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Master of Arts by Research in English



The Female Gothic's Use of Gossip

Ann Mackechnie

1133449

Supervisor: Dr Simon van Schalkwyk

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Acknowledgements

Anne Brontë poignantly stated that, "*he who dares not grasp the thorn should never crave the rose*". I have indeed grasped the thorns of arduous editing and in doing so craved the fruition of a complete thesis that would leave me as Jane Austen penned "completely and perfectly and incandescently happy".

In the words of Austen's Mr Knightley is encapsulated how I feel about my complete thesis, "*If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more".* There are mounds of ideas still whirring in my head, but I suppose that's why word counts are insisted upon and an element of awe and appreciation can be maintained by a dignified if not esteemed silence.

Jean Rhys so beautifully articulated the following truth, *"reading makes immigrants of us all. It takes us away from home, but more important, it finds homes for us everywhere".* A sincere thank you to Dr van Schalkwyk for guiding me to become a discerning immigrant and finding a wise new home in my work, a place that is both thought-provoking and sensible. I so appreciate your gracious feedback and effort because I know that Nathaniel Hawthorne was word-perfect when he stated: *"easy reading is damn hard writing"*. I applaud you on battling through the hard reading from my easy writing.

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Most importantly Soli Deo Gloria.

Introduction

Gossip and the Gothic Revival

Nineteenth-century novels uniquely combine recognisably Gothic terror, death and sometimes even romance. Yet in addition to the drama and suspense they create, they also focus on the plight of women. In this thesis I assert that nineteenth-century[1] novels can foreground issues such as gender, class, and social angst so effectively because they leave room for female voices in the novel to be heard amidst the noise and privilege generated by their male counterparts. To this end, I follow Catherine Frank's argument in *Gossip, hearsay, and the character exception in Victorian law and literature* (2015). Frank argues that gossip conveys evidence of character as well as societal expectations and constraints experienced by individuals in a text (Frank, 172).

Frank's insistence on the importance of analysing gossip in Gothic texts is encapsulated in the following quote from her article:

> "Once we link character to orality and narrative control, then acts of narration, such as scenes of storytelling or gossip, or witness testimony and oral argument, assume a family resemblance and can become the focus of analysis. On the one hand, Helen's persistent silence in *Tenant* foreshadows the silence of other outcasts and exiles like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne" (Frank, 197).

[1] Nineteenth-century novels is a broad term for the texts I have chosen to examine as they occur in the Regency, early Victorian periods and in case of the *The Scarlet Letter* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* the former is American literature written at a similar time to the work of the Brontës, whilst the latter is a twentieth-century evocation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. However, both, Hawthorne and Rhys have been influenced by what has come before them so they will be classed as novels written under the influence of the nineteenth-century novels that came before them. For the purposes of my thesis, I wish to avoid problems with definitions such as the Victorian, the Regency and the Modern period, so instead all the time periods are rather grouped by chapter and author.

Frank sees gossip as a part of a broader set of narrative devices, gossip plays an important role in the critique of feminine character within texts, such is the case with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s (1848) Helen Huntingdon and *The Scarlet Letter*'s (1850) Hester Prynne. Both women are marginalised by their societies through gossip, but it is their silence and resilience to this gossip that empowers them.

I have chosen to look at both texts mentioned above by Frank in far more detail to establish a more fully fledged argument about the way gossip functions as a technique in both *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). I believe Frank's argument acts as a superb springboard to examine other texts, such as the works of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. Frank's argument that gossip is a form of textual analysis will be developed to further include that gossip is a latent Gothic technique that survives and subtly asserts its pull-on novels outside of the genre. Jane Austen jokingly lampoons the Gothic genre's need for hyperbole in her first novel, *Northanger Abbey* (1817), but she finds she cannot satirise the entire genre as she makes use of the Gothic technique of gossip further afield in two novels which cannot be classified as belonging to the Gothic genre, namely *Emma* (1815) and *Persuasion* (1818). Gossip itself functions powerfully, in the works of the Brontë sisters, particularly *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), allowing female figures to voice their concerns. They cast the male characters in a negative light, which was unconventional for the time of publication, because men held infinitely more sway than women in the public sphere. Interestingly at the time of publication however, the Brontës used pseudonyms to be accepted and read by a wider audience, although their pseudonyms were ambiguous as to gender (they would have been presumed as male). The fact that they needed to do this points to the patriarchal society they were trying to reform. Gossip further extends to include geographically isolated texts such as the American, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), as well as Jean Rhys's twentieth-century work, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which

is new writing based on the authority of old writing, inspired by Charlotte Brontë's character Bertha, Rochester's first wife in *Jane Eyre*.

To grasp the Gothic tropes in the works of the Brontës, Austen, Hawthorne and Rhys, it is necessary to return to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) as they are hallmarked as the inception of the Gothic genre. Surprisingly, gossip functions in the same way as it does in the Victorian Female Gothic novels of the Brontës. To many critics, the Brontës rebranded and revived the Gothic genre; the critic Marie Mulvey-Roberts claims: "Brontë Gothicism far transcends the mere attempt to excite: [referring to the Gothic works that came before the Brontës - such as Walpole and Radcliffe] it induces a genuine sense of suffering" (Mulvey-Roberts, 29). However, little to no attention has been attributed to the trope of gossip in early Gothic texts in the literature.

Jane Austen famously lampooned Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* when she wrote her first novel *Northanger Abbey,* so it was crucial to see if gossip functioned similarly in her mock Gothic text and further afield in another two of her novels, namely *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Upon initial engagement it is difficult to consider either *Persuasion* or *Emma* to be Gothic novels and instead it makes more sense to see them as bearing traces of the latent Gothic trope, the trope of gossip that Austen saw fit to adopt despite her apparent ridicule of the Gothic genre in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen makes use of dampened Gothic modes which return in an altered form in her novels to alert her characters to their misguided beliefs about others or to manipulate characters towards or away from prospective marriage partners.

Emma Woodhouse is held captive by her hypochondriac and consequently parasitic father, Mr Woodhouse, and does not even allow herself to consider marriage for most of the novel as she feels bound to her father's side. Emma's only freedom comes from her incessant matchmaking and consequent gossip that give her a sense of control over others' futures because she is not

the mistress of her own. Mr Woodhouse subtle manipulation of his daughter is even more frightening as it speaks to feminine suppression and has led some to term Mr Woodhouse as "the stealthiest of the villains" (Jenkyns, 158) in Austen's works.

Persuasion functions in a similar manner as Anne Elliot is continually overlooked by her pompous father throughout the text even though she is the Elliot sister with the most grace and decorum. Lady Russell acts as Anne's overbearing godmother who dissuades her from a love match. It is fair to suggest that Austen wished to comment on how women did not only face suppression from the patriarchy but from the matriarchy as well. *Persuasion* is also quick to mark out class divides and in doing so, lays bare characters' prejudices which are undermined at the end of the novel; while Anne appears to marry down, we know she has married her equal in character and sensibility. Austen's novels are far less overt than the original Gothic novels, but they still show the alarming propensity of male agency to trap females in the domestic sphere. Ironically although not as blatantly apparent as the original Gothic texts, Austen's Gothic subtlety is even more sinister to encounter as wrongs are masked to appear as a way of life rather than something out of the ordinary. Dark natures are softened by Austen's use of satire and yet Austen does not shy away from either the humorous or educational aspects of satire, making her novels a skilful combination of the two.

The longevity of the Gothic genre is directly related to its skilful usage of gossip. Gossip allows the Gothic to exist beyond geographical and historical differences, as can be seen by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Both bear traces of the Gothic technique of gossip and both fall into the genre of the Gothic. In many ways the Female Gothic (which focuses on the characterisation of women, placing them as the novel's key focalisers) wishes to subvert these received ideas about gossip. Instead, it affords women agency or lets them use gossip as a tool to forward their place in society; thus, a feminist reading is also foregrounded. Not enough attention has been accredited to the authors' use of gossip in

the Gothic genre. Remedying this requires the close analysis of Gothic texts, observing and arguing that they consistently mobilize female gossip to challenge the patriarchal views held by communities, subverting the notion that gossip is merely the idle talk of females (Pond, 178). Gilbert and Gubar insist that gossip disturbs the submissive timidity expected of the heroines within their societal frameworks (Gilbert and Gubar, 816). Instead of discrediting the heroines' gossip, Pond argues that we are encouraged to pay attention as ignoring it may be perilous (Pond, 177). Essentially, Garber claims that the Gothic is a reworking of literary tropes and figures which in turn form a more successful genre than those that came before it and this is partly due to the authors' use of Gothic gossip returns in an altered form (Garber, 323).

Frank concludes that gossip is significant in the novel's character development (Frank, 173). She notes that "the story of a person or character is inflected by who tells it to whom" (Frank, 197). According to Frank, gossip is not an idle form of discourse as it informs character and character in turn builds a person's reputation which is his/her "best defense or biggest liability" (Frank, 173). Essentially gossip's social circumstances are responsible for how characters are seen by others and develop throughout a narrative, as Frank claims gossip and hearsay are forms of character testimony (Frank, 174).

This inflection of how gossip works greatly affected my close readings of my chosen texts. In my view, gossip is intrinsically linked to the Gothic tradition. Yet if the Gothic genre falls away, its gossip continues to create a subtle Gothic revival in texts that are not classified as Gothic novels. The works of Jane Austen start with lampooning the Gothic genre in *Northanger Abbey* but then move to examine gossip as a technique even when the Gothic genre falls away. Thus, gossip found in the Gothic tradition extends beyond the works of Walpole and Radcliffe to establish itself as its own technique, acting as a subtle nod to its Gothic origins that are in turn revived in the works of the Brontës, Austen, Hawthorne and Rhys. In this thesis I will contend that the Brontës were the most successful in their use of gossip which they exploited,

thanks to the early Gothic texts available to them. The depth of their works can be attributed to their manipulation of gossip in their societal frameworks, which in turn results in the foregrounding of female agency and an admiration for the female mind.

Critical Theoretical Overview of Gossip

It is perplexing to think of gossip as a valid means of informing character as the epistemology of gossip stands in opposition to this notion. Gossip in the nineteenth-century was perceived as "inauthentic discourse" (Spacks, 22) which produced rumour that led to resentment (Frank, 179). Pond advances that gossip was equated to a gendered way of knowing, as women's words did not amount to anything but speculation and therefore gossip was classed as the illegitimate knowledge of females seen wholly as misinterpretation (Pond, 176-177 and 185). According to Spacks, this forced women to be restricted in public due to the constraining male terms that governed their agency (Spacks, 24). These ideas were universally confirmed by other writers with Pond defining gossip as the "most obvious feminized discourse in the novel" (Pond, 177) and a "feminine mode of talk" (Pond, 190), whilst Gelles claims that gossip is part of the social imagery of the female and is utilised to downgrade the status of women (Gelles, 676). Women in the nineteenth-century, according to Pond, were constantly believed to be frivolous, overly curious and untrustworthy rumour makers (Pond, 189), whilst their male counterparts were seen to bear more agency, with their gossip being labelled instead as networking or appropriate judgment. For women, gossip meant dabbling in the forbidden, as men allowed no weight to be carried by their discourse which was deemed to be laced with malice and a form of time wasting. This is both a troubling and disheartening epistemology of gossip and not entirely true, as by reflecting on Frank's article it was clear that her work harboured a more hopeful and helpful understanding of gossip.

It is at this juncture that specific characteristics of gossip must be set out which essentially aim to show that "not all gossip is bad" (Pond, 179); indeed, gossip is versatile and requires careful examination. At its core, gossip is simply "the telling of tales about a person or persons who are not present" (Gelles, 667) which is an attempt to grapple with abstract ideas that are "spatially or socially hidden" (Gordon, 723). In the exercise of freedom of expression Gluckman marks gossip as a speech act which is not inhibited, allowing the right to any opinion, be it offensive or inoffensive (Gluckman, 307). To Spacks, gossip also amounts to the temptation to share ideas, whether they be true or untrue, as the sharing of thoughts gives speakers a feeling of enjoyment (Spacks, 29 and 31).

Interestingly, Gluckman proposes that gossip arose in the upper classes due to boredom, as socialising about each other's private concerns did not consume enough time or stimulate enough interest in conversation (Gluckman, 307). Due to the class of those engaging in gossip, Gluckman also believed it developed into an elitist mentality where the upper classes used their speech to marginalise those they did not deem fit to enter their circle of privilege (Gluckman, 308-309). Gluckman's thoughts on gossip show an intriguing dichotomy as the motives of the speaker can cause the gossip to either include or exclude others (Gluckman, 311).

The community aspect of gossip is most fascinating as it allows for past conversations to be the base of further information sharing, as members recall many hours of shared conversation which leads to the anticipation of further similar discourse and the formation of alliances (Gluckman, 313 and Spacks, 28). The induction of new members into the fold of a circle of gossip is also a sight to behold, as gossip is so versatile that it can cater for language that is "malicious and intimate, idle and serious" (Pond, 179), meaning new members get inducted based on the interest of their gossip rather than its factuality. This is a great leveller in a strictly stratified society as it allows for the potential of people to extend beyond their birth station into a society to which they aspire, due to the persuasiveness and content of their speech alone.

A distinction between scandal and gossip must also be drawn; scandal is a reaction to information that leads to public outcry (Gluckman, 313). Interestingly in the nineteenth-century, scandal was not labelled as gossip due to its base being in universal truth whereas gossip is "a rhetoric of inquiry rather than of authority" (Spacks, 33-34). However, my readings subverted this idea and I now believe that scandal is a form of gossip; it is just a more socially acceptable form due to its justifiable moralistic nature which allows gossip to permeate conversation as fact rather than speculation. Making these allowances for scandal as a form of gossip is very well but scandal itself was lacking the focus to form a serious social critique. This was because it encompassed the views of women who men sought to discredit due to the male hegemonic order. Though quantifiable, Pond acknowledges that the validity of women's gossip was nevertheless called into question due to gossip's gendered definition (Pond, 190). This sexist and unfounded exclusion of the female voice in the nineteenth-century shows men were afraid of the power of women's gossip to potentially construct accepted societal knowledge, so instead they sought to pacify women's agency (Pond, 188-189 and 195). Gossip informs female camaraderie as we see women band together in texts to be heard, showing the female fight for agency was not a unique and personal struggle but rather a movement of women to try and extend their agency.

Gossip can be the pursuit of a truth or a means of fracturing the truth for personal gain and although the latter is disheartening, it shows that gossip's value is even more important as it allows access to information about the subject being considered and the agendas of the person who uttered the gossip (Frank, 197 and Spacks, 25). Gossip is pleasurable to those who utter it as it allows for the affirmation and discovery of the self, albeit it at the expense of another's reputation (Spacks, 35). Thus, gossip in a text is an invaluable literary tool which can be used to decipher a multi-faceted view of character as it encompasses both individual and collective views of the subject of discussion (Frank, 180 and Spacks, 30). After all, the only better

evidence of character according to Frank is absence of any talk about them at all (Frank, 194). Bearing the power of gossip in mind, it is now laughable to think of patriarchal societies trying to appease its power as regardless of a person's station, gossip can be wielded to great effect (Pond, 179 and Spacks, 20).

As Gluckman notes, the practice of gossip proved to be an "important societal and cultural phenomenon" (Gluckman, 307). Oral tradition is rooted in the continuation of gossip which freely circulates in a community to make sense of its past or present social queries (Gluckman, 308). Communities talk unashamedly amongst one another about each other, creating what Frank terms "character talk" (Frank, 175) which allows for an intimacy to form between gossip sharers based on the unification of having discussed the same issue (Frank, 178, Gelles, 667 and Gluckman, 313). These intimacies are moulded by gossip which is almost inseparable from socialising (Gelles, 678), and more than solely existing for entertainment purposes, gossip proves itself to be infinitely more valuable as it amounts to a socially controlled game which toys with people's perceptions (Gluckman, 312). The social game of gossip is also reliant on the morals of the speakers which may be good or bad; regardless of moral orientation, gossip is a useful way to orientate oneself with the characters speaking and those spoken of (Pond, 201).

Most importantly gossip gives marginalised groups agency and in doing so, it elevates the idea of gossip itself as it is no longer just considered idle talk or dishonest discourse. The consensus around gossip is somewhat derogatory – however, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Jane Eyre*, challenge these conceived ideas of gossip as they shed a pertinent light on gossip's lesser appreciated features. Gossip as a notion always associated with females was ingrained in the mind of nineteenth-century readers, and they were prone to distrust it and rather see it as a gap filler in the novel instead of what it truly is. It is a way for an author to show the novel's social context and give a voice to those who are not awarded the agency they deserve.

The Brontës observe a displeasing image of male hegemony in their society and they highlight this in the way their female heroines are treated by their seemingly superior male counterparts. Instead of blindly following the constraints imposed by the social milieu, the authors choose to listen to the plight of the heroines, allowing their words to carry weight which results in them being given agency in their contexts. The subversive nature of gossip is stark as it undermines Victorian ideals of meek, subservient women. Instead, women use gossip to project their own understanding of reality, directly challenging the male order repressing them and become empowered women who choose to know their own minds (Pond, 180 and 189).

Methodology

A comparative analysis of the use of gossip in various Gothic texts will be conducted. The texts include early responses to the foundational Gothic texts, the mid-nineteenth-century re-emergence of Gothic to a point of literary prominence, and contemporary and later evocations in the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century texts that do not necessarily accord with Victorian literary sensibilities. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* form the genesis of the Gothic genre (Wolfreys and Robbins, xi) and show a reliance on gossip to allow female "character talk" (Frank, 175), although their use of gossip does not forward women's agency as much as the work of those who followed them. Jane Austen's *Emma, Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* are strong testaments to the feelings of women as well as the destructive nature of gossip to undo reputation. Austen utilises gossip as a practice that greatly informs her view of a woman's place. While *Northanger Abbey* parodies the Gothic genre, *Emma* concludes with the heroine marrying down. My primary focus, however, will be on three Brontë novels, namely, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. All use a female

focaliser and rely on gossip to champion the rights of women within the Gothic novel. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) will also be used to illustrate how the Gothic genre's use of gossip is not limited geographically or historically as it emerges as a powerful trope long after its Victorian genesis.

Traditionally women in Gothic fiction were represented as the persecuted maidens victimized by humanity's cruellest instincts and in need of salvation by men (Keech, 136). My chosen authors use gossip to bring a sense of discomfort into the domestic sphere as we see women standing up for themselves rather than relying on male figures to show chivalry in their treatment of women. No longer do women rely on the (at times) patronising chivalry of male characters, as seen by Theodore coming to Isabella's aid in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* where one feels that Theodore initially defends her as a way of proving himself rather than because he feels that female agency should be forwarded in society.

Curiosity is incited by the gossip usage in *Jane Eyre* where we know there is an unknown occupant in the house, having read of inexplicable fires and attacks, although we are left to speculate alongside our protagonist, Jane. We are not fully aware of the barrier this person presents until she is revealed to be Mr Rochester's wife, Bertha. Similarly, we are concerned for Helen Graham's reputation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as we see her new community shamelessly gossip about her, making assumptions about her character until she enlightens Gilbert Markham as to the domestic terror she has faced at the hands of her husband, Arthur Huntingdon. *Wuthering Heights* moves between the past and present, creating many questions that are only answered later in the narrative when the complete tempestuous relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff is constructed.

The encapsulation of the hero-villain in the Gothic genre also shows "the power of the masculine essence and its sexual force: dominating, ugly yet fascinating" (Keech, 137). Such an emphasis on extremely brooding masculinity not only shows male agency was highly valued

at the time but also the dangers of hypermasculinity that could lead to unchecked and untamed male hegemony. Such a realisation is shocking and a "means of evoking a response, both emotional and moral, to those aspects of life which we fear, or ethically should fear, most. To the Brontës, Gothic fear was equated with sexual energy and inhuman materialism" (Keech, 141). This marker of brooding masculinity is highly prevalent in the Brontës' writing and affects each one of their heroines distinctively, as the man in question is always the subject of community gossip and perhaps disdain in some cases. Keech's idea of untamed masculinity is clearly captured in the Brontës' characters of Heathcliff, Mr Rochester and Mr Huntingdon. This idea of unchecked hypermasculinity is also on display in the characters of Walpole's Manfred, Radcliffe's Montoni and Austen's Frank Churchill, Mr Elliot, Sir Walter Elliot and Captain Tilney. All these characters, although judged to be initially alluring, are incredibly dangerous as they exercise no restraint when it comes to prioritising their own self-interests at the expense of the females around them who they deem as inferior.

The effect of gossip can be destructive as "gossip defines a character's status in or outside the social context" (Frank, 176) and gossip can turn to fallacy in the form of rumour which can breed due to community resentment towards a protagonist (Frank, 179). "[A] successful gossip may manipulate opinions to enhance her or his status – or to destroy the status of others" (Gelles, 667). Such a gossip can generate retaliation and hatred amongst characters which leads to distrust. Although gossip is a way of informing character, the "only better evidence of character would be the absence of any talk at all about it (the best character is that which is least talked of)" (Frank, 194). Ironically, Jane does not speak of Rochester's character to St John although he has treated her ill; perhaps she is trying to preserve her own reputation instead of trying to protect Rochester's. He is perhaps not talked of because he has caused her such pain and does not deserve recognition in any form.

Complexity in interpretation is also said to rise due to the text being informed by an individual and society which can stand in juxtaposition to one another, creating what Kanwar terms multiple signifiers (Kanwar, 49). However, our own context does determine how we interpret texts as "cultural narratives always influence the way we interpret new stories, that not all stories can or are allowed to be heard in the first place, or that even when they are told, they can fail to be understood" (Frank, 174). Thus, it is correct to say that "textual interpretation is historically and culturally variable" (Kanwar, 57), which is why the Gothic novel exists in a state of flux as it is a novel rife in gossip which generates multiple meanings which in turn must be deciphered to give meaning to the characters and events in a text. These signifiers are generated by gossip and are of interest because they frame the social context and treatment of women in the Victorian era in which the Brontës' novels were written.

Studying my chosen texts showed that gossip was a Gothic signifier that existed even when the Gothic genre was not apparent, marking gossip then as a technique which revives the genre. "The Gothic aesthetic is that it is reactionary, and that for women its merits are ambiguous, at best" (Miles, 48). Gossip tries to steady this ambiguity by lending itself to the cause of women in the novel, as gossip carries the beliefs of the female authors who wish to empower the women in their works. The significance of using a female focaliser in a novel is significant as nineteenth-century society created a division "between legitimate and illegitimate forms of knowledge, a practice that often resulted in gendered ways of knowing" (Pond, 176), which in turn discounted female gossip as a reliable form of discourse. Our current context would say that "the concept of 'female' in our culture is unstable and relational, that gender as a category is the creation of institutions, practices and discourses, and not a natural, unassailable basis for the formation of identity" (Goldsmith, 297). The Brontës pioneer a new way for their heroines to be seen by readers, with pre-eminence being placed on the female voice which is enacted by gossip.

Judith Butler insists that language plays a substantial part in the formation of gender but that gender itself is performative (Butler, 142 and 148), a notion foreshadowed in the Female Gothic as a means of fighting male hegemony in the society in which they lived. Hegemony is described as "a realized complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits" (Kanwar, 52). To the Brontës, gender was "a ragged and somewhat ridiculous masquerade concealing the essential sameness of men and women. Each expressed direct opposition to the establishment of separate moral standards for men and women" (Jacobs, 204-205). The Brontës were very much opposed to Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* which promulgated ideas that amounted to the pleasing of men as any young lady's aim in life and her sole purpose in Victorian society (Gilbert and Gubar, 816). The Female Gothic novel played a significant role in "conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised" (Gilbert and Gubar, 824).

The Brontës are well received by Gilbert and Gubar who view their texts as subversive in the way they handle gender. In *Jane Eyre,* Jane refuses Rochester's offer to keep her as his mistress and instead leaves Thornfield. After leaving Thornfield Jane becomes an independent woman with a fortune of her own and is no longer reliant on her work as a governess to make ends meet. Helen Huntingdon is also able to extract herself and her son, Arthur, from an abusive marriage and trades her art for money despite the scorn of her new community, showing she rejects the Victorian norms imposed on her and refuses to be treated like property by her husband. Catherine Earnshaw is vocal in her feelings but chooses to marry for class rather than for love. However, this failing is subverted by young Cathy who marries for love and corrects the error of her mother.

Although gossip in the nineteenth-century was perceived as a bad habit, its social condemnation may also reflect the anxiety around the dimensions of its power to shape perceptions of gender (Spacks, 30). Spack's notion that gossip is a universal trait as "men as

well as women gossip" (Frank, 21), is mirrored in the Female Gothic as both genders are seen to exhibit similar behaviours and both groups gossip carries the same weight rather than simply taking the male voice to be that of truth over the female voice. The Brontës allow for both voices to carry weight in the pursuit of equality and truth within their texts, condemning the belief that gossip is merely idle talk conducted by women and rather choosing to read gossip "as a source of knowledge rather than a female vice" (Pond, 178). Pond's statement forms the crux of my argument as he to proposes that gossip empowered nineteenth-century women, granting them the agency that the male hegemonic order of their day so denied them.

