

Dressed for the Part

*A Study of the Significance of Dress in Charlotte
Brontë's Jane Eyre and Wilkie Collins's The Woman
in White.*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the significance of dress in two Victorian novels, namely Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60). In both novels, clothing acts as a vehicle for gaining a deeper understanding of the characters. In *Jane Eyre* we follow the protagonist's journey from orphan girl to married woman, all of which is marked through her clothing, but also through her relationship to needlework. This is explored by examining the frequency at which different fabrics are mentioned—as well as the amount of detail in sartorial descriptions. In Collins's novel, however, dress plays an essential role in driving the plot further, as the story is dependent on the visual likeness of the two women in white. In a narrower sense, fabrics and fashions are utilised in order to showcase different traits within the female characters. This thesis will therefore prove that coupling the field of material studies with literary analysis will lead to important insights on some of the most compelling female characters of the Victorian period.

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations	VI
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Theory and method	3
Overview of thesis	5
Chapter 2: Jane Eyre	7
2.1 From rags to riches	8
2.2 Plain Jane’s Quaker dress	13
2.3 Needlework	19
Chapter 3: The Woman in White	25
3.1 White muslin: Innocence or deception	26
3.2 Marian and the feminine ideal	31
Chapter 4: Conclusion	38
Appendix	40
Table 1	40
Table 2	41
Bibliography	46

Abbreviations

JE — *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Edited by Margaret Smith and published by Oxford University Press, New York, 2019.

WiW — *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins. Edited by John Sutherland, and published by Oxford University Press, New York, 2008. This edition uses the 1861 version of Collins's text, which is significantly different to the previous version that was published periodically in *All Year Round*.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will explore the significance of dress in two Victorian novels, namely Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–1860). These novels feature distinct heroines, compelling women of deception, androgynous defiance, and women emulating purity—characteristics that are all communicated through dress. The Victorian period saw a boom in the textile industry, and one should not underestimate how this affected the novel. According to Madeleine C. Seys, this is when we see the rise of the modern fashion industry and “swiftly changing sartorial styles” (6). In her book on *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature* she also emphasises how novels, typically containing many descriptions of their heroines, became the dominant literary genre and that “the coalescence of these factors makes the Victorian period ideal for the examination of dress in fiction” (6). Similarly, Leigh Summers writes in her book *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*: “It was believed, by the Victorian middle and upper classes at least, that costume could be read as easily as any text” (Summers, 19). The present thesis argues that sartorial descriptions, fabrics, or pieces of clothing in themselves, and references to the making and mending of clothes are an essential means of characterization particularly in *Jane Eyre*, but also to some extent in *The Woman in White*. I shall argue that the two respective authors manage to portray distinctive character traits and relay aspects of social standing, while also indicating certain expectations regarding women's roles in society. By looking at which materials are mentioned in a given context, and how the characters relate to these materials or forms of attire, one will not only gain a deeper insight into the characters portrayed (and the methods by which they are portrayed), but also gain insight into the beauty standards for women during the period in which the novels were written.

The main focus will be on *Jane Eyre*, the reason being that clothing is significant in both primary texts, but in different ways. In Brontë's novel, clothing serves as a common thread that marks the different stages of the main heroine's life, and dress is consequently essential to our understanding of the evolution of what is known as “plain Jane”. Moreover, in this novel, we follow the story through one character's point of view, which allows for a deeper exploration of the relationship between clothing, gender— and class—expression, but also how this relationship changes throughout the story. *Jane Eyre* has consequently been chosen as the main focus of this

thesis in order to properly explore, and offer new perspectives on, the role of narrative in sartorial description. Nonetheless, *The Woman in White* is a valuable addition and basis for comparison, as this novel presents different aspects of the significance of dress than what one will find in *Jane Eyre*. For example, in Collins's novel, clothing is not only a key element in characterisation, but it also drives the plot forward. Moreover, the contrasts between the three main female characters, Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie, and Marian Halcombe, allow for an exploration of different representations of femininity, where fabric, fashions and utilisations of dress play a part in these representations.

None of the secondary sources consulted in connection with writing this thesis have compared the two novels discussed here, nor has there been any focus on how the evolution of a character's wardrobe mirrors their socioeconomic climb. This thesis is anchored in the idea that we as readers make assumptions about characters based on what they are wearing (characterisation), and how this information is relayed to us (narration). But within the text itself we can also find examples of people identifying or making assumptions or informed guesses on a person's class through their attire. Rochester scans Jane when they first meet to look for clues as to what her station is at Thornfield (*JE*, 112). Hartright is puzzled when seeing Laura in a plain white muslin dress, as it "made her, so far as externals went, look less affluent in circumstances than her own governess" (*WiW*, 54). In the same way, we as readers learn a lot about the different characters through their clothing and accessories, not only in terms of class but also what these pieces represent or signify. In other words: fabrics, colours, types of clothing and other adornments act as vehicles for understanding the characters, which allow for a richer and deeper understanding of the text as a whole. Basing literary analysis on sartorial description—but also the mention of a fabric, item, or piece of clothing—and thus combining the fields of literary studies and material cultural studies is a growing field. In fact, a number of researchers anchor their studies specifically within the Victorian context such as Seys, Rosy Aindow, Catherine Spooner and Leigh Summers, due to the growing production and availability of clothing in this time period. These researchers, however, use a wider lens in their analysis, looking at the role of clothing and materials in several novels in the period, while this thesis will only focus on two primary texts, exploring a few aspects of the significance of dress within them. Moreover, some of the methodology in this thesis, which to my knowledge has not been used by others in the field, leads to new perspectives on the relevance of combining material and literary studies.

Theory and method

As my objective is to study the significance of clothing—and that which is related to clothing—in the Victorian novel, scholarship that combines material and literary studies is the main theoretical basis of this thesis. Examples are some of the works mentioned above, such as Seys, Summers and Aindow. These scholars tend to depend on structuralist terminology developed by Ferdinand Saussure and Roland Barthes, and a few preliminary definitions may be helpful. Although some have disregarded Barthes's *The Fashion System* as being overly complex in its analysis (Barnard, 96), much of what is written within the field of fashion writing today is based on basic structuralist theory. For example, Seys uses the structuralist term “signifier” in this way: “In Victorian novels, the details of the heroines’ dress function not as frivolous embellishment but as signifiers to be read within their narratives” (Seys, 1). This is in accordance with Saussure’s definition and use of the term, which is that the signifier is the “*sound-image*”, or the material form of a sign, which is associated with what he labels the “signified” (Saussure, 39, 41). Consequently, I will be using the term as Seys uses it in her analysis.

A few other definitions are necessary as well. Firstly, I will be using Fotis Jannidis’s definition of the term “characterisation” from LHN, the *Living Handbook of Narratology*, a vital scholarly resource that is available online. Jannidis describes characterisation as “ascribing information to an agent in the text so as to provide a character in the storyworld with a certain property or properties” (Paragraph 22). These properties can be either psychological or social, but also physiological or locative (Jannidis, paragraph 22). Therefore, when claiming that certain aspects of dress are essential to characterisation, I will be claiming that a fabric, for example, gives us information about a character’s personality or social standing, understanding of course that this is a “dynamic process” (Jannidis, paragraph 24), and that the reader might infer their own assumptions or experiences to this system of communication.

Furthermore, when using the term “fashion” I will use it as Valerie Steele defines it in *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age*. She writes: “‘Fashion’, however, refers not just to high fashion, but more importantly to a regular pattern of style change—the crinoline dress evolves into the bustle dress, and so on” (Steele, 84). This definition will be used as the basis for a central idea when discussing fashion(s) and class, namely that the term should include the styles worn by the middle class, rather than only considering the aristocracy and gentry. In this way, Steele broadens the scope of what one might

consider as “fashion”, which will be central to my overall argument. However, to avoid discussing clothing only in terms of what was considered fashionable during the Victorian period, I will mostly use the terms “clothing”, “attire” or “dress” when referring to a garment.

As for the critics that make up most of the theoretical groundwork in this thesis, I will be using both those anchored in the Victorian era, and those who approach it with a wider temporal and spatial lens. Here it is necessary to inform that this thesis will not engage directly with the larger field of fashion studies, as the objective of this thesis is to study the significance of fashion in literary works, and not clothing or fashion in themselves. For example, Malcolm Barnard and his work *Fashion as Communication*, focuses on the communicative properties of fashion, which is relevant to my argument. However, when writing on the topic of writing about fashion, he does so through fashion journalism. As fashion journalism and sartorial literary analysis seek different objectives, they must consequently use different approaches.

Therefore, this thesis will rely on critics who approach fashion—or that which is related to clothing more in general—within fiction. I will therefore be using Rosy Aindow’s theory, as presented in *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870–1914*, as a basis for my thesis. She uses some of the theoretical perspectives found in Nathan Joseph’s *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing*. Not all of Joseph’s concepts are relevant to this thesis, but his use of metaphor to explain clothing and the signification process is useful. He explains that “In adopting a clothing metaphor to project an image of a social status or position, one can express various degrees of identification with that position” (Joseph, 17). Thus, not all clothing items or fabrics assume a complete degree of identification with a certain social status or character trait. Aindow suggests that “When assessing the appearance of a stranger, society resorts to a shorthand system of fastening upon a few significant clues as to social position” (8), and this thesis will similarly use a shorthand system when studying the significance of clothing, as it relies on the connotations tied to a garment, fabric or style of dress in Victorian society.

Moreover, this thesis will engage closely with Seys’s *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads*, which contains discussions of both primary texts, but more specifically, the clothing of the characters Jane, Laura and Anne. Seys also gives a thorough outline of the history of fabrics such as muslin and wool, which are heavily featured in this thesis. Claire Hughes’s *Dressed in Fiction* and *Henry James and the Art of Dress* have also been consulted—the former for criticism on *The Woman in White*, and the latter for a general

understanding of how one can apply information on different aspects of dress (for example muslin's textile properties) to literary works. Additionally, Hughes's work has been influential to, among others, Seys. For more general theory on Victorian ideals of femininity, and how this influenced the fashion of the period, I have used Valerie Steele's *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age*.

