adams states, Jane is an enhanced Cinderella, bolder in speech, economically and politically driven—all of which is reflected in the New Woman. In her unconventional behavior, Jane exhibits traits of the New Woman, which separates her further from the Cinderella myth. Unlike Jane, Cinderella suffered silently at the hands of her stepfamily, and was only offered an escape by external forces, namely her fairy godmother and her prince. Jane's autonomy

proves that she is the opposite of the classic damsel in distress; she is actually her own hero. Jane becomes the hero on two occasions, saving her prince when he is injured from falling off his horse, and from escaping a terrible fire. Then, Jane is granted authority over Rochester, as she is the one taking care of him, rather than Prince Charming taking care of Cinderella.

### **The House that Built Me<sup>3</sup>; The Influence of Space on Jane's Development**

Throughout her tumultuous life, Jane comes to live in several different grand places, each controlling and influencing her with its architecture and gendered spaces. Each of these spaces, from Gateshead Hall, to Lowood Institute, to Thornfield Hall, presents Jane with a specific image of femininity. Jane confronts these images, choosing to learn from them and develop her own character in defiance of them. There is a lesson to be learned at each of these stages in Jane's transformation, with each place functioning as a small turning point in Jane's bildungsroman narrative. These various places build Jane's character; she chooses to go against the image of femininity that they promote, resulting in her ultimate transformation into an empowered woman.

In her early stages at Gateshead and Lowood, Jane seeks refuge in the windows of the homes because they signify an escape as well as protection, a paradox that is extended to her pursuit of a liberating form of servitude. The windows all hold Jane inside, but allow her to pine for what she can see, similar to how a dependent, or governess position provide stability, but also a form of oppression. At Gateshead, Jane shrouds herself in a curtain by a window, peering into a book about exotic worldly travels. The curtain serves as a barrier that protects and isolates Jane from the Reeds, which, as Adams argues,

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<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the song 'The House That Built Me' by Miranda Lambert.

“reinforces her identification both with interior space (she daydreams over her book) and with the barren landscape on the other side of the uncurtained window pane” (Adams 141). Here, Maurianna Adams notes that Jane identifies the interior world with repression and the outside world with escape and freedom. Jane is so close to the unrestrained outside world, but is trapped inside.

When at Lowood, Jane also frequently visits her window, depressed about her life inside the institution. Upon gazing out the window for the last time, Jane has a revelation, and states,

My eye passed all other objects to rest on those most remote, the blue peaks: it was those I longed to surmount; all within their boundary of rock and heath seemed prison ground, exile limits. I traced the white road winding round the base of one mountain, and vanishing in a gorge between the two: how I longed to follow it further! (93)

The excitement that Jane experiences from dreaming about an escape from Lowood motivates her to seek a new servitude. Jane desires a new form of labor because she wants more freedom and control over her own life. This wish for independence in a workplace comes to Jane through the governess position, as it is a form of servitude that Jane transforms into an influential role. The windows she gazes out of function as a symbol for what Jane seeks in a position of service: a position of servitude to earn money and gain power and independence. The window offers Jane seclusion and protection, as well as an accessible view to the outside world, rendering her inside and outside at the same time.

The specific design of the spaces at Lowood is meant to forcibly impose Christian piety in its most extreme form onto its pupils. Jane arrives at Lowood Institute in the midst of “rain, wind, and darkness,” foreshadowing the dark side of the Christian faith

that she will soon encounter within the looming set of buildings ahead of her (53). When she enters the Institute, Jane describes its imposing interior decorations, dimly illuminated by a dying fire. She notes the “shining mahogany furniture,” and how the bedroom is just like the schoolroom, “very long,” and arranged in long rows (55). The eating space is similarly arranged, and Jane remarks that it is “a great, low-ceiled gloomy room” (55). The uniformity of the bedroom, the intimate sleeping space, and the public learning and eating spaces demonstrate the value of conformity in society; anything or anyone that defied the set order of a social, or in Lowood’s case, a religious, institution, would be punished. Additionally, the plain decoration of the spaces emphasizes the Christian practice of denying indulgences as a means of being a better Christian. This explains the overall simple and minimalistic decoration of the Institute; the lack of ornate décor reflects the Christian values of self-denial, such as denying oneself indulgent foods. Instructors at the Lowood Institute set out to force its pupils into Christian piety, often literally beating humility, obedience and submission into them. These values were what Victorian society declared an ‘ideal’ woman was to have, as she was meant to be the property and subject of her husband, silent, obedient, and reliant on him.

When Jane first arrives at Thornfield Hall she is immediately “dazzled” and intrigued by the home, foreshadowing the mysteries and enchantments yet to come. From her experience at Thornfield, Jane learns how to value herself in a society that perpetually oppresses her in social, economic, and political spheres. When she first sees the grand estate she notes that it seems “cheerless,” “cold” and “eerie” (105). Thornfield’s interior involves a lot of oak and church-like structure, giving Jane a “very stately and imposing” impression (106). The imposing impression that Jane senses is the manifestation of the

misogynistic society through Thornfield's architecture and interior design. She then tours the dining room, finding it to be decorated in rich grandeur with regal "purple chairs and curtains, a Turkey carpet, walnut-paneled walls," and even a purple "spar," or crystal (111). Jane proclaims that she has "never before seen any [room] half so imposing" (111). According to Mark Girouard, a dining room in the nineteenth century had a masculine connotation to it, and was therefore decorated as such. An imposing and traditional Victorian man would design his dining room to reflect his own person. From the description of the dining room, it is evident that Rochester considers himself a powerful man of high class and culture. The prominence of the color purple in the room suggests Rochester's wealth, as well as his higher social status, and the exotic and extravagant items that decorate the room further display his own imposing and dominating masculinity.

In contrast, the drawing room was a considerably more feminine space, and was decorated to encourage gossip, tea, and other ideal ladylike activities of the Victorian elite. According to Girouard, the spaces for these ladylike activities encouraged the "Victorian concern for morality [and] domesticity" (Girouard 286). In complete contrast to the imposing dining room, the drawing room of Thornfield Hall certainly encourages the conventional image of Victorian femininity, as it is described as being lighter altogether, and decorated so that it resembles a "fairy place" (111). Complete with a boudoir and plenty of flowers, it is clear that this room is intended for the gathering of aristocratic women. A Victorian boudoir was a room in which women would primp and lounge upon velvet chaises. The inclusion of this room in Thornfield is an overt command for women to perform their femininity in an obviously feminine space. Jane

observes that the room is “very pretty,” with its accents of red and crimson, and decorations of “pale Parian mantle,” and “sparkling Bohemian glass” vases (111). In specifically mentioning these two aspects of the room, Brontë draws attention to the fact that they convey femininity; the white marble mantle is the very color of purity, and the glass vases sparkle and glitter, as a properly primed Victorian woman should. This draws attention to the paradox of the Victorian woman, as she was meant to be pure, as well as sexually attractive. The contrast between the dark and strong dining room and the light and sparkling drawing room also draws attention to the house’s gendering of space according to Victorian gender roles. Women were expected to be the ‘lighter,’ quieter, and submissive gender, only concerned with appearance and fashion, as is reflected in their specifically gendered space of the drawing room, whereas strong masculine men were to present themselves as being formidable and imposing, as was expressed through the strength and darker color of the oak wood and impressive worldly treasures. These strict gender binaries are reflected in the gendered space of Thornfield Hall, encouraging each gender to stay in their respective space, and adhere to society’s expectations of them.

When Jane and Adèle join Rochester in the dining room after dinner, the gendered space of the room makes itself quite apparent, and Jane observes its influence on Adèle’s behavior. Rochester’s masculine authority is not only present in his physical being, but it is also clear in the decoration of the room itself, which allows his patriarchal control to be made visible. Jane states,

We were, as I have said, in the dining room: the lustre, which has been lit for dinner, filled the room with a festal breadth of light; the large fire was all red and clear; the purple curtains hung rich and ample before the lofty window and loftier arch: everything was still, save the subdued chat of Adèle (she dared not speak

loud), and, filling up each pause, the beating of winter rain against the panes. (136)

Since the dining room is a masculine space, it is under Rochester's authority. This masculine authority is enhanced/pronounced by the symbolic royalty of the purple curtains, which note his economic status as an "amply rich" gentleman. The color purple is known to signify regality and wealth; since wealth is equivalent to power, by association, these purple curtains are expressing Rochester's power in the house, and in the patriarchal society. Thus, Adèle, already primed to obey this patriarchal society, would not dare to speak louder than Rochester commands, since she is in his masculine space.

The fire that destroys Thornfield suggests the close relationship between Rochester and his house. Jane describes the burnt house as a "blackened ruin," saying that in its destruction, it has "the silence of death about it: the solitude of a lonesome wild" (414). The 'death' that Jane speaks of, is the death of the patriarchal control over her, her life, and her love. There are no rules now that everything has crumbled; she is free to write her own gender, character, etc. in the blank 'silence.' Yet, is this silence truly freeing? The destruction of Thornfield is equivalent to the destruction of all it stands for, namely a materialistic symbol of the patriarchy. What is significant is that Jane was only granted more powerful than her husband because he was injured in the fire. What does this say about the nature of equality in their marriage? Rochester is a strong, dominant masculine character, and until the end of the novel, he holds steadfastly to his principles, which are founded on misogynistic societal beliefs. A challenge of these beliefs comes in the form of the fall of Thornfield and the crippling of Rochester, both of which provide an opportunity for Jane to have more control and power in her marriage.



While the fall of Thornfield does allow Jane to assert her own form of dominance over Rochester, it is concerning that it has to take place in order for the two to truly become equals, as it suggests that perhaps their equality could not have happened without it. Since Rochester is blind and physically crippled, Jane becomes “his vision, [and his] right hand,” leading him and letting him depend on her for the most basic needs (439). Jane becomes the master and Rochester the dependent, and through this exchange of power, the two become complete equals, as both have experienced a role of more power, and a role of dependency. This role reversal would not have come about had Thornfield continued to stand, and that in itself demonstrates both a positive and negative conclusion. Jane states, “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” (439). As a result of the fall of the house, there is an elimination of social and economic barriers between Jane and Rochester, and they are both able to become equals—a commentary on the necessary equality of the sexes during the Victorian era. Yet this equality was clearly impossible, for without the destruction of the house, Rochester and Jane would not have been put on an equal platform. Jane’s autonomy comes at a very high price, the price of the ending of the era of the Great Houses. That the equality of the sexes is only possible through a complete devastation of the Great Houses can be interpreted as a commentary on the problems of the tradition itself. Though it affords Jane agency, the physical damage to both Rochester and Thornfield exemplifies the beginning of the end of the Great House tradition in England.

As will later be echoed in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Jane informs the reader of her encounters with the great house in her dreams. Both protagonists of *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* seem to memorialize the great houses, Thornfield Hall and Manderley, respectively, in their dreams so that they may always return to them. Cinderella's castle has been burned down, but Jane's remains to be built, for as a newly empowered woman, she has the ability to set new rules and have a unified marriage where the New Woman is not ignored, but is equal to her husband. With the fall of the stately Thornfield and the Great House tradition comes the rise of Jane, as a New Woman figure, leading as an example for Victorian women.

## Chapter Two:

### The Conflicted Woman in *Howards End*

*“Margaret had too firm a grip of life to make a fuss. She was, in her own way, as masterly. If he was a fortress, she was a mountain peak” (Forster 348).*

E. M. Forster's early-twentieth-century novel, *Howards End* (1910), follows sisters Margaret and Helen Schlegel, idealistic, cultured members of the wealthy upper class. Though members of the upper class themselves, the Schlegels are contrasted with the Wilcox family, another upper class family that is wealthier and more traditional than the sisters. The Wilcoxes display patriarchal characteristics, typical of the extreme upper class. The aristocrats of the novel, the Wilcoxes eschew everything that does not fit with their conventional Victorian world, including the idea of the New Woman, the lower class, and overall equality. These characteristics are threatened by the encroaching modernity of the city that the Schlegels represent. Forster's novel also contrasts the two physical spaces of Howards End and Wickham Place: one, a country manor house, owned by the Wilcoxes, and the other, a modern town house in London, owned by the Schlegels. The juxtaposition of these two homes draws attention to the conflicting sets of values they each display and embody with their architecture. Each place's architecture has certain authority over gender and class, as well as philosophy and mindset. These influences, I argue, have an overall detrimental affect on women, Margaret Schlegel in particular, who will be the primary focus of the chapter. She is the Schlegel sister who undergoes the most complex character shift from a New Woman, to a Victorian, and then back to a New Woman. Margaret's character fluctuates between the two ideals for the performance of femininity in the home, embracing one as a necessity for control, and abandoning one for agency and power. However, before adopting the characteristics of the New Woman, Margaret is first intrigued by the world of the Wilcox family, and assimilated into their family as Henry Wilcox's ideal second wife, embodying Victorian conventions of femininity. As she becomes more and more enchanted with the world of

the wealthy Wilcox family, Margaret loses her independent spirit, adhering to the submissive cultural norms that defined womanhood in the Edwardian era.

While the Schlegels merely inherited their fortune, the Wilcox family labored for theirs, engaging in business down in Africa. When adapting Bourdieu's model, this key difference provides not only a point of distinction in terms of actual capital, but also an explanation for their shared social class, but differing sentiments and values. In his treatise, 'Forms of Capital,' Bourdieu defines the distinctions among economic, social, and cultural capital. He states that economic capital is easily converted into money, while social and cultural forms of capital are both more abstract. Cultural capital is realized in an embodied, objectified, or institutionalized form, and all three focus on the valuing of intangibles, such as art and education (Bourdieu 85-88). With Bourdieu's work in mind, the Schlegels are clearly seen as having cultural capital in contrast to the Wilcoxes' economic capital. Nevertheless, the two come together in the upper class, a group that benefits from exploitative capital and centers on group privilege and exclusivity. The advantages of cultural capital are intertwined with the advantages of being a member of the upper class, as this status "provides each of [the group's] members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit" (88). Here, Bourdieu highlights the advantage of having the support of the wealthy inner circle; its exclusive nature enables members to get away with things because they have 'credit,' their membership. Both the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes are able to get away with certain things because they are members of the elite class, have their class's support, and thus, they act on credit.

Since they have cultural capital, the Schlegels scoff at the Wilcoxes for having no appreciation of the arts, particularly music, all of which are dear to the Schlegel sisters, and to the upper class. Aunt Juley begs Margaret to contemplate the Wilcoxes, asking, “Are they our sort? Are they likely people?” and “Do they care about Literature and Art? That is most important when you come to think about it” (8). Certainly the Wilcoxes do not care about these things, Henry especially, who only cares about maintaining his estate and keeping it from falling into ruin. This class difference is what Marx calls the “war of the classes,” the stark contrasts that build the foundation of the classist animosity. Susan Ostrander notes that the desire to be around ‘similar’ people to one’s own class was a common mindset in the twentieth century aristocracy, as it provided a sense of security within one’s class. As is displayed in Juley’s concerns, “there is a clear preference for being with people [similar to oneself], people they consider to be class equals, and with whom they feel comfortable. There is also a general sense of being better than other people” (Ostrander 35). Concerns such as these are portrayed in Juley, as well as in Henry and Margaret, and emphasize the exclusivity of the aristocrats, and Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital. The efforts that the upper class goes to in order to ensure that they remain on the top of the social ladder as one exclusive group are astounding, but perpetuate their circle. Henry Wilcox is a dramatic portrayal of this mindset, as he actively seeks to repress the lower classes to continue his own aristocratic reign.