Gossip bands communities together as it forms a network of information sharing which promulgates relationship building within a text, "[w]hat we know about character and how we share it are crucial to creating relationships among individuals" (Frank, 175). "[G]ossip develops a mode of intimacy that reflects not only the social but the psychological bonding of the teller and listener" (Gelles, 667) as it in turn can be seen as an "affirmation of alliance" (Spacks, 28). Gossip is thus of social and individual value as it can either bring people together or push them apart (Spacks, 21). In the case of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Gilbert initially buys into the communal view of Helen until he realises, he was mistaken and then he condemns the gossip that he hears about her, instead trying to obtain the truth from Helen herself. "Nelly Dean gossips with Lockwood about the family inhabiting *Wuthering Heights* in an extended and intimate exchange of story" (Pond, 179) which results in them becoming fast friends due to Lockwood's unquenchable curiosity about the place and its inhabitants. This interaction thus affirms Gelles and Spacks's ideas about the use of gossip to create intimacy and form alliances.

My interest is to understand and analyse gossip as a feature of the Gothic and to show it as a technique which enhances character, gender and class with particular reference to the female characters in texts. I wish to provide literary value by treating gossip as a dimension of the

Gothic which spreads to texts in and beyond the Gothic genre and acts a way in which to revive the Gothic for new audiences.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One involves looks at the gendered readings contained within the Gothic cannon and ultimately calls for an examination of Jane Austen whose books bear a notable testament to the feelings of women. Austen is also acutely aware of gossip's function and how it informs "the way communities narrate their authority" (Finch and Bowen, 3) and is used as "a potentially subversive form of discourse that posits an oral and feminine alternative to the written, logocentric "male discourse of the book"" (Gordon, 12). *Northanger Abbey* was Austen's first novel and clearly a parody of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* a popular Gothic novel at the time (Wolfreys and Robbins, xi) - but by no means does Austen discourage the reading of such Gothic novels; instead she calls for discernment of the content absorbed (Wyett, 269). By encouraging the reading of novels, Austen "picks up the standard gendered arguments of her day wherein only women read novels" (Wyett, 270). In this way Austen can lampoon the Gothic novel to inform her own personal reading of Regency England's treatment of women which is closely informed by her understanding of gossip as Gluckman's idea of a provocative social game (Gluckman, 312). Austen is also seen to inflect gossip onto two of her other works, *Emma* and *Persuasion,* which will also be examined.

Chapter Two focuses on gossip is a means of validating one's social position but also a gauge to interpret a text's social milieu. Viewing this milieu creates a heightened awareness of how female gossip in Gothic revival fiction such as *Jane Eyre, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Wuthering Heights* functions to award women more agency in a society ruled by male hegemony. Brooding masculinity is seen as manipulative and is called out for its anti-feminist

stance despite its initial appearance of allure, clearly critiquing the unchecked hypermasculinity of Victorian England (Keech, 137). Women's gossip is no longer deemed idle talk (Pond, 178) but holds more weight as their gossip holds truth and is not merely scandalous as they can take a stand and disprove false gossip. Having this judgment, we see female camaraderie come to the fore in these texts, again solidifying Spack's idea that gossip is a technique which allows for the formation of relationships in communities (Spacks, 28). Within my chosen Brontë texts, there will be a focus on the characters of Jane Eyre, Helen Graham, Catherine Earnshaw and her daughter Catherine Linton. All these characters exhibit a defiance of nineteenth-century gender norms and wish to make their own way in the world. The Brontës take an empathetic stance towards the plight of women in the nineteenth-century, and they use gossip to meet this aim within their narratives.

Chapter Three will explore Gothic gossip in two belated relatives of the Gothic and the nineteenth-century Gothic novel. Gothic proves to be a genre that is anachronistic in nature; we see authors separated by both time and place drawing on gossip to enhance their own narratives. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is an American novel set in the Puritan community of seventeenth-century Boston, yet it draws on both the Gothic genre and gossip as illustrated in the work of the Brontës. Hester Prynne is subject to much community speculation and gossip mongering but amidst this adversity, she still rises to overcome public scorn and reclaim her dignity, thus highlighting how truthfulness awards agency. Hester displays the same will power of the Brontës' heroines, as she is able to single handily claim back her humanity and even betters herself. Although geographically isolated from the Brontës' works, it was written over the same period but set in Puritan America rather than Victorian England, showing that gossip is a universal trope in the Gothic genre which is utilised in similar ways despite its geographical disparity. Similarly, gossip again takes root in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* which uses Jane Eyre's Bertha Mason as a stimulus for its story. *Wide Sargasso*

Sea can award Bertha the agency she was not given in *Jane Eyre*, again capitalising on Gothic gossip to do so. Despite being a novel based in the colonial Caribbean landscape of the nineteenth-century, it is a recent work of the twentieth-century, illustrating the afterlife of the Gothic genre and its reliance on gossip that spans different historical eras.

I will then conclude that the Brontës played a significant role in expanding the Female Gothic's use of gossip far beyond what was envisioned and put into practice by their Gothic pretexts written by Walpole, Radcliffe and Austen. Gossip does a great deal in propelling women's agency in the Female Gothic novel. Gothic gossip expands as it ages to encompass the growing influence of women's thoughts in their societies. This escalation in the value of gossip makes it an unquestionable literary asset in terms of character development and the role it plays in championing the rights of women from the time it was conceived into the present age where it is still utilised. The technique of gossip casts powerful inflections on texts even when the Gothic genre has fallen away; it is the invisible thread that links poignant authors to the Gothic genre as well as rehabilitating and strengthening the Gothic to suit new modes of literature as gossip acts as a revival of Gothic modes.

Chapter One

Jane Austen's Lampooning of the Gothic Genre and Subsequent Use of Gossip

Jane Austen both grasped the importance of gossip and then expressed it within her novels *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. She realized gossip contributed a great deal to female existence in the Regency era in which she lived. In this chapter, Austen's engages with gossip, demonstrating how it is a valuable currency that informs reputation which also informs the marriageability of female characters. The forging of female bonds is also encouraged by sharing gossip which creates a form of intimacy between women. Gossip is used to alert characters to their misguided beliefs about others or to manipulate characters towards and away from prospective partners, disrupting the marriage plot for which Austen is so well known.

Following a brief introductory overview of gossip's function in *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, a thematic approach to Austen's work will be adopted in the following chapter, as seen in the subtitles below pertaining to gossip in relation to friendship, anxiety, masculinity, and the marriage plot. Austen is aware of the Gothic's use of gossip and whilst she sees fit to lampoon the entire Gothic genre in *Northanger Abbey,* she does show a deep respect for the use of Gothic gossip which she continues to use in her further texts. Although in these texts Gothic modes are dampened, and gossip instead performs in a latent manner which subtly alludes to its original Gothic birth.

Austen's endeavours to examine "the relationship of people to their families and to wider society, and she investigates a perennial dilemma: how a person can be true to herself and yet negotiate social pressures" (Todd, 8). Gossip in *Northanger Abbey* is versatile in its functions as we see it as a means of procuring pleasure, contributing to deception, revealing truth and as a way of establishing authority. In *Northanger Abbey,* Austen allows her naïve heroine,

Catherine Morland to be captivated by Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* which is in line with initial public fascination with the Gothic genre (Keech, 130-131). Yet Austen skilfully lampoons the Gothic genre as "*Northanger Abbey* is perhaps best known for satirizing the overblown language of the Gothic novels and exposing the folly of a heroine who, along with many other memorable misconceptions, mistakes General Tilney for a Radcliffean Montoni" (Wootton, 27). Austen thus viewed Gothic novels as "laughable enough to be ridiculed" (Keech, 131) which is why *Northanger Abbey* is considered an "Austenian romantic comedy" (Peltason, 624).

Austen's direct references to Gothic fiction within *Northanger Abbey* show her active satire of the genre and acts as a starting point for Catherine and Isabella Thorpe's friendship which is based on their fanciful and hyperbolic discussions around Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Isabella's introduction of Gothic fiction to Catherine proves ironically to be the catalyst to Catherine finding her own voice and shedding her mind of its naïve initial exterior. Gossip about Gothic fiction is the lens Catherine uses to examine the actions of those around her and although her impressions are flawed greatly at some points, she does indeed find that she, too, has been the persecuted maiden out of a Gothic novel although her persecution arises from those she does not initially suspect, such as the Thorpe siblings who manipulate her for self-gain and discard her and her brother, James, when they are no longer valuable.

Catherine initially displays little promise as a heroine and is said to be "in training for a heroine" (Austen, 5). Catherine is as "about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (Austen, 8). Placing Catherine in this light at the beginning of the novel inclines us towards lenience in the misinformed judgments she makes. By reflecting Radcliffe's, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* onto reality she is cast as "the portrait of a naïve reader learning the values and limits of fiction" (Todd, 30). It has also been proposed that Austen creates Catherine as an anti-heroine in order to suit her Gothic parody, as Catherine is seen as

an individual free of societal constraints and therefore more impressionable to suggestion from literature rather than societal discourse (Brown, 9). Discernment is what Catherine is lacking but it is by paying attention to gossip - understood here as what is said around and about her - that she can mature into a thoughtful woman who not only questions the inflated Gothic ideals presented in the literature she reads but also comes to question the opinions and motives of those around her. By demonstrating both Catherine's folly and her ability to overcome the Gothic, Austen is also subtly alluding to her belief in the value of literature as a tool to "help a reader judge and interpret real life" (Todd, 30). Austen is satirising the Gothic genre (Wolfreys and Robbins, xi), but her criticism falls more on the readers of the novels than the genre itself; we hold Catherine liable for her own misconceptions rather than laying the blame on the author, Ann Radcliffe.

Austen also accurately lays the blame on those whose gossip may damage others. The novel *Emma* frames such a person; Emma Woodhouse is an indulged young lady who does not pay heed to the feelings of others and instead casts the entire community of Highbury as ready players in her matchmaking game. This results in much trouble and again acts as the catalyst to Emma maturing into a marriageable young woman who is considerate to the feelings of others.

Emma's interest in gossip mainly stems from her interest in matchmaking, which she terms as "the greatest amusement in the world" (Austen, 11). Emma credits herself much like Elizabeth Bennet does, as an excellent judge of human character and she attributes this trait of hers to her success in matchmaking those around her. Mr Knightley is quick to discount Emma's fixation on the gossip of others' matrimonial futures by saying to her, "you made a lucky guess; and that is all that can be said" (Austen, 12). By making this utterance, Mr Knightley embodies the idea of gossip as the inauthentic discourse exercised by females (Pond, 180). Importantly Austen does not paint Emma as a thoughtless and unkind person; she is well-meaning in her

naivety, “but Emma was of no feeble character; she was more equal to her situation than most girls would have been” (Austen, 18).

Emma Woodhouse initially appears to be the ideal lady in Austen’s novel *Emma* where she is described by the narrator as “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition…with very little to distress or vex her” (Austen, 3). It is interesting that the novel begins with this short analysis of Emma’s life from another’s perspective; the very introduction amounts to gossip which in turn frames the central character before she has uttered a word herself.

From the outset Austen casts Emma as a lady in want of nothing. In naming the novel after her heroine, Austen bestows on her heroine a role of much importance; Emma is, after all, the only Austen novel named after a character (Brown, 88). However, upon closer analysis we can discern something far more sinister to Emma’s existence that cracks Austen’s initial façade of a privileged life. Emma’s life is ruled by her father who has been described by critics as a “parasitic plant” (Mudrick, 196), who is oblivious to any behaviour around him but his own (Bottomer, 163). This selfishness is seen in Emma herself as she too is unaware of “how her behaviour and attitude ha[ve] a negative effect on the society around her” (Brown, 88). This is partly a result of being indulged by her father who does not take the time to correct her poor behaviour and instead “could never find fault” (Austen, 5), leaving Emma to accustom herself to “rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (Austen, 4). The “blissful” domestic realm is shown not to be so, as Emma finds herself in a predicament where her future happiness is overshadowed by a self-serving and deeply neglectful father.

Unlike *Emma*, *Persuasion* shows a shy and downtrodden protagonist, a person more likely to be the victim to Emma’s matchmaking gossip than the orchestrater of it. Anne Elliot, just like Harriet Smith, finds herself talked out of accepting the proposal of a suitable match because

she has been persuaded to do otherwise by the more mature Lady Russell. Emma and Lady Russell have a lot in common as both women delight in dishing out marriage advice even though neither is currently married when they do so, as Emma is proudly if not obstinately single and Lady Russell is a widow. Anne Elliot learns to navigate gossip as the novel continues rather judging gossip by who it utters it and what their agendas are rather than blindly following the utterances of those who wish to manipulate her to fit their schemes. It is this discernment that enables Anne to make the correct decision in whom she chooses to marry at the end of the novel. *Persuasion* also points towards the folly of not consulting one's own judgment before blindly believing the words of others.

Persuasion was Austen's last completed novel and bears an even more fruitful approach to gossip than her first novel, *Northanger Abbey.* Although not a Gothic novel by genre, *Persuasion* adopts the Gothic's approach to gossip as a way of containing both anxiety and the rise of a feminine voice in her work. *Persuasion* is often seen as Austen's most mature work as it exercises a great deal of retrospect allowing "the past of the heroine Anne Elliot to bear always on her present" (Todd, 135) as well as a much stronger undertone of feminism when compared to *Northanger Abbey*. Unlike *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion's* heroine Anne "already exhibits the qualities the other heroines (such as Catherine) have to develop" (Brown, 117) and she is "quiet and past her bloom (she is twenty-seven)" (Groenendyk, 12). *Persuasion* is resolute in its review of gossip and again endeavours to redeem gossip as more than just a female vice (Pond, 178).

1.1. Gossip and the Forging of Female Friendships

Conversations about others or about subjects of mutual interest are shown not only to persist throughout Austen's novel but their purpose is twofold as they help forge female bonds

between both likely and unlikely friends. Gossip's ability to create intimacy is shown to be a powerful catalyst to relationships which form both quickly and deeply as the novel progresses. These female friendships like gossip itself can be both good and bad. For *Northanger Abbey's* Catherine, they form part of her education from naivety to well-rounded judgments of both herself and others; for Emma, they humble her to her faults, whilst for Anne in *Persuasion,* they save her from a disastrous marriage to an unsuitable and immoral man and ensure she accepts the proposal of a more suitable marriage partner.

Gothic Literature in *Northanger Abbey* acts as a catalyst for the formation of the friendship between Catherine and Isabella Thorpe, as it is Isabella who introduces Catherine to the genre through Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. It is this fanciful reading of the novel which endears Isabella to Catherine who is entranced by the hyperbolic tales within the novel which she projects onto reality. Catherine takes their contents to be a literal examination of the world rather than written for a visceral effect as Radcliffe intended. If it were not for this folly, Catherine would never be confronted so blatantly with her own ignorance which appals and saddens her in equal measure. She then amends her behaviour and examines the relationships in her life very acutely until she determines who values her friendship and who does not.

In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine interacts with Isabella who is her opposite, being both manipulative and self-absorbed (Brown, 19) whilst Catherine is impressionable and naïve. "Isabella's greatest influence on Catherine comes in the form of reading Gothic literature" (Brown, 19), particularly Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* which was "one of the best and most influential Gothic novels written during the craze for such fiction in the 1790s and early 1800s" (Todd, 32). Isabella preys on Catherine's minimal life experience and consequent gullibility, knowing she has never been introduced to the popular Gothic genre having come from a sheltered pastoral life (Todd, 30). It is significant that the Gothic genre is what allows Isabella and Catherine to remain friends for much of the novel despite being so

dissimilar, as Isabella is constantly asking Catherine about *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and is even seen to express herself in a manner similar to that of Gothic heroines (Fuller, 94). Upon initially being asked about the novel, Catherine informs Isabella that, "I (Catherine) am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life reading it" (Austen, 29). Thereafter it is blatantly evident to see Catherine's obsession with the novel as she brings it up in "almost all her social interactions" (Wyett, 271) such as her conversations with the Tilneys, with Henry Tilney validating her choice of novel saying that "when I had once begun it (Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), I could not lay down again; I remember finishing it in two days – my hair standing on end the whole time" (Austen, 94).

Just as in *Northanger Abbey* we see a friendship of manipulation in *Emma*. Emma manipulates Harriet Smith due to her position in *Emma* whilst Catherine is manipulated by Isabella who is more worldly and aware of how she can manipulate both men and women around her. Both Harriet and Catherine are as naive as each other and both are flattered to have garnered the attention of attractive and esteemed members of society. Emma can be forgiven her manipulation of Harriet; but Isabella should not be forgiven her treatment of Catherine who she used mercilessly for her own entertainment, initially thinking she was wealthy, and then never apologising for her conduct to Catherine. Emma is well intentioned if misguided by her penchant to always want to be proven right rather than pursuing what is best for those in her sphere of influence. Emma also undoes her poor behaviour and comes to recognise her faults such as her thoughtless manipulation of Harriet as a pawn in her matchmaking game.

Emma's goodness and well-meaning intentions are evident in the interest she shows from the outset in Harriet Smith. Emma goes so far as to elevate Harriet in her own mind to the class of a lady even though she is illegitimate and unsure of her parentage. Emma plans to matchmake Harriet with someone far above her station in the form of Mr Elton, the local clergyman. Emma shapes Harriet in an alarming fashion; we see Emma getting carried away with plans upon

meeting Harriet, "[s]he would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners" (Austen, 24). At the forefront of Emma's mind is to "impart the security she has experienced in her social position onto Harriet, who essentially has none, as a way for Miss Woodhouse to maintain her own security, dependence, and autonomy" (Brown, 96). This may seem calculating on the part of Emma, but it is no surprise when she has learned this modus operandi directly from her father.

She is privileged and because of this Emma sees herself as having the means to "give status to whomever she chooses" (Todd, 114) and as a way of exercising the control she does not have within her home. Unfortunately for Emma, she appears to act very poorly in the interests of Harriet who is impressionable to the degree that she "only desir[ed] to be guided by any one she looked up to" (Austen, 27) and Emma being the most amiable lady of Highbury is someone to be much esteemed. Emma's meddling leaves Harriet as "a broken-hearted girl without prospects" (Todd, 113) for much of the novel as Emma dissuades her from accepting the proposal of a man Harriet truly is fond of and who is worthy of her. Harriet is so reliant on Emma's judgment that she even starts to emulate Emma's views unprompted, even though they are not her own desires. Early in the novel Emma says she will not marry and after Emma's matchmaking goes awry, Harriet herself takes on Emma's opinion by resolutely stating that she too, "shall never marry" (Austen, 401).

Emma's snobbery exists as a binary which shows she has some maturing to do. On one hand she wishes to elevate Harriet's position in society but on the other hand she severely judges Harriet's Mr Martin. Emma labels Mr Martin as "a completely gross, vulgar farmer" (Austen, 36) because she judges him according to the rank of a gentlemen such as Mr Knightley, even though he is not in that class - just as Harriet is not in Emma's class. This is foolishness on Emma's part as she discounts Harriet's feelings for Mr Martin and is rightly rebuked by Mr

Knightley when he tells her, "[y]ou saw her answer! You wrote her answer too. Emma, this is your doing. You persuaded her to refuse him" (Austen, 69). Mr Knightley is correct when he tells Mrs Weston that Harriet is the "very worst sort of companion that Emma could possibly have. She knows nothing about herself and looks upon Emma as knowing everything" (Austen, 42), as Emma's continued interference leaves Harriet very unhappy. By letting Mr Knightley gossip so vigorously with Mrs Weston throughout the novel, Austen communicates the universality of gossip amongst the genders and the way gossip can aluminate "the truths of the social conditions governing individuals" (Pond, 180). Emma is governed by her need for authority and gossip is how she achieves this end, even if it comes at the expense of her friend's happiness.

In convincing Harriet to refuse Mr Martin, Emma mirrors the role of Lady Russell in *Persuasion*, as both women convince younger women to refuse love matches in favour of class. Emma's mistake is rectified during the course of the novel and in a much shorter time than Lady Russell's error which robs Anne Elliot of many years of happiness. Emma is not immune to Harriet's feelings by the end of the novel as she, too, realises what it is to have made a mistake and to perhaps have lost love forever. Mr Knightley foreshadows this when talking to Mrs Weston by saying, "I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good" (Austen, 44-45). She does indeed fall in love and falls into doubt that her affections are returned.

Although Emma feels very deeply for herself, Emma is not immune to suffering of others, as it is her compassion towards others that shows she is capable of remorse for her actions and that she is not malicious. After talking Harriet out of marrying Mr Martin, Emma is confronted by Mr Knightley who leaves her feeling very uncomfortable to the degree that she even wishes to know that "Mr Martin is not very, very bitterly disappointed" (Austen, 116), showing Emma is starting to regret her interference. The revelation that Mr Elton is pursuing Emma rather than

Harriet (as Emma had hoped) also starts to make Emma query her judgment and she finds that her character analysis of those around her may not be so sound. Mr Elton is no longer viewed as a polite and amiable gentleman by Emma and instead she is forced to see him for what he is, a man seeking to "aggrandize and enrich himself" (Austen, 158) at Emma's expense. More importantly, Emma starts to fully comprehend the ramifications of her behaviour on the prospects of Harriet of whom she has grown fond and views as a friend. Emma realises she is sorely tempted to gossip (Spacks, 29) but on the other hand she must be careful to speculate correctly as her self-discovery may come at the expense of others (Spacks, 35).

Emma and Harriet's friendship is also testament to the feelings of women that Austen so wishes to convey to her audience, so much so that Deanna Kreisel proposes that "Austen is more deeply concerned with relationships between young women of marriageable age than she is with the potential marryers themselves" (222). Women of a marriageable age tended to have more time on their hands than those women who were married and had to run a household. Gossip mainly circulated in this realm because the women were assessing potential suitors or because their singleness and potential marriage partners provided ripe gossip content for the community around them. Gossip framed reputation and reputation in turn determined marriage prospects of women of marriageable age. Gossip was too tempting a habit and too important socially to abstain from for young unmarried women.

Persuasion, like *Emma*, shows the damage meddling gossip can do to a person, as Anne Elliot has suffered greatly in the years following the poor marriage advice she received from Lady Russell who encouraged her not to marry Captain Wentworth. Lady Russell, like Emma, asserts her influence over those younger and more naive than herself, with devastating results as both Anne Elliot and Harriet Smith are initially persuaded out of accepting suitable proposals from the men they both end up marrying anyway at the end of the novel. However, Austen goes to great lengths to show that not all unsolicited marriage advice is bad as Anne receives advice to

refuse the proposal of Mr Elliot which is the right decision based on his character rather than an aversion to his rank.

Persuasion uniquely shows the sincerity and the usefulness of gossip a female friendship should possess as it is Anne's friendship with Mrs Smith, an old school friend, that ultimately prevents her from making a poorly informed marriage to Mr Elliot. Mrs Smith's gossip appears more noble considering Sir Walter's withering opinion of Anne associating with her, "and who is Anne Elliot to be visiting in Westgate Buildings? A Mrs Smith…you have the most extraordinary taste…low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting attractions are inviting to you" (Austen, 143). And indeed Anne's association with Mrs Smith proves invaluable as it is through her that she learns the true character of Mr Elliot who turns out to be "a man without heart or conscience" (Austen, 182), holding Anne's family's honour to be "as cheap as dirt" (Austen, 185) and having no "better principle to guide him than selfishness" (Austen, 191). Mr Elliot had used Mrs Smith's husband very poorly, having"led his friend (Mr Smith) into expenses much beyond his fortune" (Austen, 191) before his death and leaving Mrs Smith penniless in the aftermath. He then sought to extend his own fortune marrying Anne whilst keeping Mrs Clay as his mistress and Mrs Smith also reports to Anne that, "[h]e was very unkind to his first wife. They were wretched together" (Austen, 193) showing a level of concern for Anne's future happiness. All this is communicated to Anne because of "the gossip of Nurse Rooke that allows Mrs Smith to…save Anne from at best an awkward proposal and at worst a disastrous marriage" (Goss, 171). "Mrs Smith proved him (Mr Elliot) to have been very unfeeling in his conduct towards her; very deficient both in justice and compassion" (Austen, 191). In doing this, Austen shows that persuasion through gossip does not have to be inherently bad and that it can lead to good, "Mrs Smith had been able to tell her what nobody else could have done" (Austen, 195). Mrs Smith saves Anne from a manipulative match with the scheming Mr Elliot and the correction of Mrs Smith's own circumstances follows with the help

of Wentworth. Mrs Smith's gossip about Mr Elliot also stands in direct opposition to that of Lady Russell who encourages Anne to marry him, and where it not for Mrs Smith Anne notes that it "was just possible that she might have been persuaded by Lady Russell" (Austen, 194).

When contrasting Mrs Smith's gossip to Lady Russell's gossip we see who is more remiss, although both women intend to be good friends to Anne. Lady Russell posits the marriage between Anne and Mr Elliot believing it to be not only a "suitable connexion…but…a very happy one" (Austen, 145). Yet despite Lady Russell's intimations, we see Anne is not sure of Mr Elliot and feels that they have only been "acquainted a month, she could not be satisfied that she really knew his character" (Austen, 146). She distinctly observes that he is also "not open" (Austen, 146) which is astute in light of his deception later revealed to Anne by Mrs Smith. However, Lady Russell is not the only person to be deceived by his character and perhaps she is also blinded by her hope to see Anne married that she does not astutely gauge the danger of such an attachment. Anne is also perturbed to find out Mr Elliot's true nature and immediately ponders to herself that: "It was just possible that she might have been persuaded by Lady Russell!" (Austen, 194) into marrying Mr Elliot. It is also this realisation that helps Anne to see where her heart lies as she affirms that Mr Elliot stood "as opposed to Captain Wentworth" (Austen, 195), showing Wentworth to be Anne's ideal model for a gentleman. While acknowledging that Lady Russell means well, Anne has also realised that character trumps rank. Her anxiety over Wentworth is because she made the wrong decision in refusing his proposal, out of her respect for Lady Russell who she still values and she even wonders what her opinion of Wentworth would be in the present.