In terms of methodology, this thesis will rely on close reading, paired with arguments based on critics relevant to my primary texts—as well as sources that pertain to clothing and materials in general, or historical background. Moreover, I have used an additional method to map out the significance of different fabrics in *Jane Eyre*, namely categorisation of fabrics and the characters connected to these fabrics. The data was collected by taking note each time a fabric was mentioned, or a new fabric was introduced, and the results are presented in the appendix (table 1 and table 2, page 40–45), where I have added a more comprehensive explanation of each table. These findings will be the basis of my analysis in chapter 2.1, where I will argue that there is a link between the frequency of a given fabric and its class-association, and that this moreover can give us essential information about Jane as a character. Thus, I have used categorisation as a method in order to get a better overview of the types of fabrics that are mentioned in *Jane Eyre*. Thanks to this overview one can discern various patterns not only when it comes to what types of fabrics are mentioned most frequently, but also to gain an overview of which characters the different fabrics are tied to. In addition, table 2 indicates at which point in the story the fabrics are mentioned (through the list of page numbers), which clarifies at which stage of life Jane is associated with the different fabrics. This will all accumulate in meaningful discussions on the significance of dress in the Victorian novel.

Overview of thesis

In order to fulfil my initial thesis statement, each chapter will approach the significance of dress in different ways—either by delving into a fabric or piece of attire in particular, or by looking at how clothing acts as a signifier of class, or more broadly to how different characters either align with or reject Victorian standards of beauty through their attire. I could have organised the thesis so that it focused on a fabric or style of dress in each chapter, as Seys does in *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature*—and some of the chapters in the thesis are in fact organised this way. However, doing so throughout would hinder me from looking at other

aspects of the relationship between clothing and character, such as in chapters 2.1, 2.3 and 3.2. Moreover, although some comparisons to other characters are necessary at times, I will mainly focus on the character Jane in *Jane Eyre*, and Laura, Anne, and Marian in *The Woman in White*, which have been prioritised in order to properly develop my argument.

I will start by arguing that Jane's evolution can be mapped out through what she wears, and that we can gain insight to class divides within the story—and how Jane positions herself in the social hierarchy—through paying attention to the fabrics mentioned in connection with different characters. This will further prove that clothing is essential to our understanding of Jane as an Other, that is, someone who does not belong to the upper class. The next subchapter will take a closer look at one dress in particular, namely Jane's plain Quaker dress, which is necessary to exemplify how clothing can carry meaning, and how this inevitably influences the text. I will also explore the *why* behind Jane's choice of clothing and will argue that the heroine asserts her individuality in order to dress as she likes, which strengthens my claim that clothing is important. The last section of the chapter on *Jane Eyre* is concerned with the significance of needlework, which will strengthen my claim from chapter 2.1, that dress—and similarly needlework—is indeed essential to our understanding of Jane's character development. Moreover, it is an important tool in showcasing Jane as a feminist character. In this section an understanding of the role of needlework in the lives of women during the Victorian period is essential, and information on this is therefore given in the introduction to the chapter. The last part of the thesis will explore the significance of dress in *The Woman in White* through looking at two different aspects. First, I will argue that muslin—through its dynamic properties—can lead to different but also contradicting meanings, and additionally that Hartright's depiction of the women in white influences our interpretations of them. This will further prove my argument that sartorial descriptions are significant within the narration of the story. The last part of the thesis will focus on the character of Marian Halcombe, where I will argue that her androgynous tendencies are key to showcasing her practicality. Additionally, I will use Marian's clothing choices as a basis for a larger discussion on one clothing item in particular, namely the Victorian corset. This is in order to make a broader claim about how fashion influenced, or at times did not influence, Victorian literature.

Chapter 2: Jane Eyre

Before delving into the chapter on *Jane Eyre*, some clarifications on the criticism used is necessary. As there are few discussions on *Jane Eyre* and dress, I will be engaging with a few selected critics, and approach their criticism from several angles. For example, in chapter 2.3 I will largely be using Tracey Brain and her article “Stitching a Life, Telling a Story: Sewing in *Jane Eyre*”. The main benefit of Brain’s analysis is that she treats *Jane Eyre* as a primary source in order to explore the significance of needlework in the Victorian novel. She argues that Jane’s social journey is interwoven with the story of her stitching, and my argument will be based on this. However, my approach is more oriented towards the link between Jane’s relationship to needlework and how this mirrors her clothing, which will underline the findings from chapter 2.1 and 2.2. This thesis will therefore be contributing with new insights in a field that has thus far not been explored by many critics.

In this chapter I will also engage with an article by Róisín Quinn-Lautrefin, namely: “[T]hat pincushion made of crimson satin:’ Embroidery, Discourse and Memory in Victorian Literature and Culture”, and as this is an open access article it is necessary to justify why it has been used. The reason is that the article is included in a special issue on needlework in English literature and visual arts, with contributions from fifteen other scholars writing within the field of needlework and literature. Moreover, Quinn-Lautrefin is a research fellow at the University of Paris and focuses on the topic of needlework in Victorian literature and culture, which is highly relevant to my argument in the last section of this chapter. Based on this, the article has been included.

When discussing women’s education (this especially pertains to the chapter on needlework), I will base my information on research by Franscoise Basch, Joan N. Burstyn, Christina Bremner and Carol Dyhouse, who present the difference in education for girls and boys during the nineteenth century, and explain how certain beliefs and ideologies, but also the law, restricted women to the domestic realm. Basch, in *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837–67*, writes that “Public opinion placed the wife at the centre of ‘the mighty influences that cluster around the domestic hearth’ [...] but by law she was entirely subject to the head of the family in that ‘domestic sphere’ to which she had been relegated” (26). Burstyn ties such attitudes to the education available for girls in her book *Victorian Education*

and the Ideal of Womanhood and writes: “Given their ‘natural tendency’ to lack self-control, women could fulfill the moral duties defined for them by the ideal of womanhood only after an education designed specially for them” (72). This resulted in a discrepancy between boys’ and girls’ education during the end of the Victorian period, which are confirmed in Bremner’s survey *The Education of Girls and Women in Great Britain* from 1897. Bremner explains that sewing and other forms of needlework, as well as cooking, are compulsory, but also prioritised in girls’ schooling (47). She concludes that all of the time spent gaining skills in handicraft would result in a lack of observational skills, less widening of their mental horizon as well as “training in precision and accuracy”, which could be cultivated in other subjects (47). Dyhouse, in her article “Good Wives and Little Mothers: Social Anxieties and the Schoolgirl’s Curriculum, 1890-1920”, asserts that although feminists, such as Bremner, protested the prioritisation of domestic subjects for girls, this trajectory of womens’ education was met with widespread approval (21).

2.1 From rags to riches

Jane Eyre is a bildungsroman that traces the story of a young girl who is first cast away by her family and forced into the poverty of orphan life, and then works her way to a promising station as governess. After nearly gaining access to a life of the upper-class, as Mrs. Rochester, she is forced to flee out into the unknown, and must again encounter uncertainty and poverty. It is at this stage she receives a fortune that secures her the financial stability that allows her to reunite with Rochester as his equal (at least in terms of economy). Jane’s different homes (Gateshead Hall, Lowood School, Thornfield Hall, Moore House and Ferndean) represent the different stages of her life, but her journey is also marked through her clothing. This is in line with Seys’s claim that dress “identifies the heroine and sets her on a narrative trajectory; yet it also provides the means for her to refashion herself and her story. The changes in the colour, texture, and style of dress represent her narrative development; in short, dress tells the heroine’s story” (1).

Proving the connection between dress and Jane’s evolution from child to woman will be the purpose of this first subchapter. I will argue that colours, adornments, and fabrics hold key information about Jane’s values, how she views herself and how she wishes to be viewed by others. This subchapter will therefore trace how the different stages of Jane’s life determine or influence her clothing, but also how her clothing acts as a signifier of her social standing and class-belonging at each stage. It will, however, focus on her attire before and after Thornfield, as

chapter 2.2 will explore the significance of Jane's Quaker dress more in depth. I will also explore the connection between Jane's point of view as the narrator of the story, and how attire is presented (both in terms of frequency and amount of detail). These two threads (Jane's clothing evolution, and the story's narration) both show how significant clothing is in telling the story in *Jane Eyre*.

Jane begins her journey at Gateshead, living with her wealthy middle class extended family. Here, she experiences what one could only call legal guardian neglect. However, when asked by Mr. Lloyd (the family apothecary) whether she would like to live with other relatives, if they were to find them, she answers no, because she has heard that they are poor. He then asks, "Not even if they were kind to you?" (*JE*, 24) and she asserts that she is not "heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste" (24). She reflects on the conditions of living in poverty and explains that for children, the word is only "connected with ragged clothes, scanty food, fireless grates, rude manners and debasing vices: poverty for me was synonymous with degradation" (24). Thus, Jane has a fear of being poor, and this fear is evidently greater than her fear of John Reed and the red room. Her description of the clothing, food and cold that accompanies poverty sadly foreshadows her experience at Lowood, which is in great contrast to her living conditions at Gateshead. We are given very limited information about how she is clothed during her time at the Reeds—the only descriptions being that she is wearing a frock (*JE*, 37) and that she puts on a "pelisse and bonnet" (39) when leaving Gateshead. We do, however, learn that her cousins Eliza and Georgiana wear "muslin frocks and scarlet sashes", and that Jane is confined to only observing them getting dressed and their hair being "elaborately ringletted" (*JE*, 27).

This points to a common thread throughout the novel, which is the connection between Jane's point of view as the narrator and the amount and quality of sartorial descriptions as well as mentions of clothing and items related to dress. I would argue that there are not only more descriptions of expensive and luxurious fabrics, materials, styles, and adornments than of plain dress, but also that these descriptions in themselves are more elaborate and detailed than when less costly attire is described. Looking plainly at the chart (table 1, page 40–41) it is not difficult to deduce that the more costly and luxurious fabrics are mentioned more than others. Silk and satin are by far the most frequently mentioned, followed by furs, lace, velvet and then the more common wool. This trend is also evident when looking at two different fabrics made from the same raw material, namely cotton. Muslin, which is mentioned four times, could be purchased

quite cheaply, but also be more costly depending on the weave and the way the fabric was used (Hughes, *Dressed*, 36). As the girls wearing muslin dresses (indicated in table 2, page 41–45) belonged to the middle or upper class one can assume that their fabric would be on the more expensive side. Contrastingly, calico, which is also made of cotton, was cheaper (Greene, 213), and this fabric is mentioned only twice. From this one can suppose that Brontë found it of greater importance to mention the more expensive fabrics because these mark a separation between Jane—as the Other, due to her lower-class status—and the fine ladies.