Undoubtedly, the novel favors the wealthy classes, but draws much needed attention to this war through the dramatization of the conflict and disgust between Henry and Leonard, members of opposing social classes, and friends to the Schlegels. The

opening of the novel highlights this war of the classes with Forster, the narrator, stating, “We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. This story deals with gentlefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk” (47). At first glance, this quote is certainly cruel, but when read from a Marxist perspective, it satirizes the disdain for the lower classes on the part of the upper classes. Forster dramatically presents the social class structure of 1910s England as snooty aristocrats in contention with the pathetic lower and working classes. What is crucial in this quote is that Forster mentions those who ‘pretend’ to be gentlefolk, and includes them in the same class as the actual wealthy gentlefolk. This can be interpreted as foreshadowing Margaret Schlegel’s performance of aristocracy as Henry Wilcox’s wife. She must act and behave in such a way that she fits the mold Henry desires her to fill, which is that of the ideal Victorian woman: a woman who is obedient, submissive, agreeable, and nonthreatening. Upon marrying Henry, Margaret quickly abandons everything that would set her below him and his family. The war of the classes is naturally present in her mind, as she and her family compare themselves with the Wilcoxes and the Basts.

For Margaret Schlegel, a path of success to the top of the social ladder arrives through her marriage to Henry Wilcox, a recent widower. Following Victorian tradition, Margaret marries him and joins the upper echelon of her social class, eager to begin her new life. Henry Wilcox represents the capitalist system; he has earned his wealth in foreign investments and businesses, he oppresses women, and he asserts his masculine and upper class prowess on the lower classes without remorse. Despite these negative traits, he is the ideal candidate for a woman to marry, for he has his own fortune,

property, and an elevated social status. Over the course of the novel, Margaret changes for the worse, adopting traits and behaviors of Henry and the Wilcoxes. She fosters disdain for lower classes, views her sister differently, and even plays a role in her friend Leonard Bast's death. Only then does she become disenchanted with Henry's world and see how wrong she has been.

Critics of the novel have long debated Margaret's position as a feminist figure; many argue that she is not a New Woman, and though some maintain she is, much has been left out of the debate. Critic Alistair Duckworth goes so far as to say that she is 'as far from feminism as a woman can decently go,' and C. Morgan Drockwell claims that Helen is in fact more of a New Woman than Margaret is. Samantha Moore and Jane Eldridge Miller examine Margaret as a feminist figure, but they argue that she does not undergo development, and that in marrying Henry, her maternal characteristics become her weakest attributes. Yet, Margaret Schlegel is most certainly the character that undergoes much change and becomes a New Woman with more agency, and that is due in part to her adoption of maternal characteristics.

In this chapter, I examine the elements of Edwardian society through a Marxist lens in order to explain the suppression of the woman by the industrial patriarchy. Additionally, an analysis of the gendering of architectural spaces will provide evidence of how manor homes were constructed purposefully to prohibit women from exceeding their positions. A Marxist literary analysis of the Edwardian society that Forster provides offers an understanding of the social circumstances and aspects of material culture that inhibit the New Woman's development. I demonstrate how this New Woman is hindered, and then how she overcomes the obstacles that were cemented in the previous Victorian



Era. The materialistic culture of the Edwardian Era was fueled by a capitalist system, which favored wealthy upper class businessmen and oppressed women through means of commodifying her physical form.

Though *Howards End* takes place in the Edwardian Era, certain traditions of the previous Victorian Era were still in avid practice, and were still considered the conventions of society; these conventions affected every aspect of society, from gender roles to class consciousness. Following in the antiquated Victorian tradition, men had the majority of the power and influence in society; thus women were not afforded the same privileges and were encouraged to portray feminine aspects that reflected this hierarchy of gender. In order to lead a successful life, women were also advised to marry upwards along the social ladder, their primary role in a marriage being to care for their families and homes, dwelling in the private sphere while the husband controlled the public sphere. The ideal wife at this time was one who was steadfastly obedient and loyal to her husband, and would never forget her place, or her responsibilities to her husband, and by extension, the patriarchal society he represented. A woman's place was at her husband's side, dressed elegantly, reflecting her husband's material capitalist success as a type of accessory. This is the commodification of a woman, which ensures the masculinity and dominance of a man, an idea that will be further addressed in a later section.

### **Superficial Superstructure; Materialism, Culture, and Marxism**

The novel arguably portrays many of Karl Marx's theories and manifestos on the negative influence of capitalism on a society, which I contend are visible in the character of Leonard Bast, and his interactions with members of the bourgeoisie, the Schlegels, and the elite upper class, the Wilcoxes. For Marx, the modern capitalist

society, based on a system of production and exploitation of the proletariat worker, is descended from the feudal system. From the system of the Middle Ages, capitalism has transformed the production of peasant artisans and blacksmiths into industrialized factories, turning the individual work into social work. Marx asserted that with the integration of capitalism into market production, the worker became alienated from his product, resulting in much animosity between the working, and those above them.

Upon first meeting the Wilcoxes, the reader is informed of their capitalist ventures abroad in India, where they have exercised their capitalist reign and are making profits in poorer countries. As Marx states, what initially distinguished the upper class capitalists from the proletariat was their ability to control the working environment to their advantage, allowing for their fortunes to accumulate, at the expense of the working class. This “social power” that Marx speaks of is quite apparent in Forster’s portrayal of the Wilcox family. With such a social prowess, the elites are able to proliferate an ideology that supports their idea of the status quo, yet they modify them specifically to what they are able to hold, imposing their materialist notion of an ideal life onto a society that cannot afford it.

Since the upper class controls the values of society, they also control the value, or devaluing, of women as well. The class that does not wish to see women succeed will set the superstructure in such a way that favors the upper class male, and keeps women beneath them, as ‘Other,’ and social pariahs. Women, therefore, must fight against this classification. Rosemary Raymond Ruether, author of *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, addresses the New Woman as she emerges in society, challenging norms, and masculine commodification. They must, as Ruether declares,

fight for their “full humanity” (Ruether 4). Constantly oppressed, women are forced by sexist symbolism, characteristic of the capitalist system, to identify as ‘Other,’ and must therefore embrace the New Woman in order to fight for their humanity, their equality to men.

As *Howards End* is set in a society governed by a patriarchal aristocracy, men have the most power, and certainly do not support the idea of the New Woman, as it threatens their dominance over women, and society as a whole. Thus, they seek to oppress women into submissive positions, both private and public, in order to ensure their supremacy. Ruether describes the economic and social role of women, and their oppression due to sexual symbolism. She writes, “[sexism] also affects the identity and personal support system of such (male) liberals more than any other issue. Sexual symbolism is foundational to the perception of order and relationship that has been built up in cultures” (Ruether 3). The symbolic representation of women as weak and submissive figures encourages the myth that they are unequal to their male counterparts, and do not belong in the same social spheres. In a capitalist system, sexual symbolism is responsible for excluding women from the work force, and alienating them in society. The revolution against this sexual symbolism, Ruether argues, subverts the system and upsets social and economic order, resulting in a strong resistance to the New Woman from the men that she challenged. Ruether states, “Therefore, the liberation of women attacks the basic stereotypes of authority, identity, and the structural relations of ‘reality’” (Ruether 3-4). This ‘reality’ that Ruether speaks of is the society that values the oppression of women by the upper class male, one in which women constantly have to

fight for their legitimacy. I find that this reality is supported by the ideas Marx expresses on the restrictive capitalist industrial system.

According to Marx, the upper class had full control of the values of their society ('superstructure'), and manipulated the ideals in order to benefit themselves, which is portrayed in the struggle between Leonard Bast and Margaret. Margaret initially cares for Leonard as a dear friend, but when she climbs the social ladder to the ultimate position of power as Henry's wife, she adopts some of his traits, including disregard for lower classes. Margaret and Henry advise Leonard to change his stocks, which ruins him. Leonard confronts Henry and Margaret, and Charles Wilcox, enraged at Leonard's 'abuse' of Helen, charges him, causing him to fall and be crushed by a bookcase. This crash of the bookcase symbolizes Margaret's own world crashing around her. Up until this point in the novel, Margaret has wavered in her embrace of the strong New Woman, opting to side with Henry in most situations. With Leonard's tragic death, Margaret sees the errors of her ways, finally recognizing how the upper class has oppressed the lower classes for so long. This clash is physically represented in the crushing of Leonard, sparking a change in Margaret as she shifts from a submissive wife into confident woman. She has acknowledged the influence and control of the wealthy on the superstructure, which continually hinders the lower classes so much so that Leonard was killed by the pressure. This scene is crucial in understanding Margaret's transformation, as it is the catalyst for her final abandonment of conventional femininity, and embrace of an empowering maternal character.

## The Commodification of the Manor House Dream

With Marx's theories in mind, can Forster's *Howards End* be considered an accurate depiction of life in a great house in the Edwardian era? Was a woman really able to challenge gender norms, manipulate her husband, and then have actual power? Critics such as Outka have argued that it is not realistic, and Forster is distributing a flawed nostalgic vision of history. Arguing that he romanticizes the English country home, Outka accuses Forster of commodifying a falsified image of the past, but that it is in order to argue that society must change in order to have a better future. Labeling him as 'naïve,' Outka states that Forster seeks to simultaneously criticize and acknowledge the role of commerce in *Howards End*.

*Howards End* has been decaying for years and the Wilcoxes have struggled to maintain it with their fortune, but Outka asserts that this is integral in understanding the role of commerce and economic capital in Forster's novel. Understanding the role of commerce and capital is crucial in comprehending the decisions that characters make, as they are often characteristic of their social class. As economic capitalists, the Wilcoxes worked hard for their fortune, which was something that was frowned upon at this time. While their amount of wealth set them above the rest of society, they were not equal with families like the Schlegels, who kept their wealth in their family by means of inheritance. To assert themselves as exceptionally upper class, the Wilcoxes engage in a dramatic display of contempt for lower class families, such as the Basts. The juxtaposition of the two households, Bast and Wilcox, emphasizes the dramatic difference between the bustling London, full of modernity and industrialization, and the pastoral manor house in the quiet countryside.

Forster is selling the manor house as an ideal of the time period, but by juxtaposing the faltering home with the new furnishings of a modern London, he is demonstrating how it is unachievable and detrimental. A family's entire livelihood has been dedicated to its maintenance, yet they are still unable to protect it in the end, as it is an inappropriately romanticized lifestyle. A house that was dedicated to worshipping the past will detract from the embrace of the future. So rooted in the past, the great house tradition inevitably has to fade in order for a modern England to take shape. Elizabeth Outka's analysis of the novel does not recognize this; rather she argues that Forster is offering a nostalgic view of English manor house culture in order to sell a more pleasing, albeit distorted history.

Certainly, this juxtaposition of the two worlds is crucial to understanding the effect of modernity on the manor house, as the characters who infiltrate the elegant world of the upper class are from the modern world of London, slowly encroaching upon the manor house countryside. Outka writes, "For *Howards End* to survive, then, it must be rebuilt. It must become a place of paradox: separate from commercial urban spaces yet acknowledging the role of commerce in supporting such a 'purified' vision, and embodying a modern sense of time" (Outka 341). According to Outka then, *Howards End* should be distanced from the city, the place of commercial culture, yet aware of the impact of commercialism on the home itself. The role of commerce in a manor home cannot be ignored. Keeping them separate and 'purified' as Outka suggests, detracts from the significance of the relationship between the Schlegels/Wilcoxes and the Basts, which is a key element in analyzing the Marxist undertones of the novel. The superstructure of the society in *Howards End* is set by the Wilcoxes, and in keeping themselves so far

removed from the bustling city of London, where the Basts of the working class struggle, it is evident that Forster seeks to emphasize how one class detachedly governs another.

The elite aristocrats control the superstructure of their society in order to ensure their dominance over the lower classes, and to ensure their own status at the top of the social ladder. As a result of this manipulation, the superstructure is “the real foundation” of a society, and “[corresponds with] definite forms of social consciousness” (Marx, 1977). Essentially, it is a reflection of the ideal lifestyle of a culture, representing what one would strive for in life. Those who are conscious of their social class do everything they can to either change it, or to perpetuate it. Aspects of the superstructure are not always universally attainable, as the superstructure itself is established by the dominant class, typically the upper class, as they are the only ones who can achieve the ideal lifestyle they project onto their society as the superstructure. The upper class directly influences the lower class through the setting of the superstructure, an aspect of society that, Marx argues, keeps the lower class low, and the upper class up. Capitalism and materialism drive the upper class’s desires, and as Marx states, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1977). A man’s existence in his social class determines his mindset, not vice versa. Thus, the material desires of the wealthy aristocrats determine the superstructure of a society, and therefore define what they exist for. Since the aristocrats think of themselves as being ‘better’ than the classes below them, there is an obvious justification for their lifestyle and manipulated superstructure. Only the wealthy can afford the ideal lifestyle, and those who are above everyone else can too. In the case of *Howards End*, the social existence of the Wilcoxes at the top of the

social ladder is what those at the bottom strive for, and is what Margaret seeks to emulate when she becomes Henry's wife. The price of this social existence, however, is a demeaning assimilation, which Margaret responds to with a distorted acceptance.

With her assimilation Margaret is granted a sort of immunity that detaches her from her sister and from Leonard, a fact that is demonstrated in the lack of economic consequences she faces when confronting Leonard's death. Encouraged by Henry, both Schlegel sisters urge Leonard to pursue a different professional path, which ultimately results in his bankruptcy. Their consistent and unhelpful advice leads Leonard to trouble, yet they remain untouched. The repercussions of their discussions go unresolved, and they continue to sit on their perch above the lower class, full of Leonard Basts. Leonard often laments about his life in London, and the Schlegels are fascinated with the lifestyle of the Wilcoxes so much so that both sisters pursue members of the family in order to perhaps break the glass ceiling and join them. Their location, physically removed from society at Howards End, and socially above in the upper class, prevents them from being influenced or held accountable for their actions. They sit high on their Mt. Olympus, playing with the lives of those who live below them for entertainment. Once on an equal pedestal with the Wilcoxes, and having achieved social success, the Schlegels come to resemble the Wilcoxes in attitude and form. Just as the Greek gods in mythology are fascinated with the mundane lives of the mortals below, so too are the Schlegel sisters with Leonard and the plights of his lower class life.

Henry Wilcox encourages such classist behavior, advising Margaret to distance herself from Leonard so he does not forget his true place on the social ladder. The Schlegel sisters want to make a pet project out of Leonard and help him rise on the social



ladder, but Henry strongly opposes any interaction with him. He declares, “You must keep that type at a distance. Otherwise they forget themselves. Sad, but true. They aren’t our sort, and one must face the fact” (151). Henry is so vehement in his disdain for the lower classes that he forces Margaret to sever her ties with her friend, just so it is certain that Leonard knows his place and will not try to rise above it. He is above Leonard, and for that reason, he must not associate with him, and neither should his wife. Leonard’s death serves as a warning to the lower classes; they should not attempt to infiltrate the extreme upper class, as they are reaching beyond their means, and will inevitably suffer for it. Even when Margaret expresses justified guilt over her role in Leonard’s bankruptcy, Henry warns her to save her pity, since the lower class doesn’t deserve it.

He declares,

A word of advice. Don’t take up that sentimental attitude over the poor. See that she doesn’t, Margaret. The poor are poor, and one’s sorry for them, but there it is. As civilization moves forward, the shoe is bound to pinch in places, and it’s absurd to pretend that anyone is responsible, personally. (199)

Despite the fact that Henry is undeniably responsible for Leonard’s predicament, his elitist character doesn’t allow him to admit his guilt. His classist beliefs are so engrained in his being that his strong disdain for the lower class becomes indifference—he has no remorse for anything that happens to anyone below him, even if they have a relation to Margaret. Henry’s insensitivity is encouraged by the elitist attitude of his class; he is above the lower classes because he has worked for his fortune, and not everyone can be as wealthy as he. Henry’s social consciousness is most certainly defined by his amount of capital, as his wealth gives him access to the most elite class rank. Thus, he performs accordingly, enforcing the patriarchal and classist values upon Margaret, his own estate, and his children.