1.2. Gossip and Anxiety

Both gossip and anxiety are shown to inform each other in Austen's texts as characters position themselves in relation to what society thinks of them which is articulated through gossip and how they can improve their standing based on these remarks. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is enraptured with Gothic novels, placing their terrifying content into her own life by utilising her overactive and deeply naive imagination. This leads her to make some questionable remarks and deeply embarrass herself in front of the man she loves as well, as the society of Bath. This humbling position makes Catherine realise her immaturity and instead of shying away from society, she determines to better herself, maturing into a young woman who is not as impressionable as she once was. Emma occupies a slightly different position to Catherine as she is an independent and esteemed woman because her rank allows her to be so. However Emma foolishly occupies herself in the affairs of others and because of her position she is able to generate notable damage to both others and herself. It is the rebuke put forth by Mr Knightley that wakes her to her poor behaviour and makes her aware that her matchmaking is just a cover for her discontent that she is not married or as independent from her father's pedantic wishes as she previously believed. Austen's *Persuasion*, her most anxious work presents Anne Elliot as a pitiable character, exploited by her family, and looked down upon despite her vast capabilities.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is deeply fascinated with Gothic literature upon being introduced to it by Isabella Thorpe. However, Catherine's interest veers too close to reality as she projects the world of the Gothic genre onto her life. This is illustrated by the conversations she conducts with Henry who enjoys the Gothic genre as a form of entertainment rather than projecting its contents onto reality as Catherine does. Catherine is seduced by the writing of Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and in turn her sensibility declines as a result of her active imagination (Wolfreys and Robbins, xii). Henry indulges Catherine's penchant for Gothic fiction by entertaining her fantasies by talking of the novels in an exaggerated manner,

oblivious to the power it holds in Catherine's imagination (Wyett, 268). Henry is also unaware of Catherine's growing affection for him and thus his influence and musings about Gothic imagery captivate her strongly, "[h]er passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney" (Austen, 126). Before she has even arrived at Northanger Abbey, we see that Catherine is lost in Gothic reverie, constructing her own narrative for the building, "[i]ts long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (Austen, 126). Her determination to stir up mystique when arriving at Northanger Abbey cannot be quelled even though its appearance strikes her as "odd and inconsistent" (Austen, 145) contradicting her wild imaginings. Austen allows for Catherine's delusion to continue into her stay at Northanger Abbey as Catherine is quick to jump to the conclusion that General Tilney is a man that embodies Radcliffe's villain Montoni, clearly encapsulating Walpole's notion of "womanish terror" (Walpole, 4). Catherine suspects that the General has killed his wife and further proposes that he has an "air and attitude of a Montoni!" (Austen, 169) showing how she has injected "the fantastical notions of the Gothic into her stay at Northanger Abbey" (Brown, 29) which in turn contributes to the anxiety of the text. Catherine's terror is legitimate in the novel even though it is partly due to the fictitious use of her imagination; her reaction is articulated by her repetition and exaggeration of the General's character which she conveys to all around her including most embarrassingly to Henry himself. The reliance on Catherine to generate anxiety in the novel clearly points towards Austen giving a nod to the classic Gothic trope of terrorised women creating emotional flux in the text (Morris, 302).

Catherine's observations ultimately amount to conjecture as her mind has allowed her to fashion the General's demeanour clearly showing "gossip's reliance on speculation…because speculation can result in misinterpretation" (Pond, 185). Henry rebukes Catherine's fanciful

Gothic imaginings, "[d]ear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained" (Austen, 179). Catherine is visibly perturbed by her fallacy, "[m]ost grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry" (Austen, 180) and she immediately realises from where her misapprehensions have arisen, "[s]he saw that the infatuation had been created…Charming as were all Mrs Radcliffe's works…it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the Midland countries of England, was to be looked for" (Austen, 181). This revelation is what ultimately leads Catherine to "being able to more accurately read the world around her" (Brown, 30).

We may laugh at Catherine's folly, but her conflating of both realistic and fantastical anxieties does glean some truth (Wootton, 28). For example, despite being unfounded in her claim that the General is a murderer we see that Catherine is not completely incorrect in her summation of his character as he is in fact a "villain of a different order, a money-seeking and rank-conscious marriage-maker" (Peltason, 623) whose "tyrannical attitude extends well beyond Northanger Abbey" (Benis, 188) making her anxiety at Northanger Abbey valid if not misleading to herself. General Tilney may not be a murderer, but Catherine is correct in noting that despite this being true, he is a despicable man and "she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (Austen, 225) by suspecting him of murder as he was "an unkind husband" (Austen, 163). General Tilney's eviction of Catherine from Northanger Abbey further cements his poor character, as his conduct was far from what one would expect of a gentleman and instead his behaviour amounted to a "breach of hospitality" (Austen, 214).

Northanger Abbey traces the formation of Catherine's journey from childhood to adulthood as her imagination is checked when he is introduced to a society outside of her previous pastoral existence. Austen uses a similar tactic in *Emma,* as Emma, like Catherine is also naive as to the workings of the world, being both young and sheltered. In both novels, Austen chooses to educate her heroines into mature young women who are truly aware of what they want.

However, both heroines' positions in society are not the same; Emma is Austen's most upper-class heroine whilst Catherine hales from a humble pastoral background. However, Catherine's parents are more in tune with societal norms than Mr Woodhouse, as Catherine is allowed to travel to Bath and experience high society whilst Emma remains in Highbury, tending to her hypochondriac father's every need. Emma occupies a stifling domestic role when she should be officially presented to society and allowed to pursue a life outside of her childhood home, as her older sister, Isabella, has been allowed to do. Gossip is Emma's only solace as it allows her to escape the limited domestic sphere her father has trapped her in, to the extent that she even talks herself into believing that she has no need to marry when in truth she does want to marry. Gossip allows Emma to defy her father by encouraging others into behaviours she dares not imagine for herself, such as marriage. Emma is constantly presented with her own desires through the subject of her gossip, but she must abstain because she is anxious about her father's response to her getting married. Both she and Mr Knightley compromise at the end of the novel with Knightley leaving his home to move in with Emma and her father, as both parties know Mr Woodhouse will not be persuaded to allow the marriage if they do not consider his comforts.

Emma's tendency to gossip is not solely to be dramatic although that is why she continues to gossip, but because it is her sole outlet from her own tenuous reality where she feels she must give up her ambitions in order to please and cater for her father's every whim. We may judge Emma harshly as Austen did; she "described Emma Woodhouse as a heroine "no-one but myself will much like"" (Todd, 113). Emma is seen as a thoughtless meddler in other people's affairs but upon further scrutiny we can see that her gossip is a coping mechanism against the boredom and control she suffers at the hands of her hypochondriac father. Early in the novel, Emma confides that although "[s]he dearly loved her father…he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful" (Austen, 5). This idea is captured by Max Gluckman who proposes that "in the kind of society described by Miss Austen—the

country upper circles of early nineteenth century England— gossip was not idle, though the creatures were. In fact, the more idle the creatures, the less idle was the gossip" (308). Gluckman's proposition offers a reason for Emma's excessive need to gossip in that she is bored by her idle father and uses gossip as an outlet to add interest to a life that would otherwise not be stimulating enough to hold Emma's attention. It seems more than fair to allow Emma this outlet when we consider that "much of her twenty years of life has been devoted to protecting and catering to her fragile, easily overwhelmed father" (Bottomer, 163). Emma sacrifices her own pleasure for the sake of her father and even though she becomes more independent as the narrative unfolds, she still lives with her father at the conclusion of the novel (Brown, 91). The circularity contained in the text is a classic feature of the Gothic genre and Emma's future is only eased through her use of gossip. It allows her to look beyond her situation and come to terms with her own desires instead of letting her father diminish her youth, her chance of marrying and freedom (Bottomer, 163). However, when she marries Mr Knightley, Emma insists on him moving to Hartfield as she knows her decision to marry will not be accepted by her father unless she accommodates his needs. These Gothic undertones permeate *Emma* subtly and create a sinister undercurrent that in turn award Emma some sympathy and exemption for her folly in orchestrating the lives of those around her. Likewise, the same exemption of poor behaviour can be applied to Frank Churchill, who like Emma, is submissive to a parental figure; in his case to Mrs Churchill, the aunt who raised him. Both Mrs Churchill and Mr Woodhouse manipulate Frank and Emma into doing their will by fits of unease or illness (Bottomer, 164). However, because we are more in tune with Emma's emotions it is easier to extend pity to her whereas Frank is judged by his misconduct towards Emma and we are not privy to the motivations behind his behaviour.

Emma shows a young lady enjoying gossip as a form of escape until it presents her with some unpleasant truths about her own character and reveals her own desires. Emma is disheartened

to realise the damage her gossip has inflicted both knowingly and unknowingly on those around her. Before Mr Knightley's proposal she is wrecked with crippling anxiety because her gossip has led her to realise she has appeared foolish to him and that she sees herself as his worthy match and is in doubt of him returning her affections. *Persuasion's* Anne Elliot finds herself in a similar predicament to *Emma,* as the result of matchmaking gossip by others, which makes her reflect upon her own past refusal of a man she should have married, and now she must endure gossip around the same man's eligibility to other women.

Persuasion initially appears as a rather sad and out of place novel as it is not as light and humorous in tone as some of Austen's other works which satirise her society's ridiculous antics. Rather the reality with which an audience is faced is the stark reality of spinsterhood and the result that poor decision making in one's youth can have longer term consequences. Anne is also "widely considered Austen's most deeply feeling and deeply felt character" (Frey, 214) so her emotions are openly transparent allowing for a considerable amount of empathy to be felt by those who encounter her. Anne in turn finds herself in the upper echelon of society where gossip is rife, and she feels the covert pressure incited by the gossip in the exclusive group she occupies (Finch and Bowen, 2). This pressure led Anne to refuse the proposal of Mr Wentworth as a young woman as her father recalls Wentworth in the present as a man of no property, a "nobody, I remember; quite unconnected" (Austen, 21). Lady Russell's assessment of Wentworth's worth expresses similar concerns to those of Sir Walter, but it is her persuasion that ultimately underpins Anne's final decision to refuse Wentworth as Lady Russell "deprecated the connexion in every light" (Austen, 24). Although well-meaning in her use of gossip to dissuade Anne from a marriage she views as potentially disastrous, Lady Russell unwittingly breaks Anne's heart as to Anne "[n]o one had ever come within the Kellynch circle, who could bear a comparison with Fredrick Wentworth, as he stood in her memory" (Austen, 25) and she realises "she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the

engagement" (Austen, 26). Anne also goes so far as refusing another match despite it being met with approval and Lady Russell is disheartened and "began now to have anxiety which borders on hopelessness for Anne's being tempted" (Austen, 26).

Anne's anxiety comes to the fore when she discovers that Admiral Croft's brother-in-law is Wentworth who then returns to Kellynch having made a name for himself in the Navy and earned the rank of Captain. Wentworth is bitter towards Anne as he "had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill, deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shown a feebleness of character in doing so…[s]he had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion" (Austen, 54-55). Wentworth also slights Anne quickly upon his arrival by gossiping about her to Henrietta Musgrove who reports to Anne that Wentworth noted, "[y]ou (speaking of Anne) were so altered he should not have known you again" (Austen, 54). This comment deeply hurts Anne as she knows she has lost the bloom of her youth and that she cannot hope to recapture his affections having admitted painfully to herself that "[i]t was now his (Wentworth) object to marry" (Austen, 55). Wentworth's words torture an already fragile Anne who now feels what she terms as a "perpetual estrangement" (Austen, 57) from Wentworth, grieving his loss the last few years. Wentworth also shows himself not too "far from the superficial Sir Walter when, on returning, he judges Anne simply on her looks" (Todd, 131) a horrible show of his resentment towards Anne that he in fact resembles her "conceited, silly father" (Austen, 3) whom he so despises.

Anne is then left to overhear her sister Mary and brother-in-law Charles gossip about Wentworth's potential marital options, in which of course she is not even considered; "Charles gave it for Louisa, Mary for Henrietta, but quite agreeing that to have him marry either would be extremely delightful" (Austen, 67). This gossip also provides an enlightening context to the characters of Anne's other family members as we see Mary is also guilty of the same prejudice as her father, Sir Walter. Mary's snobbery is evident in her matchmaking as she disapproves

of Henrietta's match to Charles Hayter who she terms, "[n]othing but a country curate" (Austen, 68). Mary also echoes her father's ideals and discontent with poor connections when she bluntly states: "I do not think any young woman has a right to make a choice that may be disagreeable and inconvenient to the principal part of her family, and be giving bad connexions to those who have not been used to them" (Austen, 68). This may seem tactless of Mary when it comes to Anne, but she is unaware of the history that exists between Wentworth and her older sister. However, her shaming of Charles Hayter is disdainful as he is her husband's cousin and she disparages him in front of her husband who rebuffs her assertions. Mary is shameless in whom she airs her opinions to, as upon walking to Charles Hayter's residence with Wentworth and a few others she tells Wentworth: "It is very unpleasant, having such connexions! But I assure you I have never been in the house above twice in my life" (Austen, 77). Wentworth is aware of what Louisa calls the "Elliot pride" (Austen, 79) and in response to Mary, Anne notes he reacts by giving an "artificial, assenting smile, followed by a contemptuous glance, as he turned away" (Austen, 77), showing his disdain for Mary's comment that remind him of his own dismissal at the hands of the Elliots and Lady Russell who talked Anne out of marrying him.

As if dwelling on his past, Wentworth engages Louisa Musgrove in a conversation about character that is informed by his past as he claims that a person of true character is steadfast in his/her own decisions, not allowing other people's opinions to sway his/her own, directly rebuking Anne's behaviour whilst she is inadvertently eavesdropping on himself and Louisa. He then learns of Anne's refusal of Charles (Mary's husband) and again how Louisa attributes it to Lady Russell's influence over Anne, although this is not true as Lady Russell laments Anne's refusal of Charles who was a suitable match for Anne. Then Louisa decidedly asserts, "I have no idea of being so easily persuaded" (Austen, 78) in order to prove to Wentworth that she is exactly who he requires in a potential spouse.

The gossip surrounding Wentworth's lovelife permeates Anne's existence as she is even forced to take part in a conversation with the Admiral and Mrs Croft concerning Wentworth's association with the Musgrove sisters, whom the Admiral seems convinced that Wentworth "means to have one or the other of" (Austen, 82). Interestingly Anne's perceptiveness tells her that Mrs Croft "might not consider either of them (Louisa or Henrietta) as quite worthy of her brother" (Austen, 82-83), showing that Austen does not for one moment believe that superiority and pride is restricted to the upper classes. In many ways Mrs Croft may be acting in a similar way to Lady Russell, dissuading Wentworth from considering marriage to either of the Musgrove girls. All this talk of Wentworth's impending nuptials is too much for Anne and the gossip she hears leads her to a state of anxiety to the point "[s[he wished it might be possible for her to avoid ever seeing Captain Wentworth" (Austen, 84).

Austen's nuanced use of gossip around one issue, Wentworth's potential wife, helps gauge the community's motives and beliefs, and we see that all the characters are flawed by their own agendas, whether it be family pride in the case of Mary and Mrs Croft, personal experience in the bitterness of Wentworth or self-interest in relation to Louisa's hope of marrying Wentworth. In this way, we see gossip as a form of community authority that acts in the interests of the community (Finch and Bowen, 9) and that the exclusivity of a small community also allows for a ubiquitous increase in gossip itself (Gluckman, 309). In fact, in small country communities, gossip allowed a group to become elite, languishing in constructive gossip as their conversations marked themselves off from others who occupied their wider society (Gluckman, 308).

Gossip for Austen was also a means to question gender roles and, in many ways, she exercises this whilst redeeming some of the character flaws that may appear repugnant. Although being haughty, Mary (Anne's youngest sister who is married) clearly exclaims bitterly against being left out of a social event because she is expected to look after her injured child rather than

leaving him to the care of her husband "[s]o here he is to go away and enjoy himself, and because I am the poor mother, I am not allowed to stir" (Austen, 50). Mary also accurately notes that ""[i]f there is anything disagreeable going on, men are always sure to get out of it, and Charles is as bad as any of them" (Austen, 50) and that Charles is free to go as "[n]ursing does not belong to a man; it is not his province. A sick child is always the mother's property" (Austen, 50). These ideas are subversive and point towards Austen's pursuit of securing equal agency and choice for men and women. However, Austen is not naive as we see Anne is left to tend to young Charles rather than Mary, because Anne has "not a mother's feelings" (Austen, 51), casting her as more expendable than Mary as Mary is a married women who can boast more authority in society than Anne, a single and aging woman. Through this gesture Austen emphasises the feelings of women by showing that there is a significant shift in the female hierarchy after one becomes a wife and that equality among women is as important as the pursuit of equality between men and women. Instead of men standing up for women as seen in the original Gothic texts of Walpole and Radcliffe, we now see a need for women to uplift themselves and each other rather than maligning each another due to marital status as Mary does to Anne, even if they find themselves anxious to do so.

1.3. Gossip and Masculinity

Austen does not solely call for women to empower themselves but also rebukes men who act as a hindrance to them doing so. Austen points to the disconnect in how gossip from men is received in contrast to gossip from women. She refuses to accept the conventions of gossip as purely a "feminine mode of talk" (Pond, 190) and "inauthentic discourse (Spacks, 22). Women's voices are raised in her work, and she encourages her heroes to validate these voices in her work. Austen goes so far as to condemn certain characters for their deception, but she is

not hypocritical as she also allows her characters to wrestle with their failings and to apologise where necessary. This truthful account towards the handling of gossip is why Austen's characters are so tangible to her audiences.

In *Northanger Abbey,* is versatile in its functions as we see it as a means of procuring pleasure, contributing to deception, revealing truth and as a way of establishing authority. From the outset of *Northanger Abbey* Austen allows Catherine to immerse herself in gossip, as upon attending her first ball in Bath Catherine overhears two men praising her appearance and consequently "such words had their effect; she immediately thought the evening pleasanter than she found it before" (Austen, 13). It is interesting that Austen casts men as gossips so early on in her novel as she later accompanies this image with an undertone of feminism as Isabella Thorpe jokingly tells off James Morland (Catherine's older brother) for eavesdropping, "[y]ou men have such restless curiosity! Talk of the curiosity of women, indeed!" (Austen, 46). Austen is shown to value the female voice and intellect by equating the feelings of both men and women to one another whilst showing that in Austen's society women were expected to "inhabit the public realm on male terms" (Spacks, 24).

Austen then uses John Thorpe's disregard for Catherine's reputation and his public lying to show how male gossip can affect females in society. John Thorpe's interactions with Catherine show Catherine is lacking in both maturity and decorum, but they also show John to be lacking in manners that befit a gentleman. Catherine is seen galivanting around Bath in John's carriage which was most unladylike at the time as Mrs Allen comments: "Do not you think it has an odd appearance, if young ladies are frequently driven about in them (carriages) by young men, to whom they are not even related? "(Austen, 91). Mrs Allen even goes so far as to criticise Mrs Thorpe's parenting, "[i]t is not right; and I wonder Mrs Thorpe should allow it…I am sure Mrs Morland (Catherine's mother) would not be pleased" (Austen, 90). Mrs Allen's comments may seem irrelevant due to her obsession with fashion which is above any other of her concerns

but ironically, she makes an astute and yet subtle observation about clothing that paints Catherine's behaviour with John in a very demeaning light. Mrs Allen notes that one's appearance and attire in a carriage may appear dishevelled after a short ride, "[y]ou are splashed getting in and out; and the wind takes you hair and your bonnet in every direction" (Austen, 91). Mrs Allen's flighty remark in fact alludes to Austen's use of clothing to signal the loss of women's virginity (Fuller, 2) as an open carriage ride could lead to promiscuity "and while it does not specifically for Catherine, her dishevelled appearance may imply something different" (Brown, 18). This is an interesting notion as it links to the sexual undertones of Gothic fiction which alarmed British society, as they saw it as a means of ruining young women's pursuit of marriage and as Catherine's judgments are so closely informed by the literature she consumes, we judge her behaviour as erratic and out of sync for the time in which she lives (Todd, 32). Catherine is rightly humiliated by this incident and upon returning home makes sure to call upon the Tilneys to apologise for missing their walk together and from there on her attitude towards John Thorpe is altered.

John's conduct is also seen to be wanting as he has little to no regard for Catherine's reputation which is questioned by the materialistic Mrs Allen of all people and then the broader society of Bath. John is happy to deceive Catherine into thinking the Tilneys are not coming to call on her and instead he whisks her off for an inappropriate carriage ride where he reveals that he in fact saw the Tilneys coming to call on Catherine. Catherine is understandably vexed by his conduct and berates him, "[h]ow could you deceive me so, John? How could you say that you saw them driving up the Lansdown Road?" (Austen, 74). John deceives Catherine through his gossip of the Tilneys in order to ensure that she does not entertain them over himself; he is just as self-serving as Isabella when it comes to his relationship with Catherine. John's deception does not end there however, as we see the motivations for his interest in Catherine is wholly materialistic in nature as he wishes to marry her himself believing her to be Mr Allen's heiress.

This is only revealed as an explanation for Catherine's ejection from Northanger Abbey by General Tilney who is disgusted to find that Catherine is not Mr Allen's heir and thus has no fortune and is therefore not deemed as a suitable partner for his son, Henry. John orchestrated this deception, as upon being "on speaking terms with a man of General Tilney's importance…his vanity induced him to represent the family (the Morlands) as yet more wealthy than his vanity and avarice had made him believe him" (Austen, 223). John however, inadvertently does Catherine a favour as she is able to spend more time in the company of Henry in whose company she comes to learn of her folly in taking Gothic literature so literally. Northanger Abbey also provides Catherine with an escape from John's affection for her which is fuelled by avarice. Gossip is also the pathway in which she discovers John's interest in her as Isabella plainly states to Catherine that her brother is "over head and ears in love with you" (Austen, 128), showing that gossip does not have to be irrelevant and instead can be very useful in establishing ones place in relation to others. John Thorpe proves Austen's point that men gossip as much as women and that both genders are able to partake in both good and bad gossip. John Thorpe both hinders and promotes Catherine's reputation through his poor social etiquette which shows no regard for Catherine's good name but simultaneously shows him to be a liar. However Catherine is indebted to him as without him, she would never have been able to spend so much time with Henry whom she later marries. Henry also corrects Catherine's fanciful gossip about his father but he does so honestly as he does not shield Catherine from his father's true nature. By contrasting the two men Austen is eager to show that conduct towards women matters especially with gossiping which implies that men too have to admit they gossip. However, in owning up to gossiping, men then would have to openly admit that women's gossip and overall speech for that matter is of as much worth as male speech.

Just as *Northanger Abbey's* John Thorpe uses gossip to meet his own agendas so too does *Emma's* Frank Churchill who uses gossip to deceive Highbury away from the truth of his

engagement to Jane Fairfax. Frank does this at the expense of Emma's reputation just as John does the same to Catherine. Essentially it is Emma's gossip that leaves her so vulnerable to Frank's deception as he can clearly see Emma's jealousy of Jane and plays this to his advantage by ridiculing Jane to Emma to hide his true relationship with Jane. Emma's reputation is more tainted due to gossip when compared to Frank's reputation which should suffer more severely as he actively sought to hurt and undermine those around him through his gossiping rather than Emma who immaturely wields her gossip without fully understanding its consequences. It is this gendered double standard that Austen highlights as Frank is easily forgiven by Highbury whilst Emma is left to make amends with Jane and Harriet.

Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are much talked of in Highbury although neither have been residents of the place since childhood. Emma is displeased by the mention of Jane because she stands as the only threat to Emma as the most accomplished lady in Highbury. Frank is the long-awaited guest of Randalls where his father and stepmother live. Frank's excuses mount up so that Mr Knightley declares, "I cannot believe that he has not the power of coming if he made a point of it. It is too unlikely for me to believe it without proof" (Austen, 169-170). Mr Knightley's gossip is not premature as Frank does neglect his duties to his father, his secret fiancé and even disrespects his aunt by concealing his engagement from her, knowing that she would not approve of it. Frank's actions are forgiven by all (except Mr Knightley) in the novel which is also a pointed comment by Austen; the despicable actions of charming rakes are forgiven due to their male agency and quick wit.

Mr Knightley's prejudice towards Frank is also as a result of his affection for Emma and his dislike for Frank grows in direct proportion to his feelings towards Emma. Neither view can be taken at face value, as is the case with much gossip. Gossip is at its most useful when it reflects the character of the person who utters it. *Emma* holds gossip as an ubiquitous feature, and although many may view it as a dull novel taking place in a small community with little

action apart from the occasional ball and picnic, it is rife with gossip that adeptly delves into the interior world of its characters.