This element of otherness of course evolves throughout the story. As a young girl, and even after embarking on her life as governess at Thornfield, Jane is dressed in modest Lowood attire. At this point, she feels a need to explain why she owns a silk gown as she is not yet a member of the class that one would associate with this fabric (*JE*, 165). By the end, however, we read that she is dressed in silk without an explanation being made, implying that she has entered the group that she has only thus far observed and described as an onlooker (*JE*, 261, 330). In the same vein, when a character is introduced, and their clothing is mentioned, those who belong to a higher class are described in more detail than those who belong to a lower class. It is as if Brontë wants the reader to experience the world as the main character herself experiences it, emphasising that which Jane naturally would emphasise. As simple attire and cheaper fabrics such as merino or frieze are so familiar to her there is no need to explain them or describe them in detail. Satin, velvet, and expensive furs, however, deserve a mention and a more drawn-out portrayal. For example, while the students at Lowood are depicted quite sparingly, and the only fabrics or materials mentioned are wool and brass (*JE*, 45-46), their visitors, the Brocklehurst family, are described in length, as we can read that they are “splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs” (*JE*, 63), followed by a longer description of their attire (63, 64). I would therefore argue that clothing is used as a tool within the narrative to develop the characterisation of Jane, and give the reader insight into her values, desires, as well as insight into how she views herself and others.

Moreover, the way in which Brontë, through Jane, describes clothing indicates that Jane has an interest in that which concerns a person’s exterior. After describing how Miss Temple is dressed, she includes “Let the reader add, to complete the picture [...]” (*JE*, 46), followed by a depiction of Miss Temple’s complexion and the way she carries herself. This contrasts with Jane’s plain way of dressing herself, which is void of embellishments and communicates a lack

of interest in outward appearance. Not only that, but her interest in beauty is also evident in the joy she gains from looking at or being able to admire items of luxury. We can read that she is presented with a “brightly painted china plate” (*JE*, 20) which she until this point has not been allowed to hold, as the Reeds deem her unworthy, but that had “been wont to stir in [her] a most enthusiastic sense of admiration” (20). On a later occasion, when she is sitting by Miss Temple’s side, she expresses: “I derived a child’s pleasure from the contemplation of her face, her dress, her one or two ornaments [...]” (*JE*, 70). Jane’s interest in others’ appearance, in addition to the effect luxurious items have on her spirit are both antithetical to the simple way she presents herself to the world, and this creates a paradoxical element to her character, which will be further explored in chapter 2.2. All of this to say, we gain insight to her inner workings not simply through her speech and actions, but through what she—Jane as the narrator—wishes to emphasise, and descriptions or mentions of clothing and fabrics are a key element to this.

Delving back into the different stages of Jane’s life, we must not underestimate the large leap she makes, and the most visible and evident evidence of this leap, I argue, is her clothing. When she is at Lowood, she describes her clothing as “insufficient to protect us from the severe cold: we had not boots, the snow got into our shoes and melted there; our ungloved hands became numbed and covered with chilblains, as were our feet” (*JE*, 58). Jane also observes that the students are dressed in brown stuff frocks of quaint fashion, and long holland pinafores” (*JE*, 43). “Brown stuff frocks” here refers to a wool material, which would not be considered a luxury. As a juxtaposition, the fine ladies Jane meets at Thornfield are dressed in the finest fabrics. Jane describes them as such: “each came out gaily and airily, with dress that gleamed lustrous through the dusk [...] Their collective appearance had left on me an impression of high-born elegance, such as I had never before received” (*JE*, 163). Her last statement here proves how distant such dress, which only wealth can provide, is from her own wardrobe. Although she is surrounded with wealth, she has not yet entered their class. She is still an Other, and when she decides to leave Rochester after the secret of Bertha is revealed, she consequently decides to leave her ticket to become one of them. However, she does not leave without their influence. As Jane is packing, she mentions bringing these items: “some linen, a locket, a ring [...] my purse, containing twenty shillings” (*JE*, 311). She explicitly asserts that she will not be bringing the pearl necklace Mr. Rochester gave her a few days earlier because “it was not mine: it was the visionary bride’s who had melted in air” (311). It seems that Jane here is shedding all evidence

of her time at Thornfield, taking with her only the things that she brought with her into this world. However, we know that her old Lowood attire has been replaced by new garments (*JE*, 267), and we learn later that Jane is, according to her own description, “well dressed” (*JE*, 320) on her journey through the moors, and that her dress is of black silk (*JE*, 330). The Mortons even comment that “the clothes she took off, though splashed and wet, were little worn and fine” (*JE*, 329). This means that Jane does not leave Thornfield wearing the same dress she arrived in, and although she rejects a life among the upper class, her dress proves an upward class mobility.

After fleeing Thornfield, Jane desperately seeks a way to get hold of food. Her first instinct is to beg for work, but she has no luck in this endeavour. As a result, she succumbs to hunger and reluctantly goes back to a bakery to try to sell her silk handkerchief or gloves in exchange for a roll or half a cake (*JE*, 319). The woman in the bakery answers: “Nay, she never sold stuff i’ that way” and “No; what could she do with them?” (*JE*, 319). Here, Jane is faced with the reality that finer fabrics or items of clothing are not seen as valuable or useful in all socioeconomical contexts. I would, however, argue that her attire does open doors among the Rivers. She is welcomed into their home due to St. John’s mercy and, I would argue, his curiosity, as he explains to Hannah (who is hesitant in letting the strange beggar into their home): “I think this is a peculiar case—I must at least examine into it” (*JE*, 327). As Jane herself expresses earlier: “an ordinary beggar is frequently an object of suspicion; a well-dressed beggar inevitably so” (*JE*, 320). Thus, although her silk handkerchief was wasted at the bakery, her stained silk dress gains St. John’s attention, and her finer clothing helps her gain access to a new haven. We can later read that Mary and Diana deduce that Jane is educated due to her “manner of speaking”, but also through the material and state of her clothes (*JE*, 329), which further proves that clothing is an essential part of class identification. This goes both ways, as we can also read that Jane struggles to place the sisters in the same class as Hannah simply by looking at their clothing through a window. She is furthermore puzzled by their humble abode coupled with their dresses of crape and bombazeen (*JE*, 323).

The final setting of the story is Ferndean, and although there is not much description of what she is wearing at this stage, what we do learn holds a lot of information. Firstly, we read that she removes her bonnet and shawl when entering the house (*JE*, 420), which mirrors the items she puts on before leaving Thornfield (*JE*, 311), underlining Jane’s revelation that she is a “messenger-pigeon flying home” (*JE*, 411). What is different this time, however, is Rochester’s

attitude towards material objects. Discussing their upcoming wedding, he asserts “Never mind fine clothes and jewels, now: all that is not worth a fillip” (*JE*, 434), which is vastly different from his attitude during their last engagement. This shows how his priorities have changed, and clothing and adornments are essential in showcasing this change of heart. Even more noteworthy is Jane’s individuality, which can be observed through a short mention of what she is wearing at the end of the story. Seys argues that Jane maintains her independence and individuality through her clothing, claiming that “she actively refuses to refashion her femininity to please Mr. Rochester” (137). Although I do agree that Jane’s Quakerish grey dress represents her individuality as well as her modesty and sobriety, and thus is an emblem of her unwillingness to conform and submit to her master (which will be further discussed in chapter 2.2) this does not paint the full picture. We read that the first thing Rochester sees after regaining his eyesight is “a glittering ornament” around Jane’s neck, and Jane’s blue dress (*JE*, 439), proving that she does not stay bound to her grey merino or black silk throughout. This is the first time our heroine is dressed in colour, and interestingly, she is not wearing it to please her master, who at this stage she believes to be blind. One can only assume that she must be wearing it for herself. This is of course in line with Seys’s analysis of Jane’s individuality, but I would like to add that it also shows that Jane cares about her attire, and that her expression of individuality evolves. Being the most physically intact of the two, as well as having wealth of her own, she does not need to prove herself as non-angelic to her husband through her dress. Her five thousand pounds and able body speak for themselves. It is also significant that this new version of Jane is the first thing Rochester sees with his healed eye, as Ferndean as a backdrop is more reminiscent of atrophy than rejuvenation. Sandra M. Gilbert, in her article “Plain Jane’s Progress”, referring to Robert Bernard Martin remarks the “quiet autumnal quality” (803) of Ferndean as a setting, and further describes it as “old and decaying” (803). However, it is in this setting Rochester and Jane enter their “egalitarian relationship” (Gilbert, *Plain Jane*, 803), and Rochester regains his eyesight. Thus, Jane’s blue dress signifies her evolution and independence, but is simultaneously emblematic of the lovers’ new beginning in their secluded sanctuary.

2.2 Plain Jane’s Quaker dress

The garb that perhaps most represents the main heroine is her grey merino (or silk for fancy occasions) dress, labelled by herself as her “Quakerish dress” (*JE*, 97, 252). This piece of

clothing not only holds a lot of meaning, being heavily tied to history and tradition, but is also strewn with contradiction. At first glance one might simplify the grey, plain dress as a religious garment used as a means for suppressing sexual desire, and one would not be entirely wrong in this assumption. From a sociological standpoint, clothing within conservative religious groups has been used as a form of social control. Dress is also one of the most noticeable ways such groups separate themselves from the outgroup (Arthur, 1). Linda B. Arthur explains that although members of conservative religious groups are restrained in several ways internally (through control and restriction of emotion, appetite for food, or sex), they are controlled visibly through their dress code. Dress is therefore used as a symbol of one's religiosity (1). It seems therefore that there is—according to such groups—a connection between the external and internal body, and that enforcing a dress code may act as a form of purification from the outside and inward, so to speak, or if not to *purify* to at least give an *illusion* of purity. In the primary text itself, we can read Mr. Brocklehurst enforcing his doctrine upon the girls and young women at Lowood: “my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel” (*JE*, 63). His understanding is that there is a connection between the soul and the flesh, and that this connection might be informed by one's clothing; that the students should clothe themselves in a fashion that does not satisfy the flesh but subdues it. This clothing being: The plain “Quakerish dress”.

On the contrary, many researchers argue that one cannot look at the Quaker dress through this one-dimensional lens. Seys writes that “Helena Michie characterises the character of the governess as ‘the heroine’s shadow-double, the figure in muted grey or brown who follows the gaily dressed heroine ... and is always one step behind her in her progress through the novel’” (136). Our grey clad governess does not match this description, however, and to understand the significance of the Quaker garb we must look further than its religious underpinnings. Suzanne Keen, in her article “Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform in the Victorian Novel” argues that the Quakerish dress, within the Victorian context, did not simply signal purity, but signified “the promise of sexual fulfillment” (212) as the wearer was respectable, yes, but also acted out of her own agency, and could be “moved by the spirit to speak” (212) at any time. Keen points to Elizabeth Gurney Fry, who made Quaker fashion famous through her evangelical philanthropy, as one of the most influential Quaker figures. She writes: “Rejecting

girlish vanities and assuming plain garb, Mrs. Fry becomes for Victorians the model for reforming ladies in the public sphere” (213), the key words here being “reforming” and “public sphere”. Thus, the dress may not be so pious after all. Looking at the ways in which Victorians perceived the Quaker dress is important when studying the clothing with a modern lens, as we miss the sexual connotations it held in the nineteenth century. Viewing Jane’s clothing as signalling “not sexlessness, but marriageability, and not classlessness, but respectability” (Keen, 211), not only gives more clarity to the text as this description matches how many modern readers would describe Jane, but I would also argue that it strengthens a feminist reading of the novel.

