Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.22

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"I Wait by the Door Like I'm Just a Kid": Feminist Return in *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it"

ABSTRACT

This article conceptualises feminist return as an affective structure that spans both 19th-century fiction and contemporary popular music. Focusing on Chapters 37–38 of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it" (2020), the analysis explores how women navigate unequal attachments, negotiate recognition, and perform emotional labour within asymmetrical relationships. Rather than reading return as narrative closure or nostalgic repetition, the article approaches it through Sara Ahmed's account of affective orientations and Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. These frameworks illuminate how emotions circulate across bodies and histories, shaping gestures of longing, waiting, overperformance, and the desire for reciprocity. In *Jane Eyre*, return operates as a feminist reconfiguration of relational life: Jane re-enters the scene of attachment with economic autonomy and affective agency, enabling a recalibration of intimacy grounded in mutual recognition. By contrast, Swift's lyric persona remains suspended within an affective impasse—performing meticulous care at a dinner table that becomes a theatre of misrecognition. Her return is cyclical rather than transformative, structured by diminishment, emotional overperformance, and a longing that is neither noticed nor reciprocated. Reading the two texts together highlights both historical continuities and divergences in women's emotional labour. Victorian scripts of endurance persist in contemporary intimacy, yet the possibility of feminist return emerges only when emotional labour is acknowledged and reciprocated. The comparison reveals how affective economies organise belonging and exclusion across time, and how feminist agency becomes thinkable when women refuse the conditions under which they are merely tolerated.

Keywords: feminist return, affect theory, emotional labour, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, Taylor Swift, "tolerate it."

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Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 5 June 2025. Verified: 24 Mar. 2026. Accepted: 31 Mar. 2026.

INTRODUCTION

In many narratives of love and intimacy, women do not simply leave unequal attachments; they also return to them under altered emotional conditions. The concept of feminist return is understood here not simply as a movement back to an earlier attachment, but as a specifically gendered re-entry into a scene of intimacy, injury, or subordination under altered conditions of legibility, agency, and self-knowledge. Feminist return occurs when a subject revisits a prior structure of feeling and either reconfigures it on more reciprocal terms or exposes it as structurally unrecoverable. Rather than treating return as temporal nostalgia or narrative repetition, this article frames it through the circulatory logics of affect. Sara Ahmed's account of affective economies demonstrates how emotions acquire value as they circulate among bodies, objects, and histories, "sticking" to particular figures and shaping orientations toward them (11). Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism further clarifies why such returns persist even when attachments wound the subject: optimism draws one back to the object because it promises a cluster of potentialities even as the desired object threatens the subject's well-being. Read together, Ahmed and Berlant allow return to be understood as an affective structure through which scenes of longing, misrecognition, and suspended hope are revisited, tested, and, at times, transformed.

This framework illuminates unexpected affinities between *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it" (2020). Though separated by more than a century, both texts centre on emotional labour, uneven recognition, and the ache of desiring reciprocity in relationships marked by hierarchy. *Jane Eyre* stages a 19th-century negotiation of love structured by gendered obligation, affective endurance, and self-respect, while "tolerate it" renders a contemporary version of the same dynamic: a woman who performs meticulous care before a partner who receives, but does not return, the gesture. Swift has explained that the song "tolerate it" was inspired by Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. In an interview with Apple Music discussing the songwriting process behind *evermore*, Swift notes that while reading the novel she was struck by the dynamic in which the husband merely "tolerates" his wife despite her attempts to please him, a tension that ultimately inspired the song's central emotional premise. However, this article invokes *Rebecca* only as contextual background; the analysis itself focuses on the affective dialogue between *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it." As a foundational text in the Gothic tradition of female confinement, misrecognition, and emotional endurance, Brontë's novel provides the conceptual anchor for theorising feminist return. The analysis therefore focuses on *Jane Eyre* and Swift's song as dialogic articulations of women's affective negotiations across historical conditions.