In this respect, it is quite easy to understand the change in Margaret's mindset and behavior as due to Henry's influence, and as she is introduced to this new lifestyle, she is eager to embrace it all and fill the hole of the little wife that Mrs. Wilcox left behind her. In marrying into Henry's world, Margaret relinquishes all agency she has unto her husband, just as upper class women were expected to do, and according to Ostrander: "Even in the most privileged class, women [lacked] freedom, independence, and influence over family decisions relative to men" (Ostrander 67). In *Howards End*, Ostrander's general work on nineteenth and twentieth century gender certainly manifests itself in the relationship between Henry and Margaret. Henry dominates his wife in every sense, forcing her to embrace a submissive feminine image so his may remain powerful. In one instance, the two are having a slight argument, and Henry snaps, grabbing Margaret's arm and telling her not to speak of Jacky, his mistress, ever again.

Forster writes,

'Margaret!' he exclaimed, loosing her arm impressively.  
'Yes-yes, Henry?'  
'I am far from a saint—in fact, the reverse—but you have taken me, for better or worse. Bygones must be bygones. You have promised to forgive me. Margaret, a promise is a promise. Never mention that woman again.'  
(...)  
'At all events, you mustn't worry,' he said. 'This is a man's business.' He thought intently. 'On no account mention it to anyone.' (259)

Certainly, this passage reflects some of the sentiments that Ostrander mentions regarding women being required to behave in a specific way in order to please their husbands. Here, Henry is clearly enforcing this expectation, ordering Margaret to never again mention something that upsets him, or involve herself in 'man's business.' In this instance, Margaret does not have the freedom to speak as she wishes or act independent of Henry's will—she is fully, and willingly sublimated.

During her time under the spell of the Wilcoxes and Howards End, Margaret and Henry interfere with Leonard's life, giving him career and life advice that eventually ruins him. When Leonard suffers as a result of their advice, he confronts them and Henry is relentless in his apathy. Margaret is horrified at Henry's indifference towards Leonard, though could it be that she is also concerned that it is a reflection of herself and this life she has chosen? She is as guilty as Henry for what happened to Leonard after he followed their advice, yet she responds with pity, and Henry with apathy—a reflection of the aristocratic disparity to the lower class. The feigned concern Margaret has for Leonard is portrayed in Henry, and when she recognizes it, she is terrified at who she is becoming. Her whole world comes crashing down around her when Leonard dies at the hand of Charles Wilcox and the falling bookcase, a pivotal moment that will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. The falling bookcase symbolizes Margaret's life at Howards End ending, along with the heralded manor house era.

### **The Gendering of Space: Architecture and Gender Roles**

The manor house is a physical embodiment of the values of the upper class—a grand demonstration of wealth and social standing. Only the immensely wealthy can afford these houses; therefore the society they control would naturally value these structures. Spaces in these houses were attributed to being of a particular gender, which enforced the 'proper' performance of gender roles within the house as well as society. In *Howards End*, the gendered spaces are so prevalent that they create a sense of the house as a living entity, making Margaret feel as if Howards End has its own heartbeat, perpetuating the Victorian lifestyle with every beat.

Manor homes served as a physical embodiment of class values, imposing the rules and morals of a society down to their most basic structure and design. As Mark Girouard, author of *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*, states, “[manor homes] were power houses—the houses of a ruling class” (Girouard 2). Girouard compares the men of these grand estates to medieval squires acting like kings, drunk on power (Girouard 2). This power was, of course, stemming from their social and economic prowess. The wealth of the upper class allowed them the opportunity to present their wealth in their home, whereas members of lower classes, such as the Basts, could not. This depiction of wealth is a tool of the aristocrats, used in preventing the social mobility of the lower classes. Such an “elaborate code of behavior was partly a defensive sieve or initiatory rite, designed to keep out the wrong sort of people,” according to Girouard (268). Indeed, the Wilcoxes follow this ‘code of behavior,’ as they actively discourage the social mobility of lower classes, specifically Leonard Bast. They feared the changes of the impending urbanization of the country, as it allows for the middle class to swell and become more prominent, increasing their power.

The two families at the top of the ladder are not invincible to the encroaching modernity and development of the countryside, a change that is depicted in the juxtaposition of the Schlegels’ home in Wickham Place, and the Wilcoxes’ Howards End. The two separate places offer glimpses into two worlds, soon to collide in the form of modernity and industrialization. Howards End is a preservation of English country house life, while Wickham Place is in the midst of a bustling and growing city. The two houses are representations of conflicting cultures, values, and practices, reflecting those of their

inhabitants. In placing these two homes in contrast with one another, Forster presents a physical embodiment of the war of the classes: the houses themselves.

Wickham Place, the home of the Schlegel sisters, is described as being an estuary, a metaphor which notes the home's physical location as being between London and the rural countryside, and the social location of the Schlegels between the Basts and the Wilcoxes. Wickham Place is primarily influenced by the modern city rather than the country, and it is evident from the description of the establishment that it was intended to provide inhabitants with the best of both worlds—existing just outside London, but attempting to make the manor house dream more accessible to the middle and upper middle class:

Though the promontory consisted of flats—expensive, with cavernous entrance halls, full of concierges and palms—[Wickham Place] fulfilled its purpose, and gained for the older houses opposite a certain measure of peace. These, too, would be swept away in time, and another promontory would rise upon their site, as humanity piled itself higher and higher on the precious soil of London. (7-8)

Since the houses are emulating the grand manor homes of the countryside, they will fade as the estates do, as the urbanization of London society slowly buries the golden era of manor houses beneath new modern complexes. In attempting to reflect the manor houses and make them accessible for members of the working and lower classes, constructors doomed their homes, as the manor houses should not be imitated, they should be allowed to fade and be 'swept away' under the coming waves of modernity. Wickham Place's function is to be a place of median existence, between the two extreme social classes. It is in the modern sphere of London, accessible to the industrial class, yet it is also a depiction of old money, a characteristic of the elites. It expresses these two qualities in its

‘expensive,’ yet peaceful nature; Wickham Place does not challenge any social status quo, rather it exists as a middle ground to both upper and lower classes.

Due to the rise of the working class during the Industrial Revolution, there was a displacement of control in the upper class. The wealthy were struggling to maintain their control over the lower classes as machines and factories improved and modernized. With modernism and industrialism came modern political views. These changes in the modern society infiltrated the grand homes of the countryside, resulting in drastic alterations, such as downsizing estates, hiring fewer servants, and being less formal overall (Girouard 308). A lack of servants represented a lack of control of the lower classes, inside and out of the house itself, as servants were from the lower classes. With a more empowered lower class, there were fewer servants in the homes—this tested the stability of the ideal aristocratic lifestyle. Furthermore, it indicated the beginning of the end of the manor house era, as there were fewer people to serve the wealthy few, who still perpetuated this superstructure. As Girouard states, “Country houses were no longer expected to express authority—not even ‘quietly and gravely’ as recommended by Gilbert Scott. The authority of country-house owners was being eroded all the time” (Girouard 306). If there are no servants to serve, nor are there poor men to be stifled by the wealthy, what differentiates the wealthy from them? Without their social status, they have nothing. Without classes beneath them, whether they are social or domestic, the upper class has lost all authority.

However, the woman cannot truly be free until the spaces in the manor homes are rendered genderless; she must question the manner in which spaces have been constructed in order to encourage strict gender role performances. Girouard offers an

overview of how spaces were gendered in manor homes, describing the materials that were used to construct a physical representation of gender. The drawing room was considered a feminine space, while the dining room was labeled as a masculine space (Girouard 292). In assigning women to the drawing room and men to the dining room, architects assigned stereotypical gender roles; women are social creatures who love to gossip and engage in meaningless, materialistic conversation, while men are expected to dominate educated conversation at dinner parties.

When Margaret explores Howards End for the first time, she is immediately aware of the overt gendered space, observing that they are condescending to women: “The room suggested men, and Margaret, keen to derive the modern capitalist from the warriors and hungers of the past, saw it as an ancient guest-hall, where the lord sat at meat among his thanes” (170). This imagery is an indication of the success of the room, as its overt masculine design is so apparent and imposing, that Margaret envisions the man of the home as a medieval lord, overseeing his underlings. The connotation of the word ‘lord’ implies ownership of the dining room itself, in addition to everything in the house. This includes the women of the house, as a feudal lord is a man of such stature that everyone he encounters is more or less obliged to acquiesce to his every wish. The fact that Margaret immediately pictures a lord inhabiting the space of the dining room emphasizes her shift in mindset; she imagines not only a man in complete power of the home, but an extremely powerful lord, who will certainly have power over her, as she would become one of his subjects.

Furthermore, when she explores the drawing room, Margaret describes it as being “sallow and ineffective. One could visualize the ladies withdrawing to it while their

lords discussed life's realities below, to the accompaniment of cigars" (171). Margaret acknowledges the gendered spaces of *Howards End*, but does not strongly condemn the submissive role of women that they encourage. In imagining the ladies sitting in the 'sallow' drawing room, and the men discussing the important 'realities' of life in another room, Margaret implies that forcing women to perform their femininity while men are allowed to recline and discuss their own meaningless prattle, is a sickly thought. Margaret welcomes this stereotype without question, dryly indicating that although the feminine spaces are 'sallow,' the house is nonetheless infiltrating her character. Though she is in awe of the house, she notes with a hint of irony, "The dining-room and hall revealed [beams] openly, but the drawing-room's was match-boarded—because the facts of life must be concealed from ladies?" (209). This slight architectural decision speaks volumes to women's roles in a manor home; they are relegated to the feminine space of the drawing room, built to accommodate their trivial gossiping and ladylike activities. The hidden beams reflect the aspects of the woman that the masters (read: men) of the manor homes hope to hide from the public. These aspects are everything that is not in line with the submissive wife that the patriarchal society requires. If a wife were to be more outspoken than she should be, she is to be reprimanded and taught the proper behavior of a lady. Thus, the hidden, submitted beams are symbolic of the hidden selves that women must conceal in order to please their husbands.

Furthermore, the physical materials that were used to construct these gendered spaces emphasized performativity. Girouard mentions that certain types of woods and furnishings were used to connote authority, specifically masculine authority. He states, "Massive oak or mahogany, and Turkey carpets in the dining room and spindly gilt or



rosewood and silk or chintz in the drawing room” (Girouard 292). Since women were conditioned to be delicate and materialistic, their spaces encouraged this from their construction in lighter woods and expensive silk, whereas men were strong and burly, like mahogany, and educated and cultured, like the exotic rugs in their spaces.

Margaret chooses to embrace these conditions, as she is so completely enchanted with the house, she is willing to overlook Henry’s poorer character traits for the sake of living out her dream life in it. Forster writes, “She still loved Henry. His actions, not his disposition, had disappointed her, and she could bear that. And she loved her future home” (261). Margaret is so taken with the home and the lifestyle it represents that she is equating love and marriage with Henry to Howards End itself. Yet, the danger of this association is that a woman such as Margaret can get so swept up in the allure of the home and the life it displays, that she is willing to embrace it and ignore the fact that her agency is taken away in a ‘sallow’ manner. Margaret repeatedly remarks how when she is at Howards End, she “[loses] the sense of space,” and the “sense of flux”; the house captivates her, and renders her awestruck. When she must return to Wickham Place, Margaret compares it to Howards End, noting the “dirtiness” of the city. Clearly, Margaret is entranced by the home of the Wilcoxes, with everything, including her own impressive home, paling in comparison. This is the danger of the manor house that entices Margaret, but she is able to transform because of it.

#### **Two Worlds, One Femininity<sup>4</sup>; The Conflict Between Victorian and New Women**

At the turn of the century, British society was undergoing transformative changes in lifestyle, values, culture, and social life. These changes were also manifested

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<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the song, ‘Two Worlds, One Family,’ from Walt Disney’s movie, *Tarzan* (1999).

in gender roles, particularly for woman. The Victorian tradition had enforced women to be pious, submissive and overall inferior to their male counterparts. Their roles in society were to be housewives and remain in the private sphere. However, as nineteenth century British society evolved from Victorian to Edwardian, so too did the ideal woman. The idea of the New Woman emerged and she was everything the Victorian woman was not; she encouraged bold speech, equal rights, and most importantly, independence and education. The conflict between these two portraits of femininity is seen in the friendship of Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel. Their differing visions of femininity contradict each other on the most important aspects of equality, specifically concerning a woman's agency and independence from her husband.

Margaret Schlegel certainly exhibits these New Woman characteristics, even when they are met with resistance from Ruth Wilcox, Henry's wife, and the embodiment of Victorian traditions. Mrs. Wilcox's old-fashioned habits and idiosyncrasies immediately set her apart from Margaret's modern ones. While this can be attributed to the age difference between the two women, it is only to a certain extent. In these two characters, the New Woman and the Victorian woman are placed in contrast with one another. Describing Mrs. Wilcox, Forster writes, "She seemed to belong not to the young people and their motor, but to the house and to the tree that overshadowed it. One knew she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom the past can alone bestow had descended upon her—that wisdom to which we give the clumsy name of aristocracy" (22). From this excerpt, it is clear that Mrs. Wilcox is a human representation of the past century and its values, going so far as to 'worship' it all. This also explains how Mrs.

Wilcox is so attached to Howards End, for it represents a 'golden age' and the ultimate achievement of wealth and status according to Victorian standards.

Since she 'worships the past,' it can be assumed that Mrs. Wilcox also worships and lives by the moral and social codes that defined the Victorian era. This would include, of course, the role of women in public society, which would contradict what the New Woman, Margaret, represents. As explored in the previous chapter, the paradox of a woman's representation in society was expressed through the difficult dichotomy of a woman's identification as either an angel or a whore. Mrs. Wilcox is nearly synonymous with Howards End itself, which is similar to how a Victorian angel of the house was relegated to the domestic sphere, with her only form of control being over keeping the private sphere of her home proper and clean. If she is categorized as an angel, then Mrs. Wilcox's disapproval of women's suffrage is explained, for the angels of the Victorian houses were not encouraged to be independent of their husbands, or to have an identity outside of the private domestic sphere. As a worshipper of the past, Mrs. Wilcox embraces and advocates for antiquated Victorian values, against the beliefs of the 'young people' and their modern 'motor.'

Additionally, the two women's differences are apparent in their opinions concerning women's rights, a debate that was central to the New Woman's departure from the Victorian model. In a conversation about women and their place in society, Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret disagree, symbolizing the conflict between feminine ideals.

Mrs. Wilcox begins, stating,

'I am only too thankful not to have a vote myself.'

'We didn't mean the vote, though, did we?' supplied Margaret. 'Aren't we differing on something much wider, Mrs. Wilcox? Whether women are to remain

what they have been since the dawn of history; or whether, since men have moved forward so far, they too may move forward a little now. I say they may.' (80)

As a New Woman, Margaret is naturally in favor of women's suffrage, and in questioning Mrs. Wilcox, she is challenging the society that perpetuates an obedient, and obliging woman as opposed to one who speaks out and opposes the subjugation of women. Mrs. Wilcox, a woman who embodies traditional Victorian values, challenges Margaret's modern London views, representing a roadblock to the New Woman. Margaret's characterization as the New Woman, and Mrs. Wilcox's as the Victorian woman, present a conflict. While the two women get along quite well, the ideologies they represent do not. Mrs. Wilcox does not seek radical changes and movements, as she is content with her Victorian conventions. She is the ruler of the private sphere, but has no influence in the public sphere, since her role is to be at her husband's side, silent and obliging. Everything the New Woman stands for replaces the Victorian conceptions of woman, modern replacing traditional.

As a modern woman in the antique world of *Howards End*, Margaret is invading the Wilcoxes' world and threatening their way of life. In manor house novels of the Edwardian era, such as American author, Edith Wharton's *The Buccaneers*, this was a common narrative: a woman of another social class comes to live in a country home and learns about the privileged life of the aristocrats. From her experience in this manor house, the female protagonist learns that society is just as oppressive inside the house as it is outside, usually more so. For Victorian women, a successful life was dependent upon marrying above one's social class and joining a wealthy family. Margaret, however, quickly discovers that she has no power in her house or marriage. In inheriting *Howards End*, and then marrying Henry, Margaret is following a typical model of success for

Victorian women; yet this was necessary in order for her to learn about her role as a woman in a patriarchal society, thus inspiring her to adopt modern characteristics and fight the system. More specifically, as we shall see, Margaret initially resembles the late Mrs. Wilcox in her time at Howards End; however, when she is confronted with Leonard's death and Helen's alienation, she finally abandons Victorian characteristics, and embraces assertive, powerful ones, attributed to the New Woman.