In an effort to understand the why behind Jane’s clothing, I think it is imperative that we look not only at the relevant religious aspects, but also question whether her determination to be the master of her own closet is just that, or whether it stems from a wish to hold more power. In both Keen and Seys’s analysis of the silk warehouse scene in volume two, chapter nine, they argue that Jane’s rejection of Rochester’s suggested “rich silk of the most brilliant amethyst dye, and a superb pink satin” (*JE*, 261) is anchored in a wish for independence. Although I do agree to some degree, I would add the stipulation that she does not stand her ground for grey attire as a means for gaining independence, but the other way around. She asserts her independence because it is important for her to wear what she herself feels the most comfortable in. Tracy Brain points out that the dresses Jane chooses for herself were in fact more fashionable and contemporary, than those Rochester fancied, and references “The 1840s to the 1860s”, the explanatory exhibit material at the Bath Fashion Museum, May 2011, which explains that: “The 1840s saw fashions become less showy and change to a more demure and covered up mood. Soft muted colours in plain fabrics became popular” (Brain, 475). It would be ridiculous for Jane to submit to Rochester’s opinion, when she knows perfectly well how to dress herself. Her clothing is not used as a bargaining tool in order to gain power in her relationship, but rather: She feels strongly about what colours, fabrics and trims she would like to wear. This distinction is important because it underlines the importance and significance of dress in Jane’s story.

In the same vein, Keen further argues that Jane uses her plain garb as a tool to redirect Rochester’s gaze from her outward appearance—through her plain dress—towards the inward Quakerish capabilities that the dress signifies, namely: A woman who is a “good, outspoken and physical person” (230). Although this aligns with Jane’s longing for a love in which “it is my

spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both passed through the grave” (*JE*, 246), I would like to suggest a slightly different reading. Jane does not use her Quaker dress as a manipulatory tool to redirect Rochester’s attention, as there is no evidence of this in the text, but rather clings to her grey and black colour scheme because she simply wants to have power over what she wears. Reading the scene this way establishes Jane as a woman who truly embraces the outspoken, reforming Quaker spirit. We read that: “The more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation” (*JE*, 261), and ““It would, indeed, be a relief,’ I thought, ‘if I had ever so small an independency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester’” (*JE*, 261). It is not clear whether it is the *being dressed like a doll* part, or the being dressed *by him* part that she despises. It is, however, clear in these passages that Jane does not take Rochester’s opinion of her appearance into account. She is not worried that the pink satin will disguise her true character, and that his adoration of her will fade as a result. I would argue that she is more worried about becoming a woman who dresses herself to please a man. Accordingly, I would argue that it is not a coincidence that Jane suddenly remembers her uncle in Madeira when bottling up her anger over the dress-dispute with Rochester. Dreading the thought of being dressed like a doll, she is reminded that she might one day be able to provide Rochester with a fortune, and thus gain the power necessary for an egalitarian marriage. This aligns with Aindow’s claim that Jane’s elevated social position, through her inheritance, is what enables their marriage (90).

I would also argue that Jane does not first and foremost see herself as a sexual being, as Seys, Keen and Sandra M. Gilbert in her article “*Jane Eyre* and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking”, to mention a few, argue, and that this inevitably influences her choices of clothing. This is clear, both in her actions, as she places her moral compass above her libidinal desires, but more importantly through the way she views herself. Jane constantly rejects the notion of herself as a Celine Varens, or a Blanche Ingram—lest we forget the portraits she draws of herself and the latter as a reminder of her place in the beauty hierarchy. She sees herself in opposition to these women and describes herself as “[...] obliged to be plain” due to her want of beauty (*JE*, 96). It would, however, be inaccurate to suggest that Jane does not care about her appearance. She expresses a need to be neat, and a wish to make a good impression and please others through her appearance (*JE*, 96). I would, however, argue that this desire stems more from her good manners and social awareness than from a plot to seduce her male counterpart. For her,

the Quakerish dress is not meant to seduce Rochester—if it does this is not to her knowledge—but is the garment most fitting for her position as a governess, and moreover the most fitting for the way she views herself. When examining herself in the mirror before being called upon by Mrs. Fairfax to meet her new pupil, she expresses: “However, when I had brushed my hair very smooth, and put on my black frock—which, Quaker-like as it was, at least had the merit of fitting to a nicety—and adjusted my clean white tucker. I thought I should do respectably enough to appear before [them]” (*JE*, 96-97). Following this, Jane makes a snide remark on her own appearance, adding that Adele “would not at least recoil from me with antipathy” (*JE*, 97), implying that although her dress is simple it is fitting for the job as governess. Looking back at the scene in the silk warehouse: abandoning her grey and black wardrobe simply because she is to become Mrs. Rochester is a nonsensical notion to her. Marriage does not place her alongside Miss Ingram. At this point in the novel, she is still an outsider looking in, trying to gain acceptance and respect.

However, Maria Ioannou, in her article “A brilliancy of their own’: Female Art, Beauty and Sexuality in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*” suggests that Jane’s attitude towards other women evolves throughout the story and uses the example of her portrait of Miss Ingram in comparison to the portrait she later draws of Rosamond Oliver. She argues that studying these miniatures one can see that “The first portrait reveals Jane’s self-doubts, while the second Jane’s reconstituted power of self-assertion” (324) and connects Jane’s self-assertion to the level of threat these women pose to her. Miss Oliver is St. John’s desired woman in the same way that Miss Ingram supposedly is Rochester’s, but Jane’s miniature of Miss Oliver is not created out of envy. The difference between the two is that Jane loves, and is attracted to, one of these men and not the other, and therefore she is not envious of Rosamond Oliver, as she does not desire St. John. Ioannou’s point is therefore that Jane develops an evolved “attitude towards (and in favour of) sexual love” (323). I would argue that Jane’s change of attitude might also be anchored in her change of situation, as outlined in the previous chapter. She is no longer envious of *finer ladies*, because she no longer feels inferior to them.

Moreover, Seys and Keen notably lay out the paradoxical meaning behind the Quaker dress, and emphasise it as an emblem of Jane’s individuality, outspokenness and sexuality (136–138 and 212). I would, however, argue that this too heavily disregards Jane’s faith, and how it informs her decisions as well as her clothing. Her Lowood roots have formed her into a modest

and serious-minded woman who does not follow her every desire (most pointedly her desire to be with Rochester while he is still married), but also her moral allowance for frivolities. Even though she despises Brocklehurst for his hypocrisy and cruelty, it seems that his speech on the bonds between soul, flesh and clothing had an impact on her. I would therefore argue that although Victorian connotations to the Quaker dress may urge us to apply libidinal connotations to *Jane Eyre*, doing so without looking at the text in its totality may lead to an overly simplistic reading of the novel. Yes, Jane does assert her individuality and prove her rebellious outspokenness when she says: “I am not an angel [...] and I will not be one till i die” (*JE*, 253), or “I will not be your English Céline Varens” (*JE*, 262). However, the same will that asserts this hunger for individuality is the same will that refuses to become Rochester’s mistress (“following the desires of the flesh”, as Brocklehurst would put it). Thus, however dismaying the fact might be for modern readers—Jane, as members of the Society of Friends would (Keen, 212), turns to God for guidance and strength in her search for freedom. We must therefore not entirely disregard the religious connotations tied to her Quakerish attire. I suggest a reading that marries these two interpretations.

Although *Jane Eyre* was widely criticised by Victorian readers for its anti-Christian message (Gilbert, S. M., *Plain Jane* 780), Jane, through her plain dress, manages to perfectly align with the Christian ideal of feminine beauty. Steele explains in *Fashion and Eroticism* that Victorian religious writers emphasised the importance of spiritual beauty and advocated for the message that “physical appearance was irrelevant to true beauty” (105). As Jane throughout the story is not seen as beautiful, it seems that she might be the embodiment of this beauty standard. However, writers advocating for such ideas inevitably admit to the existence of other female standards of beauty and propose that if one should focus on the exterior, such beauty should come from within—the inner beauty thus positively affecting a woman’s outward appearance (Steele, 105). Jane does, however, not simply rely on her inner beauty to affect her appearance, as we see her adorning herself with different embellishments, suited for different occasions, for example when accessorising herself with a pearl brooch before entering a party (*JE*, 165). Thus, her choice of attire signals that she values her outward appearance. This sets her apart from the Christian ideal of beauty, which does not embrace material beauty at all, and her clothing becomes a point of rebellion from these ideals. On the other hand, her refusal to embrace the Victorian standards of beauty for women is similarly an act of rebellion—one that arguably aids

her in her journey for selfhood, but also for love. This dichotomy can be traced through her clothing, but most clearly through her Quaker dress.

2.3 Needlework

There are many descriptions of needlework in *Jane Eyre*. In Jane's Lowood years we read about her and the other students sewing as a part of their schooling (*JE*, 53), which is in accordance with the principles of women's education in the period (see Basch, Burstyn, Bremner and Dyhouse). In addition to learning the craft, the students at Lowood are also responsible for making and mending their own clothing (*JE*, 60–61). Later on we see Jane embroidering with “silver beads and silk threads” (169), and Mrs Fairfax is early introduced as a character who knits (*JE*, 93). The action of working with one's hands in itself sends a message, and even more poignant: the fabrics and materials used say something about the person working with those materials. This subchapter will therefore look at the act of working with textiles, and what such work may signal, in addition to the overall significance of needlework in the novel. Brain outlines the use of needlework in *Jane Eyre* in her article “Stitching a Life, Telling a Story: Sewing in *Jane Eyre*” and argues for the contradictory nature of handicraft for Victorian women. On the one hand it is oppressive in nature as it is a form of work that limits women from using other mental faculties (467), and on the other hand it can be used (as it is used in *Jane Eyre*, Brain argues) as a form of social mobility (470). I will therefore argue that Jane both resists needlework for its oppressive nature, but also embraces it as a form of social mobility. Additionally, I will argue that needlework is, like her Quaker dress, a way for her to communicate and showcase her best traits: modesty and discipline, and that different types of needlework (from simple sewing to elaborate embroidery) act as markers of different stages in her life, in the same way that we can trace Jane's social standing through her clothing. Because there is not much criticism that focuses on this topic, I will be using a limited number of sources. I have therefore chosen to engage mostly with Brain's article, but will also be using Talia Schaffer, Rozsika Parker, and other critics who write about the relationship between women and needlework during the Victorian period as the basis of my argument.