Frank gossips eagerly with Emma about Jane, calling Jane's appearance "very ill…[a] most deplorable want of complexion" (Austen, 233). Frank goes so far as to denounce any possibility of affection for Jane by telling Emma bluntly, "I never could attach myself to any one so completely reserved" (Austen, 237), a blatant lie when in fact he is secretly engaged to her. Emma enables these games of Frank's to flourish as she is an avid player in the affairs of others and when comparing her actions to Frank's actions hers "are only a little less destructive" (Todd, 112). Emma is forgiven more easily as the novel is presented from her point of view and her arrogance and unkindness is modulated into something more comical than threatening (Todd, 113).

Whenever Emma is with Frank, her gossiping exhibits its worst traits; because Frank spurs on Emma's poor behaviour as he is a malicious gossip, whereas Emma is merely a misinformed gossip. Frank maliciously wounds Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates with Emma's naive help. Emma is as much controlled by Frank as she controls Harriet; Frank brings out Emma's faults by encouraging her matchmaking, ""[w]ell, I have so little confidence in my own judgment, that whenever I marry, I hope somebody will choose my wife for me. Will you?" (turning to Emma)" (Austen, 440). Emma happily plays along with Frank's game, unaware that she is insulting his fiancée and leading herself into further temptation to not only gossip but to outrightly insult those around her. This is seen when Emma cuts down Miss Bates for her endless and feeble chatter. Frank uses Emma as a way to mask his ties to Jane Fairfax and in doing so he gossips maliciously about Jane and snidely undercuts his decision to marry her in front of an unsuspecting audience, "[h]ow many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!" (Austen, 440). This is desperately unfeeling towards Jane and is Austen's way to expose that men are equally engaged in gossip as women,

perhaps in an even more malicious way because their authority enables them to openly get away with such slander. Emma makes this poignant distinction herself when she realises Frank's deception, "Frank Churchill had behaved very ill by herself – very ill in many ways, - but it was not so much his behaviour as her own, which made her so angry with him" (Austen, 475). Emma has the maturity to acknowledge Frank's part in her indiscretions, not exempting him of all blame as the rest of Highbury does and even Jane herself who still agrees to marry him after such appalling treatment. Highbury's forgiveness of Frank leaves a sour taste as Austen is subtlety alludes to the truth that men do not face the same consequences as women when they gossip.

Emma's defence of Frank probably initially arises from her thoughts of potentially being a good match for him; this idea is speculated upon by the matchmaking gossip of Mr and Mrs Weston before and after his arrival. Mr Weston encourages the match openly to Emma by telling her that, "Frank admired her extremely – thought her very beautiful and very charming" (Austen, 241). Her defence is not so much naive as it is kind; even though she is gossiping about Frank she is starting to learn to modulate her views in accordance with her own experiences. Although Emma is later to think of Frank as a deceitful and cruel person, she does right by giving him the benefit of the doubt where Mr Knightley does not. By doing this, Austen gives Emma more empathy than Knightley and shows that gossip is intertwined into the very fabric of socializing, as the upper class saw it as its birthright to discuss others without their presence (Gelles, 678). However, it could also come from Emma's innate understanding of a demanding guardian although Emma puts on the pretence that her life is ideal on every front. It is interesting that Austen chooses to use Frank as well as Mr Knightley to show Emma the folly of her ways; both men act as foils for one another yet together they are able to aid Emma's transformation although it is clear Austen proffers Knightley's rebuking method over Frank's slyness.

However, not all male gossip is to be slated as Austen utilizes male gossip to conclude the marriage plot and to show male respect for women in *Persuasion*. Far from the Gothic tradition to subdue and silence women, it is the Gothic technique of gossip that elevates Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* into a marriage of equality.

In *Persuasion,* gossip's power when wielded by men is shown to be notable. Wentworth gradually comments on and acknowledges Anne's character, openly giving her the agency so seldom extended to her by her own family. Giving Anne agency proves that he is a worthy match for her as he openly respects her to her face and more importantly in front of others. We see Wentworth volunteer Anne to care for Louisa in Lyme in the most glowing terms, "but if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne" (Austen, 104). Rather than her previous undercutting by Mary, Anne is instead valued for what she does possess rather than for what she does not. She is seen as capable because she has shown herself to be in Wentworth's eyes and not because she is merely a single woman who should feel happy to help out wherever she is required. Wentworth also goes so far as to consult Anne on whether his plan to alert the Musgroves is suitable, "Do you think this is a good plan?" (Austen, 107). Thus, Wentworth is no longer snubbing Anne but instead is relying on her judgment which he previously criticised, which allows for a more favourable opinion of his character to form as he is being modelled into Austen's hero. Anne rapidly changes into a woman that Wentworth is once again happy to associate with socially and he even starts to enquire about her instead of cold shouldering her or acting covertly in his manners towards her and there is a creation of a silent hope that the two may rekindle their past affections for one another. By talking about Anne to others in a complimentary tone Wentworth is able to show Anne she is of value, whereas her family does not do this which denigrates her self-worth.

There is also a distinct difference in the gossip between the strata of society into which Austen delves. From the outset of the novel the Elliot pride is felt and so it comes as no surprise to find

that Mr Elliot is just as concerned with social rank as Sir Walter; this realisation for Anne is evident and she makes it clear that she does not wish to associate herself with such affectation, "[h]is (Mr Elliot) value for rank and connexion she perceived was greater than hers" (Austen, 134). The gossip she encounters from Mrs Smith who receives her news from her nurse, Nurse Rooke, on the other hand, is far more informative and less insincere and is sure to be "entertaining and profitable: something that makes one know one's species better" (Austen, 141). It is interesting that Nurse Rooke never utters gossip directly to Anne herself and yet it is her gossip relayed to Anne from Mrs Smith that ultimately stops Anne from making the mistake of marrying Mr Elliot. The treatment of women by the two men differs markedly however their treatment speaks volumes as to their character. Wentworth is open with Anne when he eventually proposes whilst Mr Elliot plans to propose in a clandestine manner as he is hiding his intentions to keep Mrs Clay as his mistress. Mr Elliot does this to ensure his inheritance is guarded because he does not wish Mrs Clay to marry Sir Walter showing he values neither women instead selfishly keeping his best interests at heart. Austen calls for her heroes to have transparency of character and thought, wishing them to interact honestly with the women in their lives with respect and without pretence.

Austen cannot be accused of concealing the dark side of both female and male gossip; *Persuasion's* Sir Walter Elliot's scathing remarks about the Navy and working men cannot go unnoticed. Sir Walter's malicious and unfounded remarks mirror the arrogance of class and the foolishness of the societal elite to take account for the poor management of their own estates. This prejudice also shows a naivety to acknowledge that the tide was turning on class as The French Revolution coincided with the novel's timeframe and there was a clear rise of the working man globally and the failure of class to amend their feckless living.

Evidently, Austen allows her characters to use gossip as a means of securing their social standing as gossip maligns those who higher classes deem as unworthy of praise (Gluckman,

309). One such person is *Persuasion's* Sir Walter Elliot, Anne's father who is "a puffed-up Dickensian monster of narcissism" (Peltason, 611) consumed with "vanity of person and situation" (Austen, 2). Sir Walter is a snob, who despite needing to rent out his estate, Kellynch, due to his squandering of his fortune, still sees himself as fit to critique new money, again showing the interaction between the morals of the speaker and the gossip they produce (Pond, 201). When approached with the idea of renting out his home to a naval Admiral, Sir Walter is scathing of the Navy remarking prejudicially that, "[t]here are few among the gentlemen of the Navy, I imagine, who would not be surprised to find themselves in a house of this description" (Austen, 16). Anne however rebuffs her father's comment replying: "The Navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow" (Austen, 17). This shows Anne's gentle wisdom as well as alluding to the fact that she is "ashamed of her feckless, vain father" (Todd, 128) and his view of the Navy "as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction" (Austen, 17) and its ability to cut up "a man's youth and vigour most horribly" (Austen, 17). Sir Walter is clearly shown to value rank and appearance above all else even above his daughter Anne whose "word had no weight" (Austen, 4). Ironically it is Sir Walter who finds himself in debt and not Admiral Croft who rents from him. Austen clearly views Sir Walter as a hypocrite and is scathing of his careless treatment of his inherited wealth (Groenendyk, 13), as well as not approving of speaking ill of anyone, male or female, simply because of their societal rank. This conversation may initially appear as commentary as opposed to gossip; however the novel itself gives a backstory to this exchange. Captain Wentworth proposed to Anne and was refused due to his rank as Anne was dissuaded by both her father's opinion of the match as well as Lady Russell's advice to not accept Wentworth's proposal. So, from the outset it is clear that Anne regrets her decision and does not share her father or Lady Russell's opinions of the Navy

or more importantly, Wentworth himself. Any mention of the Navy should thus be associated with Captain Wentworth solely rather than its larger organization. From this initial conversation, Austen positions her audience against judging people purely by rank and sets up an expectation for her marriage plot where the heroine marries down rather than up.

Having seen Anne's father's dismal parenting and arrogance, it is no wonder that we see Anne turning towards Lady Russell for counsel, as Lady Russell was a close friend of her mother. While Lady Russell is attentive and caring to Anne where her father is not, Lady Russell also falls prey to classism as "she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them" (Austen, 9). Thus, Lady Russell is as similarly flawed as Sir Walter, but she does have Anne's best interests at heart wishing only to advise Anne wisely as she sees befitting of her social station and Anne in turn "rated Lady Russell's influence highly" (Austen, 11). It is interesting that Austen makes use of a character such as Lady Russell as she is a wealthy widow who is much respected by the society around her, immediately alluding to Austen's motivation to give women more agency in her work even if they are swayed by ostentation.

1.4. Gossip and Austen's Marriage Plot

Gossip in *Emma* functions to unite both the private and public realms in a comedic manner (Finch and Bowen, 2); indeed Austen's famed satire and marriage plot may very much depend on this union. Emma Woodhouse and Mr Knightley as well as *Persuasion's* Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth are united by simultaneously unpicking the gossip around them, which in turn enlightens them to the characters of others and one another. In *Emma* both Emma and Knightley receive a moral education through gossip, which either aids in the correction of their behaviour or in the revelation of other peoples' true characters such as in the case of Frank.

Gossip enables Emma to practise some freedom from the confinement of her father's needs and in turn liberates her from a life containing no marriage prospects. Emma also wisely learns the limits of her judgment as well and her naivety is dispelled as the text unfolds. In *Persuasion,* Anne may be seen to be marrying down but when Sir Walter's gossip and disdain for those around him is shown and Mr Elliot's deception is revealed by Mrs Smith's gossip to Anne, it is difficult to not feel that she is in fact marrying up as Wentworth has far more character than the men in Anne's family.

Emma's need to be seen and praised by her public is also of paramount importance to her, which is why she entertains Frank's advances even though she does not wish to be attached to him. This need goes hand in hand with gossip and is particularly exhibited in the novel's ballroom scenes. Dancing was seen as a way in which to actively survey women's behaviour, as a courtship ritual and most interestingly as a way to gauge the female response to surveillance (Bjarnason, 145-146). Dancing by its very nature was a source of gossip generation as there was a need to appear well under public scrutiny (Bjarnason, 150). Dancing as a rule was also a male initiated performance which rendered females powerless to act first (Bjarnason, 147). Emma ignores this rule by asking Mr Knightley to ask her to dance, "'Whom are you going to dance with?' asked Mr Knightley. She hesitated a moment, and then replied, 'With you, if you will ask me" (Austen, 390). This is perhaps an attempt by Austen to inject female agency into the text as Emma usurps the male role (Bjarnason, 152). Their dancing foreshadows the marriage plot's conclusion and shows the rank of her protagonist which allows her to be so forward. Emma's control of her societal presence is formidable as she can determine the effect she has on those around her to serve herself. This can be seen when she declares to herself, "[t]hey (Frank and Emma) were a couple worth looking at" (Austen, 268). It is only Mr Knightley who foils her outward show of perfection when he points out her wanting behaviour, much to her displeasure. Frank again satisfies Emma's craving to meet her

audience's approval as he tells her that, "I must have asked Miss Fairfax, and her languid dancing would not have agreed with me, after yours" (Austen, 269). Not only does Emma think Frank would prefer to dance with herself rather than Jane but she firmly believes it is what her audience wishes too. Emma's ability to adapt clearly shows she is willing to improve herself in the eyes of others, showing she is maturing from the naive woman we encounter at the start of *Emma* (Bjarnason, 153). This ballroom dance scene alone in the novel shows Austen challenging gender, class and society which aims at subverting the private spheres of nineteenth-century life (Gordon, 723).

Furthermore, it is Mrs Elton's gossip of her new community that so enrages Emma who begins to feel more empathy towards Jane Fairfax, who does not have Emma's privileged life to sustain her and must seek an occupation to support herself. Jane is steered aggressively into applying for governess positions by Mrs Elton who sees it as her duty to guide and influence anyone who comes into her path; as Mr Knightley says to Mrs Weston, "Mrs Elton does not talk *to* Miss Fairfax as she speaks *of* her" (Austen, 335). Emma disdains Mrs Elton's actions, especially her surprise to find out that Mr Knightley is a gentleman. This is Austen's way of revealing Emma's partiality to Mr Knightley before Emma is fully aware of it herself. Emma's anger towards Mrs Elton is tangible when she seethes about her calling her a "little upstart, vulgar being…and all her airs of pert pretension and underbred finery" (Austen, 325). Mrs Elton idly talks of others for her own amusement, and there is no goodness of character in her but rather pretentious control. Emma is not unkind in her meddling but rather misguided, a key distinction when comparing the two women's gossip. Emma's position in Highbury is also far above Mrs Elton, as she is from the wealthiest family in the area and can afford to have her own views without upsetting those around her too much. This is evident in the way she boldly claims to the Westons that, "I am one of those who always judge for themselves and are by no means implicitly guided by others" (Austen, 363). This statement may appear wise, but Emma

does not extend this wisdom to those she interacts with as she sees herself as a guide to others, when she herself refuses to be led.

The catalyst to Emma's change of heart and reflection upon her actions comes in three parts. Emma can scarcely believe how wrong she has been regarding the character of Frank when she hears of Frank and Jane's engagement, "[y]ou are not serious? You do not mean it?" (Austen, 467). Emma realises her perception of character may not be the compass she believed it to be, but she is thankful that she has not ended up with a rake like Frank.

Ironically Emma's next revelation comes unexpectedly in the form of Harriet, thus far in the narrative a person completely dependent on Emma's judgment. When Harriet tells Emma of her new male interest, Mr Knightley, Emma surprises herself when she feels a deep envy of her friend, exclaiming to herself that she wishes she "had never seen her" (Austen, 486). Emma suddenly begins to realise the folly of her own actions and heart, as Harriet's infatuation with him Mr Knightley startles Emma as she realises a similar attachment in herself towards Mr Knightley (Kenney, 119).

Finally, Emma's realisation of her affection towards Mr Knightley leaves her feeling wretched as she is unable to connect Mr Knightley's reprimands of herself as evidence of his love. However, Mr Knightley's rebukes have not fallen on deaf ears; as the novel progresses, Emma seeks out Miss Bates to make penance for her cutting remarks at Box Hill and in doing so, Emma also realises her indifference towards Jane, "[h]er heart had been long growing kinder towards Jane; and this picture of her present sufferings acted as a cure of every former ungenerous suspicion" (Austen, 448). Mr Knightley has shaped a large part of Emma's emotional education albeit in a harsh way that Emma cannot equate with love. Gossip itself proves to be the stimulus of change in Emma, as it is when her gossip is challenged by Mr Knightley that she starts to mature and realise what she desirees from her life. At the start of

the novel, Emma is very quick to put others forward for marriage, but she declares herself to not want to marry as she would "be a fool to change such a situation as mine" (Austen, 99). Emma's lack of self-knowledge is evident and we are asked to wait to see a change of heart (Kreisel, 223). It is only when she is "socially and intellectually wrongheaded" (Todd, 114) that Emma sees "her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before" (Austen, 482).

Mr Knightley too is educated by gossip, because gossip is what facilitates his marriage with Emma. It is only as Emma and Mr Knightley decipher the gossip of those around them at the conclusion of the novel, that they both become aware of each other's affections. Emma clarifies that she never had a desire to be with Frank Churchill and that she is not heartbroken as Mr Knightley supposed her to be at hearing the news of Frank's engagement to Jane, "The delightful assurance of her total indifference towards Frank Churchill, of her having a heart completely disengaged from him, had given birth to the hope, that, in time, he might gain her affection himself" (Austen, 510). Mr Knightley also comes to realise that berating Emma is not a way to move forward in their relationship (Kenney, 111), "I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it…I have been a very indifferent lover" (Austen, 508). Mr Knightley is forced by Austen to "judge his own conduct toward Emma in particular as wrong and undeserving" (Kenney, 118); he has been too harsh on her as he admits to her and in seeing his own faults he is able to allow Emma the courtesy of using her own conscience to be her guide (Kenney, 119). Austen takes a realistic approach to romance by exercising her right to make both the hero and heroine undergo character correction before she concludes her marriage plot, and these revelations of character in turn are embedded in her use of gossip. Without Mr Knightley validating Emma's gossip as a source of knowledge rather than a vice (Pond, 178), the narrative would not have been able to conclude the way it does. Mr Knightley has allowed himself to credit Emma for her

observations rather than discounting them as lucky guesses as he did at the outset of the novel. In this way Austen shows a marriage of equality as both Mr Knightley and Emma have learnt a lesson at the hands of gossip.

Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth's union comes to be in a similar way as both characters become aware of each other's feelings by hearing their interactions with or from others. Wentworth proposes to Anne after overhearing her conversation with Captain Harville about the constancy of women, whilst Anne begins to hope that Wentworth is not lost to her forever when she hears that he is not to marry Louisa Musgrove. Gossip is key to the conclusion of the marriage plot in both *Emma* and *Persuasion* as it allows the hero and heroine to personally assess themselves in relation to their behaviour which spurs both parties to realise they would make a good match.

The permeation of gossip in *Persuasion* is shown to be instrumental to the conclusion of the marriage plot as it is through gossip that Wentworth is able to come to terms with his feelings for Anne and make a proposal to her. When Wentworth arrives in Bath he masks his intentions towards Anne by means of allegorical gossip by discussing Captain Harville's sister (Fanny) and Captain Benwick's engagement when he is in fact reflecting on his own relationship with Anne. Fanny died before she wed Benwick and now that Benwick is engaged to Louisa, Wentworth remarks to Anne that "Fanny Harville was a very superior creature, and his (Benwick) attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman. He ought not; he does not" (Austen, 168). However, Benwick has recovered and sees himself able to marry Louisa, meaning that Wentworth must be referring to his unwavering attachment to Anne herself. Anne is initially taken aback as she sees Wentworth's admission as a true take on Wentworth's opinion of Louisa who he implies would have been no match to Fanny and that Louisa never was seen in a romantic light by Wentworth as she initially thought. However, it then dawns on Anne that Fanny and Benwick

are in fact an analogy for Wentworth and herself. She then realises his words to be "some share of tenderness of the past" (Austen, 170). This idea is then solidified when Wentworth leaves the concert and tells Anne he is leaving because "there is nothing worth my staying for" (Austen, 175) having seen Anne with Mr Elliot and guessing at an attachment. Here gossip of another set of people mirrors the speakers' positions and there is a strong case to be made for the foreshadowing of the conclusion of the marriage plot as Wentworth is comparing himself to Benwick whilst Anne takes his speech literally and applies it to Benwick rather than to Wentworth himself. Here gossip hides a secret from Anne but not from Austen's audience who can guess at the novel's conclusion. Although the marriage plot is not concluded at this moment it is suggested and Austen again makes use of gossip to propel the marriage plot as the novel continues.

Captain Harville, Wentworth's naval friend "unknowingly intercede[s] to help Anne and Wentworth discover each other's feelings" (Frey, 220). Harville and Anne engage in a lively conversation about constancy that Wentworth listens to but does not engage in. As they gossip about humanity, Wentworth, unknowingly to Anne, pens her a letter. Anne disagrees with Harville's assumption that women are more inconstant than men, "we certainly do not forget you as soon as you forget us" (Austen, 214) and she boldly states in the presence of Wentworth that women are capable of "loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (Austen, 217). In doing this Anne can relay to Wentworth that she still loves him although she has masked the directness of her statement by discussing gender characteristics generally. Wentworth's letter reveals a response to Anne's claims about women loving longest and he creates a counterargument writing, "[d]are not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant" (Austen, 218). Wentworth's letter amounts not

only to a proposal but also a response to overheard gossip, showing how gossip catalyses the marriage plot.

Anne and Wentworth become engaged and far from shying away from their past, they instead discuss it, with Anne stating that Lady Russell had and still has her best interests at heart, and to Anne her advice at the time of the first proposal was so much valued because "she was in the place of a parent" (Austen, 227). Lady Russell receives Anne's decision graciously and admits "she had been pretty completely wrong" (Austen, 229) and ultimately "she was a very good woman, and if her second object was to be sensible and well-judging, her first was to see Anne happy" (Austen, 229). The Elliots accept Anne's engagement based on their pretentious failings as Sir Walter was "struck by his personal claims and felt that his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against her superiority of rank" (Austen, 229). Mary is similarly pleased as Wentworth "should be a richer man than either Captain Benwick or Charles Hayter" (Austen, 230) whom her sisters-in-law are to marry and so she deems her connections as better than those around her which is of great importance to her.

Austen wrote *Persuasion* as a critique of "the effeminate and profligate upper classes (encapsulated by Sir Walter), [whilst] offer[ing] the Navy (particularly Captain Wentworth) as an alternative" (Frey, 215). These ideas are forwarded by Anne who marries Wentworth, a captain in the Navy. Austen satirises the upper classes as she "argues that the Navy better fulfils the duties and obligations that the aristocracy neglect" (Frey, 219); it is Austen's satire that functions as her own personal gossip in the novel which in turn is complemented by the gossip in which her characters engage.

In providing various modes of gossip, we see Austen is playing with the ambivalence gossip creates. In this way, Austen escapes the bounds of merely utilising the Gothic novel as a catalyst for comical absurdity and instead she transforms it into something substantial and her novels

set themselves the task of redeeming gossip (Goss, 170). Gossip is shown to be the feminised voice of the Gothic novel, acting as "a potentially subversive form of discourse that posits an oral and feminine alternative to the written, logocentric "male discourse of the book"" (Finch and Bowen, 16). Gossip is no longer viewed as a "degraded speech act" (Goss, 166) but rather as a way of mapping communities' prejudices and characters personal motives as gossip directly correlates to "the morals of the speaker" (Pond, 201). In revamping her audiences' view of gossip, Austen is able to elevate the standing of women in society as their gossip is now seen as something of worth, rather than something that is denoted as a negative female vice that contributes to the downgrading of women (Gelles, 676). In fact, Austen's most dangerous uttered gossip in *Northanger Abbey* happens to come from a man, John Thorpe, which shows men are equally as capable as women when it comes to gossip and in fact their gossip can sometimes be even more sinister. This stands in direct opposition to the idea held at the time *Northanger Abbey* was penned because Austen refuses to solely contribute gossip to the use of women. This deliberate prod at the existence of male gossip shows Austen's belief in both equality and the need for all members of society to talk about one another to each other.

Austen capitalises on the notion of gossip as a "culturally controlled game with important social functions" (Gluckman, 312). Even if the gossip itself is not informative, it is able to satisfy a social obligation by creating conversation where there may not be any to be had, such an instance in the novel is when "Mrs Thorpe talked chiefly of her children, and Mrs Allen of her gowns" (Austen, 26). Neither women are paying heed to what the other is saying but gossip creates a mock intimacy between the women whilst simultaneously showing the character of the people at hand (Peltason, 619). It is unquestionably evident that Mrs Allen is frivolous and merely consumed by material possessions, so it does not seem scathing when Catherine says, "she (Catherine) had heard enough to feel that Mrs Allen had no real intelligence to give" (Austen, 57).

Catherine's transition to maturity is wondrous to behold, as we are initially disheartened and annoyed by her inexperience and resultant ignorance. As Catherine's character is challenged and altered in the novel, she comes to embody her role as an Austenian heroine, as she has learnt a difficult lesson in discernment and the limits of projecting inflated literature onto everyday life. More than that, we see Catherine reassess other characters around her with sounder judgment, such as her re-examination of Isabella who she realises is actually self-serving and dishonest, "I do not believe she (Isabella) had ever any regard either for James (her brother) or for me, and I wish I had never known her" (Austen, 199). This reassessment of others also shows that Catherine is being moulded by Austen into the heroine she is destined to be she is no longer a naive girl, but a young woman who questions and assesses situations with which she is presented. Gothic secrets and speculation are enriched by gossip which Austen employs to educate Catherine as she is alerted to her own misguided beliefs about others and realizes that she has been the victim of other's gossip having her opinions manipulated by others' agendas.

