Religion holds a powerful influence over the characters in *Jane Eyre*. Mrs. Reed is bound by her Christian duty to look after Jane as a child, Rochester is trapped for years in his Christian marriage to a mad woman, and St. John's commitment to the faith takes him abroad. Each major character in Jane's life helps to influence the development of her personal standard of ethics and spiritual maturity. The shift in religious values in nineteenth century England from a strict adherence to church doctrine to personal standards of morality is demonstrated in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* by the voices of Jane as Character and Jane as Narrator.

Evangelicalism had spread across Christian denominations in Britain long before Bronte’s birth, and it was this religious reform movement that most deeply affected Bronte and her family (Griesinger 34). One of the teachings of Protestant Christianity is “the belief that individuals have the ability to hear from God directly, to interpret God’s will for themselves, to act accordingly, and thus to become responsible for their own salvation” (32). Wilberforce describes this new Evangelical Christianity as simply a “general standard or tone of morals,” or a “system of ethics” (273, 282). Some critics note that this movement appealed to women in particular because it “validated intense emotion and passionate feeling as ways to know God” (Griesinger 36). For Victorian women willing to challenge traditional religious authority, “the assurance of being saved and the experience of being intimately in touch with God became an important source of
independence and power..." (32). This is seen firsthand in Jane's life, and she herself admits it (Bronte 204).

In Jane Eyre Bronte paints a portrait of "a woman living through a period of religious controversy and reform," who created and practiced her own, "authentic Christian spirituality" (Griesinger 34). Put simply, Bronte creates "a religion of romantic belief in the self" (31). Numerous spiritual incidents are scattered through Bronte's text, echoing religious teachings of the church while still existing as personal and individualistic experiences. For instance, a vision in the moonlight warns Jane to "flee temptation" as she contemplates becoming Rochester's lover (Bronte 319).

Instead of appealing to an outside secondary source for her religious standards, Jane creates her own moral code, a criterion that changes and matures through the course of the novel. Jane the Narrator's comments serve to enhance the impact of Jane the Character's actions, building a second point of view that adds meaning and strengthens the pathos created within the reader. The narrative voice "expresses frankly the full force of the passion felt by the character at the time and the narrator in retrospect, but it also works to contain that passion...through a strain of dispassionate analysis that accompanies but does not replace...the free expression of the feelings being narratively described" (Peters 226). The narrative and character voices serve to effectively communicate Jane's spiritual development in the text, allowing one to experience and one to evaluate the current action.

Jane as the Narrator and Jane as the Character are intertwined, with "the existence of the narrative voice entirely dependent upon the verbal evolution of the protagonist" (218). When an issue is particularly controversial, Jane the Narrator inserts
her own authoritative voice and explains the complex combination of logic and emotions that influences her decision. From early on this voice is evident; for instance, when Jane endures the cruelty of the Reed family as a small child, and cries out against the injustice, an older authoritative voice steps in to explain the situation for the reader. Jane the Character cries out “Unjust, Unjust!” (Bronte 12), and in the next paragraph Jane the Narrator comments:

What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question—why I thus suffered; now, at the distance of—I will not say how many years, I see it clearly. (Bronte12)

From an early age Jane wrestles with her inner sense of morality, judging the Reed family’s treatment of her to be unacceptable and calling into question why she has been forced to endure it. Later Jane listens to Helen’s own beliefs regarding religion, and struggles to find a way to incorporate Christian theology into her everyday life. While Jane cannot accept Helen’s renunciation of earthly pleasures, similar to St. John’s, she does later come to forgive Mrs. Reed (Lamonica 253). Helen leads by example in creating her own doctrine (254). She shows Jane the importance of “valuing God’s love above all earthly passions,” and provides her with the moral framework to later reject an idolatrous relationship with Rochester (253). Here Jane the Narrator highlights the tension between reason and emotion that underlies many of Jane’s religious decisions in the text.
In continuing her spiritual growth, later in the novel Jane willingly admits that traveling with St. John to India would be a fulfillment of her Christian duty; for her it would be a most “glorious” occupation (Bronte 344). But she feels it would be a “starving of the spirit,” that would hold her back (345). Jane concludes that she could not marry St. John, because to do so would be to “abandon” half of herself (344). Doing this would not feed the personal spirituality she has worked hard to develop.

Jane the Character tells the reader, it is “almost as if he [St. John] loved me,” but this is not enough (Bronte 419). Jane the Narrator later comments that to yield would have been an “error of principle,” regarding her own personal values (Bronte 356). Jane is willing to submit to God’s will, “but she must determine that will for herself” (Griesinger 51-52). She finds that her calling is not to be with St. John, but Rochester, and “Jane is at peace with her choice not only because she is deeply in love with Rochester but because she is convinced that this is God’s calling for her” (Griesinger 55). Jane ultimately learns that she does not need to rely on St. John for salvation in Christ, but can remain free to pursue her own method of salvation (53, 52).

When Jane and Rochester’s relationship begins, Jane the Narrator admits to the reader that her relationship with him begins to cloud her judgement. She comments: “My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for His creature: of whom I had made an idol” (Bronte 234). Jane admits that she has become swept up in emotion and criticizes herself in comparison to her personal moral standards. Her own spiritual integrity is what creates this conviction (Griesinger 49).
After hearing Rochester's cries, another spiritual experience, Jane admits that she prayed in, “a different way to St. John’s, but effective in its own fashion” (Bronte 358). Jane the Narrator illustrates Jane the Character’s personal decision to reject St. John, and the traditional Christianity he represents, in favor of marrying Rochester and living out her own personal service to God. While her personal sense of Christianity is unique and unorthodox, it is shown to be genuine. Just as Jane rejects a subservient relationship with St. John, it is only when she is on equal footing with Rochester, with their financial and physical conditions altered, that she willingly enters a marital relationship.

It is towards this ending stage of the novel that the voices of Jane the Narrator and Jane the Character begin to merge into one. Jane believes that caring for Rochester is her true spiritual calling, her fulfillment in life, saying, “for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand” (Bronte 451). In becoming Rochester’s wife, Jane finds a true loving relationship while obtaining spiritual fulfillment. She does not pledge to become a missionary’s wife to St. John, teaching the doctrines he embodies, but instead remains independent from the church; she follows her own convictions regarding her salvation and living Christian life of service.

Jane’s endeavors to define her own standards for Christian moralistic behavior reflect the historical influence of Evangelicalism spreading in the Victorian era. She turns away from characters who exemplify oppressive doctrines in favor of exploring and building her own standard of ethics that guides her decisions. Throughout the course of the novel, Jane the Narrator offers insights into various stages of this spiritual growth that Jane the Character experiences. By the end of the novel Jane the Character
and the Narrator converge (Peters 219). The combined voices portray her journey in gaining the discernment and wisdom that are required in her relationship with God (Griesinger 56).
Works Cited