Before her full transformation into this New Woman, however, Margaret is fascinated by life at Howards End, and seeks to have a life just like Mrs. Wilcox's. Margaret is the opposite of Mrs. Wilcox, in terms of opinions and social standing, as she is from a modern London world, and Mrs. Wilcox from the traditional countryside, steeped in Victorian tradition. The juxtaposition of the two differing personalities highlights just how drastically different the women are. Margaret is aware of their contrasting lifestyles and personalities, yet she is still fascinated by her new friend, often desperate to please her. When the two are Christmas shopping, Mrs. Wilcox invites Margaret to stay at Howards End with her, to which Margaret replies, 'Perhaps another day.' She immediately regrets her answer, embarrassed and horrified at insulting her friend, which I interpret as Margaret's own regression, and a class member desperate to please the upper class:

[Margaret] discerned that Mrs. Wilcox, though a loving wife and mother, had only one passion in her life—her house—and that the moment was solemn when she invited a friend to share this passion with her. To answer 'another day' was to answer as a fool. 'Another day' will do for brick and mortar, but not for the Holy of Holies into which Howards End had been transfigured. (89)

Margaret fears her new friend will leave her after she has treated her with apparent disregard. Though she is not far below Ruth on the social ladder, she is below her

nonetheless; and because of this, she fears upsetting her new friend on the premise that they are not equals, and to refuse her company is a serious social faux pas. In admitting that her answer was acceptable for the likes of Wickham Place, a place of simple brick and mortar, but not the 'Holy of Holies' of Howards End, Margaret acknowledges the embodiment of class in their homes and in them. Margaret's answer vocalizes her place below Mrs. Wilcox, and even though she had desired to impress her friend, she accidentally accepts her lower place. For Margaret, her time spent with Mrs. Wilcox causes her to idolize the extreme upper class, seeking to please her friend at all times in hopes of becoming more similar, and one day joining her at the top of the ladder.

When Mrs. Wilcox bequeaths the house to Margaret, an outsider, her family is shocked and outraged. The Wilcoxes are Industrial capitalists, having worked for their fortune, whereas the Schlegels are of older money, and inherited their home and wealth. This minor, but crucial difference contributes to the animosity that the Wilcox family has for the Schlegels, and for people of their sort. Having worked for their fortune, the Wilcoxes are snobby, but are not in the same strata as the Schlegels, as it was customary for the wealthiest aristocrats to live in their inherited estates. The Wilcoxes thus perceive the Schlegels and those below them as lazier, and perhaps even undeserving, or unaware of the economy and the capitalist system. This system is evolving, and with it, the attitudes of the wealthy, and the Wilcoxes are a new type of wealth, something that slightly challenges the definition of the upper class. Mrs. Wilcox's family had the estate, and a large inheritance, and Henry worked to earn his own, and in combining the two fortunes, the Wilcoxes become a unique exception to the aristocratic class of inherited wealth, as they both inherited and worked for their money. As a result of this difference

in capitalistic endeavors, Charles Wilcox, Henry and Ruth's son, condemns the decision to leave the ownership of Howards End to Margaret, and his father's marriage to her, accusing her of being a social climber. He shouts, "Miss Schlegel always meant to get hold of Howards End, and, thanks to you, she's got it" (193). For Charles, and for the younger members of the Wilcox family, Margaret is just another social climber after their family fortune and estate. Since she inherited as opposed to work for her fortune, Margaret is, for Charles, obviously trying to permeate their exclusive circle in order to take things from them. This classist and elitist attitude paints Margaret as a manipulative social climber, indicating a minor success on her part, since the powerful family is so threatened by just one woman.

In climbing up the rungs of the social ladder, Margaret undergoes a reverse transformation; her transition into a true New Woman is not immediate, nor well defined, as she fluctuates throughout the majority of the novel between playing the role of the dutiful Victorian housewife, and the bolder New Woman. As Margaret spends more time with the Wilcoxes, she alienates her friends, Leonard and Helen, acting like one of the Wilcoxes herself. She is exposed to a different life, and is utterly enchanted, adopting traits of the Wilcox family, such as a disapproval of Helen, and more disregard for her actions towards Leonard and the lower class. Why does this New Woman, full of proto-feminist spirit, regress so? She is mesmerized by this luxurious, glamorous lifestyle at Howards End, and charmed into burying her New Woman traits in order to embrace this new life, but once she realizes how unsympathetically cruel the upper class could be, her eyes are opened and she becomes the New Woman at last.

## **Mother Margaret; How Maternal Characteristics Grant Margaret Agency**

Margaret's transformation hinges upon her adoption of moderate maternal characteristics, such as caring for Henry, which allow the power in the relationship to be shifted in her favor. The significance of Margaret's maternal role has not always been recognized, and if it has, it has not been with a positive connotation. For example, Samantha Moore asserts that in becoming a maternal figure to Henry and Helen, Margaret plays into the Victorian image, losing agency. Moore will be the primary critic of this section, as her analysis of Margaret provides thorough investigation into her complicated role as a Victorian and New Woman, and her overall transformation. While there are several points of similarity, Moore's insight also offers many points of contention with the work of this thesis. Although she concedes that Margaret was a version of a New Woman, Moore not only labels Helen as the Schlegel sister who expresses more rebellious characteristics, but she also claims that Margaret did not undergo such a dramatic transformation that this thesis argues for. Most importantly, Moore's addresses Margaret's maternal characteristics, stating that they categorize her as a picture of Victorian femininity. This section will present these essential aspects of Moore's work, engaging with and building upon her analyses, while also challenging them and commenting on her mislabeling of Margaret.

In the nineteenth century, the idea of maternity was synonymous with femininity, vulnerable emotions, and domestication. Therefore, Moore maintains that in acting as a mother to Helen and to Henry, Margaret accepts her place as a Victorian woman would (Moore 60). Yet it is this role of maternity through which Margaret is actually able to increase her power. What is unique and crucial about Margaret's maternal power is that



she is not an actual mother; she actively rejects that actual role, refusing to bear children, stating, “I do not love children. I am thankful to have none. I can play with their beauty and charm, but that is all—nothing real, not one scrap of what there ought to be” (353). Here, Margaret defies the traditional definition of mother, as women were expected to give birth to heirs and become wholly committed to the private sphere, fulfilling the role of the dutiful housewife. Through her rejection, and alteration of this role, Margaret activates her own agency. After Leonard’s death and Charles’s arrest, Margaret steps into her strong maternal role, and cares for both Henry and Helen. Helen describes this time, claiming that Margaret “[acted] and did all” (354). Margaret clearly has the most power of all characters at *Howards End*, as she does everything and acts as the leader when the patriarchal Henry is ill. Henry crumbles when his son is arrested for Leonard’s murder, and regresses into a childlike state, in need of someone to stay with him, take care of him, and tell him what to do: he needs a mother. Margaret becomes a matriarch of *Howards End*, fully able to fill the shoes Henry, thus demonstrating that her maternal behavior allowed her more agency.

When the Wilcoxes forbid Helen to live in *Howards End*, Margaret’s motherly instinct flares, and she seeks to protect her young, her sister, from the threat of man. Margaret is aware of this burning fire of feminism, claiming that this attack on her sister makes her aware of her place in the bigger fight: “a new feeling came over her; she was fighting for women against men. She did not care about rights, but if men came into *Howards End*, it should be over her body” (206). This is a clear depiction of a strong, independent woman, capable of taking on the patriarchy—something that a Victorian woman wouldn’t dare to dream of. Whereas Moore claims that Margaret’s maternal

behavior is her weakness, it is actually her source of strength, and agency. Margaret is an example to women; betrayed and changed for the worse as a result of the patriarchal and capitalist system, she recognizes a need to improve the female condition.

Although Moore interprets a woman's maternal personality, and marriage as being a weakness, in Margaret's inheritance of power and of *Howards End*, she comes to be a mother figure to Henry and Helen, having the most power of any character. When he is ruined, Henry pleads, "I don't know what to do—what to do. I'm broken—I'm ended.' No sudden warmth arose in her. She did not see that to break him was her only hope. She did not enfold the sufferer in her arms" (350). Here, Margaret's independent spirit is at its strongest, as she has no sympathy for Henry, no remorse or guilt for leaving him. Earlier in the novel, Margaret would have undoubtedly taken pity on Henry and chosen to forgive him immediately, yet now she has seen who he and his family truly are and reserves no compassion for them. Through her marriage to Henry, Margaret seeks to teach him and change him into a more compassionate man, just as a mother would with her child. The power that Margaret has through her role as wife and mother allows her to actually impose such change. Henry finally has his own transformation and experiences guilt, fear, sadness—he is broken, and Margaret has broken him. He seeks her comfort, but instead of embracing him immediately, Margaret is resolute and reserved; she is teaching Henry tough love. This manipulation is made possible by Margaret's initial adoption of and submission to Henry's upper class antics.

While it is true that Margaret changes herself for Henry when they marry, it is also true that Margaret is afforded more power when she marries and that in her discontent she found ambition. Initially, she willingly alters her personality for one

reminiscent of Ruth Wilcox, but when she finally realizes what she has been doing, she undergoes an immediate character change, announcing her plan to leave Henry. In marrying him, Margaret becomes Henry's equal, and is then able to enact change and teach him, instructing him on kindness and empathy, two aspects of stereotypical motherhood. Margaret's success in 'fixing' Henry's emotions is depicted when he begs her to take care of him after Charles is found guilty of manslaughter; he finally expresses remorse and guilt. The moment is described as: "Then Henry's fortress gave way. He could bear no one but his wife, he shambled up to Margaret afterwards and asked her to do what she could with him" (350). In asking Margaret to 'do what she could with him,' Henry is submitting himself to her complete control, just as a sick child would its mother. Henry is in desperate need of a caretaker, as his steely, detached fortress of an exterior gives way and crumbles, rendering him vulnerable and weak. Margaret capitalizes on this vulnerability, and fixes him, teaching him to be empathetic and kind. In the end, after all of Margaret's maternal work, Helen even remarks that she likes Henry (352). Just as a mother teaches her son to be kind and compassionate, so too does Margaret finally teach Henry how to sympathize and express guilt over his actions. This is a turning point for Margaret, as she finally has power, and uses it in their relationship—this awareness represents her final character transformation into a savvy, strong, New Woman.

While Moore asserts that Helen is actually more of a New Woman than Margaret, she only analyzes the surface of the two characters, and does not account for Margaret's several transformative moments of epiphany. Moore's argument concerning Helen as being both Victorian and New Woman neglects the fact that Margaret has transformed over the course of the novel, reflecting more New Woman traits than her sister. This is

exemplified in Margaret's gradual submission to Henry, symbolizing the patriarchy, until her sister is threatened, which instills a passionate fire within her. Margaret concedes that the only way for a woman to succeed is to become the Lady of the house, overseeing everyday operations over the servants of the house. As Ruth passes, Margaret seems to take her place, both physically, in the sense that she is the new Lady, and spiritually, in terms of mindsets. Moore acknowledges this in her dissertation, stating that Ruth "imprints, at first, unnoticeable traces of herself onto Margaret, and these traces alter Margaret's approach to many situations, like the situation of Leonard Bast" (Moore 58). Indeed, Ruth and her display of an ideal lifestyle charm Margaret; mesmerized by Ruth, she emulates her when she takes her place. This causes Margaret to develop a bias towards the Wilcoxes, favoring them in several situations against her sister, further distancing them. This distance is ever present in Margaret's mind, and contributes to the elements of her life that come crashing down when Leonard is murdered. The realization that she has been distancing herself from her family in favor of an immoral one is the catalyzing moment for Margaret, as she finally recognizes that this is not the lifestyle she wants, nor the one she deserves. This is what characterizes Margaret Schlegel as a New Woman.

Moreover, women who follow this model of a New Woman were threatening to the status quo, leading to the 'Woman Question,' which begged society for a solution to their disobedient women. According to Jane Eldridge Miller, the 'Woman Question' was a response to the scrutiny of the institution of marriage, political and legal status of women, and the reevaluation of traditional gender roles (Miller 3). Miller's work analyzes several Edwardian novels, paying particular attention to the heroines and their

portrayal of a New Woman. Unlike Moore, Miller identifies both Schlegel sisters as models of the New Woman on account of their rebellious actions. Miller accuses Forster of being ambivalent towards women, claiming that in *Howards End*, the men have all the power and the women are associated with menial personal life (Miller 49-50). She states, “Forster valorizes the feminine, but his concepts of femininity and masculinity are very traditional and restrictive” (Miller 49-50). Here, Miller states that Forster’s depictions of both femininity and masculinity are one-dimensional. Yet, there are many conflicting depictions of femininity and masculinity, particularly between classes, as exemplified in the comparison of Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret, and Mr. Wilcox and Leonard. The conflict between the New and Victorian Woman is played out between Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox, and then later between Margaret and herself. Forster offers Margaret as a contrast to the conventional Victorian femininity of Mrs. Wilcox; this does not restrict the feminine, rather it enters the conversation of gender roles and challenges Victorian conventions. Margaret’s transformation demonstrates that the modern and empowering qualities of a New Woman allow for more agency and success than the traditional and restrictive concept of Victorian femininity.

Despite Margaret’s status as the New Woman, it can be conceded that she and Helen do portray Victorian traits at weaker moments, but they both ultimately defy the antiquated standard, choosing to be empowered rather than subordinated. Miller elaborates on her claim of Forster’s ‘restrictive’ portrayal of femininity, and asserts that the two Schlegel sisters do not undergo any transformation at all. Instead, she argues that they remain a pair of manipulative upper class snobs for the entire novel:

The victory of the women is also disturbing in the sense that Margaret and Helen admit to no error, experience no change, and apparently learn no lesson from all

the ‘tangle’ they have been through. Their smug, privileged self-confidence has been constant from beginning to end, while they have played carelessly with the lives of other people. (15)

Here, Miller states that because the Schlegel sisters ‘played carelessly’ with Leonard Bast’s life, they were stagnant characters that did not evolve, and most importantly, did not learn from their experience. Yet they certainly do. In order for Margaret to be exposed to the negatives of the elite aristocratic world, she is first traumatized by Leonard’s death. The death of her friend is shocking, but it also serves as a necessary climax in Margaret’s transition; she finally is able to see the danger and horror of being a detached and elitist member of the upper class. However, a point of concession in Miller’s work is the notion of the Schlegels playing with Leonard’s life as if it were part of a game. A game naturally involves winners and losers, yet in this game, there are no winners—everyone loses. Margaret and Helen must play this game in order to lose, and for Margaret to then learn and transform. The action of the novel has been building up to the very moment when the bookcase falls and kills Leonard. Henry and his lack of empathy increasingly disturb Margaret, and when his disdain reaches its peak, Leonard is dead and Margaret resolves to leave her husband. In accusing Margaret of not changing, learning, or admitting to no error, Miller does not acknowledge the crucial aspects of Margaret’s transformation into a New Woman.

It is certainly Leonard’s death that is the catalyst for Margaret’s change of heart and mind, as it sparks an immediate reaction and aversion to Henry, the symbol of the unforgiving materialistic aristocrat. Forster writes, “[Margaret] neither forgave him for his behavior nor wished to forgive him...Leonard’s death brought her to the goal” (347). The goal, here, is independence from Henry and the realization of Margaret’s true self.