As needlework was deemed a woman's duty during the Victorian period, and at the time acted as a replacement for brain-work—which was reserved for men—it is easy to understand

why Brontë used her fiction to criticise it (Basch, 26). Not only does the topic of needlework raise questions about femininity and masculinity, it also touches on class and social hierarchy. As Parker writes: “Embroidery combined the humility of needlework with rich stitchery. It connoted opulence and obedience. It ensured that women spent long hours at home, retired in private, yet it made a public statement about the household’s position and economic standing” (Parker, 64). Furniture and artwork such as tapestries were economic markers, which allowed women to partake in upholding the social and economic status of the household (Shaffer, 29). Even so, such time-consuming labour, which as Parker puts it “ensured” that women stayed within the home, did play a part in the patriarchal structure that confined women to the domestic sphere. As Quinn-Lautrefin writes: “[fancywork] came to be intimately connected with the lived experiences and identities of middle-class women, and was, in turn, the object of delight or bitter resignation” (paragraph 7).

This criticism is apparent in *Jane Eyre*, both through the role such work plays in the novel, but also quite blatantly through Jane’s inner dialogue. The most obvious example of such feminist attitudes is the speech she holds (although contained in her mind) looking out of the third story window of Thornfield. Gilbert & Gubar suggest that the third story in which Jane stands at this moment is significant as it both holds the secret of Bertha, but also because it allows Jane a view of the distant places that “promise an inaccessible but enviable life” (Gilbert & Gubar, 348). I will argue that although Jane’s statement on the surface looks like a complete repudiation of womanly tasks such as needlework, looking at the text as a whole it becomes evident that this is not the case. Jane’s statement reads as follows:

[...] women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do [...] and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they 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. (*JE*, 107)

The womanly tasks Jane lists here are, according to her, in opposition with her desire to roam free (a desire that she expresses at length preceding—and in connection with—this speech). It is

therefore ironic that we later see Jane partaking in such confining practices, and specifically embroiders a bag (more on this example later). However, one must not jump too quickly to conclusions when reading this passage and suppose that Jane is inherently against needlework and other traditionally female tasks. She is against the idea that women *cannot do more* than these tasks and are societally confined to them. Therefore, the presence of needlework in the novel does not mean that Brontë as the storyteller, or Jane as the heroine within the story, embraces its oppressive nature. Knitting, sewing, and embroidery are a part of the story's backdrop in the same way that such work was a part of a woman's everyday tasks in the context in which the novel was written.

However, we are not given an idealised version of needlework in *Jane Eyre*, as the story contains many descriptions of the toll and meticulous labour behind such work (*JE*, 21, 52, 150, 234). This, in addition to Jane's explicit criticism of its oppressive nature, as well as her utilisation of it as a form of social mobility, results in a story that inherently subverts the traditional connotations tied to needlework. Brain references Marianne Thormählen's *The Brontë's and Education*, who explains that, in Brontë's writing "womanly pursuits are not questioned in themselves; it is their function as tools of subjection and confinement that is rejected" (119). Brain suggests that the act of needlework is thus not exclusively presented as oppressive in Brontë's work (467). It is therefore not strange that we see our heroine both criticising and belittling the art of needlework throughout the novel, while we at the same time not only partaking in the activity, but arguably taking advantage of the social codes that are interwoven in the craft.

In the drawing room scene in volume two chapter two, we read that Jane is embroidering a bag with "silver beads and silk threads" (*JE*, 169). Here, it is important to note that the materials mentioned mark a leap in Jane's economic situation. During her time at Lowood, we learn that the students are given dull needles, and that they work on muslin (*JE*, 52), or other simple materials used to make their "wretched clothing" (*JE*, 81). I would argue that in the same way that Jane's clothing acts as a marker for her socioeconomic status, the kind of needlework she is associated with similarly acts as a signifier. Jane has now entered a new phase in life, one where she is not restricted to handiwork for the sake of necessity, but can produce accessories for ornamental purposes, which marks her leap from poor orphan child to middle class governess. Support for this kind of interpretation can be found in Brain, who asserts that different needles

signify different forms of status. She argues that as we see Jane carefully calculating her attire for the party it is only natural that she also chooses the activity she will be associated with throughout the evening with careful consideration, and thus replaces her book with the embroidered bag of finer materials (479). Brain claims that Jane's embroidered bag would be associated with the earlier sewing tradition connected to the aristocracy, and not the middle class (479). However, according to Schaffer's account in *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, handicraft was no longer tied to the aristocracy in the early nineteenth century, but was "increasingly identified with a middle-class sensibility, as a thrifty, skillful mode of domestic management" (33). She explains that this did not, however, result in needlework being "limited to the middle class"—on the contrary, it stayed popular among upper-class, and even very poor women (33). Therefore, during the nineteenth century, needlework "signified the moral, managerial virtues of the bourgeoisie, not just aristocratic leisure, and that members of other classes were emulating these middle-class ideals when they did craftwork" (Shaffer, 33). Additionally, both Parker and Rosemary Mitchell point out that the art of embroidery was, during the Victorian period, tied to Mediaeval feminine ideals. Mitchell writes of embroidery: "Like the seamstress, she was associated with femininity and womanly suffering—though from the absence of love, rather than poverty" (187). I would therefore argue that in the same way that Jane's plain Quakerish dress is encoded with references to modesty, discipline and strong-mindedness, her fancy needlework in the party scene emulates similar virtues. This does not, however, contradict Brain's argument that Jane uses embroidery as a tool for social mobility. Her fine needlework in this scene does not need to tie her to the aristocracy or allow her to blend in with the fine ladies at the party. I would argue that the function of the beaded bag is to show the rest of the room that although she does not belong to the upper class, she possesses that which Blanche Ingram and the other ladies lack, namely industriousness, patience and skill. These are the assets that will set her apart, and perhaps make her the one better suited for Rochester, as Jane herself expresses: "I feel akin to him [...] though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him" (*JE*, 170–171).

One cannot, however, discuss the link between needlework and social mobility without looking at it through the lens of female education in the story. In *Jane Eyre*, sewing is always mentioned as one of the disciplines that girls should learn through their schooling, either

explicitly (*JE*, 42, 53, 346) or implicitly (*JE*, 85). At Lowood, Miss Smith asks her if she can “mark, stitch, knit, &c” (*JE*, 53) without asking her if she can read, write, or do any other creative arts such as music or painting. Brain points out the fact that although sewing is mentioned at the top of the list in most cases, when Jane herself is explaining what she will teach the students at Morton she places it last, exposing her view of its importance compared to other disciplines such as reading and writing (Brain, 471). However, she also points out: “The independent-minded Jane goes beyond St. John’s instructions when she teaches ‘the finer kinds of needlework’ to those who ‘could already read, write and sew’ (312)” (471). Here, Brain maps out the dichotomy that is Jane’s relationship with needlework. On the one hand, Jane places it below other disciplines, and on the other she does not ignore its use or deny its importance.

However, I would like to go further than Brain on this point, as we are given a piece of key information in this example from the text. What we can decipher from Jane’s rebellious act of going above her pay grade and teaching her students “finer kinds of needlework” is that she does deem such work, and her students, as worthy of the other. The girls she is teaching are poor village children, who will probably only have use for lessons on hemming and other basic stitches for mending, in addition to knitting, but she wishes to elevate their skills, nevertheless. We can read Jane’s thoughts on her students’ lowly class here:

I must not forget that these coarsely-clad little peasants are of flesh and blood as good as the scions of gentlest genealogy; and that the germs of native excellence, refinement, intelligence, kind feeling, are as likely to exist in their hearts as in those of the best born. My duty will be to develop these germs: surely I should find some happiness in discharging that office. (*JE* 349)

This tells us that Jane views these girls as deserving of learning a more refined skillset, but also that although they may not need to possess the skill of fine embroidery now, they might need it in the future. Thus, she believes that they may have the ability to be as socially mobile as she herself has been, and that even though she does not care much for needlework herself, she sees how it can be beneficial for survival or flourishing.

In the same vein, Jane’s wish for a more comprehensive education for women is clear when applying for her job as governess. In her advertisement, she writes of herself: “She is qualified to teach the usual branches of a good English education, together with French,

Drawing, and Music” (*JE*, 85). Although needlework is not mentioned here, we may infer that it is an obvious part of “the usual branches of a good English education”, (as indicated in Bremner’s survey, as well as Basch, Burstyn and Dyhouse’s accounts). The act of not including needlework in this list, but assuming that the receiver of the advertisement believes such skills to be elementary further shows how Brontë has anchored her bildungsroman within the Victorian context, as far as female education is concerned. The part worth noting, however, is Jane’s additional comment: “[...] (in those days, reader, this now narrow catalogue of accomplishments, would have been held tolerably comprehensive)” (*JE*, 85). In addition to underlining Jane’s tendency to aim higher than her current situation, it also says something about her uneasiness in settling for *only* obtaining society’s simple requirements of a woman. Therefore, how Jane relates to needlework—either through resisting it in her Lowood years, or through her utilisation of it for her own benefit later—is important in the formation of our modern view of her as a feminist character. Similarly, Jane’s relationship to needlework, but also the materials and techniques she uses, are important in mapping out her evolution throughout the bildungsroman in terms of her socioeconomic climb.

Chapter 3: *The Woman in White*

‘Was it a man or a woman?’

‘A woman. I heard the rustling of her gown.’

‘A rustling like silk?’

‘Yes; like silk.’

Madame Fosco had evidently been watching outside.

–*WiW*, 313.

Although this thesis focuses more on *Jane Eyre* due to its focus on one female character and her evolution, which allows for a more thorough exploration of my argument, *The Woman in White* is similarly a good case study of the function of clothing in Victorian fiction. As in *Jane Eyre*, clothing gives us new insight into the characters in the novel. What is unique to Collins’s novel, however, is that clothing also plays an integral part in the plot, as the characters use pieces of clothing and fabrics to piece the puzzle together (as exemplified in the quote above). Without the white muslin dress not only would the title of the novel have to be changed, but also its content, given that much of its spooky sensationalist aspects stem from the ghost-like qualities of the woman’s white dress. Additionally, the novel’s suspense is dependent on the visual likeness of two of its central female characters, to which the white muslin dress plays a role, as Seys argues (38). In *the Woman in White* we are presented with three central female figures: Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe. Two are clothed in white muslin, emulating two different sides of femininity, and one is fashionless or “anti-fashion” (Cunningham, 6), emulating masculinity. All three lay a groundwork for discussions on the significance of dress and clothing in Victorian fiction, but also more broadly on the portrayal of femininity in novels during this period. This chapter will engage mostly with the critics Seys, Hughes and Casey Sloan as there is very little criticism that discusses the significance of clothing with *The Woman in White* as a primary text. For discussions on fashion, clothing items and standards of beauty during the Victorian period, I will additionally be using Steele and Leigh Summers.

