



Università  
Ca'Foscari  
Venezia

Master's Degree  
in European, American and Postcolonial  
Languages and Literatures

Final Thesis

**Madness and gender:**  
the role of Bertha Antoinetta Mason in *Jane Eyre*  
and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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**Academic Year**

2019/2020

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## Introduction

“Mental illness, according to the anti-psychiatry movement, is a myth. The asylum, Michel Foucault explained, is primarily a form of institutional control. The reception of Rhys's re-evaluation of Bertha Antoinette Mason is in part a product of this particular historical moment in England and the United States. In this context, Bertha Mason, and the figure of the madwoman in general, became a compelling metaphor for women's rebellion.”<sup>1</sup>

Madness and gender are two phenomena that run parallel within literature. The depiction of insane and crazy women who should be inserted within the most reprehensible asylums only for their gender is the main key for reading nineteenth and twentieth century's novels.

The object of this study is to analyze the deep relationship between madness and gender, and the focus will be mainly on the figure of Bertha Antoinetta Mason, the “*madwoman in the attic*” by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Here Bertha is described like an animal: the woman never speaks but only laughs, screams and bites. The main text used is the manifesto of feminist literary criticism by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, written in 1979, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Gilbert and Gubar's text and Brontë's novel are, of course, not the only texts that figure madness as rebellion. In *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler views women's madness as a journey of mythic proportions: “*Women have already been bitterly and totally repressed sexually; many may be reacting to or trying to escape from just such repression, and the powerlessness it signifies, by 'going mad'*” (1972, 37). In this repression, “going mad” might be considered the only sane response to an insane world.

Transgressive, indecent, scandalous. Thus was defined, upon its release in 1847, the masterpiece of Charlotte Brontë: the heroine without a family and without money, intelligent and cultured, but raised in an orphanage, who dared to give voice to the feelings she felt for a forbidden man, shattered many prohibitions in the rigor of Victorian England. But the strength of Jane's character and of Charlotte Brontë's writing prevailed over any possible criticism. And still today, two hundred years after the birth of its author, *Jane Eyre* is the story of all independent women who think that life must be faced with courage.

A century later, Jean Rhys revived Bertha Antoinetta Mason in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by giving her a story, from her childhood to her confinement in Thornfield Hall, providing her a voice and a body. In her point of view, Bertha was not crazy at all, but her condition was the product of everything she has suffered since childhood: difficult childhood, a dangerous social

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth J. Donaldson, *The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness*, NWSA Journal, Autumn, 2002, Vol. 14, No. 3, Feminist Disability Studies (Autumn, 2002), pp. 99-119, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR, page 100.

climate, and her husband's ultimate betrayal. In this evaluation, race and colonialism take a fundamental role.

In *Jane Eyre*, the madwoman's maiden name is Bertha Antoinette Mason. In Rhys's novel the parallel character's maiden name is Antoinette Mason, née Cosway. The name "Bertha" is an invention of her husband Edward Rochester and this re-naming emphasizes the colonial role the husband has in making Antoinette mad identity in Rhys's text.

As pointed out by Oreste Del Buono <sup>2</sup>, an Italian writer and screenwriter, there is in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë a minor character, but fairly disturbing: the character is Bertha Antoinetta Mason. Jean Rhys had the idea to reconstruct her life before her arrival in England. Jean Rhys's novel is extraordinary, a novel characterized by a poisoned charm, deranged passions. Driven by its haven of Coulibri, Antoinette faces a tumultuous and tragic fate of love and madness.

Jean Rhys pushes her heroine to burn and wear out the beautiful novel that is *Wide Sargasso Sea* up to shrink the shadow and confused by a minor character of the novel which is *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë.

After a first chapter that will be focused on the relationship between madness and gender in Victorian England, with references to the treatment of women in American and Austrian asylums, the paper will go into more in details in the following chapters, in which the character will be analyzed taking into account the novels of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Both novels are stunning, because they had put a huge cultural baggage in the history of British Literature, but *Wide Sargasso Sea*, although less known, creates an awareness that makes the reader aware of the horrors and injustices of the time. Antoinetta's death at the end of both novels can be seen as her spirit crushed by the oppressive male world around her, plus her identity is torned from her by her husband. Her individuality, Antoinette Mason, born Cosway, is completely stripped away: first her surname is taken away, having to take the one of her stepfather, then her name is also changed to "Bertha" by her own husband, who is designed as the real oppressor of the patriarchal society she's living in.

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<sup>2</sup> Oreste Del Buono, note on the back cover of *Il Grande Mare dei Sargassi*, by Jean Rhys, Adelphi, 1980.

# *Madness and gender*

## *1.1 The role of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century England*

During the era characterized by Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), women's lives became difficult because of the spread of the ideal on the "angel woman", intermediary between man and God, shared by most of society. The role of women diminished to procreate and to take care for the home. They could not pursue a profession, unless it was a teacher or housewife. The Victorian age has demarcated the spheres of men and women, always assigning the position of inferiority and domesticity to the woman and fixing the ideal role for her.

Despite their condition of "*angel in the house*", worshipped as saints, their legal status was miserable, while men were "captains of the industry". Men were expected to be mentally active, physical strong, and guiding leaders of society, and women were to be their passive and pious. "The Angel in the House" is an epic coined by Victorian poet Coventry Patmore (1823-1896) and remains the most popular way to describe the woman's position within Victorian society.<sup>3</sup>

Men and women in Victorian age were considered as separate spheres, because each of them belonged to a different role in society. The doctrine of "separate spheres" became not only a biological imperative, but also a keystone of that society, to denote the virtue of being a woman in Victorian society and adopted in the famous lines of the Poet Laureate, Lord Alfred Tennyson:

*"Man for the field, woman for the hearth:*

*Man for the sword and for the needle she:*

*Man with the head and woman with the heart:*

*Man to command and woman to obey."*<sup>4</sup>

As those lines indicate, Victorian society was preoccupied not only with legal limitations of women, but also with the very nature of them. In this case, women have a special nature fit for their domestic role.<sup>5</sup>

The ideal of the independent woman, confined to the domestic circle was expressed in the writings of Ruskin or Coventry Patmore, who saw the home as a sacred place, a haven of spirituality presided by an angel-wife. Social theorists suggested that the dependence of women might be used as a measure of social progress.<sup>6</sup>

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3 The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1608.

4 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Princess*, lines 438-440.

5 The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1033.

6 Laurence Lerner, *The Context of English Literature: "The Victorians"*, pp. 175-176.

During the Victorian age, political reforms had given citizens many rights, so that the German philosopher Friedrich Engels said that England was "*England is undeniably the freest, in other words, the least unfree, country in the world, not excepting North America*"<sup>7</sup>, even though women were not included in this freedom, because they could not vote or hold political matters.