While scholarship on *Jane Eyre* has examined its feminist, religious, and psychological dimensions, and recent cultural criticism has positioned Swift within contemporary debates on authorship, affect, and celebrity femininity, the present article offers a focused comparative account of these works through the shared affective structure of feminist return. To address possible concerns about an "arbitrary pairing," this article argues that the relationship between the two texts is not grounded in aesthetic similarity but in their shared affective architecture: both dramatise how women sustain, resist, and reinterpret emotional attachment when recognition fails. Accordingly, the article asks: how does *Jane Eyre* model a feminist return that reconfigures relational power? How does "tolerate it" represent a suspended or failed return, shaped by contemporary affective economies? And what does reading these works together reveal about the evolution of women's emotional labour—from Victorian moral endurance to 21st-century negotiations of visibility, exhaustion, and intimate disappointment? Through Ahmed and Berlant, this study conceptualises return as an affective method for thinking about how women navigate unequal attachments, and how those attachments become scenes of both injury and knowledge.

This comparison does not assume formal or historical equivalence between the two works. *Jane Eyre* is a Victorian novel, while "tolerate it" is a contemporary popular song; their differences in genre, narrative scale, and historical conditions remain significant. The present article therefore adopts a deliberately narrow focus on affect, rather than attempting a full account of form or historical context. It isolates the problem of female emotional labour, asymmetrical attachment, and recognition across the two texts, while bracketing other questions that would arise in a broader cross-period and cross-genre comparison.

AFFECTIVE ATTACHMENTS, FEMINIST RETURNS

This article approaches return as an affective structure rather than a narrative device, drawing on Sara Ahmed's theorisation of affective economies and Lauren Berlant's account of cruel optimism. For Ahmed, emotions do not reside in individuals but circulate across bodies and histories, shaping how subjects come to "take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (1). Return therefore marks a movement back into those accumulated impressions—what emotions "stick" (11), which scripts orient us toward certain attachments (12), and how prior affective investments continue to organise desire. Berlant sharpens this picture by arguing that "all attachments are optimistic" because the subject leans toward a cluster of

promises that remain partially unrealised (24). Return becomes a repetition of inhabiting a scene whose promise is continually deferred, yet necessary for maintaining hope. In both *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it," return describes a pattern of coming back—emotionally, imaginatively, domestically—to a relational scene where recognition is longed for but inconsistently granted. Here, recognition refers less to formal social validation than to affective legibility: being responded to as a feeling subject whose care, presence, and desire register within relational life.

Within these returns, emotional labour emerges as the condition that sustains attachment. The term emotional labour is used here not in a narrowly sociological sense, but to describe the gendered work of sustaining intimacy, managing feeling, and making relational life habitable. It refers to the often invisible efforts through which women organise care, attention, and emotional stability within unequal attachments. Ahmed reminds us that emotions attach subjects to the very conditions of their subordination (12), producing gendered expectations in which women become the affective caretakers of relational life. In this framework, the emotional overperformance visible in both texts—Jane's careful management of Rochester's needs, Swift's speaker's choreographed attentiveness at the dinner table—reflects the labour of maintaining proximity within an asymmetrical structure. Berlant's account of the instability of reciprocity (27) helps illuminate why such labour persists even when reciprocity falters: the fantasy of recognition remains powerful precisely because it cannot be fully realised. Subjects therefore "make affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments" (25), suspending their own needs in order to preserve the promise of mutuality. This framework allows us to read both heroines not as passive sufferers but as agents negotiating the emotional economies that shape their conditions of belonging.

Rather than pairing *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it" through plot or character equivalence, this article pairs them through shared affective formations—longing, waiting, overperformance, asymmetrical recognition, and the desire for mutuality. Ahmed's account of relational "towardness" (8) explains the persistent reaching exhibited by both Jane and Swift's speaker; their emotional orientation is a pulling-forward toward a loved object that does not fully return their gesture. Waiting in both texts reflects what Ahmed elsewhere describes as investment that deepens precisely when return is withheld (131). Meanwhile, Berlant's notion of cruel optimism illuminates how this overperformance becomes a strategy of staying attached to a relational scene that both enables and erodes one's thriving (24–28). Across Brontë's 19th-century narrative and Swift's contemporary song, attachment becomes a labour of sustaining hope within an impasse—a present that "has weight" and suspends resolution

(Berlant 29). By grounding the analysis in these affective structures, the article illuminates how both texts render intimate life as a site of emotional endurance, hopeful repetition, and the fragile pursuit of reciprocity.