3.1 White muslin: Innocence or deception

Similar to how Jane Eyre is heavily associated with the plain Quaker dress, the white muslin dress is integral to *The Woman in White*. Seys, referencing Sonia Ashmore states that white muslin, during the nineteenth century, had a wide range of use, being “fashioned into garments of elaborate frivolousness and liberating simplicity (Ashmore 69)” (31). She also notes that, according to how the material was used and how the wearer styled it “its symbolic connotations changed” (31). The fabric could be seen on a diverse array of women, and Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick, as two contrasting women in white, exemplify this perfectly. Anne’s white muslin dress makes her appear ghostly, connoting illness and death, but also deception due to its opaqueness, which can give the impression that the wearer is hiding something. Laura’s white muslin dress, on the other hand, gives associations to naiveté, purity, virginity, innocence, and youthfulness. As Seys writes: “White muslin’s delicate texture and symbolic instability function as metaphors for the intertwining identities, stories, and fates of Collins’s women in white in the following narrative” (Seys, 39). This subchapter will therefore explore how a fabric, through its dynamic properties, can lead to different, but also contradicting, meanings.

Before looking at muslin’s textural- and textual symbolic-qualities, it is important to look at the contrasting ways the two women and their white muslin gowns are introduced to the reader, as this can tell us a lot about them as characters, and their roles in the unfolding of events. This is something that the earlier criticism that I have consulted has not considered in any detail. Whereas Seys and Hughes only refer to the ways in which muslin as a fabric, or the colour white, is essential to our understanding of Laura and Anne, I argue that Hartright’s narrative power, and the way he depicts these women and their dress influences our interpretation of the women in white. When Hartright first meets Anne, she is described as such:

there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven— stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing at the dark cloud over London [...] I was far too startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night [...] The strange woman spoke first. (WiW, 20)

The account is short, and we are not given much information about the “Woman’s” appearance. Instead of describing her features, dress, or overall looks, we are given insight into Hartright’s opinions of—and reactions to—her outward appearance. This could of course be due to the darkness of the scene, which would disable him from giving a more detailed account. However, this would be inaccurate as he is able to later identify a visual likeness between her and Laura, and he does walk along the road with her “in the first still hour of the new day” (*WiW*, 23). Therefore, one could rather conclude that it says something about his distaste for the being in front of him, and his unwillingness to study her more closely. Worth noting is that Hartright establishes her inhumanity by at first referring to her as “it”. Thereafter he calls her an apparition, furthering the connotation to the otherworldly. The lack of a detailed description becomes even more evident when comparing it to his account of Laura, who is described as such:

[...] a light, youthful figure, clothed in a simple muslin dress, the pattern of it formed by broad alternate stripes of delicate blue and white. A scarf of the same material sits crisply and closely around her shoulders, and a little straw hat of the natural colour, plainly and sparingly trimmed with ribbon to match the gown, covers her head, and throws its soft pearly shadow over the upper part of her face. (*WiW*, 48–49)

Following this, we are given a depiction of her hair, eyebrows, eyes, chin, nose, lips, blemishes and expression, which fill up nearly a page. One might assume that this would set up a character with more agency, and a larger role in the narrative. However, I would argue that Hartright’s depiction of Laura foreshadows her as a character that is used more as a plot device than a character who herself is an active participant in shaping the narrative. When we meet Anne, she steps into Hartright’s recollection of the story, and after their encounter, leaves him in a cab. We also learn most about her through dialogue, and her actions. Laura, on the other hand, we meet through Hartright’s description of a painting he has created of her from the first time they meet. Thus, there are two layers of storytelling and interpretation between us and Laura: her lover’s artistic interpretation of her in portrait form, and his written description of this portrait. We do not learn about her through action or dialogue, but through visible characteristics only.

Consequently, Laura is throughout the story more an object of Hartright's desire than an active participant in solving the mystery of the woman in white, and in righting the wrongs of the villainous Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco. Additionally, the description of Laura is less credible than that of Anne, as the painting of her might not contain the true image of her, as it is likely affected by Hartright's memory of the encounter, as well as his feelings toward her. More pointedly though, this version of Laura might tell us more about Hartright than anything else. Although this is true of all second-hand accounts, it may be even more prevalent in the case of Laura. Hughes writes that "Muslin was ideally suited to reproducing the draped effects of antique statuary" (Hughes, *Dressed*, 37), and Laura is as much an artefact herself as her dress is intended to emulate one.

One of the most interesting aspects of the use of muslin in *The Woman in White* is its ability to hold such contradicting meanings. When writing about muslin's place in fashion, and its significance as a literary symbol, Seys emphasises its connotations to ephemerality and ethereality, due to its fragility and transparency (34). Its transparency on the one hand is connected to a woman's sexuality, as it literally exposes the onlooker to her physique, and as John Harvey points out in *Men in Black*: the colour and texture of it give associations to white linen and the bed (205). On the other hand, its transparency—or in some cases colour and flexibility—gives associations to horror and ghostliness. Aviva Briefel explains that ghosts "had been associated in the popular mind with the apparel of white linen or deathly shrouds" (67), but that, after the Enlightenment, apparitions in literature, were clothed in contemporary fashion" (67), which might explain Hartright's perception of Anne as a ghostly figure in her white muslin gown. It is also interesting that a fabric used for disguise, both literally within the narrative (in the case of Laura disguised as Anne), and figuratively as a symbolic device (in the case of Anne and her concealed identity), is so easily penetrable by the eye. However, Seys explains that muslin's transparent quality holds symbolic value, and that it signals contrasting meanings as it changes from transparent to opaque depending on light, style and context (36). Laura's muslin gown, as we see it through Hartright's description when he first meets her in daylight (*WiW*, 48–49), would have been transparent, which Seys connects to the fact that Laura is not hiding anything, "signifying her passive role within the narrative" (39). Anne, on the other hand, is seen at first in the dark (*WiW*, 20) and thereafter in the "evening light" at the churchyard (95). Later, she is spotted by the lake, which is covered by a white fog (261) on a "misty, heavy evening"

(260), and she further meets Laura by the boathouse during the evening (279–282). Her white gowns would in the dark light be opaque and, according to Seys “reflect her guilt, her secrecy, and her active role within the narrative” (39).

Taking this even further, I would argue that one can connect the lighting in which the scene is set with the level of secrecy. By the time Hartright meets Anne by the churchyard in the “evening light” he has already, together with Marian, unpacked key information about her. When Laura meets her face to face in the evening light one could suppose that Anne’s white muslin dress would be less opaque, signalling that she has lifted some of her disguise, so to speak. On the contrary, Sarah Lennox claims that Collins, in *The Woman in White*, problematizes a viewer’s ability to discover someone’s identity through their clothing. She argues that although we learn a lot about the three main female figures through their clothing, this novel is in a way criticising the belief that we can read physiological—and arguably material—cues to learn about someone’s character, or inner life (1-2). I would argue for a double reading which simultaneously asserts that white muslin does hold “symbolic value”, as Seys proposes, functioning as a marker of a character’s transparency, but also agrees with Lennox’s claim and the idea that Collins may at the same time be mocking the contemporary tendency to oversimplify the inner life of another through their appearance.

Hughes compares muslin fabrics during the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century to synthetic fibres in the mid twentieth century and asserts that they “transformed life” (Hughes, *Dressed*, 36). Muslin was quite cheap and could therefore be used for simple dresses suited for women further down the social scale, or into more elaborate forms, which would be more costly to make as the fabric was quite fragile, and such dresses were reserved for women who could afford them (Hughes, *Dressed*, 36). Referring to Harvey’s study of *Men in Black*, Hughes writes: “Laura’s white suits her, but, as Harvey observes, she also uses white, as men did black, to avoid class and wealth distinctions” (71). We read that:

Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin. It was spotlessly pure: it was beautifully put on; but still it was the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn; and it made her, so far as externals went, look less affluent in circumstances than her own governess. (WiW, 54)

It is then explained that Laura in fact dresses down on purpose, due to her “aversion to the slightest personal display of her own wealth” (*WiW*, 54). This is interesting, as Walter’s comment contradicts Seys’s description of the white muslin dress as a piece of clothing which “[...] captures a plethora of social, moral, and sartorial connotations in its fine weave and transparent folds” (31), implying that muslin should not exclusively equal lower class. Walter does use the word “plain”, however, and we can therefore assume that the fabric is not styled in an elaborate fashion which would communicate that the wearer is wealthy. I would argue that Anne Catherick, on the other hand, does the exact opposite, and wears her white muslin as a means of upward social mobility. We learn that the reason for her loyalty to the garment is that Mrs. Fairlie tells her to wear white because “little girls of her complexion looked neater and better in all white than in anything else” (*WiW*, 59), and she therefore swears to only wear white in remembrance of her kind benefactress. The words “neat” and “better” imply that these muslin gowns are an upgrade from her former clothing. Therefore, although we are told that the change of dress stems from Anne’s loyalty to Mrs. Fairlie, the dress (although perhaps unknowingly) places her in a higher rank than her surname would infer. Thus, I would argue that the shapeshifting abilities of the white muslin dress allows Laura to look more “plain” than her class would indicate and gives Anne an appearance “better” than her circumstances would suggest, drawing the two women closer to each other, and setting up Walter’s connecting of the dots, as well as Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco’s climactic switch of the two women later in the story.