While man could divorce their wives for adultery in general, women could divorce for adultery only if it's linked to cruelty, bigamy, bestiality.<sup>8</sup> This just to show that women's rights were not the same as those of men, because the same sin or behavior was seen and consequently dealt with in two different ways, depending on the sex.

Everything for women was limited and from this, it's born what it's called today "*Women Question*".

A very important English literary work is "*The Subjection of Women*"<sup>9</sup> (1869), by John Stuart Mill. This work was adopted by the leader of the suffrage movement as the definitive analysis of the position of women in society. In chapter I, Mill says that the social relationship between the two sexes, who submit one sex to the to the other, is the biggest obstacle to the progress of humanity, and that this social condition of the Victorian age should be replaced by absolute equality.

Even in Hardy's "*Jude the Obscure*" (1894), his heroine quotes literally Mill's words in "*On Liberty*" (1859) to persuade her husband to free her from their unequal marital bond: "*Sue continued: 'she, or he, 'who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation'. J. S. Mill's words, those are. I have been reading it up. Why can't you act upon them? I wish to, always.*"<sup>10</sup>

Virginia Woolf in a famous essay explains the reasons why for centuries women have been prevented from cultivating an artistic talent. First, it is important to try knowing that women writers rarely published with their name, and they write using a male pseudonym. However, the situation changed in the Victorian era. For many centuries women were put aside, and they were prevented from entering the country's active life and having a higher culture. Consequently, it was not possible to cultivate artistic attitudes, except perhaps in secret, or that a talent as William Shakespeare's (this is Virginia Woolf's thesis in the essay "*A Room of one's own*") could be born, because it would have been immediately suffocated by prejudices.

But, with the rise to the throne of Queen Victoria, the situation started to change. The rise of the middle-class had allowed, from the years before Queen Victoria's coronation, to the middle-class to have a good education to its offspring.

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

<sup>8</sup> The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1032.

<sup>9</sup> The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1104.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, Wordsworth Classics, 1993, Part IV, Chapter III, "At Shaston", page 194.

The ability to "breathe" culture allowed many writers to develop their literary talent despite the many facets imposed on them by the society of the time.

One of the most important female poet of those times was Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), wife of Robert Browning. Her work feels into disrepute with the modernist reaction against what was considered the inappropriate didacticism and rhetorical excess of Victorian poetry; but recently scholars interested in her exploration of what it means to be a woman poet and in her response to social and political events have restored her status as a major writer.<sup>11</sup>

She is best-known for her "*Sonnets from the Portuguese*" (1850), which it stands out from the others for aulic and great sentimentality. This literary work can be considered as an implication of genre, firstly because it's itself a collection of sonnets, which are in their typical form, composed of fourteen verses. This attention for this type of poetry is associated with great poets, such as the Italian one Petrarch, or Shakespeare, and it underlines Elizabeth Barret Browning's ambition to claim to high poetic art. She is a female speaker poet addressing male love poet, who is himself a poet. "*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,*"<sup>12</sup> so it opens the sonnet devoted to his dear "*Beloved*", the poet Browning.

But most of all, her verse novel "*Aurora Leigh*" (1857) has attracted critical attention, because it depicts the growth of a woman poet and is thus, as Cora Kaplan observes, the first work in English by a woman writer in which the heroine herself is an author.<sup>13</sup> She narrates the story of Aurora who, always in search of her emancipation, refuses to marry to maintain her freedom. It's a daring work both in its presentation of social issues concerning women and its claims for Aurora's poetic vocation. Virginia Woolf used to say that this poem tells the reader that "*Aurora Leigh, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as an artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age*".<sup>14</sup>

On the morning of her twentieth birthday, Aurora rejects a marriage proposal by her cousin Romney Leigh. She chooses to devote herself to her vocation in defiance of Romney, who disparages her verses and wants her to dedicate herself to his philanthropic causes, using these words:

*"What you love  
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:  
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,  
A wife to help your ends, - in her no end."*<sup>15</sup>

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11 The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1123.

12 Elizabeth Barret Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Sonnet 43.

13 The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1123.

14 Virginia Woolf, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1930.

15 Elizabeth Barret Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book 2, ll. 400-403.



In presenting her heroine's track to poetic maturity, Barrett Browning created a female literary tradition by alluding to her predecessors. Her work draws upon novels written by women, Charlotte Brontë's "*Jane Eyre*" (1847) being one major source: the female protagonist's status as an orphan, the figure of a cruel aunt, the proposal by St. John Rivers, and Rochester's blindness all appear in "*Aurora Leigh*".

In the work "*A Madwoman in the Attic*" (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, it's examined the notion that women writers of the nineteenth century were confined in their writing to make their female characters either embody the "angel" or the "monster", following Patmore's ideas.

Another author who can be honored could be Christina Rossetti, a real *female laureate*, which can be considered as the heir of Elizabeth Barret Browning. The critic Jerome McGann calls her "*one of the nineteenth-century England's greatest 'Odd Women'*"<sup>16</sup>, who refuses marriage to devote herself to her art.

Dr. Simon Avery asks how Christina Rossetti's poetry sits within this context, looking at her representations of oppression, female identity, marriage and the play of power between men and women. In 1870, the acclaimed Victorian poet sent a letter to her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in which she commented on her abilities as a writer. Comparing herself to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she noted: "*It is not in me, and therefore, it will never come out of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs. Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to a greater than I.*"<sup>17</sup>

The Victorian period witnessed massive changes in thinking about women's roles in society with much debate concerning women's education, employment opportunities, marriage, sexuality, psychology, and the right to vote. Within this context, Christina Rossetti had complicated views on female suffrage and equality. At times she used the Biblical idea of woman's subordination to man as reason for maintaining the status quo, while at others she argued for female representation in Parliament and spoke out against the sexual exploitation of women in prostitution.<sup>18</sup>

Christina Rossetti is famous for her sonnet "*In an Artist's Studio*", in which she criticizes the conventional representation of women in Pre-Raphaelite art. She uses "*a nameless girl*"<sup>19</sup> to describe the objectification given by the male artist while painting a woman: it's not simply a girl, but a nameless one, the woman in general, so it's referred to all the women. The woman is not conceived as a person in her own right, but simply a reflection of what the man wants to find.

As mentioned above, it is important to remember not only the refused rights of women in the social and political field, but also the description of them in the most well-known Victorian poems.

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16 The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1489.

17 Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter, 1870.

18 Dr Simon Avery, available at <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles-christina-rossetti-gender-and-power>.

19 Christina Rossetti, *In An Artist's Studio*, 1896, line 6.

A very clear example of this, is the portrait of Queen Guenevere in Morris' "*The Defence of Guenevere*" (1858) and in Tennyson's "*Idyllis of the King*" (1859), in which there are the two different portraits of the queen.