The foregrounding of gossip in *Northanger Abbey* has proven to deepen existing understandings of the text as well as showing Austen's acknowledgement of some of the Gothic novel's achievements rather than just satirizing the entire genre. Austen's appreciation of the Female Gothic's Gossip is again shown to come to the fore in *Emma* although it presents itself in a dampened Gothic mode with gossip appearing as a latent Gothic technique which Austen feels is worthy of perpetuation in her own texts. Emma and Mr Knightley both come to a true understanding of the role and importance of gossip. Emma realizes that her gossip can mar reputations and blind her to her own prejudices whilst Knightley comes to realize that gossip does amount to knowledge and cannot be fully discounted. Austen does not simply glorify gossip blindly but shows a nuanced understanding of how it functions and the fact that it can be used to do both good and bad. Austen also makes Mr Knightley educate male readers of

their folly in overlooking gossip, as to do so means to wilfully misunderstand and ignore the female sex's intellect and agency. In many ways Austen is discouraging her female readers from marrying men who do not acknowledge their speech and allow them to carry agency in their presence. Instead Austen encourages a just meeting of minds and proffers the idea of a marriage of equality rather than convenience or opportunity which many of her readers would have been both tempted and encouraged to settle for. *Persuasion* functions similarly by ensuring that Anne Elliot has learnt from her past indecision and that she is able to see beyond what others tell her to do and think for herself and to ensure she surrounds herself with people who are honest and unassuming. Austen's focus on the plight of women is evident and she harnesses gossip most effectively to do her bidding which is to let the voices of women be heard clearly in her texts.

Chapter Two

Gothic Gossip and Female Agency in the Brontës

The Victorians relied on gendered ways of knowing, meaning that men's discourse carried more congress than women's discourse (Pond, 176). The Brontës sharply oppose this notion by utilising gossip as the female voice of their novels. The Victorians regarded gossip as a "female vice" (Pond, 178). By contrast, as I proceed to demonstrate, the Brontës understood gossip as a means by which to bolster individual ego, extend women's agency and to frame the social prestige of characters. In this regard, I follow Gelles who argues that gossip is dangerous as it is the "potentially malicious use of gossip as a weapon [that]..has contributed strongly to its negative reputation in philosophy, literature, and religion" (Gelles, 667). In this chapter, I wish to assert that female gossip in the Brontës' novels extends agency towards their Victorian female characters who are humanized and trusted to the extent that their voices are considered to hold knowledge as legitimate as the voices of their male counterparts. To this end I will examine the texts *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where the Brontës' Victorian female characters use gossip, both socially and individually, in order to extend their influence in their social set.

Gossip is considered to be "[t]he most obvious feminized discourse in the novel" (Pond, 177) and thus gossip itself becomes a versatile lens by which to view the life of Victorian women in the novels of the Brontë sisters. He asserts that gossip formed an alternative mode of discourse than was commonly recognized by Victorian society as gossip allowed a speaker to project their own version of reality onto a series of events making it a mode of conversation that differed markedly from Victorian culture (Pond, 180). This construction of knowledge was seen as dangerous because of its ability to confer power to women who were now able to shape the narrative of the world around them and challenge the male hegemonic order of the day

(Pond, 188 and 195). To this end gossip was labelled as feminine discourse and largely frowned upon in Victorian society to hush women's opinions (Pond, 190).

Spacks agrees with Pond about the intense association of gossip with women (Spacks, 19) but she is adamant that gossip is enjoyed by men as well as women and is also the way in which women can inhabit the male realm in the novel (Spacks,19, 21 and 24). Spacks instead focuses on the bonding that arises from gossip (Spacks, 20). To Spacks, gossip is both valuable on a societal level as well as an individual level because it can both unite or divide people by affirming alliances, revealing secrets and as a means of entertainment (Spacks, 21,28-29 and 31). Interestingly, Spacks also sees gossip as educational as it lends itself to the discovery of the self which can sometimes be the expense of someone else's reputation (Spacks, 35). Whilst Pond notes how gossip allows women to construct knowledge (Pond, 188), Spacks notes how this knowledge also can extend to educate the women who uttered it to a better understanding of themselves (Spacks, 35).

Just as Spacks asserts that gossip can lead to bonding so does Gluckman who notes that the act of gossiping is a powerful speech act as it can control lives by forming part of a "culturally controlled game with important social functions" (Gluckman, 312) that allows for authoritative labelling of peoples' social importance even beyond their social class. Gossip for Gluckman is a pervasive marker of community life (Gluckman, 308) as it serves as a way for the elite to assert their dominance over the lower classes by permanently verbally putting them in their place (Gluckman, 309). Just as Pond observes that gossip allowed Victorian women to defy the norms of Victorian discourse (Pond, 180) Gluckman concurs that gossip does serve as a way for a group to form separately from other groups because those in the group are privileged members who are able to both construct and share knowledge (Gluckman, 313). In this chapter, I will forgo the thematic approach used in the previous Austen chapter and rather approach the Brontës' novels separately.

2.1. Gossip's Framing of Jane Eyre's Place in Society

Jane Eyre is frequently regarded as a novel of cloistered femininity and masculine deception and though critics tend to focus on gender, they do not, as I now intend to demonstrate, recognise the centrality of gossip to the formation of gendered subjectivities. Gossip plays an integral part in Jane's characterization in multiple locations from the Reed household to Lowood school and finally and most formatively at Thornfield. At the Reed house, Jane is maligned by her aunt's (Mrs Reed) malicious gossip about Jane's behaviour which excludes Jane from being a valued member of the family, as her cousins treat her with as much disdain as their mother does. Jane is then sent to Lowood school where her reputation precedes her thanks to her aunt's reports to the Headmaster. He shames her publicly before the entire school and labels her as rebellious and in need of harsh discipline. Jane is not loved from a young age due to false reports about her character and being unwanted and uncared for in the space she occupies. It is only at Thornfield that Jane has time to sift through her childhood, acknowledging that she was unfairly treated and wishes to speak for herself. The gossip at Thornfield intrigues Jane but she has no inkling that it has the potential to ruin her newfound freedom; Jane is rightly wary of gossip due to the devastating effect it has had on her own life. However, Jane is not wary enough because she does not account for a lack of gossip and she blindly accepts Rochester's proposal without knowing much about his life, although he is aware of her life.

Charlotte Brontë is nimble in the way she approaches gossip within her novel *Jane Eyre* as Jane's position in the Reed family is blatantly revealed through gossip from the outset. John Reed frames Jane's social value by repeating the words of his mother about Jane to Jane herself, "'you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought

to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us'" (Brontë, 13). This belief is shown to be a household truth as even the maids marginalise Jane casting her as "the scapegoat of the nursery" (Brontë, 19), even below themselves in rank, "you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep" (Brontë, 15). Thus it is clear to Jane through direct and indirect gossip that she is the lowest ranked person in the Reed household, "I was a discord in Gateshead Hall (the Reed's home); I was like nobody there" (Brontë, 19).

Jane, however, does not take on an attitude of submission as expected of her by the Reeds; instead she is a "revolted slave" (Brontë, 18) who wishes to "achieve escape from insupportable oppression" (Brontë, 19). Jane's behaviour towards Mrs Reed is in retaliation to the psychological abuse she endures, "[m]y Uncle Reed is in heaven, and can see all you do and think; and so can papa and mamma: they know how you shut me up all day long, and how you wish me dead" (Brontë, 34). Interestingly it is a matriarchal authority in the form of Mrs Reed that Jane challenges and not a primarily patriarchal force, although John does pose a threat but not to the same degree as his mother (Baumlin and Baumlin, 18). Jane's protestations against Mrs Reed's treatment of her have long been viewed as, "an act of rebellion and wilful pride" (Baumlin and Baumlin, 18) by critics. And this defiance of spirit can be directly correlated to Jane's exposure to gossip and her discernment at its use, being that of subjection which she condemns, saying to Mrs Reed: "you have treated me with miserable cruelty…you are bad, hard-hearted. *You* are deceitful…[d]eceit is not my fault!" (Brontë, 44-45). Here the young Jane is calling out Mrs Reed for her malicious gossip about her as Mrs Reed has used gossip to mar Jane's reputation in her household casting her as a devilish child set on harassing her. Mrs Reed's gossip is successful as Jane is maligned by her cousins and sent to boarding school with a reputation that precedes her. Charlotte is also sure to side with Jane over Mrs Reed in her text as she shows glimmers of reason to justify Jane's heated anger. For example, Bessie (a maid in the Reed household) shows a fondness for Jane by naming her daughter after her

and telling Jane at a young age that she is: “such a queer, frightened, shy, little thing. You should be bolder” (Brontë, 47) implying that Jane’s behaviour requires passion in order to allow her to defend herself against the repression she experiences at Gateshead.

A change of location does not serve as a means for Jane to escape gossip, as Lowood school is rife with it and is described as entertaining a “Babel clamour of tongues” (Brontë, 56); this biblical analogy to the tower of Babel is where people’s language was altered by God in order to stop them from their idolatrous building of a tower to reach Heaven. The distortion of the language of Babel is a fitting description for the school because just as Babel descended into chaos so does Lowood, where students are condemned and punished unjustly by a bureaucratic dictator manifested in the form of Mr Brocklehurst. While Jane has been removed from Mrs Reed’s callousness, she is still to endure gossip as a framing device for her life, as Mr Brocklehurst is sure to keep Mrs Reed’s false judgments of Jane alive. Mr Brocklehurst does this by introducing Jane to the school as “an interloper and an alien…a liar..[t]his I learned from her benefactress” (Brontë, 78-79) and then Jane is punished by being made to stand all day on a stool having been publicly humiliated to all her peers before they have the opportunity to judge her for themselves. Although Lowood may strike many as little better than Gateshead, it is at Lowood where Jane makes her first friend, Helen, and it is Lowood that equips Jane to become a governess so that she may eventually escape its walls to Thornfield.

Lowood enables Jane to form a stern mode of survival and she is able to mellow her temper into sound reason as is seen when she converses with one of her teachers, Miss Temple. Miss Temple enables Jane to rebuff both Mr Brocklehurst and Mrs Reed’s false testimonies of her character by allowing her to tell her own narrative, “when a criminal is accused, he is always allowed to speak in his own defence. You have been charged with falsehood; defend yourself to me as well as you can. Say whatever your memory suggests as true; but add nothing and exaggerate nothing” (Brontë, 84). Miss Temple not only believes Jane, “to me, Jane, you are

clear now" (Brontë, 85) but she also proves that bad gossip is capable of being vindicated by good gossip as Jane is able to tell her story truthfully and receives acknowledgement of the truth from Miss Temple. This again shows how the Brontës defend gossip by refusing to paint it as a mere "female vice" (Pond, 178).

Mrs Reed is not the only matriarch that Jane will have to face as we see Dowager Lady Ingram, a houseguest of Mr Rochester's, embody similar traits to Mrs Reed; she sees herself fit to judge what is proper and what is improper. Lady Ingram's manner is pretentious and even her demeanour is said to accurately illustrate this point, reminding Jane of Mrs Reed, "[s]he had, likewise, a fierce and a hard eye: it reminded me of Mrs Reed's; she mouthed her words in speaking; her voice was deep, its inflections very pompous, very dogmatic - very intolerable, in short" (Brontë, 200). Lady Ingram also poses a threat to Jane through her disdain of governesses (Jane's profession) which she openly voices by gossiping about them at Rochester's house party within earshot of Jane herself who is the governess of Rochester's ward, "don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice. I thank Heaven I have now done with them…they are a nuisance" (Brontë, 205). Lady Ingram's gossip concerning governesses is her way of establishing herself as a person who is worthy of adjudicating behaviour whilst finding a way to channel her frustration at governesses (Gelles, 678). For Charlotte it is a way to foreground Jane's ostracization from the upper classes and to wisely attest to the fact that Victorian women's matriarchy was just as much of a hindrance to the elevation of the Victorian female as the male hegemony exercised through patriarchy at the time.

Gossip also functions to frame character in *Jane Eyre,* as by inadvertently discussing others a character's motives and beliefs come to the for; even a character's lack of talk about a certain subject can be revealing, such is the case of Rochester. For example, Helen Burns is Jane's first friend and Jane holds her in an almost devout regard, even going so far as to claim she is

faultless, "[y]ou say you have faults, Helen: what are they? To me you seem very good" (Brontë, 67). Helen has evidently interrogated the idea that she has faults, but her reflection also implies that she is prone to believe that all women have faults thanks to the stifling Victorian discourse at the time which denigrated women's value in society, an idea that Jane does not embody and instead challenges. Helen embodies an angelic presence in the novel conforming to Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* notion of an ideal Victorian women being, "a girl whose unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility reveal she is not only a pattern Victorian lady but almost literally an angel on earth" (Gilbert and Gubar, 815). It is refreshing that Jane does not view herself as much like Helen, as being an angel in the house in the Victorian world required strict submission to male authority and a timidity that left females with few rights and limited ways in which to establish their own freedom. Jane does not wish to be imprisoned which is shown by the initiative she takes to leave Lowood by advertising as a governess, which she says is as a result of yearning for freedom, "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer" (Brontë, 102).

It is Mr Rochester's cunning omission of truth and lively gossip with Jane that proves to be an obstacle in Jane establishing the freedom she so earnestly desires, as her rapport with him is marred by the secret of his first marriage (the Gothic secret that is hidden by the use of gossip in the novel). Charlotte continues the Gothic interest in the guilty Gothic hero, but she also combines it with her heroine's desire to free herself from the confines of convention and the stifling imprisonment women endure in their homes in the Victorian era (Milbank, 140). Two female prisoners are discovered at Thornfield, Jane who is psychologically shackled by Rochester and Bertha who is physically restrained by Rochester. Charlotte skillfully juxtaposes the two women but simultaneously allows their persecution at the hands of the self-serving Rochester who cares very little for the women in his life. In fact, his treatment of Jane could be seen as a way to ameliorate himself of his treatment of his first wife, Bertha.

Jane should be aware that Rochester is not a man of excellent character before she even meets him; Mrs Fairfax, Thornfield's housekeeper, simply states of Rochester, "[m]y employer is always civil, and I expect nothing more" (Brontë, 119). This is hardly a glowing recommendation of his character, yet it leaves Jane wanting to know more. This short account of Rochester by Fairfax may be her trying not to gossip about her employer or it may be that she thinks not saying much will alert Jane to his questionable nature. Either way this small glimmer of gossip leads to questions and creates the idea that there is a secret to Rochester, a man who is not well known for his kindness but perhaps for something far more somber. He is neither admired nor despised by those who work for him. An interesting comparison can be drawn between Mrs Fairfax and Mrs Reynolds, Mr Darcy's housekeeper in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice;* Mrs Reynolds is bursting with praise of her master and never ceases to gossip about his good character to Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her aunt and uncle, Mr and Mrs Gardiner. This makes Elizabeth uncomfortable as she is starting to comprehend her misjudgement of Darcy's character.

Mrs Fairfax allows Jane to speculate upon what she has said as gossip can either reveal a truth or spread false rumour which is how gossip functions as a textual trope. Fairfax does, however, offer one piece of information to Jane in the form of a strange anecdote of the Rochester family, "yet it is said the Rochesters have been rather a violent than a quiet race" (Brontë, 125). Interestingly this gossip does not sway Jane's opinion of Rochester s she instead concludes that her new employer is an enigma shrouded in ambiguity, "you cannot be always sure whether he is in jest or earnest, whether he is pleased or the contrary, you don't thoroughly understand him" (Brontë, 124) and that she will have to judge him for herself when she is acquainted with him.

Before we meet Rochester, we see Jane trying to adjust to life at Thornfield which initially bores her and she longs for more experiences, "I desired more of practical experience than I

possessed…restlessness was in my nature" (Brontë, 129). Charlotte ensures that her audience knows that a woman wanting more for herself is not unprecedented, as Jane herself bolsters the opinion that, "women feel just as men feel" (Brontë, 129) and that men are seen by women as their "more privileged fellow-creatures" (Brontë, 130). Upon encountering Rochester on a walk, Jane behaves in an unusual manner towards him after he is injured by his skittish horse. Jane offers him aid and adopts the posture of a gentleman rather than a lady, "I cannot think of leaving you, sir, at so late an hour, in this solitary lane, till I see you fit to mount your horse" (Brontë, 135).

Upon taking his place as owner of Thornfield, Rochester elects to spend time in the company of Jane, whom he likes due to her blatant honesty, which is conveyed through her speech, particularly her gossip. Rochester values his own judgment of people, telling Mrs Fairfax to cease giving him an account of Jane as he tells her, "[d]on't trouble yourself to give her a character…eulogiums will not bias me; I shall judge for myself" (Brontë, 144). Rochester's valuing of his own discernment leads him to require time in the company of Jane in order to determine whether he approves of her or not. He is demanding of her, asking her many questions about Lowood School where she was previously employed as a teacher. Rochester himself comments on his domineering attitude, saying to Jane: "Excuse my tone of command; I am used to say, "Do this," and it is done: I cannot alter my customary habits for one new inmate (referring to Jane)" (Brontë, 145). This abrupt inability to change shows Rochester is indeed one of the men Jane terms: "more privileged fellow-creatures" (Brontë, 130) as he goes unchecked due to his position as head of the house which makes him expectant of submission to his wishes. When discussing Mr Rochester and his arrival at Thornfield, Jane and Mrs Fairfax gossip about his character as any employees would do of their employer. Mrs Fairfax is quick to excuse his ill-tempered manner exclaiming that, "it is his nature- and we can none of us help our nature; and partly because he has painful thoughts, no doubt, to harass him, and

make his spirits unequal" (Brontë, 149). This defence of Rochester hints at a darker undisclosed reason for his behaviour which can be found at the root of his painful thoughts, which affect his nature in a notable way leaving Jane to ponder what is the cause of his disgruntlement. It is this undisclosed reason for Rochester's behaviour that gives the novel its Gothic quality and shows how gossip is both what goes unsaid as much as what is said.

Gossip is not just a female tool for elevating agency but can also be used to generate female rivalry as gossip can both unite or separate those who engage in its use (Spacks, 21). Jane is made to feel inferior to Blanche Ingram because of the gossip generated around her character as well as Rochester's attentions towards her resulting in Jane hating Blanche and feeling she has lost Rochester's attention, having spent a lot of time with him before Blanche's arrival.

Blanche Ingram's arrival at Thornfield results in much gossip among the servants as well as a lot of discomfort to Jane who must watch Rochester pay Blanche the attention to which she has become accustomed. Jane also becomes aware of Rochester's courtship with Blanche through Mrs Fairfax rather than from Rochester himself and this leads to Jane despising Blanche, who although unlikable, would perhaps not bear the brunt of such distaste from Jane if she was not receiving attention from Mr Rochester. Jane is made to feel inferior to Blanche by Mrs Fairfax who acknowledges Blanche for, "not only her beauty, but for her accomplishments" (Brontë, 185), as well as noting that although Jane is a favourite of Rochester's she should not dwell on his attentiveness towards her and instead think, "Mr Rochester might probably win that noble lady's heart (Blanche), if he chose to strive for it; is it likely he would waste a serious thought on this indigent and insignificant plebeian?" (Brontë, 187). This commentary from Mrs Fairfax bears a subtle undercurrent to Rochester's nature as he values beauty and accomplishment rather than goodness and character, as Mrs Fairfax must have observed before. Blanche is such a woman as she is catching Rochester's eye and is in his strata of society making them a good

potential pairing, but also having the ability to escape his advances if she wishes to whereas Jane is not able to do so being considered as a lowly governess.

Fairfax's observations cut Jane down to size and she resolves not to entertain the idea that Rochester may hold affection for her. However, this does not stop her from violently discrediting and shaming Blanche in her narrative, a very anti-feminist stance for Jane to adopt as she is cutting down her own gender. Jane says of Blanche, "*she could not charm him* (Rochester)" (Brontë, 216), implying that it is Jane instead who is able to charm Rochester. Jane also implies that her judgment is without fault as Blanche is unlikable, "[i]f Miss Ingram had been a good and noble woman…I should have admired her - acknowledged her excellence and been quiet for the rest of my days" (Brontë, 216). From Jane's reaction it is clear that she has not heeded Mrs Fairfax's gossip which point towards Rochester not valuing goodness and nobility, but rather beauty and accomplishment; she instead chooses to denigrate Blanche's character to herself in an attempt to feel better about Rochester's taste in women. Rochester is able to generate gossip amidst his staff that is consequently able to unsettle and manipulate Jane, whose jealously clouds her discernment of his character which, although marred by secrecy, still alludes to a darker secret of which Jane is unaware.

Rochester himself also admits to treating Blanche affectionately to make Jane jealous although having no intention of marrying Blanche, showing Blanche has been used poorly both as a piece of malicious gossip but also as a pawn in Rochester's matrimonial game (despite Rochester being ineligible for such a romance as his first wife is alive). Jane becomes aware of this deception after she has accepted Rochester's proposal and asks him why he entertained Blanche's attentions and is quick to rebuke Rochester's use of Blanche as a puppet to stir up envy in herself, "I feigned courtship with Miss Ingram, because I wished to render you as madly in love with me…and I knew jealousy would be my best ally" (Brontë, 303). Jane responds to this admission by sympathising with Blanche, "[d]id you think nothing of Miss Ingram's

feelings, sir?" (Brontë, 303). This response by Jane shows her blindness to perceive Rochester's true nature which is to deceive either directly through action or to manipulate women by allowing their gossip to turn them against one another. Jane's blindness to Rochester's faults is also somewhat inexcusable; although she condemns Rochester's treatment of Blanche, she fails to recognise that his behaviour towards her is problematic as he chooses to hurt herself and Blanche to manipulate Jane into falling for him. Charlotte's narrative is fuelled by gossip to allow a deep sense of secrecy to permeate the text and her audience becomes more aware of this as the novel unfolds. However *Jane Eyre* as a Bildungsroman is undone by Jane's naivety to heed the underlying truth displayed by the gossip she hears as she chooses to love Rochester despite the psychological torment he makes her endure throughout the novel, by his secret keeping which amounts to deceptive illusionary gossip.

Upon Jane's acceptance of his proposal Rochester exclaims heavenward, "God pardon me...and man meddle not with me: I have her, and will hold her" (Brontë, 295). This statement is very telling that something is amiss as Jane has no family to meddle in her affairs and so Rochester must know something that we and Jane are not privy to because he is already asking for God's pardon before they are married. Rochester allows himself to lie openly in front of Jane as he knows of his wrongdoing in proposing to her whilst his first wife lives, which is why he asks for God's pardon. However, doing this in front of Jane amounts to gossip as his pardon includes the omission of the fact that he is already married to Bertha, although Jane is not aware of the depths of his deception which leads him to ask for God's pardon.

Mrs Fairfax is blunt when she hears of the engagement and deliberately tells Jane, "[g]entlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses" (Brontë, 306), clearly showing Jane that Mrs Fairfax thinks she is marrying up and that the marriage itself is not a good idea as people will gossip due to its unorthodox appearance. Jane herself ponders Mrs Fairfax's words and feels that, "I half lost the sense of power over him. I was about

mechanically to obey him" (Brontë, 306). This is a frightening thought when we know how Jane has expressed a longing for both freedom and equality. Jane's sense is eclipsed by Rochester as she notes, "[h]e stood between me and every thought of religion…I could not see God for His creature: of whom I had made an idol" (Brontë, 316). This is startling when reflecting on Jane's piety in the novel and we do not agree that Rochester is an apt substitute for God who has brought her such solace in the many tribulations she has faced.

Upon her wedding day Jane discovers the existence of Bertha, Mr Rochester's first wife, whom he keeps imprisoned at Thornfield. Rochester speaks of Bertha in a derogatory and dehumanizing way describing her to the wedding party as "a bad, mad, and embruted partner" (Brontë, 337) and later to Jane as "that fearful hag" (Brontë, 347). Although horrified, Jane is still able to have some empathy for Bertha and shows her aversion to the way Rochester speaks of her, "you speak of her with hate – with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel – she cannot help being mad" (Brontë, 347). This gossip surrounding Bertha is indicative of Rochester's overall appalling treatment of the women in his life as both Bertha and Jane have not been fully aware of each other's roles in his life. Rochester then goes on to narrate his interactions with the Masons, casting himself as a victim, "a marriage was achieved before I knew where I was" (Brontë, 352) a stance that is difficult to believe in light of his propensity to deceive through his use of gossip.

To Rochester, Jane is his "good angel" (Brontë, 363) whilst Bertha is relegated to becoming the female monster hidden away and associated with his vices, a symbol of sexual nausea (Gilbert and Gubar, 823). Jane rejects these projected notions of Victorian society, namely Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* who is "not only a pattern Victorian lady but almost literally an angel on earth" (Gilbert and Gubar, 815). Jane is no angel nor is she a female monster, but she can identify with either side of the spectrum having experienced being treated as both an angel by Rochester and as a demon by the Reeds and Mr Brocklehurst. She refuses

to stay at Thornfield upon finding out about Bertha, whom she pities, and she boldly tells Rochester: "I will *not* be yours" (Brontë, 363), "Mr Rochester, I must leave you" (Brontë, 350)- showing she will not condone Rochester's wish for her to become his mistress. This is an alarming response as Jane does not openly condemn Rochester's treatment of Bertha or the fact that he has repeatedly lied to her even though she has encounters Bertha and come into contact with others who knew the secret, all of these instances have resulted in the perpetuation of lies through gossip in order to hide Rochester's dark secret.