She muses about one's soul finding its true path by looking out at the world below, and now she feels just like that, and resolves to be unforgiving in her treatment of Henry. She states that she is "determined not to spare him" (348). These strong thoughts are all brought upon Margaret as a result of Leonard's traumatic death, and Henry's subsequent apathetic response. Henry is more concerned with Charles's punishment than Leonard's death, or the fact that he himself played a part in it. Forster writes, "'Nothing matters,' the Schlegels had said in the past, 'except one's self-respect and that of one's friends.' When the time came, other things mattered terribly" (347). This is direct evidence of a change in mentality. Prior to their experience at Howards End, the young women have a naïve sense of self, based only on the opinions of themselves and their peers, which would only be their equals, their fellow upper class citizens. Upon their stay at Howards End, the Wilcoxes teach them that these respects from their 'friends' were subjective and meaningless. Howards End matures the Schlegels, allowing Margaret especially to transform into a New Woman.

Margaret's complicated femininity offers relevant insight for women of modern society, as again, conflicting images of femininity are presented. The modern feminist movement is growing stronger and becoming increasingly popular with the help of high-profile celebrities, TED Talks, and viral articles. However, despite the immense successes of the movement, many feminists have come under fire from the media and other celebrities for being too 'intense' and coming off as a 'feminazi' movement that seeks to espouse 'man hate.' Other critics of the movement believe that while women and men should be equal, women should also not be chastised or looked down upon for wanting to be a stay-at-home mother, or a trophy wife. If society is to look to the past for

entertainment, it should also pay closer attention to heroines such as Margaret, who is confronted with varying images of femininity, and chooses to adapt to her situation at *Howards End* and empower herself through a manipulation of motherliness, something that the society labeled as a weak characteristic. Women need to find their own strength for themselves and use it to empower their own agency, no matter the sphere in which they choose to reside.



## **Chapter Three:**

### **Ghosts of Patriarchy's Past in du Maurier's *Rebecca***

*"No one got the better of [Rebecca], never, never ... She did what she liked, she lived as she liked. She had the strength of a little lion, too" —Mrs. Danvers*

Sampling from the gothic tradition of the nineteenth century, Daphne du Maurier weaves together a romance and a mysterious ghost story to create her novel, *Rebecca*. Reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca* (1938) follows the story of a young woman who comes to be mistress of a grand and imposing estate in which she finds love, secrecy, and strict gender norms. MDW, a nameless woman in love with the grand lifestyle of Manderley and the man who owns it, is willing to give up everything, including her freedom, to live out her fantasy life. MDW becomes obsessed with Rebecca, hoping to embody her and be the perfect wife for Maxim, the master of Manderley. Guilty of murdering his first wife, Rebecca, Maxim harbors strong animosity towards women who are reminiscent of her; this would be any woman who exhibits traits of the New Woman, a model of woman that challenged the patriarchy on all levels.

In the midst of the novel's conflict between patriarchal power and feminist modernity, du Maurier weaves in elements of the gothic to create a ghostly mystery as well as a classic romance. These gothic aspects include the haunting, yet immaterialized (as in, she is not physically there) presence of Rebecca, the malevolent antagonist, Mrs. Danvers, and most importantly, the foreboding house of Manderley itself. The prominent presence of Rebecca and her faithful servant, Mrs. Danvers, leads many critics, such as Michele Gentile and Nina Auerbach, to interpret the ghostly Rebecca as the main antagonist of the novel. Marketed and identified as a gothic romance in which a couple is able to conquer the evil spirit of a former wife, these critics mislabel *Rebecca*. The novel certainly involves a romantic plot, but it is a romance that provides a social critique on the image of femininity. Rebecca is a constant eerie presence in Manderley, kept alive by Mrs. Danvers' faithful upkeep of Rebecca's room, closet, and overall unwavering loyalty.

Over the course of the novel, the enigmatic Rebecca is revealed to have been manipulative, insolent, charming and poisonous to Maxim and his precious Manderley. As a physical representation of the patriarchy, Manderley is protected at all costs, and is revealed as a sort of living entity, brought to life by the society it displays. As in previous chapters of this project, the present chapter will also explore the role that a physical place has on social and gender roles, but it will be extended to argue that Manderley is a manifestation of the patriarchy, enforcing conventional gender roles through its physical presence. Pons describes Maxim as a ‘protector’ of misogyny and patriarchal values, arguing that he “is a protector who has to be protected; he is the protector of the values and conventions of patriarchal masculinity, even of the ideal itself, which was increasingly under threat at the beginning of the twentieth century” (Pons 76). Certainly, as the New Woman was on the rise, the patriarchy, and all that embodied it, was increasingly threatened, as masculine control over women and the whole of society was diminishing.

While many critics, such as Pons, have labeled Manderley as the villain of the novel, I find that the work is limited in its concern with how the house encourages gender performance. Here, I intend to use the work of Judith Butler on gender performativity in order to argue that the patriarchal society of du Maurier’s *Rebecca* enforces certain portrayals of gender upon characters, and Manderley imposes these portrayals further. This is primarily depicted in the main female characters of the novel, Rebecca and MDW, as both women acknowledge their role as Maxim’s wife, and what their performance of that role demands from them. Manderley is constructed in such a way that it has specifically designated feminine and masculine spaces. This is prominently seen in an

analysis of Rebecca's bedroom, as it is a space that is decorated to encourage the proper performance of femininity, as decided by the patriarchal society that Maxim and the house itself embody.

Forced gender performance, and the consequences of a failure to perform properly, will be addressed in this chapter, as the former Mrs. de Winter, Rebecca, refused to adhere to such a role, and was led to her death as a punishment. Butler's ideas on the consequences of gender performance will be applied specifically to Rebecca, MDW, and Maxim, as analyses of all three characters offer insight into the damage that a forced gender role can have. For Butler, gender is an act that is "broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler 528). Thus, gender is an arbitrary thing, completely different for any two social groups. In the case of *Rebecca*, the aristocratic definition of femininity is similar to the ideal Victorian woman: submissive, heterosexual, and conforming.

Rebecca de Winter refuses gender role assignment, and engages in a performance of femininity that incorporates traditionally masculine characteristics, such as sexual confidence, promiscuity, manipulation, and an air of powerful independence. For her failure to perform her gender according to her social sphere, Rebecca is labeled as a threat to the established order. The upper class woman was expected to not only dress the part of an aristocrat, drenched in materialistic jewels and satins, but also to act the part, which would mean she would only agree with her husband and not be her own independent person. While Rebecca did perform according to her social sphere in terms of her clothes, she rejected the However, Rebecca's defiance of conventional gender performativity categorizes her as the New Woman figure of the novel. For Madeline

Davies, Rebecca is more than the New Woman; she was the ‘true heroine’ of the novel, offering readers of the novel a boldly independent portrayal of femininity (Davies 186). She explains that while MDW is the protagonist of the novel, Rebecca is the one with whom readers should identify. However, Davies contradicts her praise of Rebecca’s heroic performance when she cites her illegitimate pregnancy as the main cause of her murder. While the pregnancy certainly was important in Maxim’s decision to murder his wife, it was in addition to her defiant performance of her gender, and her expression of New Woman characteristics that constantly challenged his masculinity.

Since I assert that Rebecca is the New Woman of this text, her categorization as such provides an interesting foil for MDW and her development, as MDW expresses submissive and dependent characteristics that are reminiscent of an outdated Victorian femininity. Although the transformation from underappreciated companion to the wife of a wealthy upper class man has proven to be empowering for previously analyzed characters, such as Margaret Schlegel, MDW does not undergo such a change. Instead of progressing into a New Woman, MDW regresses, accepts, and then performs the gender role forced upon her by Manderley, the embodiment of patriarchal society. Auba Llompart Pons argues that because the characters are unable to perform such “highly demanding gender roles,” they are led to “hypocrisy, hysteria and crime” (Pons 3). While Pons’ notion of gender roles leading to hypocrisy is applicable to Maxim, it does not fit MDW, as she is able to perform her assigned role, but suffers consequences nonetheless. The imposed gender performance of the perfect housewife is straining, and in succumbing to the allure of Manderley, MDW is consumed by the rules of the ‘correct’ performance of femininity. She becomes hysterically obsessed with Rebecca, constantly

comparing herself to Rebecca, and believing that the deceased woman is out to get her. More importantly, MDW becomes a hypocrite, since she longed for more control of her life when she was Mrs. Van Hopper's companion, but nevertheless surrenders to the pressure of gender expectations and chooses to act the part of the perfect little wife.

The gender politics of the time that this novel was published did not question women's roles in the traditional home, yet when modern feminist literary theory is applied to the text, the relation to the contemporary feminist movement is quite evident. Rebecca would certainly support, and even motivate modern feminists, as she expressed a desire for autonomy, a confident sexuality, and a refusal of traditional gender roles.

As in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a conflict between two femininities is the main conflict of *Rebecca*, especially since du Maurier's novel drew from Brontë's, which calls for an analysis of the two protagonists. In the first chapter of this thesis, the Cinderella fairytale was compared to *Jane Eyre*, with the argument that Jane was not a Cinderella, but that she was an independent hero. However, du Maurier's MDW, a Jane of the late 1930s, was indeed a Cinderella. MDW childishly imagines her perfect life as a sort of princess in a castle, wishing to escape her life with Mrs. Van Hopper in exchange for a life with her ideal prince. In a later section, MDW and Jane will be contrasted in order to reveal that while the two are more or less equals, they could not be more different, for one is a Cinderella, and the other anticipates the New Woman. The novel revisits the tradition in order to comment on a perceived 'Golden Era,' while also providing a form of nostalgic entertainment. This nostalgia is captured in MDW, a woman who succumbs to an antiquated femininity in hopes of attaining her perfect life.

This chapter will focus on the two drastically different portrayals of femininity in the novel, Rebecca and MDW, a New Woman, and a woman who regresses into a submissive and oppressed femininity, echoing the Victorian era, respectively. In this chapter, I will argue that Rebecca defied the patriarchy's definition of woman, threatening its systematic repression of women, and she had to be eliminated in order to restore order. In her pursuit of the unattainable, MDW realizes that she never will be the perfect wife, since her fairytale illusion is shattered when she realizes that Rebecca, whom she had previously thought to be Maxim's ideal wife, was killed by her beloved Maxim, and Manderley. The patriarchal society is depicted in the house of Manderley, as it is an estate that imposes specific societal beliefs, gender roles, and the overall subjection of women. MDW falls in love with Manderley, and with the submissive image of femininity that harkens back to the Victorian era. This because MDW is a naïve Cinderella, attracted to materialism and a Victorian lifestyle in which she is dependent on a man. While Adams refers to MDW as a princess in a fairytale, I would like to specifically categorize MDW as a Cinderella, a name I use to emphasize dependent and compliant character. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Cinderella is a girl who relies on others, namely her fairy godmother and prince, to rescue her from her downtrodden servant position. MDW fits into the Cinderella category because she too is captivated by Maxim, her version of a prince, and depends on him for an escape to his castle and a new life.

### **I'm Just a Girl, Living in Captivity<sup>5</sup>; A Confining Femininity**

As the main character of the novel is introduced, it is evident that she is a timid woman, which explains how she is so easily manipulated later by Maxim and Manderley itself. All that MDW wants is a life other than the one she knows as a mundane companion to the socialite Mrs. Van Hopper, and she believes that Maxim can offer her the excitement and romance she so desires. Yet, MDW's vision of a perfect fairytale marriage with Maxim in his luxurious estate has a hidden flaw. Though MDW longs to leave her life with Mrs. Van Hopper behind in exchange for one of splendor and materialistic possessions, little does she know it will come with a cost. Maxim is awarded significant control over MDW because of her desire to be his perfect wife. The image of the 'perfect wife' that MDW has in her mind is one whom is submissive to her husband, wears expensive clothes and jewelry, and lives in a luxurious mansion, with only the desire to serve and please her husband in any and every way. Her desperation to achieve this naïve dream of a princess/housewife life is demonstrated in her doglike submission and devotion to Maxim, who manipulates her girlhood femininity to his advantage.

Upon first agreeing to marry Maxim, MDW daydreams about life as the new Mrs. de Winter, describing her ideal life as a childlike fantasy, which emphasizes her naivety, and categorization as a typical Cinderella. She ponders, "I would be Mrs. de Winter. I saw the polished table in the dining-room, and the long candles. Maxim sitting at the end" (54). Since she is so easily impressed and convinced by elegance, and motivated by materialistic possessions, Maxim is able to manipulate MDW into doing what he wants, as he has access to an abundance of the things she so admires and covets. This childlike

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the song 'Just a Girl,' by the band No Doubt. The song addresses the strict gender binaries that limit women in society.



fascination with items that are stereotypical identifiers of wealth indicates MDW's regression upon encountering the aristocratic lifestyle, as she is easily distracted and manipulated by a looming estate of shiny dining room tables and elegant candles. Like a naïve Cinderella first entering her prince's castle, MDW is captivated by the luxury and ornate décor of Manderley. This glamorous life she is confronted with allows her to play house, living in her dream house with her dream husband, playing the part of the perfect wealthy family, just as a little girl would. MDW's childish game of playing house is, according to Davies, her version of creating her own "ideal fairytale," complete with her "fairytale prince and his castle" (Davies 190). It is the guarantee that her dream will come true that motivates MDW to embrace the submissive wifely role. She acts according to the castle's (Manderley's) demands; the princess must be a helpless girl, willing to obey her prince for the promise of his love, and his castle.

Capitalizing on MDW's childlike nature, Maxim asserts his masculinity and control over her, demeaning her to the point of manipulating her into a role of dependence and further submission. He often enacts his control over MDW through the names he calls her, confining her to the role of a child, or even a pet. Often giving her names such as 'my good child,' Maxim is aware of MDW's childish fantasy and uses it to his advantage, ensuring she will have neither the agency nor the threatening power that his first wife did, as he keeps identifying her as a dependent child. As their future marriage is being discussed over breakfast, Maxim laments, "It's a pity you have to grow up" (53). This statement simultaneously inserts a condescending and fairytale quality into the conversation in that it suggests that Maxim wants his new wife to remain in a state of continuous childlike ignorance so he may keep his authority over her. The image of a

perpetually youthful and naïve wife evokes imagery of the childish fairytale of Peter Pan, a boy who never grew up. In preventing MDW from aging, Maxim could keep his control over her forever, ensuring she remains a naïve child. Though the conversation is topically about their marriage, there is an undertone of Maxim's fear that with MDW's maturity, he will lose his control over her. If MDW were to mature and lose her malleable naivety, she would be of little use to Maxim, who is mostly interested in her as a wife because she is the opposite of Rebecca. Rather than resisting Maxim's domination, MDW is easily manipulated into playing the part of the "little lady" of the manor house, her childish fantasy of a princess in a castle coming true.

However, MDW is aware of the part she must play and in acknowledging what she must do in order to fit the mold of Maxim's wife, she actively seeks to embody Manderley's image of perfection, consciously choosing to accept Maxim's oppression. When Maxim shows MDW the Happy Valley, the beautiful fields of flowers render her speechless. Yet he disrupts the illusion of perfection when he tosses a stone for Jasper to fetch, introducing a mundane task into MDW's dreamy view of the valley. For MDW, the contrast between the lavish estate of Manderley and the natural beauty of the Happy Valley feeds her dream that this is the most ideal lifestyle, as it is a combination of wealthy luxury and control of lush nature. Maxim's cavalier stone toss signifies that he considers his lifestyle to be mundane, nothing to be particularly excited about. MDW knows she is under the spell of Manderley, and yet she chooses to do nothing about it. She laments, "The enchantment was no more, the spell was broken. We were mortal again" (110). In admitting that she and Maxim became mortals again after Maxim throws a stone, MDW is acknowledging that she clings to a naïve image of herself and Maxim as

perfect husband and wife in their perfect home, just playing house in a perfect bubble, separate from the world. Yet when this illusion is destroyed, MDW is reminded that her real life is not her childlike fantasy, and that she and Maxim are trapped in Manderley with all its rules, roles, and secrets. She is completely aware of what she is doing; she is condoning the patriarchy in hopes of becoming Manderley's princess and Maxim's ideal wife. Manderley allows MDW to think of her and Maxim sitting above the rest of the world like gods—powerful in regards to capital, possessions, and mindset. Yet, the stone toss shatters MDW's vision of life at Manderley to be something like gods on Mount Olympus, and reminds her that she does not have the agency she desires as a result of her hypocritical performance. She is still dependent on Maxim, and does not have nearly as much agency as he does, because she acquiesces to the gender performance that society dictates.