One of the most unusual characteristics of the first poem is that Morris gives Guenevere a powerful eloquence, very distant from Tennyson's view of a complete subdued Guenevere, which is represented just as a guilt-ridden wife.<sup>20</sup> William Morris creates a realistic drama dealing with the illicit romantic passion between Queen Guenevere and Sir Launcelot, figures out of Arthurian romance. In a speech similar to the dramatic monologue of Robert Browning, Guenevere both acts as her own defender and appears as an accuser before a hostile audience of the knights. Guenevere's speech dramatizes the tension between the speaker and the audience, by which Guenevere attempts to delay her execution before Launcelot arrives.

Morris' Guenevere gains confidence as she goes along the story, describing not only her actions, but also her emotions, with vivid and colorful detail.

Morris, from the title, convinces the reader that this poem is about a defence of a woman who cheated on her husband, King Arthur, so about a woman who is an adulteress. The narrator speaks about her as "*bravely glorious*"<sup>21</sup> and as one who "*stood right up and never shrunk*".<sup>22</sup> Guenevere also portrays herself as a brave warrior: "*So, ever must I dress me to the fight*".<sup>23</sup> In the manner of heroic warriors, she narrates a tale of battle: to defend herself in a men's world, Guenevere must use characteristics of both the male and female genders.

This literary work demonstrates that women, to survive in a world completely dominated by men, must have characteristics typical of man, and not just of women.

On the contrary, in Tennyson's poem, as mentioned above, there's the view of a complete submitted Guenevere:

*"And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven  
My wickedness to him."*<sup>24</sup>

In those lines, Guenevere portrays herself as a sinner, as a woman who prays for her husband's pardon, so it's very different from Morris' point of view, because Morris' Guenevere acts like an independent woman, who is racked with guilt over her infidelity to King Arthur. Indeed, here she's portrayed as a weak woman, a repented queen.

This kind of doctrine of the separate spheres is present also in the best work by Charles Dickens, "*Great Expectations*" (1860-1861), Considered one of the best-known classics in Victorian literature. It tells the story of the orphan Pip, and describes his life since he is still a child up to

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<sup>20</sup> The Norton Anthology English Literature, The Victorian Age (Volume E), 2012, page 1513.

<sup>21</sup> William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere*, 1858, line 56.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. William Morris, line 55.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. William Morris, line 165.

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idyllis of the King*, 1859.

adulthood. The protagonist tries to become a gentleman during the novel. The main female characters in this story are Mrs. Joe, Pip's sister, Miss Havisham, a wealthy old maid, and Estella,

Miss Havisham's adopted daughter. The reader knows the difficult life that Pip has to live, because he's surrounded by surrogate parents: absent mothers and violent mother substitutes are integral to the narrative from its very beginning. The female character Pip introduces, after his dead mother, is his sister-mother substitute, Mrs. Joe Gargery. He describes his sister as harsh and unapproachable, far from the loving mother of Victorian fantasy: Mrs Joe has "*a hard and heavy hand...*".<sup>25</sup>

Mrs. Joe is clearly the opposite of the ideal Victorian woman. Pip depicts her more as a monster than as a woman, because she is a malevolent mother substitute.

Another figure in this text is the one of Miss Havisham, a wealthy middle-aged woman mentally unstable because of a trauma, who lives in her luxurious home with her adoptive daughter, Estella, and who insists on wearing her wedding dress for the rest of her life. She dresses that since she was left at the altar from her future husband. She felt so humiliated and depressed that she decided not to change anything, never removing her wedding dress, wearing only one shoe, leaving the wedding breakfast and cake uneaten on the table: the things for her must remain in the exact position of her wedding day. While Estella was still a child, Miss Havisham began casting about for boys who could be a testing ground for Estella's education in breaking the hearts of men as a revenge for Miss Havisham's pain. Pip, the narrator, is the eventual victim; and Miss Havisham readily dresses Estella in jewels to enhance her beauty and to exemplify the most the vast social gap between her and Pip. When, as a young adult, Estella leaves for France to receive education, Miss Havisham eagerly asks him, "*You are looking round for Estella? Hey*" ... "*Do you feel you have lost her?*".<sup>26</sup>

This attitude once again emphasizes the malevolence and the greed of Miss Havisham, who enjoys seeing others suffering, as she has the desire for revenge because of the repressed pain given by her past, as she was abandoned by the man she loved. "*Well? You can break his heart*": this is a sentence said by Miss Havisham to Estella, to make her understand her real aim: to play cards with Pip just to break his heart, because of the huge gap between them and their social position.

Most other female characters are horribly deficient at performing the duties which Victorian culture prescribes to them. Miss Havisham, for example, raises Estella as a heartless femme fatale, and this can be seen in chapter 8, when she plays cards with Pip, always referring to him as a "*common labouring-boy*" or simply "*boy*", rather than as a virtuous, self-effacing "*angel of the house*". So, Estella is repeatedly persuaded by Ms. Havisham to upset the hearts of the opposite sex.

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Penguin Classics, 1996, Chapter 2, pp. 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, page 116.

Another character, which the readers don't know a lot of, is Molly, Mr. Jaggers's maid and Estella's real mother.

Molly's relationship to her employer reveals a cruel streak in the man of law. When the young men who are his guests start comparing their muscles "*in a ridiculous manner*"<sup>27</sup>, Mr. Jaggers calls Molly and Pip describes him as closing his hand over her wrist and he forces her to show all the men her wrists. They are not only strong, but "*disfigured and scarred across and across*".<sup>28</sup> This episode shows Mr. Jagger's pleasure in having Molly under his control. This can be seen even because she doesn't speak a lot in this story, even when Mr. Jaggers forces her to show her wrists, all she wants to say is "*Master, please*".<sup>29</sup>

Molly's inability to even speak for herself can be interpreted as a reflection of how women were marginalized in the society Dickens describes, which is the Victorian one. But then, Mr. Jaggers succeeds in showing her wrists and he tells the other gentlemen that "*There's power here... Very few men have the power of wrist that this woman has. It's remarkable what mere force of grip there is in these hands*".<sup>30</sup>

By drawing attention to Molly's impressive strength, Mr. Jaggers accentuates the boys' relative weakness. His claim that "*very few men have the power of wrist that this woman has*", could be seen as an attempt to humble them. However, the demonstration does not only reveal Molly's power through her wrist's force, but also reveals her lack of it. Despite her physical power, Molly occupies a position of great weakness, because she is completely at the mercy of her master; as a servant and a woman she cannot refuse him and his orders.

In conclusion, to understand more deeply the status of women and their representation in the Victorian age, it is necessary to read and inquire about the well-known classics of the literature, because no one better than man poets and mostly women poets have managed to better analyze the feminine figure of the time.

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27 Ibid., page 213.