The contrast between the way Jane and Rochester treat Bertha is marked, and we can clearly see that Jane has more empathy for Bertha acknowledging her as a person despite her mental state, whilst her own husband is ashamed to even acknowledge her existence. Jane gives Bertha some agency in the text despite the heartache Bertha's existence causes her. Jane acknowledges Bertha's existence not just as a problem as Rochester does but also as Bertha having the right to be married to Rochester (by his own admission) without Jane's intervention, "[s]ir, your wife is living: that is a fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire – I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical – is false" (Brontë, 350).

Leaving Thornfield proves to be a time of healing for Jane who providentially manages to be taken in by the Rivers family (to whom she is related). Jane is valued and treated as more of an equal in her new situation and instead of being seen as merely an untrustworthy governess (as she was previously labelled by Lady Ingram) she is instead esteemed. Rosamond Oliver tells her wealthy father of Jane, "she is clever enough to be a governess in a high family, papa" (Brontë, 426). Upon discovering the Rivers are her cousins, Jane is jubilant as she has never known much family, let alone family that treat her with kindness. Jane's resistance to St John's proposal also shows she will not marry for convenience or be pressurised into doing the Lord's work when she has no vocation towards it, "I cannot marry you, and become part of you" (Brontë, 470). Jane refuses St John multiple times which could show a resolute improvement

in her mental state, or more likely points towards the reality that Jane is still in love with Rochester and cannot imagine marrying someone else showing the after effects of Rochester's manipulative and deceptive gossip which acted as a catalyst to make Jane fall in love with him.

There is a need for Jane to address her past as she is restless to hear what has become of Rochester, so she journeys to Thornfield despite the hurt he has caused her. She finds Thornfield a derelict ruin and gossips with the Old Mr Rochester's butler who tells her of her own past, saying that a governess (Jane herself) bewitched Mr Rochester and that he was not the same after "that midge of a governess crossed him" (Brontë, 493). Jane is cast as the villain to Rochester's demise as well as Bertha who is deemed responsible for the fire that demolished Thornfield. Rochester once again is exempt from responsibility, "[p]oor Mr Edward…[s]ome say it was judgment on him for keeping his first marriage a secret, and wanting to take another wife while he had one living: but I pity him, for my part…[h]e is stone blind" (Brontë, 494). This explanation clearly shows how the Victorians had gendered ways of perceiving information which were in turn extended through their gossiping. Men, such as Rochester, were always seen to be justified in their decisions whilst women, such as Bertha and Jane, were seen rather to be the root of the problems that arose in men's lives (Pond, 176).

When Jane finds Rochester, she does not immediately marry him; rather she tells him of how she managed to make a new life for herself despite the heartbreak and abandonment he caused her to endure. Jane lauds her new-found family and wealth over Rochester (who is alone and not as wealthy as he once was) in a teasing way, like the way Rochester teased her upon meeting her at Thornfield. She proudly states: "I am an independent woman now…[m]y uncle in Madeira is dead, and he left me five thousand pounds" (Brontë, 501). This change of circumstance directly affects the dynamic between Rochester and Jane as she now sees herself as his equal in wealth and class. Rochester can scarcely believe it, questioning her statement, "[a]re you an independent woman? A rich woman?" (Brontë, 501). Jane rubs in her new-found

position, reiterating that she is "independent sir, as well as rich. I am my own mistress" (Brontë, 501). By mentioning that she is her own mistress, once again Jane smugly snubs Rochester's offer to keep her at Thornfield even though he could not marry her. More than that, Jane irks Rochester exceedingly by telling him of St John's proposal and he responds as she would wish, "[t]hat is a fiction – an impudent invention to vex me" (Brontë, 510). Yet Jane refuses to leave to marry St John as Rochester suggests and rather states she will only "leave you (Rochester) of my own accord" (Brontë, 511). By gossiping of St John between them, Jane and Rochester allow themselves to strike up the intimacy they once shared at Thornfield. Rochester is now sure of Jane's affection for him as she did not marry someone else and Jane feels secure of her equality with Rochester because of her inheritance, which should not be the case had Rochester truly treated her as an equal, thus making Jane believe herself to be his equal with or without her inheritance. Bertha's plight is also undone as she is no longer defended by Jane and we no longer pity or even think of her, instead resigning her to having been a simple obstruction in the marriage plot that has now been removed, allowing the narrative to conclude.

Jane settles for Rochester despite his mistreatment of her in the novel, although she has many opportunities and warnings to exit Rochester's influence for good. Ultimately, Jane conforms to Rochester's wishes and she marries him despite her potential to resist someone who has treated her and others so poorly. Jane's agency is established as she discusses her fortune with Rochester, but her equality with him should never have been in question had he truly treated her as his equal. Gossip frames Jane's worth in society to others, but it is Jane who must decide whether she will subscribe to this view of herself or not. Ultimately, Jane teeters hopefully towards allowing her own voice to determine her worth but she is ruled by her heart which is drawn to Rochester who allows her brief glimpses of agency, but ultimately controls her. It is Jane who proudly states towards the end of the narrative: "[r]eader, I married him" (Brontë, 517). Jane's lively mind excites us as she is able to put forward her views regardless of

circumstance; her gossip empowers her when she uses it but it is Rochester who makes her yield to his gossip which Jane allows to frame herself. Truthfully, Jane and Rochester end up on a more equal footing at the end of the novel, but we are left thinking that Jane has married down as Rochester is not deserving of her affections as he will not allow her the freedom she initially desired upon leaving Lowood.

2.2. Gossip's Splitting of Souls in *Wuthering Heights*

Just as the latter part of *Jane Eyre* follows the troubling relationship between Jane and Rochester, so does *Wuthering Heights* which follows the tempestuous relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine (Cathy) Earnshaw who are raised as brother and sister although Heathcliff is not a blood relation to the family, having been taken in by Mr Earnshaw when he was a child. As Cathy and Heathcliff grow up their view of each other is deeply informed by the way in which people gossip about them, Heathcliff is overlooked due to his unkempt appearance and passionate nature which isolates him from the rest of the Earnshaws. Cathy as a child does not see Heathcliff as others do and she befriends him and the two become inseparable from a young age. However, come adulthood Cathy's gossip about Heathcliff's unsuitability as a marriage partner to her maid Nelly does irreparable damage to Heathcliff who overhears them and promptly leaves and returns years later set on revenge against all who have wronged him, including Cathy herself whom he still loves. Gossip is pivotal to the novel's character development and overall narration as it is Nelly's gossip to Lockwood that forms the entirety of the novel. Gossip is particularly prevalent in the figure of Heathcliff as his actions and identity are framed continually by how others gossip about him which leads him to become the fulfilment of the Byronic hero for which he is so well known in the literary world. Cathy's gossip to Nelly changes the trajectory of her life as she marries Edgar Linton although she is

in love with Heathcliff; this too changes the course of her daughter young Cathy Linton's life as she falls prey to Heathcliff's bitter revenge on her father, Linton, who Heathcliff so despises for marrying Cathy.

Wuthering Heights shows Emily Brontë's clear ability to frame characters by using gossip, particularly in the case of Heathcliff who is scorned by his society from his youth into his adulthood. Heathcliff's demise into the villain of the novel can be partly but not solely attributed to the slander he receives by the continual judgment of his character by those around him, both directly and indirectly. As we see throughout *Wuthering Heights,* Heathcliff is scrutinised and then overlooked by the society in which he exists. Heathcliff's very name speaks to this ostracization by his own family and those around him alike; he is not Heathcliff Earnshaw but rather simply Heathcliff, "he wears his name as an indication of his difference, and this persists after death since his tombstone is inscribed with the one word Heathcliff" (Kermode, 420). Heathcliff has often been termed a character of the in-between as he is "neither inside nor out, neither wholly master nor wholly servant, the husband who is no husband, the brother who is no brother, the father who abuses his changeling child, the cousin without kin" (Kermode, 425) - all of which is due to his treatment which is exercised by the gossip of those who surround him.

We are swiftly made aware of this judgment of Heathcliff as Lockwood is quick to comment on Heathcliff's appearance and manners upon arriving at Wuthering Heights, "a dark-skinned gipsy…under-bred pride…an aversion to showy displays of feeling – to manifestations of mutual kindliness. He'll love and hate equally under cover" (Brontë, 5). Heathcliff is not only spurned by his society, but he is also seen as a marker by which to allow others to judge themselves as better; Lockwood himself notes, "[i]t is astonishing how sociable I feel myself compared to him" (Brontë, 7). Although Lockwood's gossip is indirect and only to be read, we are then exposed to more direct gossip as Lockwood becomes acquainted with Heathcliff's past

via Nelly Dean who narrates the past to him. Lockwood actively comments on and gossips with Nelly about the history of Wuthering Heights and its inhabitants. Emily chooses to cast Lockwood as an active and curious gossip showing that she believes gossip to be a universal trend which is not solely attributed to females.

Heathcliff is described as a "naughty swearing boy" (Brontë, 47) by Mrs Linton who refuses to let her children associate with him and insists upon their separation from him when they visit Wuthering Heights. This gossip is hurtful to Heathcliff who already bears the brunt of Hindley's disgust of him in his own home. Parallels can be drawn between a young Jane Eyre's treatment at the hands of the Reeds and a young Heathcliff's treatment at the hands of the Earnshaws. Neither Jane nor Heathcliff escape the devastating power of gossip as it is allowed to extend into their adulthood due to Lowood School's policy of shaming pupils unnecessarily and the expansion of the Earnshaw's social circle to include the Lintons who allow for gossip about Heathcliff to be steadily maintained. This gossip in turn maims both Jane and Heathcliff's self-worth in the process as they are framed cruelly by those around them, including those they love dearly, namely Rochester and Cathy. Emily goes one step further than Charlotte as she allows for her male character, Heathcliff, to be maligned by gossip, showing that gossip's effect are not limited to the female realm.

Catherine, far from dispelling the gossip, perpetuates it upon her return from staying with the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange and can be seen adopting their opinion of Heathcliff. Cathy tells Heathcliff unkindly that he is, "black and cross…funny and grim…because I'm (Cathy) used to Edgar and Isabella Linton" (Brontë, 46). The implicature of this statement is that the Linton's view of Heathcliff is true and that Cathy herself has come to believe it. Cathy does not stop there in her character assassination of Heathcliff and stoops to basal insults exclaiming, "you are so dirty" (Brontë, 46). Cathy's view of Heathcliff descends from the gossip of the Lintons about Heathcliff, who they view as less than they are. This gossip is defining for Heathcliff

who is taken aback by Cathy's change of attitude towards him, "I shall not stand to be laughed at. I shall not bear it!" (Brontë, 46). It is perhaps this gossip that acts as a catalyst to further gossip between Nelly and Cathy regarding Heathcliff and Heathcliff's subsequent belief that Cathy herself cannot stoop to marry him, preferring instead to marry Linton. Heathcliff overhears only part of the conversation between Cathy and Nelly but what he hears is enough to convince him that Cathy has an altered opinion of him and treats him with the same disdain as other do, "[i]t would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now" (Brontë, 69). Heathcliff leaves at this point in the conversation and so does not hear the following words spoken by Cathy, "he shall never know how I love him…he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (Brontë 69-70). However, in marrying Linton, Cathy causes Heathcliff's heart to harden and adds yet another barrier to the gossip surrounding Heathcliff as she marries a man who Heathcliff cannot abide and upon his return Linton refers to Heathcliff as "the gipsy – the ploughboy" (Brontë, 81) a "runaway servant" (Brontë, 82) and as a "low ruffian" (Brontë, 98) rather than Cathy's brother. Linton's animosity towards Heathcliff also extends beyond Cathy's death as he tells his daughter young Cathy that, "Mr Heathcliff dislikes me; and is a most diabolical man, delighting to wrong and ruin those he hates" (Brontë, 191). It is of paramount importance that we understand Cathy's position in *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of carefully examining Heathcliff's character, as the two's emotions are interwoven one cannot exist wholly without the other, as is seen by Heathcliff's haunting by Cathy's ghost long after her death.

Charlotte's Jane faces the same malicious childhood gossip as Heathcliff as both suffer at the hands of their adopted family due to rumours that become truth to those around them. However, Jane and Heathcliff need differentiation as Heathcliff reacts to his gossip in a malicious way whilst Jane aims to forgive those that have wronged her. In fact, many view Jane's actions as too forgiving and, in many ways, they keep her subservient to those who have wronged her.

Heathcliff's behaviour is abominable but not without causation, as Cathy never acknowledges her part in wronging Heathcliff and dies haunting him; it is her own foolishness that led her to such unhappiness as she decided to marry Linton for convenience rather than Heathcliff whom she loved. Gossip is Cathy's undoing as although *Wuthering Heights* is "known as a great love story, the book focuses less on the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff than on the ways in which that relationship and others are distorted by the power structures [which are informed by the gossip] of the characters' world" (Jacobs, 213).

In *Wuthering Heights* Emily casts Lockwood and Nelly as the chief gossip mongers and secret keepers, a powerful role to impart on two seemingly irrelevant characters in the narrative. Interestingly it is Lockwood who initially gossips with us rather than a female character, which allows Emily to show that she believes men are just as willing to gossip as women (Spacks, 21). Emily further elaborates on this view as Lockwood is seen to seek out Nelly Dean for further information about Heathcliff and Wuthering Heights as his curiosity cannot be vanquished. He even goes so far as to tell us that he hoped "sincerely she (Nelly) would prove to be a regular gossip" (Brontë, 29) showing how he sees gossip as a female activity (Pond, 177) rather than acknowledging he is a gossip himself and that his gossip simply carries more congress because he is a man. Lockwood is selfish in his pursuit of gossip and is quick to judge any information given to him despite not having been an eyewitness to any of the goings-on at Wuthering Heights. Initially he believes Nelly wishes to feed him gossip "about her own personal affairs, and those could hardly interest me" (Brontë, 29). We soon find that Nelly's affairs are intertwined with those of Wuthering Heights as she is the only figure that bridges the divide between characters and locations. She is, in fact, the optimal person with whom Lockwood should be conversing.

Lockwood proves to be an avid consumer of gossip and before Nelly officially starts her story of Wuthering Heights, he says of himself, "I was excited, almost to a pitch of foolishness,

through my nerves and brain" (Brontë, 30). Again, this reiterates Emily's wish for her audience to know that both men and women can be lively participants in gossip. Interestingly, Lockwood is seen to hang on Nelly's every word giving Nelly the power of a female narrator rather than a female listener who instead gleans the truth of Wuthering Heights from a male narrator. Nelly freely admits that she wishes to tell the story in "true gossip's fashion" (Brontë, 54) and this works as she is able to "portray the events in a more mysterious and exciting manner" (Shunami, 452) through her gossip. This technique utilised by Emily clearly works as we see Lockwood is riveted by the story, "now continue the history of Mr Heathcliff, from where you left off, to the present day" (Brontë, 78). And although he is ill, he still insists on hearing the lengthy story from Nelly, "I am too weak to read; yet I feel as if I could enjoy something interesting. Why not have up Mrs Dean to finish her tale?" (Brontë, 78). However what is most striking is how Lockwood praises Nelly as a narrator complimenting her on her attention detail, "[y]ou've done just right to tell the story leisurely" (Brontë, 52-53) and saying of her, "[s]he is, on the whole, a very fair narrator, and I don't think I could improve her style" (Brontë, 134). Lockwood's praise of Nelly's gossip is to be noted as it shows that men should be able to acknowledge female gossip as carrying merit rather than just being a vice they abhor. Nelly's gossip is so valued by Lockwood for its detail which shows that women may be more attentive than men and therefore their speech should be valued accordingly.

Some critics, including Gideon Shunami state that it is Nelly who is the villain of the novel and not Heathcliff seeking to control Cathy and plot Heathcliff's demise (Shunami, 451). It is true that Nelly has a wide grasp of what occurs in the novel (Shunami, 452) but Lockwood is also encouraged by Nelly to judge the past events for himself, "[b]ut you'll not want to hear my moralizing, Mr Lockwood: you'll judge as well as I can, all these things: at least, you'll think you will, and that's the same" (Brontë, 159). Nelly is alluding to the fact that no gossip can ever be truly trusted, but that she has done her best to be true to what she witnessed in the past.

She tells Lockwood that all he can do as a response is to speculate about what he has heard (Spacks,19) whilst realising that gossip can be manipulated by its speaker to their own ends, as it is a "culturally controlled game with important social functions" (Gluckman, 312). It is highly unlikely that Nelly would give such a wise warning had she manipulated her narrative and that being said, her story does not paint her in the best light, which of course she would have altered if she had wanted to look like a better person and secretly pardon herself of any wrongdoing. By all respects Nelly is a mother-like figure to both Cathy and Heathcliff as both characters come to her with their woes which burden her a great deal in the novel. Nelly "serves as recorder or uncoverer of a hidden reality of the novel, and her story is also one of impotence and suppression" (Jacobs, 216) much like that of the characters of Heathcliff and Cathy whose inaction and concealment of their feelings for one another proves to be the root of their unhappiness and final undoing. Nelly is just as plagued as Cathy and Heathcliff, if not more so, as she finds herself playing the go between for two unstable and emotionally volatile children whom she has grown up, both raising them and loving them as her own as both were motherless. Nelly even goes so far as to see herself as the only person of sound mind in the novel, "convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body" (Brontë, 104).

It is to Nelly that Heathcliff comes with his insecurities, telling her, "I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being rich" (Brontë, 48) all of which stem from the demeaning gossip he has endured from the Earnshaws and the Lintons. Nelly does not keep up the gossip surrounding Heathcliff and rather chooses to take pity on him than make him feel he is right to be disappointed in himself. She instead gossips about all that he could be, painting him in a better light, "[w]ho knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week's income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together?" (Brontë, 49). Her

words please Heathcliff who "gradually lost his frown and began to look quite pleasant" (Brontë, 49). Nelly's gossip affirms her care for Heathcliff as she refuses to act in the snide custom of those she serves and instead mothers him kindly considering the slander he endures. More than just consoling Heathcliff, Nelly acts in the defence of those Heathcliff wrongs and calls Heathcliff out on his despicable behaviour towards his son, "[y]ou're worse than a heathen – treating your own flesh and blood in that manner!" (Brontë, 65).

Cathy is also mothered and rebuked by Nelly in a similar manner to how she handles Heathcliff. Nelly is blisteringly honest about Cathy and as Nelly has known Cathy all her life, we know her account comes from a vast amount of experience of Cathy's character. From a young age Cathy is shown to be trying, "she put all of us past our patience fifty times and oftener in a day" (Brontë, 36). Cathy and Heathcliff are as wild as each other, "[s]he never had power to conceal her passion, it always set her whole complexion ablaze" (Brontë, 61), and so we see them as steady companions from a young age as they naturally gravitate towards one another's instability. Cathy is said to be enamoured with Heathcliff from childhood and just as if not more unpredictable in nature than Heathcliff himself, "[a] wild, wicked slip she was…[s]he was much too fond of Heathcliff. The greatest punishment we could invent for her was to keep her separate from him" (Brontë, 36).

Nelly is cautious of Cathy's relationship with Heathcliff from a young age as her gossip alludes to the fact that she was "too fond of Heathcliff" (Brontë, 36), and it perhaps Nelly who sees Cathy and Heathcliff as detrimental to one another, which is what they prove themselves to be within the course of the narrative. It is not only Nelly who sees the relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy as dangerous. Even Linton cannot bear to see his wife upset by the company of Heathcliff and chooses to disallow the two to communicate with one another. Isabella Linton is also horrified upon marrying Heathcliff and tells Nelly that, "Catherine had an awfully perverted taste to esteem him (Heathcliff) so dearly, knowing him so well.

Monster!" (Brontë, 148-149). These multiple testaments as to the danger of a relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy disprove that Nelly is the only one who seeks to separate Heathcliff and Cathy for their own good.

Nelly is far from unfeeling towards Heathcliff and Cathy as she is shown to care equally and deeply for both children. Upon Cathy's death she says, "I was weeping as much for him as her" (Brontë, 143). However, Nelly knows their natures are so wild that neither will yield to the other, making them parasitic to one another as they feed directly off each other's vices. It could be for this reason that Nelly encourages Cathy to marry Linton as she tells Cathy she "will escape from a disorderly, comfortless home into a wealthy, respectable one" (Brontë, 68). Heathcliff forms part of the dysfunction of Wuthering Heights which Nelly urges Cathy to leave and Nelly sees herself as acting in Cathy's best interests because of Cathy's restless and indominable will. Cathy is only able to admit her love of Heathcliff to Nelly after she has denied to herself that she can marry him, "[i]t would degrade me to marry Heathcliff" (Brontë, 69). Even after she has admitted that she loves Heathcliff to Nelly, she further dehumanises Heathcliff saying that she believes him incapable of love, "Heathcliff has no notion of these things" (Brontë, 70) and that she refuses to marry him because her social standing will be diminished, "if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars" (Brontë, 70). It is Cathy who talks herself out of marrying Heathcliff and not Nelly; in fact Nelly is troubled by Cathy's admissions and urges her to, "trouble me with no more secrets" (Brontë, 71).

Nelly's judgment of Cathy's self-pity shows that Emily acknowledges the power of gossip to infringe on life decisions as well as its ability to insight lifelong bitterness and unhappiness in Cathy's case whilst Heathcliff uses it to stir up his anger and allow him to return to exact his revenge to which Nelly also receives a front seat. The unhappiness that Cathy endures is essentially self-inflicted as it her decisions that lead to her own heartbreak, although she never owns this line of belief, instead choosing to blame others, "Nelly, *you* have helped to unsettle

me" (Brontë, 108-109) and "[y]ou and Edgar have broken my heart, Heathcliff" (Brontë, 137). More than shielding us from Cathy's faults, Nelly elaborates on Cathy's manipulative behaviour that stems from her selfishness. Cathy makes her own husband feel guilty at even the notion of upsetting her as Nelly observes that, "Mr Edgar had a deep-rooted fear of ruffling her (Cathy's) humour" (Brontë, 79). Nelly also sees Cathy's behaviour as an act and states bluntly, "I could not get rid of the notion that she acted part of her disorder" (Brontë, 104). Cathy is just as awful as Heathcliff as she wishes to prey on people to meet her own ends and fails to see that her behaviour is inexcusable, "I thought, though everybody hated and despised each other, they could not avoid loving me" (Brontë, 105). Even Heathcliff can see that Cathy is to blame for her displeasure, "[w]hy did you break your own heart Cathy? … I have not broken your heart – you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine" (Brontë, 139). Cathy is not only guilty of breaking her own heart, but her gossip has also inflicted great harm to those around her as Heathcliff becomes a tyrannical villain seeking power over both the Linton and Earnshaw families. The power of her gossip manifests so powerfully that she even has agency over Heathcliff after her death.

Heathcliff takes out his bitterness towards Cathy on her relatives both before and after her death. He starts by marrying Isabella Linton whom he does not love because he simply wishes to punish Cathy for her decision to marry Linton. He then starts terrorising Cathy's nephew Hareton and his own son. Hareton is made into the outcast that Heathcliff was when he lived at Wuthering Heights as a child, showing a cyclical element to the novel and reemphasising that Heathcliff's hurt began as soon as he arrived at Wuthering Heights and continued into adulthood. The effect of Heathcliff's speech on his own son is seen when Master Heathcliff gossips with young Cathy saying, "Papa talks enough of my defects, and shows enough scorn of me, to make it natural to doubt myself. I doubt whether I am not altogether as worthless as he calls me" (Brontë, 217). This statement clearly illustrates that gossip, be it direct or indirect,

can define our self-worth as both Heathcliff and his son come to believe that they are just what others think of them.

To Nelly, Cathy and Heathcliff are tortured souls who cannot exist without each other, but she refuses to let us think they should have been together. Although Nelly cares for both equally, she will not excuse their faults which makes her gossip a valid form of truthfulness as care in gossip can dispel maliciousness and instead replace folly with thoughtfulness. Nelly's behaviour towards the end of the novel is proof of this as she refuses to allow young Cathy to behave in the manner of her mother and rights Hareton's plight.

Young Cathy is just as passionate as her mother and stands up to Heathcliff's tyranny, "I'll not do anything, though you should swear your tongue out, except what I please" (Brontë, 27) and "I'm not afraid of you!" (Brontë, 231). Heathcliff tricks young Cathy into entrapment in order to exact his revenge on Linton; he does this by both blackmail and lying manipulation. Heathcliff leads young Cathy to believe that the root of her father's quarrel with Heathcliff lies in his marriage to Isabella as Heathcliff tells her: "He (Linton) thought me too poor to wed his sister…and was grieved that I got her: his pride was hurt, and he'll never forgive it" (Brontë, 186). Heathcliff's gossip is due to Cathy's hurtful gossip and consequent decisions that have hardened his heart, so he behaves as Cathy did, manipulating others because he is unhappy with his own life. Young Cathy thus finds herself at Wuthering Heights and behaves abominably towards her cousin Hareton to the extent that Nelly rebukes her, "I don't like your conduct there. If you had remembered that Hareton was your cousin as much as Master Heathcliff (Heathcliff and Isabella's son), you would have felt how improper it was to behave in that way" (Brontë, 214). Reconciler is the role Nelly adopts as she brings both Hareton and young Cathy together, encouraging them to be friends, which they become whilst Nelly looks on, "[t]he intimacy thus commenced [and] grew rapidly" (Brontë, 270) until the two are

engaged at the end of the novel showing a reconciliation between both Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights.