METHODOLOGY: FEMINIST AFFECTIVE PAIRING

The textual corpus comprises a deliberately delimited pair of affective sites: Chapters 37–38 of *Jane Eyre* and Taylor Swift's "tolerate it." The final chapters of Brontë's novel stage the moment of return, recognition, and relational recalibration, producing a dense emotional archive where gestures, pauses, and shifting power dynamics become narratively charged. These scenes illuminate how Victorian affective scripts frame feminine endurance as moral virtue. Swift's "tolerate it," treated as a narrative monologue rather than as a purely musical object, aligns with Sloan's demonstration that Swift's songwriting constitutes coherent narrative craft (11–26). Reading the lyrics as a voiced scene of emotional labour allows the two texts—despite distance in genre and period—to be placed under the same analytic lens.

This study employs a feminist affective close-reading method grounded in Ahmed's conceptualization of emotions as circulating across surfaces and bodies (10–11) and her analysis of love as a form of "towardness" sustained even when unreturned (124), producing ambivalence, dependency, and vulnerability (124–25). Ahmed's argument that waiting intensifies attachment further clarifies the dynamics of endurance central to both texts (131). Berlant's theorization of "cruel optimism," in which attachments to normative objects threaten flourishing (49) yet remain sustained through fantasy (49–50), provides an additional interpretive frame; her account of how subjects remain attached even in conditions that wear them out (28–29) helps illuminate the differing modes of emotional persistence enacted by Jane and by Swift's lyric speaker. Rather than analysing the entirety of *Jane Eyre*, the study focuses on Chapters 37–38 because they concentrate the novel's climactic scene of return and recognition, offering a high-density affective threshold where relational power, vulnerability, and reciprocity are renegotiated. The analysis attends to micro-emotions, silences, bodily orientations, tonal shifts, and affective residues that signal how each text stages negotiations of recognition, longing, and self-preservation. McNutt's analysis of Swift's paratextual authorship supports treating her lyric persona as a culturally shaped, gendered narrative subject (72–91).

The logic of pairing *Jane Eyre* with "tolerate it" is grounded in the continuity and transformation of affective scripts that structure feminine

relational labour rather than in aesthetic resemblance. Victorian emotional economies that valorise women's endurance circulate into contemporary pop culture, where emotional over-investment is reframed as authenticity or devotion. This study does not propose that Swift rewrites Brontë; instead, it traces how long-standing structures of attachment—what Berlant terms cruel optimism—continue to shape women's affective negotiations across historical contexts. Reading the two works together reveals how the cultural politics of emotional labour migrate from 19th-century fiction to 21st-century popular music, showing both continuity and reconfiguration in how women navigate asymmetrical care and desire for recognition.

THE AFFECTIVE SCENE OF RETURN IN *JANE EYRE*

Jane's return to Ferndean unfolds as an affective crossing that combines risk, longing, and the suspended breath of recognition. Ferndean is not merely a setting but an emotional landscape: "a desolate spot" buried in the woods (Brontë 517), a site of isolation that mirrors Rochester's internal ruin. Jane reaches it "just ere dark . . . cold gale, and continued small penetrating rain" (517), a meteorological register that amplifies the precarity of return. The thickness of the timber—"you could see nothing of it, so thick and dark grew the timber" (517)—positions her arrival not as triumphant but as tentative movement into uncertainty, almost a misstep: "I thought I had taken a wrong direction and lost my way" (517). This geography of obscurity materialises the unresolved attachments she carries: love not yet secure, desire not yet reciprocated, fear not yet resolved. When the door opens and Rochester emerges—"a man without a hat" (518)—recognition becomes an affective jolt, a bodily interruption: "I stayed my step, almost my breath" (518). The moment is not romantic completion but painful intensity—"rapture . . . kept well in check by pain" (518)—capturing Ahmed's sense that emotions circulate between bodies, binding and unbinding at once. The return is thus an affective threshold: Jane comes back not to reclaim a promised future but to risk the possibility of it.