28 Ibid., page 214.

29 Ibid., page 214.

30 Ibid., page 214.

## 1.2. *The rise of the Victorian madwoman*

In terms of how women were considered by the society of the nineteenth century and, unfortunately, still today, it can be said that it was commonly thought that every woman was born mad and so it would have been an adequate reason to send her to an insane asylum. During the nineteenth century, female hysteria spread and asylums saw more women patients than ever before, causing the increase of the Victorian madwoman.

But the main question is: why women?

As R. A. Houston states in his article *Madness and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century*, written in 2002, “historically women were almost always victims. Specifically, being classed as insane was an arbitrary act perpetrated on women who simply failed to conform. Thus, women were the victims of repressive doctors and asylums; the way they were defined as mentally disabled was inherently sexist; and living in a male-dominated society placed a unique strain upon women's lives.”<sup>31</sup>

The gendered differentiation began at the end of the eighteenth century when a shift occurred in the way madness was treated. In her article “*Victorian women and insanity*” written in 1980, Elaine Showalter states that “the domestication of insanity, its assimilation by the Victorian institution, coincides with the period in which the predominance of women among the insane becomes a statistically verifiable phenomenon”.<sup>32</sup>

The Lunatics Act of 1845 required all countries to provide adequate asylum accommodation for pauper lunatics, who were defined as those people whose maintenance came wholly or in part from public funds. As Showalter states, before the Lunatics Act “paupers were usually sent to workhouse, to public hospitals such as Bedlam, or to private madhouses in which conditions were appealing and treatment was notoriously cruel.”<sup>33</sup> Bedlam is a symbolic place: the so-called Bethlem Royal Hospital, also known as St Mary Bethlehem, is a psychiatric hospital in London. It became a royal foundation for the care of lunatics in 1547 and it was infamous for its poor treatment of inmates. In his most famous book written in 1771, “*The man of Feeling*” Henry Mckenzie describes Bedlam in chapter XX: “Of those things called Sights, in London, which every stranger is desirous to see, Bedlam is one.”<sup>34</sup> Lunatics were seen as brutes and animals that needed to be chained and to live in locked cells, but there was the first psychiatric revolution that turned lunatics to be seen merely as sick humans. This revolution caused many reformers, and magistrates looked into how insanity was treated in private madhouses and prisons. They used their findings to create

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31 R.A. Houston, *Madness and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century*, *Social History*, Oct., 2002, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Oct., 2002), pp. 309-326, published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd., JSTOR, page 310.

32 Elaine Showalter, *Victorian Women and Insanity*, in *Victorian Studies*, Winer, 1980, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter, 1980), pp.157-181, page 159.

33 *Ibid.*, page 160.

34 Henry Mckenzie, *The man of Feeling*, Oxford World's Classics, 2001, chapter XX, page 23.

an alternate way to treat insanity, and started insane asylums where patients were heavily surveillance.

**Table 1**  
**Number and Distribution of Lunatics and Idiots**

	1859			1879			1896		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
County and Borough Asylums	7,251	8,953	15,844	17,678	21,193	38,871	28,966	34,991	63,957
Registered Hospitals	974	881	1,855	1,491	1,346	2,837	2,135	1,890	4,025
Metrop. Licensed House	1,128	1,423	2,551	1,232	1,244	2,476	1,112	1,370	2,482
Provincial Licensed Houses	1,306	1,159	2,465	1,028	1,141	2,169	740	1,114	1,854
Naval and Military Hospitals	164	—	164	325	17	342	208	—	208
Broadmoor (opened 1863)	—	—	—	374	109	483	475	166	641
Workhouses	3,435	4,528	7,963	5,014	6,683	11,697	4,813	6,093	10,906
Metrop. District Asylums	—	—	—	1,971	2,337	4,308	2,911	3,128	6,039
With Relations	2,498	3,422	5,920	2,570	4,132	6,702	2,578	3,756	6,334
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16,756</b>	<b>20,006</b>	<b>36,762</b>	<b>31,683</b>	<b>38,202</b>	<b>69,885</b>	<b>43,938</b>	<b>52,508</b>	<b>96,446</b>

Source: *Special Report of the Commissioners in Lunacy on the Alleged Increase in Insanity, 1897.*

Table 1 sets out the distribution of known lunatics on three occasions in the second half of the nineteenth century: 1859, 1879 and 1896. By this time provision of public asylums had become mandatory and the numbers of lunatics confined had increased markedly. The first thing one can notice is that on the second half of the nineteenth century, women were the typical patients.

This turn also shifted lunatics from being male patients to female patients. As a matter of fact, in the middle of the eighteenth century, the most common image of madness was a sculpture of two male nudes manacled together. By 1815, the rape and murder of women patients by madhouse keepers changed this image of the madman and replaced it with a victimized and delicate lady. There seemed to be a fundamental link between femininity and insanity, with women being represented as irrational, and men being seen as reasonable and knowledgeable.

In classical epic, for instance, women were seen as masters of disorder and frenzy, while men were seen as ordered and rational. It's not a case that in presenting textbook cases of female insanity, doctors usually designed women who were disobedient and rebellious.

As Showalter's article states, according to the census of 1871 "for every 1000 male lunatics, there were 1182 female lunatics; every 1000 male pauper lunatics, 1,242 females."<sup>35</sup> By 1872, out of 58,640 certified lunatics in England and Wales, 31,822 were women. There were more female pauper inmates in county and borough asylums, in licensed houses, in workhouses, and in single care."<sup>36</sup>

Two centuries later, the "angel in the house" emerged. It was the Victorian feminine ideology, coined by Coventry Patmore in his epic that portrayed an idealized image of the Victorian

<sup>35</sup> Mortimer Granville, *The Care and Cure of the Insane* (London: Hardwicke and Bogue, 1877), II, page 230.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, page 160.

woman: cooking, cleaning, and tending to her husband's every need.<sup>37</sup> The Victorian ideology of women is perhaps best represented by Queen Victoria herself, when she described marriage as a "great happiness... in devoting oneself to another who is worthy of one's affection; still, men are very selfish and the woman's devotion is always one of submission which makes our poor sex so very unenviable... it cannot be otherwise as God has willed it so."<sup>38</sup>

The perfect Victorian woman's main mission was to serve others dutifully and selflessly and to be deemed a lady; women had to follow the norms and manners inflicted upon them by the society. In the Victorian social pyramid, a woman was always considered secondary both in the family and society and her only role was to be a servant to her husband and children, having no desires or needs outside of this role.<sup>39</sup>