MDW struggles in her complicated performance, since she is caught in a paradox; she is given agency through taking Maxim's last name, but in taking his last name, she gives away her individuality and just becomes his wife, the new Mrs. de Winter. In allowing Maxim's last name to define her and give her power, MDW acknowledges his control over her. Her first name is never mentioned in the novel, indicating that without Maxim's name, she is nothing. In order to further enforce this control, Maxim addresses MDW as a child, almost pet like, commanding her to act according to her new role at Manderley as his possession. Since Maxim is the ideal embodiment of masculine identity in the context of *Rebecca*, he enforces MDW's expression of ideal femininity, demanding that she perform her gender role as he see fit, which in this case is a naïve and submissive girl. In obeying Maxim and accepting her submissive role in Manderley, MDW identifies

with Jasper, a small dog that is at the beck and call of Maxim, his owner. Such a dehumanizing and patronizing form of love, for Alison Light, is significant, as “the couple’s companionship now seems more paternalism on his part, doglike devotion on hers” (Light 12). Thus, MDW is indeed Maxim’s pet—he is able to dress her up as his perfect pretty wife, show her off to his friends and partygoers, and reward her with a kiss on the head, expecting unwavering loyalty and obedience in return. However, their relationship is more like a dog and its owner rather than a father and a daughter, as MDW is dependent upon Maxim for her identity, as well as her functioning within Manderley. Maxim rewards her with kisses, pats her on the head, and treats her just as he treats Jasper—she is his second pet. MDW comments on this treatment, stating, “The smile was my reward. Like a pat on the head of Jasper. Good dog, lie down, don’t worry about me any more. I was Jasper again” (du Maurier 118). Here, MDW’s desperate attempts to perform her femininity are equated to a dog performing tricks for treats and affection. She is rewarded for her performance with Maxim’s love, further demonstrating his ownership and control of her. This childlike, doglike devotion that MDW exhibits towards Maxim is what Maxim wants—the mistress of the home is dependent on the master for her performance of femininity, and moreover, her existence as a whole.

Nevertheless, this ownership that Maxim has over MDW provides her with an identity, albeit a demeaning one, as the consequence of adhering to a society’s gender definition is inauthenticity, and therefore painful to the psyche. MDW performs her femininity according to how Maxim sees fit, as it is his name that provides her with her only identity of the narrative, Mrs. de Winter. Yet for Alison Light, the consequence of such a dependent performance is that while women are granted “the security of belonging

to a male,” it is only granted to them “at the cost of underwriting his definitions of what femininity should be” (Light 16). Here, Light argues that when women acquiesce to their husband’s definitions of femininity, they deny themselves agency in exchange for financial security, but that they also support their husbands’ imposed image of femininity. Light implies that this support is unconscious, yet for MDW it is an active choice. She is so desperate to be Maxim’s perfect wife that she willingly supports his definition of femininity, and overlooks his violent murder of his first wife, becoming his faithful lap-dog wife in the process. MDW is granted a secure identity when she accepts Maxim’s crime of murdering Rebecca as her own; she needs Rebecca in order to define herself. By accepting Maxim’s guilt, MDW completely surrenders her agency and individuality, just for the security of an identity—her obedience is rewarded, whereas Rebecca’s disobedience was punished.

Furthermore, MDW’s identification of herself through Maxim has dangerous consequences, as she is willing to do anything in order to become the perfect wife and mistress of the manor house. When Maxim finally divulges the details about his crime, MDW immediately states she will stand by him through anything, claiming herself responsible for his murdering of Rebecca as well. In doing this, Alison Light argues that MDW “[aligns] herself with Maxim in his guilt, MDW is rewarded with the identity of Mrs. de Winter” (Light 16). Here, Light states that MDW accepts Maxim’s crime as her own, claiming equal culpability for a crime she did not commit. She dreamily states, “I had listened to his story and part of me went with him like a shadow in his tracks. I too had killed Rebecca, I too had sunk the boat there in the bay. (...) All this I had suffered with him, all this and more besides” (284). By accepting Maxim’s guilt without question,

MDW certainly earns her identity as Maxim's wife, as she is unified with him in his crime; she fully accepts guilt for the crime herself, as she has no identity without him.

This identification brings an interesting connection to the world of *Jane Eyre*, as Victorian laws of coverture regarded the wife as not only the property of her husband, but also as fully dependent on him for her entire identity. MDW is certainly a human embodiment of these laws, as she is dependent on Maxim for her personal identity and name, as well as her legal identification, as she claims equal culpability for his crime, thus creating a unit wherein Maxim has control of her as his property. Since this crime is such a crucial part of who Maxim is as a person, MDW must accept equal blame in order to be rewarded with her status. Immediately following this decision, MDW states she will no longer be an 'I,' rather she and Maxim will be a 'we'— a united pair, both only bearing Maxim's name. MDW effectively loses her own identity in the man controlling it, indicating success for Maxim and the patriarchy he represents—the nameless girl has now become Mrs. de Winter, all by accepting responsibility for her husband's gruesome crime.

Through MDW's narration, Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers are cast in a negative light, and MDW is presented as the heroine; however it is the supposed villains, (specifically Rebecca) who are the champions of feminism and freedom. Though Rebecca is presented as an antagonist to MDW, her supposed 'villainy' is what grants her the most agency of any character in the novel, particularly among the female characters. Under the guise of a love story, du Maurier offers two conflicting portraits of femininity—one which abides by oppressing patriarchal standards, and the other which defies such norms. In defying her husband's wishes, Rebecca is certainly a feminist by

modern standards, as she does not care to listen to the patriarchy, deciding instead to please herself. Her disregard for convention is depicted in her sins against society, her husband, and Manderley itself.

Deemed ‘sins’ by society, Rebecca’s affairs and behavior were all part of her game of toying with the restrictive standards of femininity. This incredible amount of agency is what denotes Rebecca’s success: she was so powerful that she posed an immense threat to the status quo, and thus, had to be eliminated. For Madeleine K. Davies, this threat is what categorizes Rebecca as “clearly the true heroine of the novel,” as “even in memory, [Rebecca] offers the female reader a clear focus for identification, a template of action, dominance, free-ranging sexuality and liberty more usually inscribed into representation of maleness” (Davies 186). Here, Davies touches upon the concept of an atypical gender performance, such as that of a woman performing masculinity, an idea that Judith Butler also addresses in her work on gender performativity. Butler states that sex is to be distinguished separate from gender, and that the actions that one takes either place them in the context of woman, or are separate, and are “acts in an of themselves, apart from any instrumental consequence, that challenge the category of woman itself” (Butler 523). Rebecca performs masculine actions—assertiveness, independence, manipulation, sexual confidence—all of which are to be suppressed in the typical feminine performance. Rebecca’s expression of masculine traits is what alienates her from conventional femininity and what creates her connection to the New Woman, a figure that promotes an adjusted femininity—one that adopted bolder, and more empowered (i.e., traditionally masculine) traits in order to argue for equality.

## **A Masquerade of Femininity and Gender Performativity**

As described thus far, Rebecca de Winter did not adhere to convention, particularly in regards to sexuality and gender performance, both of which are discussed in the works of Judith Butler. Butler's work is relevant to the analysis of *Rebecca*, as it offers a descriptive theoretical work on gender performance, which I argue, is encouraged in a specific manner by Manderley, a representation of the patriarchal society. The New Woman was a figure that championed women's independence, as well as the adoption of bolder characteristics, and an independent economic, political, and social identity. This new identity for women was a threat to the patriarchy, as it challenged masculine authority and the concept of traditional femininity.

Judith Butler investigates the qualities of gender expression, arguing that gender is a performance of repeated motions, not something given or assigned at birth. Due to this performative aspect of gender, Butler presents it as a fluid concept, able to be altered according to the person performing the role. She states, "Gender is in no way a stable identity, or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—and identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (519). For MDW, her repetitive acts of submission allow her to perform her gender as the naïve housewife she insists on playing in order to please her husband, society, and the house itself.

Furthermore, Butler's presentation of the performance of femininity can be applied to the character of Rebecca, as she did not adhere to traditional feminine performativity during her lifetime. Rebecca exhibited masculine traits, homosexual desires, and a complete disregard for the patriarchy that ruled society, as well as



Manderley. If using Butler's work, this would categorize her outside of the definition of woman, since "to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign" (Butler 522). By 'cultural sign,' Butler is referring to how the image of femininity evolves depending on historical context, and this image is therefore completely unnatural, as a woman forces herself to adhere to a particular image. Rebecca's image of femininity is indeed what society wants her to be, however she manipulates it to her advantage, challenging the patriarchy. A modern society's definition of woman is different from a woman a century before, for example. The historical idea of a woman was one who obeyed social convention through her physical appearance; she would be modestly dressed, at her husband's side, charming, and silent until spoken to. Since Rebecca defied these cultural signs and conventions through her confident sexuality, and manipulative, cunning behavior, she disobeyed the 'cultural sign' of the time, presenting a version of femininity that challenged conventions. This androgyny threatened the patriarchy that demanded a conventional feminine (submissive) woman.

In contrast with the overtly feminine MDW, Rebecca's androgyny allowed her to define her own sexuality and subsequent gender performance, effectively renouncing and defeating the patriarchal role of submission assigned to her by Manderley and Maxim. This androgyny is reflected in Rebecca's sexuality, choosing to love outside of the restrictions of gender binaries. Not only did she engage in an extramarital affair, but also, according to Mrs. Danvers, "She was not in love with [Jack Favell, Rebecca's lover] or Mr. de Winter. She was not in love with anyone. She despised all men. She was above that" (340). Rebecca was beyond depending on a man for pleasure; she confidently took

control of her own sexual pleasure and sought out an affair with Jack Favell and established a very intimate relationship with Mrs. Danvers. This passage indicates Rebecca's subtle homoerotic desire, as Mrs. Danvers recalls how she was 'above that,' with 'that' being the patriarchal confines of female sexuality. Mrs. Danvers insinuates that Rebecca turned away from men and perhaps towards women for pleasure, further demonstrating her free and independent sexuality.

When she taunts MDW in Rebecca's bedroom, Mrs. Danvers performs a little show, emphasizing the intimate nature of her relationship with Rebecca, while also demonstrating Rebecca's manipulative sexuality as well as Mrs. Danvers' own homoerotic desires. In the scene, Mrs. Danvers suggestively dangles her former mistress's lingerie and intimate silks in front of her, challenging her to face the invisible, but fully represented threat of Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers is very clearly excited about touching the intimate objects in Rebecca's room, from her lingerie to her hairbrushes. Mrs. Danvers talks of how Rebecca would tell her things she wouldn't tell anyone else, including her husband, intimating that she was the only person who knew the 'real' Rebecca. This closeness goes beyond that of a housekeeper and a mistress—it intimates a homoerotic desire. She illustrates this close relationship to MDW: 'I did everything for her, you know,' she said, taking my arm again, leading me to the dressing-gown and slippers. 'We tried maid after maid but not one of them suited. 'You maid me better than anyone, Danny,' she used to say, 'I won't have anyone but you'' (176). In revealing this relationship to MDW, Mrs. Danvers is obviously quite proud of her closeness with Rebecca, emphasizing how she was the only one to 'maid' Rebecca the best, and how Rebecca wanted nobody but her. This has significant sexual connotation, as a lady's maid

undresses her mistress, touching her naked body. For Nicky Hallet, such intimate, erotic moments are prevalent in du Maurier's novel, providing a basis for the argument that the relationship between Mrs. Danvers and Rebecca goes beyond that which is appropriate between an employee and employer. Hallet asserts that Mrs. Danvers' sexual desire for Rebecca was manifested in her touch, breaking the "boundaries of desire...in a way that servants uninvited do not" (Hallet 44). Mrs. Danvers further breaks these boundaries of desires when she recalls brushing Rebecca's long hair, something that Maxim would typically do, which emphasizes her fantasy of replacing Maxim (Hallet 42). Mrs. Danvers would gladly take the place of Maxim, and she and Rebecca would ideally, live in Manderley without him or the confines of gender performance set by the society he represents and values.

The idea of a 'mistress' is typically a woman who engages in covert sexual affairs with a man, yet in this case, the sign denotes an additional meaning; the mistress is simultaneously the one with the power, fulfilling the role of the man, and her actual role as mistress, as employer. Scenes in *Rebecca*, according to Hallet, are "alive with erotic tensions and same-sex cross-class intimacy, or fantasy of it: desire here, as 'mistress' is power related" (Hallet 38). Rebecca is aware of her power over Mrs. Danvers, as she flatters her and allows her to feel special as her maid. This grants Rebecca considerable influence over Mrs. Danvers, using her sexuality and power to her advantage. Even in her death, Rebecca ensures she will continue to threaten Manderley, as Mrs. Danvers' steadfast devotion to her and her traditions, opinions, and spirit will allow her to live on through Mrs. Danvers. This offers an explanation of why Rebecca may have indulged Mrs. Danvers' desires—so she could guarantee her defiant legacy in Manderley. Such

masculine traits of calculation further demonstrate Rebecca's nontraditional performance of femininity, and how she can be categorized as a New Woman for taking full control of her sexuality and capitalizing on it, using it for her own benefit and pleasure. Rebecca's adoption of more masculine traits was purposeful, as it provided her with more agency. The ideal of the New Woman advocated for a bolder and more independent woman, which would only be achieved by adopting masculine traits in exchange for submissive feminine ones.

Moreover, Rebecca exhibited masculinity specifically by expressing her overt sexual confidence, something that was deemed quite unladylike for any woman, let alone one of higher social standing. As stated in the first chapter of this thesis, the standard of feminine beauty varied depending on her social status. For Rebecca, a typical performance of aristocratic femininity would involve being elegantly dressed and nodding silently at Maxim's side as a subservient wife. However it is clear that Rebecca did not approve of this performance of femininity, and sought to manipulate Maxim and her social sphere with her sexuality. This manipulation, Alison Light argues, stems from the differences among the social classes of society. Light explains that Rebecca exposed how "femininity is powerfully over-determined — definitions of female sexuality are not just saturated with class meanings, but produce them and ensure their continuation" (Light 15). Here, Light notes the influence of social class on female sexuality, arguing that a different image of femininity is imposed depending on the class. An aristocratic woman's femininity was "saturated with" identifiers of her class, (i.e., her wealth); as an upper class woman, Rebecca's femininity was the image of masquerade balls, fancy gowns, and materiality. While Rebecca indulged in this femininity, she defied the

limitations of it through her disregard for sexual convention, as she is blatant in her desire for sexual pleasure outside of her marriage.

Though Rebecca is certainly the physical depiction of traditional femininity, with her dresses and beauty, she is not traditional in her mind, or in her true self. It is her performance that is traditionally feminine, not her character. The notion of women being obvious about their sexuality was vulgar and quite unfeminine at this time, again casting Rebecca as a defiant 'Other,' an outsider in her society. However, Light interprets Rebecca's confident sexuality as an "aristocratic mix of independent and 'essential' femininity, a strong physical presence, a confident and alluring sexuality. The girl [MDW] emerges as literally a girl, immature by Rebecca's standards" (Light 11). For Light, Rebecca's sexuality emphasizes her femininity. While Rebecca certainly adheres to the image of traditional femininity through her dress and appearance, she wholly rejects it in her true character. A confident female sexuality was threatening to the patriarchy, as it indicated that such a woman did not need a man to define it for her. As seen in Rebecca's affair with her cousin, Jack Favell, she is confident and manipulative with her sexuality, demonstrating she will not acquiesce to the patriarchy's or Maxim's notions of women and sex. Thus, Light's labeling of Rebecca as an "essentially feminine" woman undermines her character, for although Rebecca does outwardly act the part of the traditional upper class female, she rebels against it in her private and true behavior, giving her power over Maxim and Manderley.

