Four years after the commercial success of *Pride and Prejudice*, and five years after the even more popular reception of *Wuthering Heights*, another British nineteenth-century novel by a woman writer was adapted into film. In 1944 Robert O. Selznick released a production of *Jane Eyre* that was directed by Robert Stevenson, probably with the assistance of Orson Welles. Although aspiring for and achieving similar commercial success, this adaptation differs significantly from its Depression-era predecessors. By 1944 the Second World War had drastically changed American culture. Many men had gone abroad to fight, and the women working in the jobs the men had left behind were receiving a great deal of public attention. Women’s wartime work was venerated, and cultural ideas about women changed. Yet the new independence women seemed to have gained triggered anxieties about women abandoning their homes, husbands, and children. Not surprisingly, in this context, the adaptation makes some significant changes to Charlotte Brontë’s representation of a woman’s quests for independence.

Unlike *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* had often been identified as a feminist novel before it was made into a film. Virginia Woolf had drawn attention to the now-famous passage in which Jane asserts that women need wider spheres of experience than baking puddings and embroidering. Elizabeth Bowen, in *English Novelists* (published in 1932 and again in 1942), joins Woolf in quoting Jane’s description of women’s “silent revolt against their lot” and even concludes that *Jane Eyre* is “the first feminist novel.”¹ *The Facts of Fiction* (1932), in a chapter entitled “The Independent Brontës,” calls Charlotte Brontë a “womanly anarchist” and claims that she purposely ends the novel with a wife who has an independent fortune in order to assert the importance of women’s autonomy from men.² In the 1941 *Concise
Cambridge History of English Literature, George Sampson states that *Jane Eyre* is a novel that “establishes the first independent woman in fiction” as it depicts a character who “is woman herself: confronting man on equal terms.”

The novel’s sexual content had also been noticed before 1944. In *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (1934), David Cecil claims that, despite what he calls the “Puritanism” of the Victorian era, *Jane Eyre* expresses “sexual energy,” and he places Brontë in a group of writers that includes D. H. Lawrence. In sum, not only early feminist critics but also readily available popular histories of literature asserted that *Jane Eyre* was feminist and that it explored sexual themes. One can assume that Selznick, who was known for his love of nineteenth-century novels and his interest in literature, was aware of such interpretations. Nevertheless, the 1944 adaptation resists these two central themes in the novel.

The adaptation’s erasure of the novel’s feminist themes was noticed by feminist critics in the 1980s and early 1990s. Elizabeth Atkins criticizes the adaptation for removing Jane’s female role models and editing out her inheritance. E. Ann Kaplan and Kate Ellis claim that the changes the film makes are “a result of a reversion on the part of the two directors to accepted patriarchal structures,” that it is “anti-feminist.” They particularly fault the film for eliminating Miss Temple – whom they define as a maternal role model who resists patriarchal structures – and replacing her with Dr. Rivers, a character the film invents. This view, as was typical of adaptation studies at the time, overlooks the complexities of both the novel’s and the film’s representations of gender. The novel is not one-dimensionally feminist, nor is the film simply “anti-feminist.”

Since the Dr. Rivers character was actually added to the script at the same time as Bessie, Miss Temple is in fact replaced by two characters. The film’s Bessie is also very different from both Bessie and Miss Temple in the novel. In fact, female role models are not simply removed but are reconstructed in accordance with idealized representations of motherhood circulating in the culture during, and especially toward the end of, the Second World War. Brontë’s exploration of female desires that are not bound to the home and her critique of Victorian maternal ideals are replaced in the film by an idealized representation of motherhood typical of the period in which the film was made.

Although Adrienne Rich has claimed that in the novel Jane is guided by a series of substitute mother figures, Brontë actually reevaluates her culture’s ideals of motherhood by portraying all these substitute mother figures as inadequate or flawed. Miss Temple is too distant and aloof to satisfy Jane’s intense emotional needs; Bessie is not consistently