The study of Patmore's poem has increased among feminine studies in opposition to the assertion of the two different spheres. The poem can also be studied to examine the masculine writer's prejudices, his view of women's roles and why men held women to these roles. The term "angel in the house" came to be used in reference to women who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal: a wife and mother who was selflessly devoted to her husband. The term then evolved into a more derogatory assessment of antiquated roles with critiques from popular feminist writers like Virginia Woolf, who said: "*Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.*"<sup>40</sup> Women's literature has always tried to fight for women's independence against the ideal of the "angel in the house". One of the most common and brilliant example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story called "*The Yellow Wallpaper*". Published in 1892, the story is about a young mother and her husband, who imposes her a "rest cure" when she suffers temporary nervous depression after the birth of their baby. As the young woman tells her story, the reader gradually gets that she does not love her husband, because he does not care for her. Rather, "*she is seething with frustration and resentment at his power to confine, control, and trivialize her.*"<sup>41</sup> This story has been interpreted by feminist critics as a condemnation of the male control of the 19<sup>th</sup> century medical profession. In her bedroom, "*she fancies she sees a woman in the pattern of the yellow wallpaper - a woman who shakes the walls with her efforts to escape, who circles the room endlessly on her hands and knees, looking for the way out, who is "all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through the pattern- it strangles."*<sup>42</sup>

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37 Yildirim, Aşkın Haluk. *Angels of the House: Dickens' Victorian Women*, Dokuz Eylül University Journal Of Graduate School Of Social Sciences 14.4 (2012): 113-125. Academic Search Complete. Web. 17 May 2013.

38 Ibid., page 117.

39 Ibid., page 118.

40 Virginia Woolf, *Professions for Women*, Collected Essays (London: Hogarth Press).

41 Elaine Showalter, *Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers*, The Antioch Review, Winter-Spring, 1992, Vol. 50, No. 1-2, 50th Anniversary Issue (Winter-Spring, 1992), pp. 207-220, published by Antioch Review Inc., page 210.

42 Ibid., page 210.

The woman is trying to break out of her life; but she can do so only by being mad. In the story's terrifying conclusion, she locks herself in her room, systematically ripping the paper off the walls. In the role of madness, she can express her aggressions against her husband; and when at last he breaks into the room, and faints in shock at the sight of her, there is a triumph in her narrative: "*Yet she is truly mad; she has defeated him only by destroying herself.*"<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the short story the narrator offers many suggestions to help her get better such as exercising, working, or socializing with the outside world. Her ideas, though, are dismissed immediately while using language that stereotypes her as irrational and, therefore, unqualified to offer ideas about her own condition. This interpretation draws on the concept of the "domestic sphere" that women were held in during this period.

Acting in anyway outside of the gender norms pressed upon women was not acceptable and could lead to an insane asylum.

There are many causes as to why women make up the majority of mental disorder patients, ranging from sexual oppression to stress from their family life. Most female patients are a product of their social situations, both from their confining roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their mistreatment by a male-dominated psychiatric profession.

Doctor Richard Napier saw that among his patients, women of all social classes complained more of stress and unhappiness in marriage, had more anxiety over their children, and suffered more depression than their male counterparts. This goes to show that the stress of being a doting mother and wife was overwhelming for some women as they tried to live up to society's idea of a perfect family woman. The women of the nineteenth century became so overworked trying to be the perfect housewife that they fell ill a lot from the stress and became delirious.<sup>44</sup>

According to Lunbeck, seventy percent of manic-depressive patients "belong to the female sex with its greater emotional excitability." This suggests that the gender difference was not just a matter of perception by society, but was encoded into the very categories that ordered psychiatrists' observations.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Ibid., page 210.

44 Ibid., page 55.

45 Elizabeth Lunbeck, *Hysteria: The Revolt of the "Good Girl"*, The Psychiatric Persuasion, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Print.



### 1.3. *Biological Factors and the consequent sexual repression of women*

Madness in literature could be seen as a state of being which transcends the normal, the expected and the polite. That is to say that madness or insanity by definition is a dangerous state of the mind, “*leading the possessor of the madness to break rules, threaten the status quo, and provoke a general state of anxiety and unrest.*”<sup>46</sup> Insanity is by definition the antithesis of logic and reason, and it’s associated with hysterical women, dark people, creative thinkers and future icons.<sup>47</sup>

Another theory of why women were more susceptible to lunacy was because of their instability of their reproductive systems and the biological crises linked to the female life cycle including: puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause.

*“In claiming women's physical and mental illness as gynecological territory, gynecological medical science collapsed the distinction between gender and sex: all of woman's complaints were reduced to her reproductive organs, her sex. When applied to women's mental illness and nervous complaints, gynecological medicine suggested that women were mentally ill or nervous simply because they were female and that their symptoms could be handled with physiological cures that, to late twentieth-century readers, appear to range from mildly punitive to unmistakably sadistic.”*<sup>48</sup>

Showalter's own position is clear enough, as the title of her *The Female Malady* indicates, and in the text she elaborates and develops her claims as to the strong links between women and madness in the period 1830 through to 1950, seeing the association as a means of regulating women's minds.<sup>49</sup> Their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control, causing them to be more susceptible to insanity.<sup>50</sup> This connection between the female reproductive and nervous systems led to the condition called “*reflex insanity in women*” which led to a weakened mind because of their life cycles.<sup>51</sup>

As a matter of fact, most female patients were admitted to the asylums right after they went through puberty and experienced their first menstruation. Doctors then argued that menstrual discharge in itself predisposed women to insanity and irregular menstruation was seen as dangerous so they treated women with purgatives, forcing medicine, hip baths, and leeches on the thighs. In his article “*The female malady? Men, women and madness in nineteenth century Britain*”, Joan Busfield wrote: “*Women, she suggests, were required to live lives that facilitated the emission and*

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46 Gregory Shafer, *Madness and Difference: Politicizing Insanity in Classical Literary Works*, Language Arts Journal of Michigan: Vol. 30: Iss 1, Article 9, page 42, available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707-2168-149X.2041> .

47 Ibid., page 43.

48 Nancy M. Theriot, *Women's Voices in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse: A Step toward Deconstructing Science*, Signs Autumn, 1993, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 1-31, published by: The University of Chicago Press, JSTOR, pp. 6-7.

49 Elaine Showalter, *The Rise of the Victorian Madwoman. The Female Malady*. New York: Pantheon, 1985. Print.

50 Ibid., page 55.

51 Ibid., page 55.

*flow of bodily fluids. It was the cessation and suppression of menstruation that was problematic for women and could affect their physical and mental health.”*<sup>52</sup>

So, the menstrual discharge in itself predisposed women to insanity, since it was believed that madness was a disease of the blood, which could affect the brain primarily. Showalter states that “*late, irregular, or "suppressed" menstruation was regarded as a dangerous condition and was treated with purgatives, forcing medicines, hipbaths, and leeches applied to the thighs.*”<sup>53</sup> A totally opposite view, however, was advanced by Edward Tilt in his 1851 study “*On the Preservation of the Health of Women at the Critical Periods of Life*”. Tilt believed that menstruation itself was so disrupting to the female brain that it should be retarded as long as possible.