Modern critics dislike Collins’s message of the passive woman in *The Woman in White* (see e.g. Hughes, *Dressed*, 71, Showalter, 162, Mangham, 121). The women are either portrayed as gullible and incapable (Laura), or mentally ill (Anne). Or, as Hughes proposes: “Laura, like so many of Collins’s heroines, is bleached into almost nonexistence [...] and the bleaching effect is redoubled in her paler alter ego, Anne Catherick, the first woman in white we meet” (Hughes, *Dressed*, 71). This suggests that the women are not only incapable, but also easily overseen and penetrable, if not non-existent altogether. The only woman who truly has agency, and who aids Walter in his hunt for justice is Marian, who is described as beholding masculine rather than feminine traits (more on this in chapter 3.2). Hence, femininity, as presented by Collins in this novel, is equal to passivity, a lack of intelligence, and vulnerability. Laura would both be

destitute and dependent on the mercy of surrounding men if it were not for Walter's protection, and this protection in many ways resembles a kind of guardianship. This is in accordance with Leila Silvana May's claim in her article "Sensational Sisters: Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*", where she suggests that Hartright is both Laura's brother, husband but also father (84). All of this results in the feminine being connoted heavily to childishness, and the muslin dress underlines this association. Seys explains that the use of white muslin in Victorian England spanned from "debutantes' gowns, wedding gowns, tea gowns, evening gowns, rational dress, and shrouds; its symbolic connotations changed with its style and use" (31). Thus, one could argue that it is not inherently connected to infantilism. However, Seys does write that it (contrasting to its ghostlike connotations) "evokes ethereality, innocence, youthfulness, purity and virginity" (31). Writing about muslin in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Hughes explains: "When white muslin began its career it was associated with children" (Hughes, *Dressed*, 38), and although she does point out that older women and young ladies in fiction wore muslin as well, she additionally notes: "On the older, plumper figure this sometimes had an unfortunate babying effect" (38). In *Jane Eyre* muslin is only used by Eliza and Georgiana Reed, Adèle Varens, and Amy Eshton (see table 2, page 41–45), who is described as: "rather little; naive, and child-like in face and manner" (*JE*, 167). Although one must not assume that Brontë or Collins were following the contemporary rules of attire when clothing their characters, it is worth mentioning which associations the white muslin dress would evoke in the Victorian reader. Steele writes that the ideal within women's beauty during the nineteenth century was "simultaneously maternal, childlike and seductive" (104). This paradoxical beauty standard encompasses the depiction of the women in *The Woman in White*, especially Laura, who although an object of affection, never assumes to be independent and without the need of aid from her admirer.

3.2 Marian and the feminine ideal

To the critics who claim that Collins's novel lacks women with agency or grit, Marian Halcombe stands as a testimony to the contrary. Collins, through her, proves that women can do the dirty, nitty gritty, detective-work that is necessary in driving the plot of *The Woman in White* further, and finally resolving its mystery. Kaye Mitchell claims in her article "Gender and Sexuality in

Popular Fiction” that the sensation fiction of the 1860’s “posed a challenge to contemporary notions of femininity, not only in its female characters [...] but also in the types of ‘unfeminine’ knowledge that it put into the public sphere and into the minds of its female readers” (123), and I will here argue that Marian clearly is a female character who challenges the Victorian feminine ideal. On the one hand her lack of femininity is pointed out as a flaw, and on the other, the sides of her that align with Victorian male ideals are highlighted as her most admirable characteristics. Marian’s “propensity towards androgyny” (Bollen & Ingelbien, 406) are evident not only in her actions, but also through her clothing, and these tendencies lead to a dynamic character, who is instrumental in solving the mystery of the woman in white. Laura and Anne showcase two different sides of femininity through their contradictory and ever-flowing white muslin, while Marian’s gender fluidity—exemplified through her attire but also her rejection of Victorian etiquette—presents a different alternative to the gender norms of the period. Casey Sloan has argued that Marian’s clothing choices do not communicate an anti-fashion or anti-feminine message of fashion as unnecessary and frivolous, as many critics have argued, and proposes instead that “Relying on Marian’s ‘anti-fashion’ to establish her agency problematically reinscribes an understanding of Victorian women’s fashion as emblematic of patriarchal oppression and feminine helplessness” (803). I will base my argument on Sloan’s criticism but add to it by proposing that although we must not equate her clothing choices as rejections of femininity, looking at her dress as an extension of her androgynous tendencies can lead to a richer understanding of the text.

As with the women in white, Laura and Anne, we first encounter Marian through Hartright’s description of her. He sees her first from behind and is struck “by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude” (*WiW*, 31). He comments on her figure, expressing that she is “not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat” (*WiW*, 31). The most striking remark, however, is about her waist, which is in his opinion “perfection in the eyes of man” (31), and he explains that this is due to it not being restricted by stays (more on this later). Moving on from her figure, however, and seeing her face to face, Hartright is struck by her lack of facial beauty. He directly describes her as “ugly!” (31) and declares a repulsion due to the masculine form and look of her face (32). Studying her more closely, Hartright states: “Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of

the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete” (32). According to Hartright, her intelligence—although celebrated—is a hindrance to the feminine traits of “gentleness and pliability”, and therefore to her beauty. To understand the consequences of this one must look at the Victorian standards of beauty for women, which Steele has outlined in her chapter “The Victorian Ideal of Feminine Beauty” in *Fashion and Eroticism*. She explains that it was a woman’s “first duty to society to be beautiful” (102). Not only that, but it was assumed that a desire for the beautification of one’s home and oneself was a part of a woman’s nature, and to go against that nature would beg the question of whether she was a woman at all (102). In light of this, Hartright’s comment is not simply insulting; it is loaded with moral implications of Marian’s character, and whether she is doing her duty to society. Further, Steele writes: “In a sense, woman’s profession was to be beautiful, to please and to marry” (105), all of which I would argue Marian does not do, however. She is not beautiful, due to the masculine nature of her facial features. She does not seem to please as a woman should—as Anne Gaylin writes in her article “The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*”, Marian “violates established Victorian assumptions about gender” (313), and she does not marry. Her androgyny also makes her a complicated character, as the beauty standards for women and men were directly in opposition to one another during the Victorian period—men being judged based on their strength, and women on their beauty (Steele, 103). Thus, Marian’s naturally masculine features result in a perceived lack of femininity in the Victorian context, which in turn forms the basis of societal doubts as to whether she is performing her moral duty as a woman.

Contrastingly, Marian does at times dress in a way that accentuates her best features, according to the Victorian beauty standards. For example, her primrose yellow dress in part one chapter eight, which Hartright describes as “becoming to her age” and “matches so well with a dark complexion and black hair” (*WiW*, 54). However, one could argue that elevating her looks through clothing would be a lost cause because she will not be able to escape the fact that she, as a masculine woman, does not align with society’s standards of beauty. Pamela K. Gilbert in her book *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* writes about the connection between the body and items connected to the body. Referencing the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, Gilbert writes: “adornments, tools and other items in the body’s habitus can be cathected as part of the body image; this is also true of the represented/representative body.

Bodies are never ‘just themselves’ in any meaningful way” (16). She also references philosopher and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray, who argues that capitalism creates “an additional burden of signification” (Gilbert, P.K, 16), which she calls “the *schein* of the commodity” (16), and that this can subordinate or replace the material body. Capitalism is indeed relevant in the Victorian context, as Paul Johnson writes in *Making the Market: Victorian Origins of Corporate Capitalism*: “In the nineteenth century the British Empire grew on the back of a free-trade doctrine” (2). Capitalism, consumerism, and the growth of the garment industry go hand in hand, and as Erika D. Rappaport and Christopher Breward, to name a few, argue, this industry and the consumer culture in general redefined gender expressions but also influenced “women’s place in public life” (Rappaport, 61). Thus, clothing became an essential signifier of both class and gender during this period. Using this line of argument, one could argue that the clothing Marian wears, and how she wears it is more significant than the body underneath the garments, as what she wears is a stronger signifier than her body in isolation. Sloan argues that Marian “is familiar with, and effectively utilises, modish clothing styles to her advantage” (803) and pairing this claim with the idea that clothing and other material adornments are more significant than the body itself, it becomes evident that Marian’s clever use of clothing is one of the sources of her power.

Marian is a masculine woman trapped in a society which demands her to conform to the feminine ideal of “gentleness and pliability” (*WiW*, 32). I would argue that Marian does not conform to this expectation, but instead creates space for both her masculinity and femininity and does so through her clothing—utilising fashions on the one hand for aesthetic- and the other for practical purposes. I agree with Sloan’s claim that critics such as Hughes and Gaylin have made arguments about *The Woman in White* that rely too heavily on “models of female identity as extremely precarious, highly vulnerable, or even completely nonexistent” (Footnote 1, 814). An example Sloan points to is the eavesdropping scene in part two chapter nine, where Marian explains to the reader that she must completely change her dress in order to carry out her mission. She writes in her diary entry:

I took off my silk gown to begin with, because the slightest noise from it, on that still night, might have betrayed me. I next removed the white and cumbersome parts

of my underclothing, and replaced them by a petticoat of dark flannel. Over this, I put my black travelling cloak, and pulled the hood on to my head. (*WiW*, 326)

Sloan interprets this change of dress not as Marian casting aside her feminine dress and replacing it with menswear, as Hughes proposes, but instead suggests that Marian replaces one version of womenswear (the impractical silk gown and heavy petticoat) with another, namely: a more fitting flannel and hooded cloak (805). Sloan criticises Hughes's argument because it "necessarily obscures any flexibility or agency women could mobilise within gender norms in general and women's clothing styles in particular" (805). Although I side with Sloan in this debate, I would suggest a reading of *The Woman in White* that is less concerned with whether Marian's celebrated characteristics are masculine or feminine, but instead sees her as a character that makes the most out of what she has at her disposal. This being either her ability to write, her ability to plan out and execute a scheme, or her ability to shift clothing according to what each context will require—from a yellow dress that suits her colouring, to attire that allows for better movement and disguise. I would like to add to this by looking more closely at Marian's following statement. She expresses that: "In my ordinary evening costume, I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I" (*WiW*, 326). Here, she shows that although women did not have the same legal rights or ability to access power as men (Fiorato, 30) she can utilise her femininity (here in the form of a slender petticoat) to gain a leg up, or even supersede her male rivals.

Andrew Mangham, in his article "'What Could I Do?' Nineteenth-Century Psychology and the Horrors of Masculinity in *The Woman in White*", writes about the "unbalanced fascination" with female psychology during the Victorian period, and outlines some of the unscientific medical practices that were used in order to restrain or debilitate different female bodily functions (117). He argues that *the Woman in White* explores how the male obsession with female hysteria and "madness" says more about the illegitimate and "unbalanced nature" of masculinity, as well as the psychological practices that were used to control women, than they did about the "alleged 'dangers' of femininity" (117). Mangham points out that although Hartwright is depicted as a hero in the story (which makes sense as he controls much of the narrative), he arguably has an unhealthy obsession with Anne Catherick, or more specifically,

with “the mysteries surrounding her identity” (118). I would argue that Marian, on the other hand, is something else. She is an equally inquisitive and active participant in the search for truth and justice as Hartright, but because of her womanhood, and “sororal love” (May, 84) with Laura (and in some ways Anne), which act as a form of protection, she is able to play an active role in solving the mystery without holding what Mangham calls “the detective/diagnostic gaze” (124). She manages to avoid the female traits of madness or passivity, while simultaneously dodging the negative masculine connotations that Mangham is referencing. This idea is significant, as it suggests a reading of the text that does not view masculinity as inerrant or exclusively favourable. This idea is mirrored in Marian’s clothing, as her sartorial shapeshifting abilities allow for the same elasticity.