The force of recognition deepens when Jane confronts Rochester's suffering. His "strong and stalwart contour" remains (518), but the transformation is written on his face—"desperate and brooding" (518)—and in the animal metaphors that signal wounded dignity: "some wronged and fettered wild beast," "the caged eagle . . . whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished" (518). Rochester's blindness creates a condition of radical vulnerability: "all to him was void darkness" (518), and he reaches out futilely to "gain an idea of what lay around him" but meets

"vacancy still" (518). Recognition, here, is not only about knowing Jane—it is about being known and felt again in a world that has turned opaque. When he demands, "'Who is this? Who is this?'" (520) and finally pleads, "'be perceptible to the touch or I cannot live!'" (521), affect becomes survival. His despair turns into trembling recognition when he touches her fingers—"'Her very fingers!'" (521)—and the reunion erupts with the intensities of living presence: "'In truth?—in the flesh? My living Jane?'" (521). Yet immediacy does not erase suffering: he fears she is a dream—"'I always woke and found it an empty mockery'" (521). Recognition thus functions as affective healing, a reconstitution of relational life after ruin. The sightless Rochester sees through touch, and Jane's voice, described as "'all the melody on earth . . . concentrated in my Jane's tongue'" (528), becomes the medium through which he re-enters the world. The mutual recognition is not simply romantic but reparative—an act that repairs the broken attachments that once forced them apart.

In the intensities of return, Jane becomes an affective labourer—one who gives, attends, and heals—but crucially not at the cost of erasing herself. When Rochester laments, "'I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree'" (535), Jane responds with counter-affect: "'You are no ruin . . . plants will grow about your roots'" (535). She offers emotional repair without submitting to self-sacrifice. Her affective labour is chosen, not imposed. This agency is anchored in her earlier declaration: "'No, sir! I am an independent woman now . . . I am my own mistress'" (522). Her inheritance grants her not only economic autonomy but relational equality. When she commits to staying—"'I will be your neighbour . . . your companion . . . to be eyes and hands to you'" (523)—it is a voluntary redistribution of care, not a subordinate role. Rochester fears she will feel "fatherly feelings" toward him (523) or descend into the position of a nurse, but Jane rejects this asymmetry. By the time we reach Chapter 38, her self-possession becomes the basis of partnership: "I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (543). This scene gestures toward a more reciprocal form of intimacy, though it remains shaped by the novel's Victorian domestic horizon. Their marriage is imagined as more reciprocal than the asymmetrical relations Jane rejects elsewhere, even if it does not entirely escape hierarchy—"We talk . . . all day long . . . all my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me" (543). Jane's affective labour therefore becomes a model of feminist agency: care as choice, not compliance; love as reciprocity, not duty.

Jane's return ultimately stages a feminist reconfiguration of relational life. She comes back not as the governess who once fled Thornfield in poverty and moral anguish, but as a woman who can say "Reader, I married him" (541)—a line as famous for its reversal of the male narrative gaze

as for its quiet assertion of authorship. Jane does not return merely to be tolerated; she returns under altered conditions of agency, recognition, and self-possession. Her earlier refusal of St. John—"'He is . . . cold as an iceberg.' . . . 'He wanted to marry me only because he thought I should make a suitable missionary's wife'" (534)—defines the boundaries of her feminist autonomy: she will not enter a marriage predicated on duty or utilitarian affection. With Rochester, by contrast, the return produces a relationship in which difference, disability, and gendered expectations are renegotiated under altered conditions of dependence. She becomes "his vision . . . his right hand" (543), a formulation that suggests a more reciprocal intimacy, even if that reciprocity remains marked by asymmetry. Rochester does not demand the sacrifice of self that St. John assumed; instead, he learns "tempered judgment with mercy" (544), accepting love not as domination but as grace. As they build a life where "perfect concord is the result" (543), the novel gestures toward a feminist alternative to Victorian marriage norms rather than resolving them completely. Jane's return thus rewrites the terms of belonging: not absorption into a husband's identity, not ascetic denial of desire, but a relational structure built on equality, chosen care, and emotional truth. It is the culmination of a trajectory in which she refuses every space where she is merely accommodated—every version of being "tolerated"—and claims instead a home shaped through mutual recognition, ethical intimacy, and shared becoming.

"TOLERATE IT": A FAILED OR SUSPENDED FEMINIST RETURN

The dominant affect in "tolerate it" is diminishment—the slow erosion of the self under the weight of asymmetrical attachment. The narrator's confession, "I wait by the door like I'm just a kid," crystallises the regression that love demands of her. This is not innocence but self-infantilisation, a deliberate shrinking of adult agency in hopes of eliciting attention. Affect here functions as a disciplinary force: to be loved, she must become smaller, quieter, easier. The repeated refrain "I sit and watch you" deepens this power imbalance, as her position shifts from partner to observer, from subject to spectator. She watches him "reading with your head low," "breathing with your eyes closed," absorbing him while he barely registers her presence. The emotional economy of the song reveals a subject who learns to calibrate herself downward—less need, less volume, less demand—in the desperate belief that smallness might be rewarded with affection. Yet even this conforming labour does not yield reciprocity; all she receives is toleration, a condition that can be read as

the cruel underside of recognition: being allowed to exist, but not being welcomed or desired. The narrator's self-diminishment is thus not a flaw but a strategy—an affective survival mechanism in a relationship that offers no secure ground for belonging.