During the nineteenth century, females weren't allowed to publicly talk about anything that was going on with their bodies and their mothers didn't prepare them for it all, causing them to have a mental breakdown and have great feelings of anxiety and shame. As a matter of fact, twenty-five percent of female mental patients were left completely in the dark about their menstrual cycle and once they experienced their first period, they became frightened, screamed, and went into hysterical fits, causing them to be seen as mad. Up until their first menstruation, girls were treated just like their brothers, but after, they were forbidden to participate in physical activities, travelling, exercising, and studying. Now a woman, the female had to give up everything and stay at home to become the perfect housewife.<sup>54</sup> Diagnosis for insanity was highly imperfect and the male psychiatrists used knowledge extracted from embarrassed and confused female patients.<sup>55</sup> Examination was an arena, after all, in which psychiatrist set the rules, called the plays, and determined the outcome, so no amount of a female explaining her menstrual situation would help her sanity in the doctor's eyes. This would explain why so many young women were committed right after their first menstrual cycle because not only were they confused about what was happening to their bodies, they were also deeply embarrassed too.

Many women were seen as lunatics with their sexual orientation and sexual desires, thus leading them to get committed. Up until the nineteenth century, women weren't allowed to show their feelings and affection towards ones they loved and at the turn of the century, they had relaxed their sexual etiquette and were viewed as “*hypersexual*”.<sup>56</sup> Before, mothers taught their daughters that they were to feel no passion or sexual desire because, “*in the conventional society, which men have made for women, and women have accepted, they must have none, they must act the farce of*

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52 Joan Busfields, *The female malady? Men, women and madness in nineteenth century Britain*”, *Sociology*, February 1994, Vol. 28, No. 1 (February 1994), pp. 259-277, published by: Sage Publications, Ltd., JSTOR, page 274.

53 Showalter, *Victorian Women and Insanity*, in *Victorian Studies*, Winer, 1980, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter, 1980), pp.157-181, page 170.

54 *Ibid.*, page 57.

55 *Ibid.*, page 143.

56 *Ibid.*, page 180.

*hypocrisy.”*<sup>57</sup> In this way of thinking, Showalter quotes Felman's view: “*Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation.*”<sup>58</sup>

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57 Ibid., page 64.

58 Ibid. Showalter, quoting S. Felman, *Woman and madness: the critical phallasy*, *Diacritics*, V, (1975), page 2.

## 1.4. Gender conflicts in Victorian Europe: Sigmund Freud and the case of Dora

Freud's first major case history, "*Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*", written in 1905, has been recognized as one of the classic texts of psychoanalysis.

Naamah Akavia is one of the most important scholar in this context. She graduated *summa cum laude* in 2003 with a master's degree from The Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Tel-Aviv University. In her "*Hysteria, Identification, and the Family: A Rereading of Freud's Dora Case*", written in 2005, she states that "*Romanticizing hysteria, some feminists regard Dora as a heroine whose "illness" is a form of revolt against societal norms, while others tend to pity her as a victimized figure who constitutes her subjectivity around a pathological narrative that renders her protest impotent.*"<sup>59</sup>

In a letter dated October 14, 1900, Freud informed his friend Fliess that he had successfully started a new analysis. The patient was an eighteen-year-old girl, Dora, whose real name was Ida Braun. Freud treated this patient in 1900. Dora had a slightly older brother than her, Otto, who was particularly attached to their mother, while Dora certainly preferred her father. The mother was in fact a fairly cold and anaffective woman, especially towards her daughter. Dora's father was a successful industrialist. After having had tuberculosis, their father decided to move, together with his family, to a small town near Vienna.

The first time Freud saw Dora, the girl was 16 and she suffered from nervous cough and hoarseness. Later, Dora was brought back to Freud for psychological symptoms: the girl was particularly dissatisfied with herself, she used to treat her father rudely and she rebelled against her mother, who wanted to make her participate in home affairs. All this was diagnosed by Freud as "*pétite hystérie*".

Her father made Dora his confidante and trusted her with his most intimate secrets, something that will later backfire for Dora and ruin her life.<sup>60</sup> During the nineteenth century, it was common for daughters to nurse their sick fathers back to health, but according to Freud, "*this led to the young woman's own illness and anyone whose mind is taken up by the hundred and one tasks of sick-nursing ... is creating material for a 'retention hysteria'.*" The retention hysteria is one of three types of hysteria distinguished in 1895 by the Austrian physician Josef Breuer (1842–1925) and

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<sup>59</sup> Naamah Akavia, *Hysteria, Identification, and the Family: A Rereading of Freud's Dora Case*, *American Imago*, Summer 2005, Vol. 62, No. 2, Early Freud (Summer 2005), pp. 193-216, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, page 193.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, page 203.

Freud in “*Studies on Hysteria*”, supposedly characterized by emotions that have not undergone abreaction and are therefore retained.<sup>61</sup>

Akavia states that, “*in addition to being deprived of sleep, obsessively worrying, and neglecting her own body, the nurse is compelled to preserve a demeanor of indifference when faced by a large number of disturbing impressions. She is therefore likely to repress them, sowing the seeds for her own hysteria.*”<sup>62</sup> The stress of taking care of her father and knowing that all her life consisted of was being a good housewife, deprived of anything intellectual, caused Dora to exhibit symptoms of hysteria. When her father’s health worsened, he hired a new nurse with whom he started an affair with.

In addition, Dora's father met a couple of friends, Herr and Frau K. The last had a relationship with Dora's father and Mr. K. seemed to turn a blind eye to this relationship, because he had made a sexual advance to Dora. As a matter of fact, when Dora was 14, she was invited by Mr. K. to a trip on the lake, during which he shook her violently and kissed her. Dora reported the episode to her father, who however did not believe her.

From Freud’s analysis he blames her hysteria on the jealousy she felt from her father’s affair because she had repressed sexual desires for her father, rather than the stress of nursing.<sup>63</sup> Freud had her committed to an asylum because he thought she was obviously hysterical and had possible incestual desires and when Dora denied the allegations, it only gave Freud further proof that she was insane, thus Dora spent the rest of her life as a neurotic patient.

Freud initially thought of calling the case “*Dreams and Hysteria*”, because his analysis was characterized by Dora’s dreams. He accounted two dreams. Quoting the first one, Dora saw “*a house on fire. My father was standing beside my bed and woke me up. I dressed quickly. Mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case; but Father said: 'I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel-case.' We hurried downstairs, and as soon as I was outside I woke up.*”<sup>64</sup>

In the first dream, Dora's father wakes up his daughter because the house is on fire. Dora dressed quickly to leave the house, but her mother starts looking for her jewels before running away. Dora's father then exclaims that he will not let himself die with his children to save his wife's jewelry box. At this point, Freud points out that “*jewelry box*” was also a slang word for “*vagina*”.