Nelly is effectively correcting her past inaction as she does not wish young Cathy to live as her mother did and thus becomes a wise surrogate mother to the girl (Shunami,458). Heathcliff is also faced with two ghosts of Cathy as her daughter has the same wilfulness as her mother and condemns Heathcliff for his behaviour as he has become all that has been said about him, a now truthful, physical representation of the gossip of which he was the subject. Heathcliff is a character primarily shaped by Cathy's and others' mistreatment of him through gossip. Heathcliff is framed socially by gossip and his character degeneration gives credit to the notion that Cathy's gossip succeeded in giving her a vast amount of agency over those around her. Cathy is empowered by her gossip, albeit it harmful to those around her; her gossip exists long after she dies as her words and actions haunt Heathcliff in the form of her ghost.

2.3. The Revelation of Hidden Domestic Abuse and Flawed Opinions in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Gossip in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* functions very effectively in a community setting as the new tenant of Wildfell Hall, Helen Graham is scrutinized by her new social circle who mar her reputation without actively getting to know her or her past. This leads the heroine, Helen and the hero, Gilbert Markham into dire straits as both misconstrue information at various points in the novel due to their incorrect assumptions. However, gossip does not just lead to confusion but also clarity as the novel is narrated by Gilbert Markham who both writes and reflects upon the contents of Helen's diaries; in fact the novel is the longest epistolary novel of the nineteenth-century (Gordon, 719). This is an intelligent move by Anne Brontë as its contents are a testament to the female condition, but the narration primarily falls to a man showing "the

outer reality is male and the inner reality is largely female" (Jacobs, 207). It also bears testament to the fact that "[g]ossip occurs in writing as well as speech" (Spacks, 23) and that written pieces of work are often a Gothic device which allows for the narrative to be pieced together, enhancing the Gothic theme of mystery (Gordon, 720). The novel also places a greater emphasis on the function of community gossip rather than just focusing on the gossip exercised by primary characters, a trait that is also present in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Gossip is both direct and indirect in the novel and Helen bears the brunt of her new community's ignorant, speculative scrutiny. Gossip also spurns Helen, simultaneously allows her to meet her correct match in Gilbert who comes to learn of her traumatic past at the hand of her abusive husband, Arthur Huntingdon.

Anne starts the novel with the Markhams discussing trivial everyday gossip such as Rose Markham's (Gilbert's sister) referral to Eliza Millward becoming Gilbert's future wife, "I'm not going to tell you about her; - only that she's a nice, amusing little thing, when she is in merry humour, and I shouldn't mind calling her- "(Brontë, 13). We have not even met Eliza, but she has been framed socially as a potential match for Gilbert. Although the Markhams know Eliza they do not know Mrs Helen Graham, as she is a new arrival to the community, yet they have no reservations about discussing her in terms of the gossip they have heard about her as she intrigues them as a newcomer who does not yet have a reputation (Frank, 195). Eliza relays the information from her father to Rose who shares that Mr Millward wishes to pay Mrs Graham a visit and offer her some pastoral advice as, "though she is known to have entered the neighbourhood early last week, she did not make her appearance at church on Sunday" (Brontë, 14). Helen is already being judged for her truancy at church by those who have not met her, thus demonstrating "the pervasive role of gossip in community life" (Gluckman, 308). The female Markhams' curiosity is unquenchable as they propose to visit Mrs Graham and return with more ammunition for their gossip as Mrs Markham declares Helen "self-opiniated"

(Brontë, 15) and Rose is shocked when Helen returns the visit as she judges Helen to "wholly disregard the common observances of civilized life" (Brontë, 28). Helen is judged before she can even make an impression on the community as they are self-righteous in their judgments which they announce through their use of gossip and upon meeting Helen in person their gossip escalates dramatically. Helen's reputation is marred by her new neighbours' gossip as she is overly discussed when in truth "the best character is that which is the least talked of" (Frank, 194).

Helen's framing in the community goes hand in hand with the gossip about her as she is labelled an overprotective parent by Mrs Markham who scathingly tells her directly in company that Arthur her son, "ought not to be always tied to his mother's apron string; he should learn to be ashamed of it" (Brontë, 29). The community is yet more cutting of Helen's behaviour over time and gossip about her relentlessly, without seeking to ask Helen for an explanation as to the way she acts and instead forming a fictional account of her among themselves. Rose notes "I don't know what to make of her, at all" (Brontë, 48) showing that Helen is difficult to read to the extent that she is an enigma who people prefer to try deciphering through their gossip rather than getting to know her. Mr Millward condemns Helen to the community and to her face, "my pastoral advice quite thrown away upon her…*my* daughters – shall – not – consort with her" (Brontë, 98). Helen's identity in the community is formed by this slanderous gossip which affects how she is treated socially as she is cast out by those around her, "I don't like to sit by Mrs Graham" (Brontë, 80) who deem her to be "scarcely respectable" (Brontë, 80).

Over time, Gilbert comes to despise this slander of Helen as he is the one person who tries to get to know Helen personally and openly condemns the behaviour of his community to Helen, telling her, "we often hold discussions about you; for some of us have nothing better to do than to talk about our neighbours' concerns" (Brontë, 62). This admission shows that "[g]ossip and even scandal unite a group within a larger society" (Gluckman, 313) and that gossip has that

ability to be “forever enlarging and expanding the field of its domain” (Gordon, 723). Anne is a critic of gossip as speculation but also understands its literary benefits as it allows for the creation of a “domestic social comedy, with idle talk creating connection and interjecting humour” (Joshi, 909).

The community resorts to using their gossip to a scandalous end as their speculation leads to the belief that Helen is having an affair because she lives alone at Wildfell Hall and has been seen to entertain Mr Lawrence, who in reality is her brother and not a lover. Rose partakes in this gossip and warns Gilbert off visiting Wildfell Hall, “and besides, mamma says, if she were a proper person, she would not be living there by herself” (Brontë, 95) she also articulates the gossip of others in her protestations, “Jane Wilson thinks your visits to the old hall but another proof of her depravity…[a]nd Eliza Millward is quite grieved about you” (Brontë, 96). This time, Gilbert stands up for Helen, strongly condemning the gossip of his family and friends, “so they dare to turn my friendship into food for further scandal against her! – That proves the falsehood of their other lies, at all events, if any proof were wanting. – Mind you contradict them Rose, whenever you can” (Brontë, 96). Gilbert’s defence of Helen is displayed in a similar manner to the traditional male heroes in Walpole and Radcliffe’s Gothic novels, although Helen then dispels the gossip by confiding in Gilbert herself through letting him read her diary which acts as her voice because her trauma is unspeakable (Gordon, 719).

Although Gilbert is the hero of the novel, he is also not devoid of partaking in and being led astray by gossip. Men and women both gossip in the text as gossip is “neither exclusively feminine - Markham and the vicar join in every conversation” (Joshi, 910). Gilbert initially discusses Helen and judges her alongside his friends; upon seeing her at church in person for the first time he says, “I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home” (Brontë, 17), showing that he deems her attractive but believes the gossip he has heard about her so far. Gilbert also tells Eliza of Helen, “I cannot say I like her much.

She is handsome…a woman liable to take strong prejudices" (Brontë, 43). This is very rich coming from Gilbert who himself is prejudiced against Helen without knowing her at all well. Gilbert's treatment of Eliza also points towards substantial immaturity as he leads Eliza on and then drops her when he starts to get to know Helen. Before he sets his hopes on Helen, Gilbert enjoys the attentions of Eliza, "I must plead guilty to snatching a kiss behind her (Eliza's) father's back" (Brontë, 44) even though his mother is vocal in her disapproval of the match, "how bitterly it would grieve me to see you married to that girl" (Brontë, 45). Mrs Markham is at least consistent in her gossip and does not limit it to the singular subject of Helen as she sees herself as fit to judge all her neighbours, showing that gossip can encompass any subject.

As Gilbert visits Wildfell Hall he comes to realise that he, "rather liked to see Mrs Graham, and to talk to her" (Brontë, 51) which is a world of difference from his initial judgments of her and his wishes to admire her from a distance. As he continues to get to know Helen, he revises his opinions of Eliza, instead preferring Helen's company, "it would, perhaps, be better to spend one's days with such a woman than with Eliza Millward…I found her (Eliza) rather frivolous, and even a little insipid, compared with the more mature and earnest Mrs Graham" (Brontë, 52-53). This change is notable as earlier in the novel we find Gilbert quite content with Eliza, "I went home very happy, with a heart brimful of complacency for myself, and overflowing with love for Eliza" (Brontë, 27). Gilbert treats Eliza poorly and unpicks her character claiming that, "Eliza's playful nonsense ceased to amuse me" (Brontë, 66) yet he has the sense to still maintain his good name and gradually cease in his attentions towards Eliza, "I did not entirely relinquish my visits to the vicarage, because I wanted, as it were, to let her down easy; without raising much sorrow, or incurring much resentment – or making myself the talk of the parish" (Brontë, 77). Gilbert fears the gossip he could create if he does not treat Eliza kindly which shows that gossip was a powerful force over any person, Victorian man or woman. It is perhaps Gilbert's recent dealings with Helen that have alerted him to the danger

of gossip as an informer of social value whether it be true or not that makes him wary of the gossip he hears and partakes. Eliza towards the end of the novel, is despised by Gilbert for her treatment of Helen as he sees her as a chief instigator of the malicious gossip about Helen as Gilbert reports to Mr Lawrence that, "Eliza Millward…the very [originator] of the slanderous reports that have been propagated…to blacken your sister's character to the utmost of her power without risking too greatly the exposure of her own malevolence" (Brontë, 417). This condemnation of Eliza by Gilbert also amounts to gossip, albeit true rather than fictional as Gilbert also enjoys gossip as much as those around him, but he prefers his gossip to show the truth rather than mask it.

The subject of gossip is discussed between Gilbert and Helen with both parties agreeing that it can prove tiresome and unreliable if used idly. Helen sums up her thoughts on the slanderous gossip she has endured in the following statement, "I hate talking where there is no exchange of ideas or sentiments, and no good given or received" (Brontë, 85). Although the gossip against Helen is false, it does not mean that all gossip is false. In condemning gossip to Helen as Gilbert does, he too gossips about those gossips around him whom he detests, "I heard some detestable falsehoods; but none but fools would credit them for a moment, Helen, so don't let them trouble you" (Brontë, 103). It is gossip as well that allows Gilbert to judge Helen differently from those around him as the woman he observes does not match the accounts given about her by his community, "[w]as I not certain that she, in intellect, in purity and elevation of soul, was immeasurably superior to any of her detractors; that she was in fact, the noblest, the most adorable, of her sex I had ever beheld" (Brontë, 82-83).

Helen proves to be an education for Gilbert particularly in allowing him to read her diaries which recount her life as well as the lives of those around her which help to revise his feelings towards women as the narrative progresses. She does not succumb to his attentions and he feels that "her opinions respecting me, on every particular, feel far below those I entertained of

myself" (Brontë, 36). This forces Gilbert to humble himself as he views Helen as taking "pleasure in mortifying my vanity and crushing my presumption" (Brontë, 72), but instead of condemning her coldness he instead tries to understand from where her cool exterior originates, which in turn results in Helen gradually being able to trust him. Gilbert by and by becomes more understanding towards women as a whole as he spends more time with Helen and even astutely notices that Helen herself has an "absolute resolution against a second marriage formed prior to the time of our acquaintance, whether from excess of affection from her late husband, or because she had had enough of him and the matrimonial state together" (Brontë, 72). This foreshadows what Gilbert is to encounter in Helen's diary as she warns her friend Esther off marriage saying of her own experience, "[m]arriage *may* change your circumstances for the better, but in my private opinion, it is far more likely to produce a contrary result" (Brontë, 375). As Gilbert gets to know Helen more he compares her to the accounts of gossip he hears about her and he cannot help but realise there is far more to her than initially meets the eye so he pursues both friendship and the truth when he befriends her.

Both Helen herself and her diary soften Gilbert's opinion towards women as Gilbert laments along with Helen as he reads her history. Helen is transparent in her diary, showing herself to have married naively and not having listened to her aunt's warnings, "beauty is that quality which, next to money, is generally the most attractive to the worst kinds of men; and therefore, it is likely to entail a great deal of trouble of the possessor" (Brontë, 131) which come to pass as she marries the diabolical Huntingdon. Helen in time comes to reflect on her aunt's words and seeks her aunt's approval when she decides to accept Gilbert's offer of marriage, showing how gossip can be wise even if it is only followed in retrospect.

Huntingdon makes Helen lose hope not only in him but also other people as she deplores Annabella Wilmot's relationship with him, "[s]he will neither deplore his faults nor attempt their amendment, but rather aggravate them by her own" (Brontë, 163). Annabella presents a

worrying image of the state of Victorian England as she has "internalized the male standard that sees piety and kindness as weakness. Annabella tries to act like a man" (Senf, 453) and is in effect the female Huntingdon as she sees it as her only way to exert any authority over men. Helen herself is despised by her husband, "I won't be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife" (Brontë, 235) and his friends for being too outspoken, "I (Mr Hattersley) must have somebody who will let me have my own way in everything – not like your wife, Huntingdon, she is a charming creature, but she looks as if she had a will of her own" (Brontë, 221). These assertions show that Victorian men wished to have no input from their wives and expected unwavering obedience and devotion which meant women found themselves at the mercy of their husbands' natures with no defence other than that of being angelic (Gilbert and Gubar, 816). Despite being pious, Helen is despised by Huntingdon for her devout behaviour which judges him for his indiscretions. Helen herself can barely escape Huntingdon without the motivation of her son, Arthur, who she wishes to save from becoming like his father, "I am fully alive to the evils that may and must result upon the step I am about to take; but I never waver in my resolution, because I never forget my son" (Brontë, 362). Women were then vulnerable to becoming scapegoats due to men have a higher standing, meaning they could voice their blame more audibly, blaming the women in their life for their misfortune as Mr Grimsby does in the novel, "[i]t's all these cursed women...[t]hey're the very bane of the world!" (Brontë, 295). Helen, although maliciously controlled by Huntingdon, still finds it in herself to correct the plight of her friend, Milicent Hattersley, whom she stops being beaten by her husband after staging an intervention with him, rebuking him for his wrong, something which could not have come about without the gossip between women.

Despite correcting her friend's own situation, Helen can only find solace in her own situation by keeping a diary, "when I cease writing, I find my head aches terribly" (Brontë, 307). This diary in time proves to be a way of securing her freedom as Gilbert allows her to gossip silently

with him through her writing and in doing so, her life is no longer shrouded by her past and her silence is broken by Gilbert's interest in her life and subsequent sympathy and disgust at how she is limited as a woman by her brute of a husband who makes Gilbert furious (Senf, 455). Gilbert's view of Helen is now multi-faceted, and he cannot condone the behaviour of men in her life, "I could readily forgive her prejudice against me, and her hard thoughts of or sex in general, when I saw to what brilliant specimens her experience had been limited" (Brontë, 396). Gilbert even tells Helen of Huntingdon, "that man is *not* your husband: in the sight of Heaven he has forfeited all claim" (Brontë, 401), showing he is appalled by his behaviour and wishes to remove Helen once again from his grasp.

Gilbert's respect of women's place in the world as well as their feelings increases as the text unfolds. Early on he tells his subservient mother who puts his every need before her own that, "you must consider your own comfort and convenience a little more than you do" (Brontë, 57) and that "when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive" (Brontë , 58). These are startling remarks in light of how Victorian men expected to be treated at that time, but it is also key to note that Gilbert has been brought up "in the company of women and, aside from when he dashes across the fields to spy on Helen, he is almost always ensconced in the ladies' sitting room, a room Huntingdon will not enter" (Joshi, 917). Anne is making it clear to us that Huntingdon and Gilbert are completely different in the way they view women and although both have their faults, Gilbert's are far more forgivable than Huntingdon's and that he can become a worthy husband for Helen (Joshi, 919). Upon learning of the truth of Helen and Mr Lawrence's relationship and finding them to be siblings, Gilbert acts on Helen's word and humbles himself, "I had not forgotten my assault of Mr Lawrence; and I must see him to apologize for the unhappy deed" (Brontë, 407). Laying a defence for Helen also becomes a priority for Gilbert who honours his word to Helen by keeping her secrets but also disputing

gossip that is false about her. This shows he cares for her reputation because he is aware of her circumstances. When Gilbert marries Helen it is with the approval of her aunt who gives all relief when she solidifies his worthiness of Helen, "I know of no one, now living and of a suitable age, to whom I would more willingly resign her than yourself, or who would be more likely to appreciate her worth and make her truly happy" (Brontë, 487). This glowing recommendation speaks to Gilbert's character transformation in the novel and his new found empathy for the women around him. Much of this alteration of character can be attributed to Helen's diary which softens and adds discernment to Gilbert's view of the situation held by Victorian women.

In the novel Anne aims to redeem gossip by using it to narrate Helen's unspeakable suffering at the hands of her alcoholic and adulterous husband, Arthur Huntingdon, whose treatment of Helen both degrades her personally and socially (Frank, 181) and shows the upsetting plight of being a Victorian woman with limits to her influence (Joshi, 919). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* amounts to "a classic mid-Victorian feminist protest" (Ward, 151) and takes an active stance in resisting domestic violence in marriage (Ward, 152) by focusing on the "expropriated, estranged nature" (Brontë, xi) of Helen Huntingdon's life. The text is also responsible for shattering the mirage of Victorian domestic bliss and the idea of the home as a refuge as many women faced Helen's reality in their homes due to violent domestic abuse which was increased due to the powerless posture women and children occupied in the Victorian world (Jacobs,205). Ultimately text trumps talk in the novel as it is a more durable form of evidence and seems like a more valid way to disprove rumour (Frank, 195). The novel also serves to create the idea of the silent innocent, as both Anne's Helen and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne are orally silent instead of waiting for others to see their innocence (Frank, 197). It is also notable that Helen must marry down in order to find a man who treats her as an equal (Brontë, xxviii),

showing Anne has a distaste towards the upper class who she judges to be the worst in its treatment of women.

2.4. Gossip's Haunting of Locations of Terror and as a Catharsis to Painful Memories

All the Brontë novels mentioned demonstrate a need to leave locations where terrible memories have occurred; Jane leaves Thornfield, Young Cathy and Hareton leave Wuthering Heights for Thrushcross Grange and Helen escapes Grassdale to Wildfell Hall. All three vacated locations are the stage of much turmoil in the characters' lives, and they see leaving as a necessity for their well-being. This well-being comes by gossiping about where they have left either directly or indirectly, as Jane's story is pieced together by the Rivers and by critics who are privy to her entire biography. *Wuthering Height*'s secrets are narrated by Nelly and Helen allows her past to be shown to Gilbert in the form of her diary. All three types of narration amount to gossip as they discuss not only the protagonists but those around them as well. Readers and characters alike benefit from the gossip as it creates empathy and understanding for the character who shares their gossip. In many ways the gossip both empowers the speakers and accelerates the story into a satisfying conclusion for individuals we never thought would know such happiness. There is also a play on names by both Anne and Emily who repeat names generationally in the hope of improving the blight the past has caused by using gossip as a healing mechanism that allows the past to settle down so that the present characters can continue in a manner that vastly differs from their predecessor namesakes. Such is the case for young Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* who does not repeat her mother's mistake and marries for love rather than convenience and for Arthur in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* who is saved from becoming like his brutish father because his mother removes him from his care and finds a new husband, Gilbert, who will father Arthur lovingly.

Chapter Three

Gossip Elsewhere

The Brontës' engagement with Gothic gossip extends beyond a solely British Victorian context into the realms of North America in *The Scarlet Letter* and the Caribbean in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is set in the Puritan community of seventeenth-century Boston, with its protagonist Hester Prynne bridging the gap between Europe and America as she moves from England to Boston (Mackenzie, 17). Hawthorne is directly influenced by the Brontës' work as his novel makes use of the Gothic genre, paying careful attention to the subject of gossip. However, Hawthorne places more emphasis on the psychological effect of gossip on characters than the Brontës do (McIntyre, 880).

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a reimagining of *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Rochester whom Rhys decides to track from childhood to adulthood, giving her more agency and elaborating on her background and acting as a counter-narrative to *Jane Eyre's* narrative of Bertha. Reading the two narratives brings into question the validity of both texts as both form novelistic gossip in conjunction with one another which disrupts the narrative order within each text. This intentional disruption is at the heart of gossip's function as it brings into question what may have been believed before, a useful tool when it comes to the Gothic genre which specialises in the production and continuation of terror. Gossip functions in Austen's novels to reach moral resolutions where the novel of manners is concluded in a satisfying manner with partners being matched due to their equal conduct. The Brontës on the other hand prefer to conclude their narratives with underlying tensions. Their resolutions are not the ones hoped for but are fitting to the Gothic's production of terror, for example Jane and Rochester's union feels dissatisfying in light of his treatment of both Bertha and Jane which serves as a muted but not forgotten tension. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is evidence of the longevity of the Gothic genre as we see the

Gothic ideals of terror and gossip alive and well within the narrative although they are published in the twentieth-century.

3.1. The Shunning of Hester Prynne Through Puritanical Gossip

The Scarlet Letter proves to be a rich example of the Gothic gossip technique which is utilised to great effect to try to shame Hester Prynne, who rebuffs its aim by maintaining a dignified silence which with time dispels the malicious gossip that blackens her name. Matei Calinescu states that he believes that *The Scarlet Letter* rotates around the secrets of its characters and that the narrative progresses as the secrets are either withheld, hidden, corrected or eventually revealed (Calinescu, 448). I believe that this secrecy gives new life to the gossip in the novel as gossip is then allowed to take centre stage forming an accepted truth where there is none to be obviously found. Hester is subjected to gossip, but her silence acts as a powerful riposte to gossip's chaotic Gothic effects, as Hester is far from downtrodden and instead rises to become a respected woman who proudly wears her supposed mark of shame. Secrecy gives way to community speculation and gossip mongering, which in turn give way to the complementary themes of "guilt, repentance, betrayal, revenge, revelation, and the urge for transparency" (Calinescu, 450). From the novel's outset, Puritan Boston is both patriarchal, "[a] throng of bearded men" (Hawthorne, 45) and judgmental of sin. Upon the Puritans' arrival they allot land for a cemetery and a prison showing how they see the human condition as fallen and in need of punishment and ultimately resulting in death. Secrecy is soon shown to be a marker of the fallen condition (Calinescu, 453) and as a sign of evil and the foreboding of the Day of Judgment when all secrets shall be revealed (Calinescu, 452), something the Puritans would have evoked in their teachings.

Hester is punished harshly for her adultery and ridiculed for her silence which keeps the community from judging, Arthur Dimmesdale, the father of her child. Hester is tried by European law (Mackenzie, 19) and it is evident that the novel is less about love but rather about examining the role of "secrecy in human relations" (Calinescu, 449). Secrecy in turn escalates speculation through gossip and it is this harsh judgment of Hester and her suspected partner in adultery that makes us realise the novel is more comparable to a tragedy than a love story (Levi, 297-298). Before Hester even emerges, the townsfolk have their "eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door" (Hawthorne, 47) from which she will appear onto the scaffold to be openly condemned by the community. This morbid curiosity is encouraged as public discipline was the practice amongst the Puritans who viewed religion and law as synonymous.

The women of the Puritan community are described as "gossips" (Hawthorne, 48) in the text, and they conduct their gossip in a vindictive and abrasive manner which gives them power in their patriarchal setting, and their appearance is far from flattering in description as they are described as coarse, overweight countrywomen with "broad shoulders and well-developed busts" (Hawthorne, 48). Hester in contrast is described as having "a figure of perfect elegance…dark and abundant hair…being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion…lady-like" (Hawthorne, 50). This is a far cry from the appearance of the women that gossip about her which gives them another reason to despise her as her beauty far exceeds their own.

The Puritans are not without their hypocrisy as Mistress Hibbins, a witch, is protected by her brother who is a magistrate, whilst Hester becomes an easy scapegoat. Hester serves as a microcosm of the early Puritans cruelty towards women (Levi, 292) as she becomes "something of a pariah: a fixture of *Town Talk*" (Wharton, 234) and is forced to embody "women's frailty and sinful passion" (Hawthorne, 71). Hawthorne condemns not only the women who gossip but also the men which is clearly shown when Hester says she feels "as if

her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample on" (Hawthorne, 52). Hester's suffering is not solely attributed to the gossiping women of the community but also to the men who see themselves as fit to chastise her when they are not without blame themselves.