If diminishment marks the narrator's internal state, emotional overperformance marks her external labour. "Use my best colors for your portrait" announces the gendered creative labour she pours into the relationship—she offers aesthetic devotion, imaginative attention, and expressive care that is neither reciprocated nor even acknowledged. The lyric "lay the table with the fancy shit" further captures this pattern of emotional overperformance, transforming a mundane act of domestic preparation into a ritual of affective display. Her performance is exhaustive: she greets him "with a battle hero's welcome," takes his "indiscretions . . . in good fun," and "polish[es] plates until they gleam and glisten." These gestures belong to what affect theorists identify as overperformance—the excessive giving meant to compensate for a partner who gives almost nothing in return. Her selfhood becomes a medium for his comfort; her emotional range narrows to anticipation, correction, silence, and readiness. This overperformance is also a rehearsal of gendered expectations: she choreographs devotion in the hope that love might be returned to her. But instead of celebration, she receives toleration, which transforms her emotional offerings into invisible labour. The song becomes a study in the exhaustion of affective overinvestment: the more she pours into the relationship, the more she disappears.

In the world of "tolerate it," the dinner table becomes the site of an elaborate affective theatre—a material space where invisible labour is staged, performed, and dismissed. The practice of "lay[ing] the table with the fancy shit" is not mundane housekeeping but a form of choreography: plates polished "until they gleam and glisten," colours chosen, gestures arranged, all for an audience of one who refuses to look. The table thus marks the paradox of her devotion: she creates beauty for someone who denies her emotional visibility. Sitting across from him, "watch[ing] you tolerate it," she is both performer and witness to her own diminishing value. The table is where relational asymmetry becomes undeniable—where he eats, reads, and occupies space without registering her existence, while she enacts a ritual of care that becomes increasingly spectral. Her emotional offerings accumulate like props: the portrait colours, the polished plates, and the hearts she draws "in the byline." Each object attests to her desire to be chosen, but each is met with indifference. The table becomes a microcosm of the relationship's emotional architecture: she builds worlds—"I made you my temple, my mural, my sky"—while he consumes without acknowledgment. The lack of recognition transforms the table into an affective void, a place

where effort disappears and intimacy dissipates. In affect-theoretical terms, recognition functions as the mechanism through which emotional labour becomes socially legible; as Sara Ahmed suggests, emotions are relational, taking shape through orientations toward objects and through responses to others (8–10). The dinner table scene thus operates as the inverse of the Ferndean encounter in *Jane Eyre*. Whereas Jane's return culminates in reciprocal recognition that reconstitutes relational life, Swift's narrator experiences suffering without recognition, performing care in a space that gradually erases her presence.

Misrecognition structures the emotional core of the song. The narrator does not suffer because she is unseen, but because she is seen incorrectly—perceived, acknowledged, but not valued. The refrain "If it's all in my head tell me now" expresses the desire not merely for love but for interpretive clarity: she needs confirmation that the pain she feels is real, that his indifference is not a misreading. Yet the emotional cues are unmistakable: "You assume I'm fine," she says, emphasising not absence of perception but failure of understanding. This is not invisibility but distorted visibility, a condition in which she is present but reduced to an accessory. Even her devotion becomes misread: she is "begging for footnotes in the story of your life," forced to inhabit the margins while he writes the main narrative. Her question—"Where's that man who'd throw blankets over my barbed wire?"—reveals the cruel temporal misalignment: recognition once existed but has since decayed, leaving her suspended in the ache of relational memory. The song's emotional tension arises from this unstable recognition: he sees her labour, but only enough to tolerate it; he sees her presence, but not enough to respond. In affect theory terms, she is caught in a circuit where recognition is withheld, partial, or strategically delayed, creating a state of emotional depletion that she cannot exit without breaking the structure of the relationship itself.