His interpretation begins with this observation. According to Freud, Dora was worried that her “*vagina*” was in danger because of Herr K. and that if something happened it would be her father's fault.

The second one:

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61 On Oxford Reference, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view-10.1093-oi-authority.20110803100416547>

62 Naamah Akavi, page 203.

63 Ibid., page 207.

64 Ibid., *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Standard Edition, Vol. VII, page 64.

*“I was walking about in a town which I did not know. I saw streets and squares which were strange to me. Then I came into a house where I lived, went to my room, and found a letter from Mother lying there. She wrote saying that as I had left home without my parents' knowledge she had not wished to write to me to say Father was ill. "Now he is dead, and if you like you can come." I then went to the station and asked about a hundred times: "Where is the station?" I always got the answer: "Five minutes." I then saw a thick wood before me which I went into, and there I asked a man whom I met. He said to me: "Two and a half hours more." He offered to accompany me. But I refused and went alone. I saw the station in front of me and could not reach it. At the same time, I had the unusual feeling of anxiety that one has in dreams when one cannot move forward. Then I was at home. I must have been travelling in the meantime, but I knew nothing about that. I walked into the porter's lodge, and enquired for our flat. The maidservant opened the door to me and replied that Mother and the others were already at the cemetery.”*<sup>65</sup>

In the second one Dora walked through a city she didn't know, she saw streets and squares that were foreign to her. Then she entered the house where she lived, and in her room she found a letter from her mother, who wrote to her that, since she had left home without her parents knowing, she did not want to write to tell her that her dad was sick, but now he was dead and if he wanted, he could return. Then Dora went to the station, asking a hundred times: *“Where is the station?”* and each time she was answered: *“Five minutes”*. Then he saw a dense forest in front of him and a man, to whom he asked again about the station. The answer this time was: it's more than two and a half hours. The man offered to accompany her, but she went on alone. He saw the station ahead of him, but he could not reach it. Then she found herself at home, the maid opened the door for her, saying that her mother and the others were already at the cemetery.

Freud claims that Dora's dream was born out of a revenge fantasy directed against her father. Through the analysis, Freud interprets Ida's hysteria as a manifestation of her jealousy toward the relationship between Frau K and her father, combined with the mixed feelings of Herr K's sexual approach to her.

The basic idea is that the rise of the Victorian madwoman can be due to the fact that insane asylums were seen as an easy place to dump somebody that you no longer cared for or, in Dora's case, for knowing too much.

One may note that in the conduct of this clinical case, that Freud had no cure for the huge trauma suffered by the girl: the psychoanalyst showed himself completely devoid of empathy and understanding for Dora, because of his male chauvinism. Feminist scholars saw in Dora the symbol of the oppression of male power over women, where Freud did not have the role of the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., page 94.

neutral scientist, but was an expression of that male power, of that patriarchal family, which he believed was “natural” to subjugate women.

## 1.5. Nellie Bly and her reportage on the insane asylum: “Ten Days in a Madhouse”



Fig. 1, Nellie Bly, the writer. *New York World*, October 9, 1887.

General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

“On the 22d of September I was asked by the *World* if I could have myself committed to one of the asylums for the insane in New York, with a view to writing a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein and the methods of management, etc. Did I think I had the courage to go through such an ordeal as the mission would demand? Could I assume the characteristics of insanity to such a degree that I could pass the doctors, live for a week among the insane without the authorities there finding out that I was only a "chiel amang 'em takin' notes?" I said I believed I could. I had some faith in my own ability as an actress and thought I could assume insanity long enough to accomplish any mission intrusted to me. Could I pass a week in the insane ward at Blackwell's Island? I said I could and I would. And I did.”<sup>66</sup>

This is what the young Nellie "Brown" Bly wrote on the first chapter of her *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, an entire reportage on the methods used by doctors in the insane asylum at Blackwell's Island. It was initially published as a series of articles for *The New York World*, but later the author transformed the articles into a book, published by Ian L. Munro in 1887.

Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, better known by her pen name Nellie Bly, was an American journalist. She was asked by the newspaper *The New York World* to pretend to be a mad patient to enter the insane asylum and report all the contents journalistically and can attest even today the abuse received in insane asylums during the nineteenth century. Even if she has been asked to do so,

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<sup>66</sup> Nellie Bly. *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, New York, 1887. Print, Chapter I, “A Delicate Mission”.



she “always had the desire to know asylum life more thoroughly—a desire to be convinced that the most helpless of God's creatures, the insane, were cared for kindly and properly.”<sup>67</sup>

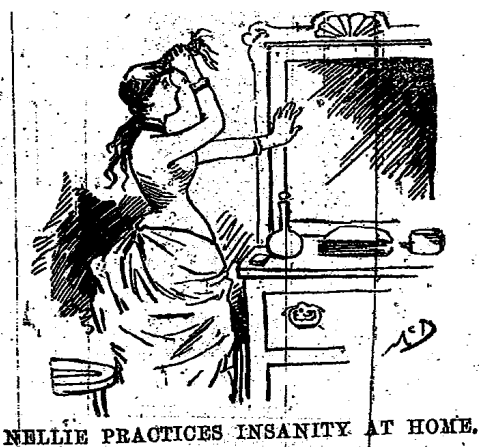


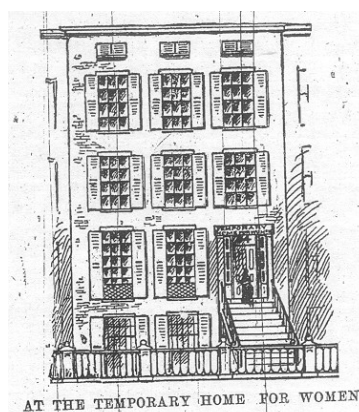
Fig. 2, "Nellie Practices Insanity At Home." *New York World*, October 9, 1887.

General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

In general, the twenty-three-year-old journalist stated that those conditions felt by female patients were unacceptable. She stayed there for ten days where she saw some of the worst horrors of her life.

So, to alarm the doctors, she spoke irrationally during meals and stayed up all night, with “staring eyes”, making noise in her room.<sup>68</sup> She entered territory controlled by the predominantly male medical field, in which female sexuality was exposed, unmasked, and interpreted by men and “by turning the tables and unmasking the male experts themselves, Bly positioned herself as an authoritative interpreter of one of the most threatening pockets of the city: the asylum.”<sup>69</sup>

Firstly, the new insane girl Nellie "Brown" Bly came to the Home one night and asked to remain overnight. The Home was a kind of temporary place for working women, at No. 84 Second Avenue. That was a place where she had to pay thirty cents a night to stay.



67 Ibid. Nellie Bly.

68 Jean Marie Lutes, *Into The Madhouse With Nellie Bly: Girl Stunt Reporting In Late Nineteenth-Century America*, *American Quarterly*, Jun., 2002, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), pp. 217-253, published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR, page 224.