## **A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes<sup>6</sup>: the Danger of Being a Cinderella**

Though it is clear that Daphne du Maurier drew upon *Jane Eyre* in writing *Rebecca*, an analysis of the language used in Brontë's work illuminates just how closely tied the two works are, especially in terms of the protagonists' relationship to the Cinderella fairytale. In studying Brontë's language in *Jane Eyre*, it is made abundantly clear where du Maurier emphasized and dramatized certain phrases in MDW's own character, particularly the phrases that mention fairytales, dreams and identity.

Du Maurier emphasizes Jane's changing identity in MDW when she readily defines herself through Maxim, a choice that categorizes MDW as a Cinderella, and Jane as the opposite. When Jane accepts Rochester's marriage proposal, Jane explains that she is blushing because "[Mr. Rochester] has given [her] a new name—Jane Rochester" (Brontë 257). This understated aspect of Jane's marriage to Rochester is brought to the extreme in MDW. Jane is blushing because taking Rochester's name labels her as his property, but since she seeks independence from her husband, she refuses this type of ownership, and will not be identified through him. In contrast, MDW revels in this sort of identification. Maxim gives MDW a new name, but she accepts it as being a whole new identity, a new part to play in her princess performance at Manderley. Just like Cinderella, MDW is rewarded with a completely new identity upon marrying her prince. Cinderella evolves from a lowly servant into a princess, and MDW progresses from a paid companion into the wife of an aristocrat. Jane refuses to be dependent upon her husband for an identity, casting her as the hero, rather than a Cinderella. MDW, on the

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<sup>6</sup> Title of the theme song to Walt Disney's 'Cinderella' film (1950).

other hand, is a Cinderella, as she is dependent upon her prince to rescue her and provide her with a new identity.

For Jane, the idea of a new, changed identity at the hands of her husband was absurd, for it meant compromising her own independence and character, something MDW was all too eager to do in marrying Maxim. Jane strongly tells Rochester “do not address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess” (Brontë 257). Jane does not want to be put on Rochester’s angelic pedestal; she wants to retain her character and uncompromised true self. Whereas Jane urges Rochester not to treat her differently, or impose upper class femininity onto her, MDW is the complete opposite, eager to try and fit into Maxim’s world, desperate to abandon her lower class life and depict the image of a woman of thirty, in black satin and pearls (37). MDW wants to put on her costume and perform her Cinderella role. This is MDW’s image of a princess at Manderley: this is her fairytale.

A key point of contention is the way in which the two protagonists engage with the word ‘fairytale,’ as it denotes their maturity, Though Jane exclaims that her new life with Rochester is like “a fairy tale,” she does not dwell in a childish fairytale world as MDW does (Brontë 257). MDW has imagined her fairytale life at Manderley ever since she first bought a postcard with its picture on it, fantasizing about the ideal aristocratic lifestyle it would offer her (23). Clearly, MDW has had this dream of being a princess in Manderley ever since she first saw it in a picture, which calls to mind images of young girls reading princess stories before bedtime, dreaming in the same way. Similarly, Cinderella dreams of leaving behind her servitude to her stepfamily for a long time, and

when the opportunity comes, both Cinderella and MDW's dreams come true, and they become the idealized princesses they wanted to be.

### **Hitchcock in the House; Analyzing Alfred Hitchcock's Sexualized Adaptation**

Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of *Rebecca* (1940) emphasizes this homoerotic desire, portraying Mrs. Danvers as a predatory and malicious housekeeper with a sexual desire for Rebecca and possibly for MDW as well. Hitchcock's film provides a unique interpretation of Mrs. Danvers, specifically in terms of her sexuality, which is not blatantly stated in the novel. This sexualized version of Mrs. Danvers also provides for a more powerful Rebecca, as Mrs. Danvers speaks to her sexually intimidating presence, and her eerie controlling legacy at Manderley. Hitchcock's film also emphasizes MDW's childlike nature, as Joan Fontaine dramatically plays up her girlish character, with many wide-eyed and gaping mouth expressions as she encounters her magical Manderley.

In the film's depiction of the lingerie scene, Mrs. Danvers sits MDW at Rebecca's vanity and pretends to brush her hair, sensually touching her shoulders and cheeks, and toying with Rebecca's delicate lingerie. While doing all of this, Mrs. Danvers recounts how she was always present when Rebecca dressed for an event, bathed, and when she went to bed. This insinuates that Mrs. Danvers frequently saw Rebecca when she was naked. She shows MDW a lacy embroidered pillowcase that she always keeps on Rebecca's pillow, even in her death. Since Mrs. Danvers kept Rebecca's room exactly as it was when she was still alive, Michael Walker asserts that it was "kept by Mrs. Danvers as a shrine to Rebecca's memory" (Walker 309). Mrs. Danvers's obsession with Rebecca makes MDW visibly uncomfortable, and the fear in her face is seen from the beginning of Mrs. Danvers's little show when she strokes MDW's cheek with a sleeve from



Rebecca's fur coat. Hallet's ideas on the sexual significance of touch in du Maurier's novel can be applied to this scene, as Rebecca's bedroom is "erotically charged by the lesbian presence, current and past, and by the touching of erogenous objects, previously activated by other women's hands" (Hallet 44). Hallet's notion of one's touch having lingering sexual connotations is powerful, and is certainly played out in MDW's reaction to Mrs. Danvers' touch. Each time Mrs. Danvers mimes brushing MDW's hair, or touches Rebecca's intimates and demands MDW touch them as well, the new Mrs. de Winter shudders, and is visibly distressed. Perhaps thoughts of the hands that lingered on Rebecca's objects are running through her mind, tormenting her with the thought of what else (or who else) those hands lingered on and touched. Rebecca's intimidating sexuality still lives on through Mrs. Danvers, and continues to challenge the inexperienced and naïve MDW, a victim of patriarchal-defined femininity.

The image of femininity that MDW seeks to portray is an idealized and imaginary character. Interestingly, MDW organizes a masquerade ball at Manderley, engaging in a sort of double masquerade of performing her gender, as well as a character for the ball. MDW puts significant effort into the costume ball in order to fit the mold of femininity that she thinks Manderley and Maxim want. Mrs. Danvers maliciously undermines MDW's efforts, and tricks her into wearing a costume that Rebecca wore at the last gala, resulting in Maxim's fury, and MDW's absolute shame. This shame allows her to open her eyes and truly see the type of masquerade she and her husband are constantly forced to perform by aristocratic social convention. She observes, "We were like two performers in a play, but we were divided, we were not acting with one another. We had to endure it alone, we had to put up this show, this miserable sham performance for the sake of all

these people I did not know and did not want to see again” (225). Certainly, this acknowledgement corresponds with Butler’s performative theory, as MDW is aware of the actions she must repetitively perform in order to be feminine. Of course, MDW is performing her gender within the boundaries set by the patriarchal society. She describes this performance as, “[bowing] and [smiling] like a dummy” (228). She is like a doll, playing house and performing femininity as her society, husband, and collection of guests’ demands.

Hitchcock’s adaptation highlights this doll-like performance in the masquerade scene, wherein the conflicting images of femininity collide in the form of MDW, emphasizing the ever-present, and powerful threat of unconventional femininity at Manderley. MDW’s childlike fantasy of her prince and his castle is shattered, and she realizes (after practically being thrown out of the room for wearing a costume identical to Rebecca’s) that everything is pretend. For John Belton, the film’s emphasis on MDW’s embarrassing episode at the masquerade emphasizes the feminization of Manderley. When MDW wears the same costume that Rebecca wore, Belton asserts that it is “a dead woman [enveloping] Manderley, having first assumed the costume of one of its ancestors” (Belton 44). For Maxim, it is an unwelcome return of the atypical feminine threat he believed he had eliminated. In choosing to dress like Caroline de Winter, Rebecca aligned herself with the previous owners of Manderley, establishing herself as a rightful matriarch. Of course, as Rebecca was confident, sexual, and independent, she could never come to own something that represented the image of femininity she was rejecting.

Rebecca could not ever be the head of Manderley, since her performance of her gender was disobedient to what society dictated. Thus, when she was murdered, her presence was gone, or so Maxim thought. When MDW dresses identically to Rebecca, the threat returns and for Belton, “the fatal costume ball serves once more to visually cement the analogy between seductive feminine body and the de Winter home” (Belton 44). Hitchcock’s adaptation plays heavily on this, as Maxim is quite emotional when his new wife descends the grand staircase. His first words to her are “What the devil do you think you’re doing?” which are quickly followed by a guest’s shocked whisper, “Rebecca!” He then commands her to change, shouting, “What are you standing there for? Didn’t you hear what I said?” which sends MDW running upstairs to cry. Maxim then cradles his head in his hands, reeling from his encounter with memories of Rebecca and her nonconforming femininity.

Whereas MDW is a portrait of submissive, doll-like femininity, Rebecca was the opposite, performing more masculine traits, and posing a threat to Maxim’s own masculinity, and notions of gender performance. Maxim constantly tried to tame Rebecca’s wild and defiant personality in order to hide the insecurity he had about his performance of his own gender. Rebecca’s masculine characteristics challenged Maxim’s understanding of gender, as he believed them to be crystallized rather than fluid. Rebecca’s performance afforded her more power over Maxim, causing him to feel inferior to her, which was the position the patriarchal society assigned to a woman. For Pons, Rebecca’s masculine traits force Maxim to feel “feminized” by his wife. His anxiety at his wife’s potential and his “fear of the feminization of his estate reveals his own insecurity as a patriarch” (Pons 77). In coming close to the shed by the sea while on

a walk with MDW, those emotions and memories came rushing back, reminding Maxim of his anxiety about his gender performance. Du Maurier writes, “He held me very tight, and his eyes questioned me, dark and uncertain, the eyes of a child in pain, a child in fear” (117). Maxim’s regression into a fearful little boy indicates his memory of the pain that Rebecca inflicted upon his ego, insulting his masculinity. In being close to where Rebecca last was, Maxim was close to where he once was, in terms of gender performance. He is frantic and desperate to never return to that place, and therefore does everything he can to oppress MDW into a role of traditional femininity so that she will never threaten him the way that Rebecca did. In the film, Laurence Olivier (Maxim) emphasizes this fear in his abrupt and unpredictable actions, frequently abandoning MDW without an explanation, clearly uncomfortable being in Rebecca’s haunting presence.

Interestingly, Rebecca’s agency is limited in Hitchcock’s adaptation, for in the script, her illegitimate child is replaced with her being diagnosed with terminal cancer—a change that removes a significant amount of her audacious character. In the novel, the unborn child is tangible evidence of Rebecca’s infidelity. The baby is something that Maxim uses against her, and that Rebecca herself uses to threaten and attempt to manipulate Maxim with. The removal of this in the film takes a crucial aspect of Rebecca’s sexual confidence away, and that is the actual proof of it. The baby served as a threat to the established patriarchal order, in which a woman would remain steadfastly faithful to her husband, serving his every need. Rebecca rejected this, and as previously stated, used her alluring sexuality to seek pleasure and gain agency outside of her marriage. Removing the baby and replacing it with terminal cancer does more than limit

Rebecca's agency—it removes the significance of her choice in the matter. She chooses to have the baby, but she obviously does not choose to have terminal cancer, which removes her agency, and the fact that her threat to patriarchal Manderley was nearly a reality.

### **Mismatched Maxim; a Patriarchal Pansy**

In his marriage with Rebecca, Maxim was forced by her masculine performance to perform more feminine traits, resulting in an internal conflict that could only be solved by eliminating her and restoring Maxim to his rightful masculine dominance. Rebecca refuses to perform her designated femininity, and instead chooses to manipulate Maxim into doing what she wants, using her charm and beauty to take down the patriarchy, rather than support it. Rebecca mixes masculinity and femininity, implementing performances of both whenever it suits her interests. This forces Maxim to acquiesce to her, which as a man obeying the patriarchy is certainly not acceptable. He is the quiet one while she entertains their guests, and it was Rebecca who put Maxim out for show, just as he does later with MDW. She once taunted Maxim, “Haven't we acted the parts of a loving husband and wife rather too well?” (227). Rebecca throws their performance of a loving couple back in Maxim's face, demonstrating just how good an actress she is, and how she can manipulate anyone with such a convincing performance. She further threatens Maxim and his beloved Manderley with her illegitimate child, claiming there is nothing Maxim can do to prevent her from having it. Rebecca's conniving plan is that her illegitimate child would “grow up here in Manderley, bearing [Maxim's] name. There would be nothing you could do. And when you died Manderley would be his. You could not prevent it” (227). With this threat, Rebecca demonstrates her full power; she obeys

the patriarchy only to the extent that she uses it to her benefit. She makes Maxim think she was playing his game, yet it is she who is in control and setting the rules. This portrayal of masculine prowess is the ultimate threat to Maxim's gender performance, and the physical embodiment of it, Manderley.

In a drastically misogynistic view, murder was an obvious punishment for Rebecca's performance, since there was no other way to stop her from breaking down gender barriers established by the patriarchy. Rebecca's lack of conventional femininity materialized itself in her illegitimate child, a physical threat to the established order at Manderley. Her punishment for threatening this society was, as Davies states, "a series of clichéd patriarchal labels signifying the demonic ('devil,' 'damnable,' 'filthy,' and so on)" (Davies 186). Davies notes that the words used to label the defiant Rebecca function as her punishment, yet it is these words and labels that provide justification for her murder. For Davies, Maxim's reference to Rebecca as a 'devil' is her punishment, and her murder, the actual punishment, he justified by accusing her of being a 'devil.' For Maxim, Rebecca's affair with Jack Favell was the act of committing the crime, the unborn child the physical representation of the crime, and the words used to describe her are used to justify her murder. Thus, she is the 'devil' because she was unfaithful, and therefore deserved to die. In her theory, Butler proposes, "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" (Butler 528). Certainly, according to this statement, Rebecca's murder was, according to Maxim, a sort of justified punishment for her failure to perform her gender properly. While Butler most likely did not have murder in mind when she described the consequences of an atypical gender performance, in this text, it was Maxim's last resort in defending his own gender

role. Ultimately, Rebecca is punished because she refused to adhere to society's and Maxim's definition of gender. Her crime is, as Davies puts it, one "generated by Maxim's insistence upon the 'rules' of female chastity" (Davies 189). For blatantly defying these 'rules,' Rebecca was a threat to the traditions of Manderley and the patriarchal lifestyle it promoted, and therefore had to be eliminated for it to continue. This is what made Rebecca the New Woman of the novel; she defied what men told her to be, embracing her sexuality, performing masculinity, and threatening the patriarchy up until her death.

Furthermore, Maxim justifies his actions against his wife by claiming that everything he did, he did "because of Manderley," because he felt he had to protect the house and the ideals that it represented. He did everything, including murdering his disobedient wife, for Manderley, because of Manderley. It also justifies his hurried wedding to MDW, for although they did not know each other for very long, she was the opposite of Rebecca, and Maxim recognized that he could control her; she would not pose the threat that Rebecca did. Maxim needs to be the protector because he is insecure in what he is protecting, and that is his own performance of masculinity. On a similar note as Pons, Davies also reflects upon Manderley's influence on Maxim, arguing that it is a "patriarchal signifier of permanence, inheritance and ownership" (Davies 188). Therefore, without Manderley as a physical symbol of dominance and masculinity, Maxim's own masculinity would be further threatened, and he loses himself—he needs Manderley to define himself. Thus, his repeated phrase, "because of Manderley," served as his own justification of his actions, no matter how terrible. As long as Manderley stands, the values it stands for will endure. Rebecca did not perform her gender as Maxim or Manderley instructed, and as a result, Maxim acted to protect the society he performed

for, and kill what threatened it, punishing her for her disobedience, protecting Manderley from her and her unborn illegitimate child.