Unlike *Jane Eyre*'s return to Ferndean—where recognition, reciprocity, and feminist agency emerge from mutual suffering—the narrator of "tolerate it" returns every night to the same scene of diminishment without structural transformation. She comes back to the table, to the doorway, to the role of observer, repeating gestures that neither shift the emotional landscape nor destabilise the relational hierarchy. This cyclical return reflects what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism: the attachment to a situation that obstructs one's flourishing. The narrator clings to the hope that her love "should be celebrated," even as she acknowledges that he merely tolerates it. Her imagined departure—"What would you do if I . . . break free and leave us in ruins?"—stays hypothetical; the possibility of escape remains suspended, never actualized. Unlike Jane, who refuses to be tolerated by St. John and re-enters Rochester's life only when mutual

recognition is possible, Swift's narrator continues to inhabit a relationship that is emotionally asymmetrical and structurally unrepaired. Her return is not yet feminist in the reconfigurative sense developed here, because it demands self-erasure rather than autonomy and reinforces rather than renegotiates hierarchy; it sustains emotional labour without reciprocation. She ends as she begins: "I sit and watch you," a line that encapsulates the stuckness of affective circulation in a relationship where love becomes a diminishing resource. If Jane's return is an ethical realignment toward mutual becoming, the narrator of "tolerate it" remains trapped in a loop where affect binds but does not liberate. Her return is not a reclamation but a suspension—an affective holding pattern with no transformative horizon.

COMPARING THE TWO AFFECTIVE STRUCTURES

Both *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it" are anchored in heterosexual relational dynamics structured by unequal emotional labour, even though they emerge from radically different historical contexts. Jane's attachment to Rochester is shaped by 19th-century constraints around class, gender, and propriety; Swift's narrator, by contrast, can be read as condensing a postfeminist emotional economy in which women's affective labour remains undervalued. In both, longing is not passive but labouring: a process of watching, interpreting, waiting, and offering oneself in the hope of recognition. Jane's vigilance—her "restless search of my heart" (Brontë 257)—echoes Swift's refrain of sitting, watching, and noticing "everything you do or don't do." This shared structure of anticipation reflects the gendered burdens of relational care staged across both texts. Both texts dramatize the psychic taxation of such labour: Jane worries she "must keep in good health" to deserve love (Brontë 274), while Swift's narrator fears she has "got it wrong somehow." Their emotional vulnerability, shaped by hopes for reciprocity, marks a continuity in women's desire for legible recognition from male partners—a desire Weeks argues remains central to modern intimate life (8–12). Despite their different epochs, both narratives expose the unevenness of heterosexual love as a field where women's yearning becomes both the engine and the burden of relational life.

Yet the divergence between the two is sharp. Jane returns to Rochester only after she secures financial autonomy and moral clarity, producing what Owsley characterises as the ability "to negotiate the terms of the relationship" enabled by inheritance and Rochester's altered physical condition (63). Her return is not a recoil into dependence but a self-determined re-entering of partnership on more reciprocal, though still historically and ethically constrained, terms. Swift's narrator, by contrast,

returns each night to the site of diminishment—"I sit and watch you"—not because she is empowered, but because she is stuck in what Berlant theorises as "an impasse," a present that cannot move forward yet cannot be left (21–23). Where Jane's emotional labour leads to reciprocity, Swift's collapses into invisibility; her offerings—"best colors," the polished plates, the laid table—fail to register. Jane's selfhood grows through inquiry and moral reasoning, aligning with Jung's reading of her as a female detective whose "curiosity leads her to realize her own selfhood" (21); Swift's narrator, conversely, is caught in a cycle of self-erasure, making the partner "my temple, my mural, my sky" while receiving only tolerance in return. Ioannou's analysis of female beauty and artistic agency in *Jane Eyre* underscores how Jane's artistry (e.g., her watercolours) becomes a means of expressing desire and judgment (327–31). Swift's narrator also engages in artistic labour—"use my best colors"—but unlike Jane, her creativity is not recognized as such; it becomes domestic affective service rather than self-expression. Sloan's discussion of Swift's lyric precision highlights how the song's formal repetition enacts emotional exhaustion (17–22), reinforcing the contrast with Brontë's narrative arc, where emotional work leads toward liberation rather than depletion.