Something that exemplifies Marian’s clever utilisation of fashion to her own advantage is her aforementioned rejection of stays, which Sloan argues “signals a fine fluency in the visual rhetoric of Victorian women’s dress” (Sloan, 807). She claims that rejecting corsetry would not be analogous to rejecting fashion overall, as many women found fashionable ways to forgo restricting undergarments (804). However, Steele on the other hand claims that the clothing of feminist dress reformers never really caught on, as their less erotic clothing was “widely perceived as less beautiful” (156-157). Thus, Marian’s unconstructed waist would, seen through the lens of the Victorian female ideal, be considered both less virginal but also less sexual and therefore less feminine (Summers, 122). To understand this paradox, and to understand the significance of this undergarment, one must look at the complex view of the corset during the period. Leigh Summers’s *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* gives an overview of how the corset influenced Victorian middle-class women, exploring why suffragettes were against it due to the medical dangers and patriarchal implications of it. However, Summers also explores how tracing the history of the corset one inevitably also traces the history of female commerce (22–27). As sewing machines became widely available, female patent makers such as Fanny Gibson entered the scene, whose objective was to create undergarments that fit over the body, rather than constricting it. Therefore, although the corset was undoubtedly a garment meant to “construct, maintain and police *middle-class* femininity” (Summers, 9), one must not overlook the ways in which women utilised it to their advantage. Additionally, women in the public and political sphere were ridiculed for their use of fashions such as stays or corsets, as these, according to both male and female critics, undermined their political engagement and

suffrage (Summers, 99, Sloan, 804, and Valverde, 185). When discussing whether stays, corsets, petticoats, and the crinoline, or other fashionable items, were inherently anti-feminist during this period, we must therefore be careful in assuming that only un-corseted women were enlightened. Similarly, it would be problematic to assume that Marian's uncorseted body is emblematic of her intellectual superiority to the other female characters in *The Woman in White*, or that her physical liberty in turn gains her more judicial freedom, because it does not.

Furthermore, although I have suggested that Marian's uncorseted body would not be considered beautiful in its literary context, it is important to remember that the Victorian fashions did not encompass or influence all, as *The Woman in White* exemplifies. On a corset advertisement from 1887 we can read "Art steps in when nature fails" (Summers, figure 10), implying that the female body could not reach perfection in its natural form. It is therefore interesting that Hartright describes Marian's stays-less waist as "perfection in the eyes of man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays" (*WiW*, 31). This leads to an important point, which can be supported by Summers's claim that one must challenge the "widely held gender- and class-associated misconceptions" (9) of corsetry. I will therefore make the point that not all men would have the same opinions of the corseted body and not all women would wear a corset to align with the male imposed feminine ideal. In fact, John Sutherland claims that Collins preferred a fuller female figure (*WiW*, explanatory notes, 672), and referring to Catherine Peters's biography *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* suggests that Marian may have been inspired by the "deliciously hideous" George Eliot (Peters, 217). Thus, I would argue that instead of making bold claims about Marian as either emulating anti-fashion, as Cunningham or Gaylin would suggest, or being ultimately feminine and fashionable as Sloan argues, we can instead appreciate Collins's quite controversial appraisal of Marian's natural form and understand her clothing choices as an extension of her practicality. Marian exemplifies that an author can utilise pre-existing notions of femininity to a character's advantage at one moment (the yellow dress, or a change of petticoat), and in another reject such standards with favourable outcomes (the absence of stays).

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore the significance of dress in the Victorian novel, and thus to contribute to a small but growing field, namely the convergence of material- and literary studies. There was an obvious void in the criticism as not many have delved into this topic through use of *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* as primary sources. Therefore, this thesis has aimed to prove that the Quaker dress is vital to the depiction of plain Jane, just as the white muslin dress is essential to the narrative in *The Woman in White*. Moreover, it has demonstrated that there is value in studying characters' dress—and how they react to the way other characters dress—because one can through such study gain insights into their values and motivations, and by extension gain a deeper understanding of the stories as a whole. This is important as it gives us valuable information about not only the fashion of the period, but also how popular Victorian styles, fabrics, garments, and adornments influenced literature, which additionally shed light on the contemporary beauty ideals that shaped Victorian society's definition of femininity.

This has been executed through analysis of the novels, focusing on different aspects of the significance of dress in each. In *Jane Eyre*, the focus has been on how Jane's narrative voice reveals how she views herself in opposition to others, especially women, such as Blanche Ingram, Adèle Varens and Rosamond Oliver. In order to demonstrate this, I used categorisation of fabrics as a method, which allowed me to prove how the fabrics she clothes herself in act as markers of her socioeconomic status at different stages of her life. Additionally, a closer look at her most iconic dress, the Quaker dress, was necessary, as this garment is essential to our understanding of her character. Interwoven in this wool and silk garb are connotations to modesty and religiosity, but also independence. By establishing this, this thesis is contributing to conversations on *Jane Eyre* with an interpretation that embraces Jane's complexity as a feminist character, but also a woman of faith. I have, furthermore, demonstrated the value of looking at the significance of needlework in *Jane Eyre*, especially in terms of how it establishes her evolution and social mobility, which has thus far not been thoroughly studied by other critics.

As for *The Woman in White*, this thesis has explored how Laura, Anne and Marian's differences are showcased through their dress. Our understanding of the women in white is shaped by muslin's dynamic properties, which allows for two different representations of

femininity depending on the context at which it appears. Marian's clever utilisation of clothing—embracing certain fashions and discarding others—showcase her practicality, but also demonstrate a woman's ability to shape her destiny in a society that did not celebrate all forms of gender expression, and in which women had little judicial power. Moreover, her omitting corsetry also proves that fashion did not completely dictate taste in Victorian society, or dictate which styles were featured in the literature of the period. All in all, these contrasting versions of femininity, communicated through different aspects of dress, exemplify the power of clothing in storytelling.

Topics for further research could be studying how the main character(s) in each novel (Jane, Anne, Laura and Marian) are represented compared to other characters (Miss Ingram, Miss Oliver, the Miss Rivers, Madame Fosco), and consider how colours, materials and trims affect our interpretation of them. Similarly, it could be interesting to compare the way in which women are portrayed compared to men, which I did not touch upon in this thesis. Moreover, the epistolary narrative of *The Woman in White* was not explored and studying how the different narrators approach sartorial description could lead to relevant discussions on the male gaze within sartorial description. On a broader note, however, applying the method of categorisation to the study of other texts—either looking at fabric, or other data points such as colour, garments etc.—could be useful in expanding conversations on the significance of dress in literature, either within the Victorian context, or in other spatial or temporal contexts. This could lead to new significant findings that have thus far not been studied by other critics.

Appendix

Table 1

This chart lists only fabrics that are mentioned when describing clothing, or accessories related to attire (such as, but not limited to, the fabric of a bonnet or a handkerchief). The object of the chart is to give a better overview of which fabrics are most frequently mentioned, as this is the basis of some of my analysis. Explanations or additional information has been added in the cases where I felt that it would be necessary.

Fabric	Number of times mentioned
Silk	19
Satin	13
Furs	9
Lace	6
Velvet	5
Wool	5
Muslin	4
Straw	3
Crape	2
Calico ¹	2

¹ A widely manufactured cotton cloth (Greene, 213).

Cashmere	2
“Cloth” ²	1
Frieze ³	1
Plumage	1
Linen	1
Bombazeen ⁴	1

Table 2

This chart lists the owner or wearer of the different fabrics listed in table 1. All of the fabrics in table 1 are accounted for here, and the page reference is also included. Additional comments are added in parentheses when necessary, for example to indicate that a character wears a fabric on two different occasions, but referring to the same dress or item of clothing, or if the context of the fabric is relevant.

Fabric	Worn by	Page number
	Mrs. Reed	15
	Georgiana’s doll	21
	Brocklehurst’s daughter, Augusta	33

² The fabric of the dress is not specified. We only learn that the dress “was of purple cloth” (*JE*, 46) and that it was “in the mode of the day” (46).

³ “A kind of coarse woolen cloth, with a nap, usually on one side only” (*JE*, 468).

⁴ “a twilled or corded dress-material, composed of silk and worsted; sometimes also of cotton and worsted or worsted alone” (*JE*, 496).

Silk	Brocklehurst's wife and daughters	63
	Brocklehurst's wife and daughters	64
	Jane	117
	Adele	136
	Jane (The same dress as mentioned on p. 117)	165
	Rochester describing how he wishes to clothe Jane	261
	The dress Jane chooses	261
	Jane's handkerchief	317
	Jane	330
	Rosamond Oliver	359
Satin	Georgiana's doll	21
	Adele	136
	Mrs. Fairfax (when visited by "the well-dressed ladies")	161
	Adele (when meeting "the well-dressed ladies")	165
	Lady Lynn	167
	Mrs. Colonel Dent	167
	Rochester (describing how he wishes to clothe Jane)	252

	Rochester (describing how he wishes to clothe Jane)	261
	The dress Jane chooses	261
Furs	Brocklehurst's wife and daughters	63
	Mr. Rochester	111
	Jane	112
	Mr. Mason	207, 208
Lace	Adele	165
	Mrs. Colonel Dent	167
	Rochester (describing how he wishes to clothe Jane)	252
	Jane (mocking Rochester)	254
Velvet	Miss Temple	46
	Brocklehurst's wife and daughters	63
	Mrs. Ingram	167
	Jane	208
	Rosamond Oliver	357
Wool	Students at Lowood	43
	Students at Lowood	45
	Students at Lowood	61

	Jane	112
	Jane	222
Muslin	Eliza and Georgiana	27
	Mrs. Fairfax (apron)	93
	Adele	161
	Amy Eshton	167
Straw (Bonnet)	Students at Lowood	47
	Jane	267
	Jane	311
Crape	Blanche Ingram	216
	The Miss Rivers	323
Calico	Students at Lowood	47
	Students at Lowood	60
Cashmere	Céline Varens	137
	Céline Varens	262
“Cloth”	Miss Temple	46
Frieze	Students at Lowood	47

Plumage	Brocklehurst's wife and daughters	64
Linen	Jane	311
Bombazeen	The miss Rivers	323

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