### **The House on Haunted Hill<sup>7</sup>; the Haunting Influence of Gothic Gendered Space**

In this section, I will be describing the physical place of Manderley and how it inhibited the New Woman, led to Rebecca's death, and forced specific gender performances. While critics have noted that the gothic house, haunted by memories of Rebecca, is certainly an imposing and eerie structure, it is the gendered space of Manderley that is the true villain of *Rebecca*, as it allows sexism and gender performances to be enforced through the physical construction of its rooms. The house is constructed upon the desires of the elite upper class, and therefore it is comprised entirely of materialism and misogyny—two real, but abstract things. Manderley is an imaginary, idealistic place envisioned by those who desire the mythical dream life of the upper class. As MDW herself states, “Manderley stood out like an enchanted house, every window aflame, the grey walls coloured by the falling stars. A house bewitched, carved out of the dark woods” (227). This description of Manderley as a place of enchantment and bewitchment evokes a feeling that the house is not realistic, that it is beyond the real, created as an ideal, unattainable thing. It is the material of dreams, a point emphasized by the famous first sentence of the novel.

Furthermore, this dreamy aspect of Manderley ensures that it will exist forever; no one can destroy a dream, as they are intangible and unattainable, just like Manderley. Towards the end of the novel, MDW awakes the morning after the investigation party comes to Manderley to speak with Maxim about Rebecca's death and possible autopsy.

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<sup>7</sup> The title of 1959 film, ‘House on Haunted Hill,’ in which a millionaire invites guests to attempt to spend a night at his mansion in exchange for \$10,000.



She reflects upon the events of the night before, musing that Manderley is not concerned with their problems, and that it will always exist without them. She thinks, “No one would ever hurt Manderley. It would lie always in its hollow like an enchanted thing, guarded by the woods, safe and secure” (357). Though this quote eerily anticipates the great fire that burns Manderley to the ground, MDW is clearly still in her fairytale world, imagining the manor being preserved “like an enchanted thing,” like the mythical fountain of youth, always able to be accessed in her vivid memory. Only in her memory will Manderley remain so untouched and perfect, for the reality of its fiery destruction is too much for her mind to handle.

So long as Manderley is preserved, the patriarchy it embodies will survive as well. It is an enchanted entity, keeping the values of the elites alive, indefinitely. It will never fade from memory or from a dream, as that is where it will be kept alive—untouched, and perfectly preserved in the minds of those who desire the idealized, materialistic lifestyle it projected. In beginning the novel with the dreamy statement, “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again,” du Maurier is introducing this nostalgia for the past, indicating society’s and MDW’s longing to return to the past. MDW wishes to return to the Manderley she dreamt of, not the one she actually experienced; she is romanticizing and idealizing the lifestyle she wishes she had in Manderley. Simultaneously, this sentence offers audiences a glimpse into MDW’s naïve character, as well as society’s nostalgic pining for an era that will never return, but will only be preserved in dreams.

This dreamy aspect of the gothic house is its ‘phantasmic’ quality, according to John Belton, and it is this quality that explains MDW’s fascination and obsession with it,

and the culture it represents. Belton analyzes the illustration and representation of Manderley's phantasmic quality in Hitchcock's adaptation, arguing that the house encourages MDW's naïve dream of living as a princess in a lavish castle. For Belton, MDW's first glimpse of Manderley is of particular importance, as it establishes the fact that she desires the house more than Maxim (Belton 36). In this scene, Maxim and MDW are approaching Manderley when a sudden rainstorm hits and the drops on the windshield distort their vision. Belton describes Hitchcock filming from MDW's point of view, behind the blurry windshield. He states that the house "[rises] powerfully from amid the trees, then cuts back to a close-up of [MDW's] face as she stares, openmouthed, at the spectacle before her" (Belton 36). In filming the first sight of Manderley this way, Hitchcock presents MDW like the mesmerized child she really is, emphasized by her awestruck gaping mouth, and captivated stare. Like a young girl seeing a princess castle for the first time, MDW visibly regresses into a performance of femininity reminiscent of girlhood.

MDW's regression is due to her desperate childish dream of being a wealthy aristocrat in a luxurious home, and when she is offered the chance to live her dream, she is willing to accept any treatment in order to get it. In Hitchcock's film, MDW and Maxim are out on their first drive together, just getting to know each other. MDW nervously sputters "I wish I was a woman of about thirty-six dressed in black satin and a string of pearls," in hopes that this image of femininity that she is speaking of is exactly what Maxim is looking for in a wife. She has clearly attached a very specific feminine image to her idealized life at Manderley, and is desperate to play such a role. However, Maxim quickly tells her that this is not the woman he wants, for, unbeknownst to MDW,

the woman she is describing is exactly what Rebecca was. This again makes evident how the novel places two different views of femininity in contrast with each other.

Since Rebecca's portrayal of femininity is rejected by patriarchal standards, Maxim desires the opposite, which is the naïve and impressionable image of girlhood that MDW expresses. In his adaptation, Hitchcock thus, according to Belton, "comes to use the image of Manderley as the focal point for her daydreams about ascending to a more distinguished and elegant life, while equally feeding her masochistic notions about her own inferiority" (Belton 36). Certainly, Belton's ideas on MDW's self-respect being masochistic are justified, as she willingly submits herself to a position lower than her husband, going so far as to identify with a pet dog. Manderley enforces this masochistic feminine role, physically dwarfing MDW with its size, and constantly reminds her that she is out of place, both in terms of social class and as a woman. If MDW were to reject this demeaning role of the dutiful housewife, she would not achieve her dream, and would most likely face a similar fate as Rebecca. As a Cinderella figure, MDW is enchanted by the lifestyle that Manderley symbolizes, and because she is from a lower social class, she is desperate to fit in with the culture she is introduced to. She thus willingly submits to a masochistic treatment from Maxim, because this treatment ensures that she will be able to stay in Manderley and live out her princess fairytale. However, MDW's Cinderella dreams are shattered in the end, as Manderley is completely destroyed in a fire. Her dream is literally in a crumbled mess. She even states that from afar, the fire looked like "a splash of blood," which demonstrates that MDW's dream has literally been killed (380).

In living in an estate dedicated to embodying the patriarchy's values of masculinity, Maxim has effectively, yet unknowingly, trapped himself in the same cage as his wives. Though he is insecure in his performance of masculinity, he unconsciously traps himself on the stage, locked in his aristocratic gendered space. For Pons, he is therefore a "puppet in the upper class world he is trapped in" (Pons 31). In *Manderley*, Maxim has created a theater for his gender performance puppetry, trapping his wives and himself in it. Since *Manderley* is a physical representation of a materialistic, sexist civilization, and projects these ideals on its outside, so too will its interior. The décor of the house restricts its inhabitants and demands 'proper' gender performance, according to its society. Maxim's study is meant to encourage his masculinity, with the dark wood, a well-stocked library; the grand bedroom of the late Rebecca was intended to encourage femininity with the white lacy curtains and ornate furniture. Yet, despite these gendered spaces, both characters struggle to meet the demands of society in regard to their gender performances. Rebecca refused to meet the expectations of her husband and of society, which caused Maxim to question his own masculinity and murder his wife. MDW fixes *Manderley*; she obeys the gendered spaces, performing the role of Maxim's perfect wife, as he and the house require. For Walker, MDW experiences *Manderley* as a "disempowering crypt," as it too limits her agency, leaving her subject to Maxim's and thus, *Manderley*'s commands (40). While the house is certainly disempowering to women, it is not a crypt for all of them, as Walker asserts. Unlike Rebecca, MDW does not die at *Manderley*, therefore it cannot be a crypt that holds her there forever. Yet for Rebecca, *Manderley* is a crypt, as her spirit and legacy lives on and inhabits the house, just as a ghost would haunt a crypt. Maxim's insecurity in his gender performance comes

hand in hand with Rebecca's empowered sexuality and characterization as a commanding New Woman, for as he continuously struggles with his performance, her spirit is kept alive because she was the one who forced him to question it in the first place. Since Maxim continues to impose this idealized masculinity on himself, he therefore keeps Rebecca alive, as it was her performance of a mixed masculinity and femininity that made him question his own performance. Both MDW and Maxim are trapped in this gilded cage, forced to perform, as the cage, Manderley, demands.

However, Rebecca does win in the end, as the New Woman has infiltrated and feminized Manderley, with Mrs. Danvers ultimately destroying the patriarchal symbol in an all-consuming fire, acting for her beloved Rebecca. Throughout the novel, MDW describes how Rebecca's initials are everywhere, surrounding her and serving as a reminder of the past matriarch. Walker notes that this is Rebecca's legacy left behind, reminding Maxim and Manderley that they will never truly be rid of her, for although "Manderley may be Maxim's family mansion, [it] is Rebecca's mark the heroine keeps coming across: an embroidered 'R' on everything from table linen to stationary" (Walker 309). This lasting impression that Rebecca leaves on Manderley signifies to MDW and to Maxim that she will never leave. Though Walker notes that the 'R' signifies Rebecca's ownership of Manderley, he does not mention her destruction of her house, from the inside out. Rebecca has infiltrated Maxim's mind, making him insecure in his gender performance, thus removing his ownership of the mansion that represents idealized masculinity. Her influence over Maxim and her constant presence, noted by her 'R's, demonstrates that she is in complete control of the house and its inhabitants. The fire

symbolizes Rebecca's victory, as through Mrs. Danvers, she has finally destroyed the institution that sought to destroy her.

The fire that destroys Manderley also signifies the end of the great house era, as the fall of the patriarchy is symbolized in the fall of a grand house that represented it. The fire in this novel completes the circle, as this thesis began with *Jane Eyre* and the fire at Thornfield Hall, which illuminated Rochester's secrecy. Jane, the New Woman of Brontë's text, is able to gain agency and authority over Mr. Rochester when Bertha burns Thornfield, and similarly, when Mrs. Danvers, acting for the sake of Rebecca, burns Manderley, Rebecca has finally won her battle against the patriarchy's standards of gender. In the case of Bertha, she is literally held prisoner in the attic of Thornfield Hall, and for Mrs. Danvers, she holds onto the spirit of Rebecca, who fought against the patriarchal cage that is Manderley. The fire that consumes Manderley signifies Rebecca's victory. She has won; she has brought about the physical fall of Manderley, a representation of the patriarchy that demanded her fatal punishment for her sexual disobedience.

The destruction of Manderley is Rebecca's ultimate revenge, and is the end of the great house (gilded cage) era, but for MDW, Manderley lives on, despite its physical destruction. She is content to dwell within her dreams, and keep Manderley alive in her mind, because it is only there that her beloved house can be preserved forever. Through this, MDW ensures that her Cinderella dream will always exist, even if Manderley, her castle, physically does not. With Walt Disney's *Cinderella* in mind, the lyric 'Whatever you wish for, you keep,' has special significance, as MDW is keeping her dream of Manderley alive, but only in her mind. She is able to hold on to her once tangible dream,

in the abstract space of her own dreams. This contradiction between the physical destruction of Manderley and MDW's preservation of it in her mind leaves the reader with the question of whether Rebecca of MDW won, and also addresses the two conflicting femininities again; one, a naïve girl, desperately holding on to something that will never be, and the other, an audacious and independent woman.

## Coda

In closing this thesis, I will now turn to a novel that once again revisits the gothic tradition and provides a modern commentary on the Great House era in order to demonstrate how the genre is still relevant in the twenty-first century. Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* (2009) is set in the 1940s at Hundreds Hall, the crumbling estate of the once wealthy Ayres family. Over the course of the novel, the house is revealed through personifying descriptive language to have intentions and actions of its own as it strikes down members of the Ayres family one by one. In applying the sentiment of manor homes being the physical embodiments of the patriarchal society, I find that Waters' novel takes it to the next level, creating a grand estate that is its own entity. Hundreds Hall attacks its own residents in an attempt [to protect](#) itself from the threat of modernity.

The theme of evolution and change is prominent in this novel, and it also serves as a significant threat to Hundreds Hall, just as it did for Thornfield, *Howards End*, and *Manderley*. At the end of the novel, Hundreds Hall [lies](#) in ruins, representative of the fact that the Great Houses all had to be physically destroyed in order for the New Woman, new society, and a new culture to succeed.

An analysis of the narrator, Faraday, provides evidence for, and a critique of a modern obsession with the time period. Faraday is a representation of the lower class man, dreaming of one day owning an estate such as Hundreds Hall. However, because of his class, Hundreds Hall deems him an unwelcome outsider, and seeks to expel him, permanently. In order to achieve this, the Hall removes everything Faraday loves, indicating to the audience that outsiders will never be able to return to the Gilded Age of the Great House, and for good reason, as this thesis demonstrates. Faraday's courtship of



Caroline Ayres is a fraud, for he is not in love with her, but he instead is obsessed with her enormous estate that he has glorified in his memory all his life. He does everything he can to protect the house—often angering Caroline and her family by doing so. Being in a lower class than the Ayres family, Faraday's attempt at ascension angers the house, and it lashes out, killing both Mrs. Ayres and Caroline, successfully preventing Faraday from ever joining the family and becoming the man of the house. He finally realizes this at the end of novel, when the house eliminates every member of the Ayres family one way or another. Reminiscing, he states, "It is as if the house has thrown the family off, like springing turf throwing off a footprint" (Waters 509). The house recognizes that Faraday, a man from a lower class, is infiltrating the Ayres family and it therefore seeks to expel him at all costs. Similar to how Henry Wilcox seeks to expel the Basts and other lower class families from the aristocratic upper class, so too does Hundreds Hall with its physical space. To the upper class and to Hundreds Hall, the lower classes are equivalent to grass on a footprint: insignificant.

As Faraday becomes increasingly infatuated with Hundreds Hall, the house itself works harder to drive him away. Faraday expresses his discomfort at being in a lower class, but having more passion for the house when he first meets the Ayres family, and deduces that they are ill fitted to run the estate. In this excerpt, Faraday resembles a crazed fanatic, seeking to own Hundreds Hall in order to appreciate it the proper way, as opposed to how the Ayres family treats it. He states,

I felt a flicker of impatience with them—the faintest stirring of a dark dislike—and my pleasure in the lovely room was slightly spoiled. Perhaps it was the peasant blood in me, rising. But Hundreds Hall had been made and maintained, I thought, by the very people they were laughing at now. After two hundred years, those people had begun to withdraw their labor, their belief in the house; and the house was collapsing, like a pyramid of cards. (27)

Here, Faraday's frustration with the Ayres family is evident, as he thinks he appreciates and will care for the house more than they ever did. He acknowledges his 'peasant blood rising,' because he is so angry that a family with such an incredible house does not appreciate it as he, a working class man, does. Faraday is more in love with the old house than he is with Caroline, and it is why he pursues a relationship with her in the first place, and now that the house has taken her away, he has no purpose being there. Thus the house has "won."<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

The insight into the literature of the manor house that Waters' novel provides is crucial to understanding its influential legacy. As seen in the novels analyzed in this thesis, these literary works challenged gender norms of a pre-existing and detrimental mindset, encouraged by Victorian standards. Jane, Margaret, and Rebecca all serve as different modes of femininity for the modern feminist movement, as they each challenge the patriarchy, and portray characteristics of the New Woman figure in their own unique ways. Jane introduces a rebellious spirit, determined to be independent of her husband, Margaret adopts motherly characteristics that were deemed by society to be 'weaker,' and Rebecca unabashedly expressed a nonconforming sexuality, all of which threatened and brought down the patriarchal structures that sought to submit them. In order to better understand the progress of the modern feminist movement it is imperative to acknowledge the crucial foundation that occurred as a result of the conflict between the feminine images of the Victorian and New Woman, and the impact of patriarchal structure on gender performativity. It is this conflict that allows for the women of these

novels to challenge convention and establish a new and more empowered vision of femininity, an example that set the stage for, and continues to inspire the modern feminist movement.

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