Comparing the two texts shows a durable continuity in the affective burdens placed on women across centuries, even as conditions for empowerment shift. Victorian realism exposes the constraints that force Jane to navigate love through self-discipline, moral reasoning, and cautious autonomy. Even so, the novel ultimately imagines a feminist possibility: a rebalanced partnership where recognition becomes mutual, echoing Gao's reading of Jane as a woman who "gradually becomes feminist" by insisting on equality and moral agency (926). In contrast, Swift's modern pop narrative figures a feminist moment in which women ostensibly possess autonomy yet remain emotionally overextended in intimate life. Her narrator's diminishment speaks to the contradictions McNutt identifies in Swift's broader star-text: feminist gestures limited by structural conditions that never fully shift (72–91). Swift's portrayal of a woman "begging for footnotes in the story of your life" resonates with Smialek's argument that Swift's work exposes tensions between agency, gender, and cultural expectations (104–12). Whereas Brontë's novel imagines an exit from asymmetry, Swift's song exposes the emotional residue of partnerships that never become balanced—situating her narrator in the suspension of Berlant's impasse rather than a feminist return.

These affective structures reveal how feminist feeling does not progress linearly from oppression to liberation. Instead, it oscillates across eras: Brontë writes toward a hoped-for equilibrium, while Swift writes from within contemporary exhaustion. In the terms developed

here, feminist refusal begins when a subject ceases to absorb the demands of others as the price of attachment; Jane enacts such a refusal when she leaves Thornfield, but Swift's narrator has not yet reached that threshold. The comparison thus illuminates the complexity of feminist affect across time: empowerment emerges when emotional labour is recognised and reciprocated, whereas diminishment takes hold when such labour becomes invisible. The distance between Jane and Swift's narrator marks not a simple historical trajectory but the uneven, affective terrain through which women continue to navigate intimate life.

CONCLUSION: RETURNING DOES NOT EQUAL BELONGING

The comparative reading of *Jane Eyre* and "tolerate it" reveals how feminist affect remains structured by the tension between desire, recognition, and emotional labour across radically different cultural forms. Both texts illuminate how attachments—romantic or domestic—shape the subject through what Ahmed calls the "press" of impressions that form the surfaces of bodies (6). Yet the two narratives diverge sharply in how they imagine the possibility of transformation. Jane's earlier departure from Thornfield can be read as a refusal of structures that negate her subjecthood, making her later return legible as a re-entry on altered terms. Swift's narrator, by contrast, inhabits what Berlant describes as an "impasse," a suspended present in which the subject remains bound to the promises of a scene that wears her out (28–29). Where Brontë offers a model for negotiating equality—enabled by Jane's financial agency and affective autonomy—Swift exposes an attachment that erodes the self even as it is desperately maintained.

These findings speak directly to the durability of what Berlant names "cruel optimism": the condition of remaining attached to what threatens one's thriving (24). Swift's narrator exemplifies this affective structure—waiting "like I'm just a kid," and offering her "best colors" for his portrait—continually bargaining for recognition. The fear structuring her attachment lies less in losing the beloved than in losing the very capacity to remain hopeful. Jane, however, refuses this trajectory; her insistence on being "my own mistress" reorients her attachments toward relational reciprocity and mutual recognition. This contrast suggests that feminist affect is historically mutable: Victorian realism narrates the possibility of rebalancing emotional labour, whereas contemporary pop surfaces the exhaustion of emotional giving that yields no structural change. Such exhaustion aligns with Jackson's critique of "basic," depoliticised feminisms that circulate affect without transforming conditions (1078).

Finally, the cultural stakes of these attachments extend beyond individual narratives. As Fogarty and Arnold note, Swift's work embodies the contradictions of contemporary popular feminism—simultaneously offering visibility and revealing the limits of celebrity as feminist pedagogy (3–4). Placing Swift beside Brontë thus clarifies a broader feminist insight: emotional labour, recognition, and attachment are never merely personal but culturally organised, mediated, and historically reproduced. If, as Ahmed argues, emotions are "world making" (12), then these texts show two different worlds: one where feminist agency is wrested from systems of constraint, and another where affective endurance becomes a quiet survival strategy amid asymmetrical love. The task of feminist criticism, then, is not simply to diagnose these structures but to imagine modes of relation that do not require diminishment as their price.

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