The women of the community willingly heap condemnation on Hester through censorious gossip, "[t]his woman (Hester) has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die" (Hawthorne, 49), as do the men who turn out to be the most conniving and cowardly in the text, mistreating Hester. Hester is proclaimed to have, "raised a great scandal, I promise you, in godly Master Dimmesdale's church" (Hawthorne, 57), although it turns out that Dimmesdale himself is the father of her child even though he is proclaimed to have, "the responsibility of [Hester's] soul lies greatly with you" (Hawthorne, 61). This statement is dramatically ironic as Dimmesdale is responsible for Hester's current afflictions and has neglected his responsibilities as her spiritual guide, acting in opposition to the beliefs he teaches. Hester's treatment by her community extends far beyond her judgment on the scaffold as she is not allowed to work on wedding attire despite the skilful embroidery for which she is known. Hester's scarlet letter marks her as an adulteress and daily Hester endures looks from strangers and those she knows as they stare at her letter which grew "more sensitive with daily torture" (Hawthorne, 77). This daily torture is exacerbated by secrecy as Hester is forced not only to endure ridicule but also to keep secret the identities of both her husband, Roger Chillingworth and Pearl's father, Reverend Dimmesdale. This takes its toll on Hester and it comes as no surprise when Hester does leave for Europe as, "the world had frowned on her, —for seven long years had it frowned upon this lonely woman" (Hawthorne, 169) making her "the people's victim and life-long bond-slave" (Hawthorne, 197). Not only is Hester persecuted but her daughter is too, "[m]other and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society" (Hawthorne, 85). Pearl is termed "a born outcast" (Hawthorne, 84), "her mother's only treasure" (Hawthorne, 80) and a "child of its father's guilt and its mother's shame" (Hawthorne, 101). The society can

only see Pearl as a product of sin which shows the maliciousness of their gossip as she becomes a living symbol of the scarlet letter which they feel validates their gossip.

Yet despite this social cruelty, Hester refuses to acknowledge her adultery as sin and does not recede due to community scrutiny; instead she owns her identity and wears the scarlet letter, "fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom" (Hawthorne, 51). The letter itself represents Hester's secret as she has not disclosed the identity of her child's father to the community, it is this valuable piece of information that makes her become even more talked of in the community as everyone wishes to know who else they can gossip about openly. This silent act of defiance to feed community gossip makes her punishment appear noble rather than shameful as she keeps her secret to herself infuriating her loose tongued community. Even upon her judgment on the scaffold she appears innocent as she is described as appearing to be an image of, "Divine Maternity" (Hawthorne, 53) which alludes to her purity as she and Pearl are likened to the virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Dimmesdale himself contributes to this divine imagery when he terms Hester, "my better angel" (Hawthorne, 176). From the outset Hester is shown to be no ordinary victim of gossip but instead someone who is intimately aware of its consequences and thus she protects Dimmesdale from public slander.

Hester's strength is admirable throughout the novel and we admire her courage although she "fails to impart her lover (Dimmesdale) [with] her own courage and boldness" (Levy, 379) Dimmesdale in fact seems to see the need to lean on Hester and envies her scarlet letter, "[h]appy are you Hester, that wear the scarlet letter openly upon your bosom! Mine burns in secret!" (Hawthorne, 167). Dimmesdale's cowardice is at its peak when he begs Hester, "[t]hink for me, Hester! Thou are strong. Resolve for me!" (Hawthorne, 171). Hester's strength comes from refusing to accept adultery as a source of guilt, unlike Dimmesdale who is crippled by not confessing (Mackenzie, 28). Hawthorne's disdain for the Puritan's self-righteousness is captured in his distasteful view of Dimmesdale who is overshadowed by Hester. We respect

her for her "strength of mind, passion and courage – with an admixture of stunning beauty" (Tassi, 26). Hawthorne delights in toying with "questions of gender, even reversing traditional ideas of feminine and masculine traits" (Tassi, 26) which he subverts when showing Dimmesdale's dependence on Hester in the forest. In illustrating this subversion of gender through gossip, Hawthorne, like the Brontës, allows for more female agency as Hester is empowered despite her plight, "[t]he stigma gone…[s]he had not known the weight, until she felt the freedom!" (Hawthorne, 176). Sensing this gender power reversal, Hester is able to reveal Chillingworth's identity to Dimmesdale and allow herself to justly express Dimmesdale's part in her plight which also leads to Chillingsworth exacting his revenge on Dimmesdale, whereas Hester chooses to protect him. Chillingsworth's behaviour is so despicable that Hester declares: "[h]e betrayed me! He has done me worse wrong than I did him!" (Hawthorne, 154). Hester becomes the most masculine figure in the novel with her scarlet letter instead; her ability to stand strong is admired, "so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength" (Hawthorne, 141). And Hester is able to do this because she is acutely aware of how gossip functions in her society, knowing that her secrecy harnesses her with power as she can be admired for her loyalty to the father of her child but also ensure that Dimmesdale will never allow Pearl to be taken from her.

Hester's becomes an iconoclast and instead of being overshadowed she represents untamed emotion and is likened to a rosebush (Stubbs, 1446), an image that is both wildly beautiful amidst the stringent backdrop of the Puritan regime and resilient due to its thorns that resist the Puritan way of life. Hester rises above the Puritans' attempt to cast her as a mere adulteress as "the scarlet letter had not done its office" (Hawthorne, 145) and became "her passport into regions where other women dared not tread" (Hawthorne, 174). Hester can return to her society after living in Europe and she returns wearing her scarlet letter proudly as she has relabelled it and upon her death her tombstone a single letter A is written as her feminist legacy outstrips

her life. Hester contains the same will power of the Brontës' heroines, as she is able to single-handedly claim back her humanity and even betters herself in the eyes of her community. This conclusion to the novel shows the powerful influence of the Brontës' Gothic gossip as Hester is able to subvert initial malicious community gossip into a useful form of gossip that elevates her position in society from that of an outcast to that of a deeply respected community member and a well-loved literary character (Tassi, 23).

Hester remains silent in a similar manner to her predecessor, Anne Brontë's Helen Huntingdon who also hides her secret from her community (Frank, 197). By resisting the urge to speak, these novels challenge the way character evidence is constructed (Frank, 201) and show the destructive property gossip possesses when false speculation is taken to be true. Hester's silence is voluntary and leads to a rise in gossip as the community's curiosity and need to apportion blame cannot be stifled (Alsop, 85). There is also strategy to Hester's silence in the form of passive resistance (Person, 465-466) as she leaves Dimmesdale to become a victim to his hypocrisy and cowardice having, "to hide a guilty heart through life" (Hawthorne, 62). Chillingworth is left to discover who has cuckolded him which leads to his own self-destruction (Person, 468-469), surely a path that Hester could have foreseen by maintaining her silence which in turn helps her exact her justice towards the men who have wronged her (Person, 475).

Roger Chillingworth creates a visceral reaction in those who encounter him as his surname suggests; he is the embodiment of Gothic terror in the novel with a penchant for causing pain to the man who cuckolded him, "I shall seek this man as I have sought truth in books" (Hawthorne, 69). Chillingworth is malevolent in his pursuit of revenge and swears to abuse Hester's lover most brutally, "I shall make him tremble" (Hawthorne, 69) and "[h]is fame, his position, his life, will be in my hands" (Hawthorne, 70). This comes to pass as Chillingworth discovers Dimmesdale's secret and does "plot against his soul" (Hawthorne, 112), becoming devilishly sadistic due to the "constant analysis of a heart full of torture" (Hawthorne, 148)

with Dimmesdale telling Hester that, “I tell thee, my soul shivers at him” (Hawthorne, 137). Chillingworth is the author of his own demise, a third sinner in the affair of the scarlet letter, as foreshadowed by Dimmesdale, “[t]hat old man’s revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of the human heart” (Hawthorne, 170), so much so that after Dimmesdale dies, Chillingworth loses his will to live, vanishes and he dies soon afterwards.

Men were known at the time to silence women into submission, thus decreasing their power, so it is ironic here that silence aids Hester as she is both safe and able to exact her revenge on those who have wronged her (Person, 470). It is interesting to observe that the presence of no gossip can be more destructive than the use of gossip, showing that perhaps gossip is not as much of a vice than a mechanism for character truths to be shared. The threat of her breaking this silence is also a tool that Hester utilises to keep both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth under her control as can be seen when she orders Dimmesdale in front of the governors to make sure she does not lose the custody of Pearl, “[l]ook thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!” (Hawthorne, 100). In doing this, Hester implies that she will divulge the identity of Pearl’s father to the governors if Dimmesdale does not speak up for her, ensuring Pearl remains with her. In maintaining her silence Hester “revenges herself upon both men who had forsaken her. Keeping Dimmesdale’s secret from Chillingworth and Chillingworth’s from Dimmesdale, she tacitly encourages the two of them to develop a love-hate relationship that climaxes in their deaths” (Person, 481). Even at Dimmesdale’s confession and passing, Hester is still able to exact her plan and leaves Boston for Europe as she intended (Person, 481). Interestingly, both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth’s demises bring about much good for Pearl as she determines to, “grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but to be a woman in it” (Hawthorne, 222), enabled to do so by the powerful example of her mother and the surprising inheritance she is left by Chillingworth as an apology for his wrongdoing. In this

way Hester's response to gossip is proven most effective as she allowed speculation to fester which led to community revisions about her character and for guilt to manifest in her oppressive partners, neither of which took responsibility for their treatment of herself and Pearl.

The Scarlet Letter is rife with gossip, but we are instead asked to take a more empathetic view of those we discuss as we are intimately acquainted with Hester Prynne and feel she is not deserving of such ridicule. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth undo each other, benefitting Hester, who although clearing herself of wrongdoing, is then respected throughout her community. Silence as a defence of gossip is also promoted, as both Anne Brontë's Helen Huntingdon and Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne are able to extract themselves from unjustified, malicious community gossip, giving themselves agency and enabling them to get justice and the peace they deserve.

3.2. New Writing Based on the Authority of Old Writing

According to Robert Miles the Gothic genre's aesthetic manifests in new writing based on the authority of old writing (Miles, 41). New writing based on revising supposedly authoritative narratives also suggests that those narratives are little more than gossip themselves in need of further participation or correction. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a new piece of writing that challenges the authority of old writing, in the form of a rebuttal of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, trying to give agency to Bertha Mason and vindicate the idea of the mad woman in the novel (Kubitschek, 24). The longevity of the Gothic is proven as this novel was written in 1966. However the text is still reliant on the Gothic genre's use of terror and gossip in order to complete its scathing critique of Charlotte's Rochester.

The beginning of *Wide Sargasso Sea* sets the scene for Antoinette's (later renamed Bertha by Rochester) childhood. Antoinette is a creole brought up in Jamaica and as a result she has many

assumptions placed on her; for example her friend Tia labels her as a "white cockroach" (Rhys, 7) as she does not fully conform to Tia's perception of whiteness due to her living conditions, "[r]eal white people, they got gold money" (Rhys, 8). Instead Antoinette lives at Coulibri Estate which has not been maintained, "[o]ur garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible - the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild" (Rhys, 4). The state of her family home is foreboding of Antoinette's treatment at the hands of Rochester as she too is beautiful but descends into madness due to Rochester's abominable behaviour towards her. Antoinette finds herself in a no-man's land as she is neither white nor black with people labelling her as follows, "[c]reole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys, 37). Even before Rochester erodes Antoinette's identity further, we see she is deeply damaged by community gossip about herself as she tells Christophine, "I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (Rhys, 63).

Antoinette's mother, Annette, suffers from a mental illness due to her son Pierre's condition as well as being ostracised by the Jamaican ladies which Christophine says is, "because she pretty like pretty self" (Rhys, 3). Christophine is alluding to Annette's beauty as well as the beauty of Antoinette herself, as it is to Antoinette she speaks. This notion is foreshadowing Annette and Antoinette's demise due to their excess of beauty that attracts the wrong sort of men. The idea of beauty as tempting and leading to a man's ruin is evident in both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* as both Annette and Bertha are seen as creating sexual nausea and catastrophe for the men they marry (Gilbert and Gubar, 823). The women's allure is of course blamed rather than the men who refuse to allow them a voice. This is what Rhys seeks to correct in her narrative, giving Antoinette the ability to frame her own history rather than letting us naively believe Rochester's account of her life. The interlinking symbolism of red across both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows untamed passion; Jane is restrained in the red room as a child when her nature is said to turn wild and she is in need of punishment, whilst Antoinette

is imprisoned and asks Grace Poole if wearing a red dress will make her appear "intemperate and unchaste" (Rhys, 120). Red is shown to be an excess in a woman's nature or sexuality in both narratives; however Jane escapes these coarse restrictions as she enters adulthood whilst Antoinette is further inhibited by them into adulthood.

Rochester proves to be pathetic in the narrative as he does not try to understand Antoinette for himself and instead, "he seizes on gossip about Antoinette to distance himself from her" (Kubitschek, 24) to terrifying effect as it signifies his refusal to understand his wife and her culture. Rhys critiques Rochester's solipsism in the novel as he is unable to see anything but his own culture and desires. His affection for Antoinette is questionable from the start as he desires her but does not love her, "I was thirsty for her, but that is not love" (Rhys, 56). Rochester's motives in marrying Antoinette are soon shown to erode further as Antoinette senses he does not love her and Christophine says she cannot help her, "[i]f the man don't love you, I can't make him love you" (Rhys, 70) and that his main reason for marrying Antoinette amounted to her money even though her beauty attracted him initially, "for that man money pretty like pretty self, he can't see nothing else" (Rhys, 71). Further disrespecting Antoinette, Rochester will not even listen to her account of her family, "[y]ou have no right to ask questions about my mother and then refuse to listen to my answer" (Rhys, 82). Instead Rochester believes local gossip that says, "[t]here is madness in that family…bad blood she have from both sides" (Rhys, 58-59). Antoinette comes to understand that Rochester cannot believe her account of the past, so instead he relies on the lies he has been told because "[l]ies are never forgotten, they go on and they grow" (Rhys, 83).

Rochester does not only not believe Antoinette's story of the past, but he also refuses to believe Christophine's account of Annette showing his complete bigotry towards women, "I've listened to all you had to say and I don't believe you" (Rhys, 103). Christophine is more openly scathing towards Rochester unpicking his threats, "[t]his is a free country and I am free woman"

(Rhys, 104) and telling him of his error, "[y]ou meddle in something and perhaps you don't know what it is" (Rhys, 104). The startling truth is that Antionette has had her agency stripped away from her, as she is no longer the narrator of her own story but must conform to others' false beliefs about her, mainly the altering of her identity by her husband who refuses to listen to his wife's account of her family and culture.

Rochester is shown to value the judgement of others rather than that of the subject about which they gossip. His decisions do not come without their consequences however, as at the conclusion of the novel we see Antionette has become what Rochester falsely believed and he loses his estate to the fire she starts. The deliberate erosion of Antoinette's identity by Rochester comes to fruition when he renames her Bertha (Anderson, 58), "it is a name I am particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" (Rhys, 86). By naming Antoinette Bertha, Rhys has made her transition to Brontë's novel and we are left to watch Antoinette succumb to the gossip driven assumptions of both her husband and her society (Roper, 30). In many ways *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a text acts as a catharsis for Antionette, a way for her to reclaim her identity and use it as a defence for the slanderous gossip she has endured and made true through her imprisonment.

A pattern emerges as we see that Rochester alters those he encounters; both Jane and Antoinette/Bertha succumb to his wishes although it must be noted that Jane has far more authority than Bertha. In Rhys's opinion, this is perhaps because she has an established identity devoid of racial complications. *Jane Eyre* can be said to be a Bildungsroman as Jane's condition is vastly improved from childhood into adulthood, whilst Antoinette transitions to Bertha and becomes further silenced and imprisoned as the text progresses (Herischian, 73-75). Rochester is also shown to have a type as he preys on women who have been abused by their families from a young age and pursues them blindly with little knowledge of their true circumstances. In light of *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is difficult not to view Rochester as a jailer rather than a

feminist hero as he does not champion women's rights (Anderson, 58). This complete character assassination of Rochester is voiced by Antoinette in her last stand against him before her mental collapse, "Bertha's not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (Rhys, 95). And it is with glee almost that Rochester undoes Antoinette as he proudly states, "I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness" (Rhys, 111).

This hopelessness in the newly named Antoinette leads her to descend into madness but she is sane enough to take her revenge on the man who has abused her so appallingly, "I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (Rhys, 123). Antoinette's last act shows her owning both her past and present as she acts as Bertha is expected to, but in the light of her past as Antoinette, she finds her freedom in the flames she creates at Thornfield, which once burnt down her childhood home Coulibri (Anderson, 59). Rhys's novel does not amount to a character substitution as she also forces identification with the position of the marginalised Antoinette, showing the problems of Rochester's intolerance to let women voice themselves, which in turn can be seen reflected in the original text, *Jane Eyre* (Kubitschek, 25).

As my discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* has shown, Gothic gossip has travelled far from its origins in Europe and England. Hawthorne and Rhys utilised Gothic gossip beyond its original realm of nineteenth-century England and revitalised it bringing it to American and twentieth-century audiences. Due to the employment of this Gothic technique of gossip both Hawthorne and Rhys's work is respected and not traditionally classed in the same canon as either Walpole, Radcliffe, Austen or the Brontës who preceded them.

Conclusion

In summary gossip was traditionally seen as idle female discourse (Pond, 177) and was used to lower the status of women for their sharing of unsubstantiated information (Gelles, 676). However, this notion is subverted by Gothic literature which seeks to justify and elevate the use of gossip. Instead gossip is painted as a form of character evidence (Frank, 172), holding greater social value whether it be true or untrue (Pond, 176), as gossip can allude to the character about whom it is spoken and the character who uttered it. Being endowed with such social value, gossip becomes a social game (Gluckman, 312) that allows people to be valued socially into desirable or undesirable positions (Gluckman, 309). In short, gossip is the voice of the Gothic novel, and particularly comes to the fore in the form of the Female Gothic Novels of the Brontës which utilise their female focalisers to convey both empathy for and agency to the women in their novels. Gothic gossip is a technique that far outlives its genre which falls away in the latter texts of Austen for example, yet the subtle use of Gothic gossip as technique creates new inflections on texts that in due course rehabilitate the Gothic genre into something that can be utilised further afield to great effect.

Originally Gothic novels mainly relied on gossip to create speculation (Spacks, 19) which in turn fuelled anxiety in its audiences (Keech, 131), thus furthering the gossip trait of terror. The blueprint of the Gothic genre can be attributed to the writers Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe (Wolfreys and Robbins, xi); both authors rely on the abuse of women by tyrannical men in order to generate fear in their audiences. Gossip proves to be a resource to ease the tension in the narrative as both Walpole's Manfred and Radcliffe's Montoni are undone by the gossip of the characters around them who actively seek their demise which is echoed by their gossip usage. The female characters are spared lifelong persecution as their male counterparts advocate for their freedom through gossip which leads to Manfred's abdication and Emily's escape from Montoni and her consequent marriage to the redeemed Valancourt. Gossip

triumphs ultimately although it comes through male interference in female concerns. This interference may be frowned upon by modern day critics, but it is twofold as the Brontës correct the stance of women's gossip in their work, but their predecessors cannot be criticised as they solidify the fact that gossip is not only a female past time but enjoyed and exercised just as much by males (Spacks, 21).

Austen lampoons the Gothic genre in her first novel *Northanger Abbey*, elaborating on the feelings and condition of women in the era in which she lived. Although ridiculing the Gothic's excessive use of terror for comedic ends, Austen does not discredit the Gothic's use of gossip which she allows to lead her heroine, Catherine Morland, to maturity. Catherine realises the folly of identifying gossip and literature as literal assertions pertaining to her life and instead learns that they are tools used to assert social dominance (Gluckman, 309). Some critics believe Austen tasks herself with the job of redeeming gossip (Goss, 170) as Catherine's maturity springs from discerning the gossip she has heard for herself - finding value in it whether it be true or false as it can alert one to one's own companions' motives as well as interpreting others' characters as long as one judges the content wisely as Catherine learns to do.

In *Emma*, a novel of manners, we see a deluded heroine schooled by gossip; it is only when she sees the folly of her judgments that she is able to correct her behaviour and escape the grasp of her needy father. Moreover, Emma is united to Mr Knightley who amends his view towards Emma's judgments and rather than rebuking her constantly he learns to respect her conscience and her judgments, thus validating her speech and solidifying her gossip as more than just a female vice (Pond, 178). Gossip allows Emma authority in her community which she does not have the opportunity to exercise in her own home. Austen is skilful in her narrative as she uses Emma, a privileged upper-class lady to show the breadth of gossip as well as the limitations of female speech in the male realm. When Austen completes the narrative, we are assured of Mr Knightley respecting Emma's views whether they be correct or incorrect. Equally, we

understand that her meddling has been tempered but her natural curiosity will not stop her from trying to gauge and predict the outcomes of others' affairs. Emma is essentially a good hearted and respected gossip who makes a good marriage, whilst correcting her misgivings which occur during the text. Gossip enables Emma's education and escape, but it also proves to be an undercurrent which results in much tension in the novel: a subtle nod to the terrifying antics of the Gothic genre from which the novel's technique of gossip originates.

Austen expands on her understanding of gossip in her last novel, *Persuasion*, where gossip plays a monumental role in concluding the marriage plot between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. Anne and Wentworth are united due to Wentworth overhearing the gossip between Anne and his friend Captain Harville who discuss gender and the strength and failings of the sexes as they see fit; again, letting Austen's feminist undertones permeate the novel. Austen allows Anne to marry Wentworth to forward her own individual gossip as she strongly promotes the Navy as worthy of elevation due to the aristocracy's excessive snobbery (Anne's father Sir Walter Elliot depicts the Navy distastefully throughout the novel), which stands in direct contrast to the Navy's humility and integrity. Austen enables an elevation of class for her male protagonist which in turn raises the agency of the timid Anne who is empowered and seen as Wentworth's equal, rather than as a worthless, unmarried daughter to her arrogant father who refuses to acknowledge her worth although he has been the cause of much of her unhappiness. Anne finally makes the right decision without the prejudicial input of those around her escaping her subduing family due to her use of gossip and the ability of Wentworth to take Anne's gossip seriously as an acknowledgement that she should have accepted his proposal many years ago, which prompts him to propose once more.

The Brontës further extend Austen's ideas as their female focalisers are given further agency showing a subversion of the ideals forwarded by Victorian society's treatment of women. We empathise with the poorly treated women in the texts who are persecuted until they mature and

empower themselves. All three novels are Bildungsromans due to the intervention of gossip. Each novel illustrates the various modes of conveying gossip as Jane confides her afflictions to us in *Jane Eyre* through the text itself, whilst Nelly Dean and Mr Lockwood convey the past and present history of *Wuthering Heights* through their gossip with one another. Helen Huntingdon allows Gilbert Markham to access her former life through her diary, which amounts to epistolary gossip. Women in all instances are given the authority over their own narratives and their gossip originates through self defence which shows a shift in agency from the Gothic novels of Walpole and Radcliffe which allow men to appeal for the improved treatment of women. This is why the Brontës' gossip is the most effective of my examined authors as it allows for the patriarchal and damaging conventions bolstered on Victorian women to be justly and radically revised, gaining women more freedom in the expression of their conditions (Gilbert and Gubar, 824). Justice is publicised as the abominable male figures in the novel are subjected to the terror they forward; Rochester is imprisoned by his blindness for a time, Heathcliff is subjected to the horror of Cathy's ghost and Huntingdon dies a horrible death at a young age. By exacting their revenge on the men who subdue their female characters, the Brontës' show a hope for future generations as gossip intervenes to make the female protagonists' lives improve and to quell the Gothic trope of terror that would otherwise pervade the Brontës' texts. Jane inherits a vast fortune and discovers family who actually care for her deeply; young Cathy does not make the mistakes of her mother before her and marries for love and Helen's son Arthur is safe to be raised by a man who is nothing like his father which means the domestic violence Helen endured will not be repeated by her son to his own wife. In using gossip so pointedly, the Brontës' allow for the improvement of the practice of Gothic gossip in light of their predecessors' work, as the gossip allows women's' suffering and opinions to be seen more clearly.

Later evocations of the Brontës' novels prove that their use of gossip was influential on both a geographic and historical scale. *The Scarlet Letter* shows the idea of gossip being capitalised on by Nathaniel Hawthorne in a Puritan community. Hester Prynne is a deeply admired feminist icon who is ironically empowered by her silence in response to slanderous community gossip which allows her to exact her revenge on the cowardly Arthur Dimmesdale and the malevolent Roger Chillingworth. Her silence acts as a rebuff to community assumptions and leads to the destruction of the two men who have deeply wronged her by not coming forward to reveal their role in her public shaming. The afterlife of the Brontës' Gothic gossip is evident in the work of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* that further questions Rochester's authoritative summary of his wife's life and instead wishes to divulge Bertha's past to us which in turn shames Rochester and gives Bertha the retrospective respect she was not given by the Victorian audience who initially read *Jane Eyre*. Here Rhys takes *Jane Eyre* as a form of gossip and comments and adds to it accordingly bringing into question the motives and validity of both narratives leading to an extension of literary critique on both novels which further aids the longevity of the Gothic genre using its technique of gossip.

Gothic gossip escalates in value from Walpole and Radcliffe who utilise it to exaggerate terror and slightly defend women's plight in society with the help of men to defend women's virtues. Austen then lampoons the Gothic genre and almost unknowingly discovers that gossip is to become an asset and constant ally in her own writing even when she does not utilise the Gothic genre; the technique of Gothic gossip still exists in her texts. The Brontës' interpretation of Gothic gossip proves to be the most powerful as it not only propels terror in the text but also solidifies the need for gossip to be used to interpret character and enhance the agency of women by independently letting their female characters grasp gossip as a tool for self-development and societal elevation. The Brontës understanding of gossip plays a significant role in expanding the female Gothic's use of gossip far beyond what was envisioned by their Gothic pretexts

(Walpole, Radcliffe and Austen), as Gothic gossip exists in later geographical and historical locations through the works of Hawthorne and Rhys. Gossip is invaluable to the Gothic genre and beyond.

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