69 Ibid., page 221.

In Chapter V, called “Pronouncing Insane”, Nellie “Brown” Bly is sent to Bellevue for examination. In the previous chapter she had been judged by Judge Duffy at the Essex Market Police Courtroom as a girl who had been drugged by someone else and brought to the city. The judge himself thought that the effect of the drug will pass off in few days and that soon she will be able to tell the true story.

In chapter V, Nellie is visited by a doctor, who felt her pulse and the beating of her heart. Since the pupils of her eyes have been enlarged since she came to the Home, the doctor concluded by saying that she was drugged. But the real story is that Nellie “Brown” Bly is near-sighted, and that’s why she reported: *“for the first time I was thankful that I was a little near-sighted, which of course answers for the enlargement of the pupils.”*<sup>70</sup>

Of course she met a lot of women there: one of them was Miss Anne Neville and she had been sick from overwork. They had a dialogue:

*“Is there anything wrong with you mentally as well?” I asked her.*

*“No,” she said. “The doctors have been asking me many curious questions and confusing me as much as possible, but I have nothing wrong with my brain.”*

*“Do you know that only insane people are sent to this pavilion?” I asked.*

*“Yes, I know; but I am unable to do anything. The doctors refuse to listen to me, and it is useless to say anything to the nurses.”*<sup>71</sup>



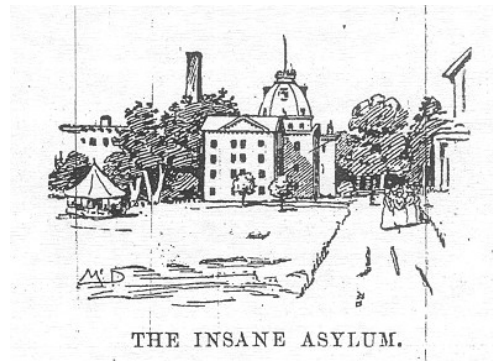
After having been asked a lot of questions, *“fully as useless and senseless”* the doctor concluded: *“Positively demented. (...) I consider it a hopeless case. She needs to be put where some one will take care of her.”*<sup>72</sup>

One of the thing Nellie used to say to the doctors and nurses was that the only problem was she lost her trunks and that she only wanted to have them back.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., Chapter V, “Pronounced Insane”.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Chapter VI, “In Bellevue Hospital”.

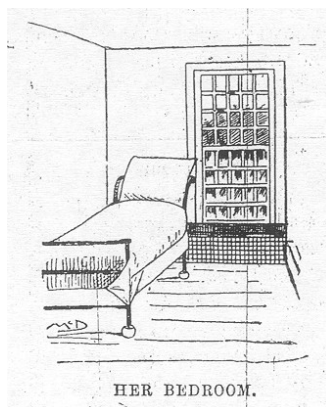
<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Chapter VI, “In Bellevue Hospital”.



*"Blackwell's Island, an insane place, where you'll never get out of."* <sup>73</sup>

Nellie also met her first companion that she could confide in, a girl named Miss Tillie Mayard. Nellie asked her if she was insane and the woman's response was: *"No, but as we have been sent here, we will have to be quiet until we find some means of escape. They will be few, though, since all the doctors, refuse to listen to me or give me a chance to Prove my sanity."* <sup>74</sup> Sane women sent to asylums were condemned to them, never given a chance to explain why they were sent there, whether it is by a jealous family member or their sexual orientation.

In chapter XI, called "In the bath", the women were woken up early to get their monthly bath that was one of the worst events Nellie endured. The water they used was "ice-cold" and the nurses scrubbed so hard that patients' hair would come out and their skin would bleed. The entire time the nurse, whose name was Miss Grupe ignored the complaints of pain and told the patients: *"There isn't much fear of hurting you. Shut up or you'll get it worse."* <sup>75</sup>



After the bath, Nellie was sent to a room alone to-night, whose number was 28. When the nurse Miss Grupe came in, Nellie asked her for a night-gown. But the nurse answered her, again, in a very horrible way. From that point on, a rude dialogue begins between the two:

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Chapter VII, "The Goal In Sight".

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., Chapter VIII, "Inside the Madhouse".

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., Chapter XI, "In the bath".

*"We have not such things in this institution," she (the nurse) said.*

*"I do not like to sleep without," I replied.*

*"Well, I don't care about that," she said. "You are in a public institution now, and you can't expect to get anything. This is charity, and you should be thankful for what you get."*

*"But the city pays to keep these places up," I urged, "and pays people to be kind to the unfortunates brought here."*

*"Well, you don't need to expect any kindness here, for you won't get it," she said, and she went out and closed the door.*<sup>76</sup>

Obviously the city didn't have enough money to properly maintain the asylum because the living conditions were very poor.

For all her journey, Nellie "Brown" Bly did not notice the doctors in taking interest in their patients. Nellie states: *"There are sixteen doctors on this island, and excepting two, I have never seen them pay any attention to the patients. How can a doctor judge a woman's sanity by merely bidding her good morning and refusing to hear her pleas for release? Even the sick ones know it is useless to say anything, for the answer will be that it is their imagination. Try every test on me," I have urged others, "and tell me am I sane or insane? Try my pulse, my heart, my eyes; ask me to stretch out my arm, to work my fingers, as Dr. Field did at Bellevue, and then tell me if I am sane." They would not heed me, for they thought I raved.*<sup>77</sup>

Nellie states *"when the doctors came, the patients made no movement to tell him of their sufferings and when I asked some of them to tell how they were suffering from the cold and insufficiency of clothing, they replied that the nurse would beat them if they told."*<sup>78</sup> Sadly, the nurses took pleasure in beating, choking, and locking patients in closets for days, making their job with the patients a pure and horrible game.<sup>79</sup>

Nellie talked to many women there who weren't really insane, but sent there because of their families or friends. The saner they acted, the more mad the doctors thought. There was no way they could prove their pureness because no one listen to them. As Nellie wrote down: *"The insane asylum on Blackwell's Island is a human rat-trap. It is easy to get in, but once there it is impossible to get out."*<sup>80</sup>

The last chapter of her novel, called "The Grand Jury investigation", describes Nellie's feeling she felt for leaving those women in the hands of horrible people: *"If I could not bring them that boon of all boons, liberty, I hoped at least to influence others to make life more bearable for*

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Chapter XI, "In the bath".

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Chapter XL, "The last goodbye".

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., Chapter XII, "Promenading with lunatics".

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Chapter XIII, "Choking and beating patients".

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Chapter XL, "The last goodbye".

them.”<sup>81</sup> After she left, Nellie appeared in front of a Grand Jury to talk about what really happened at the insane asylum in Blackwell Island and so the jury questioned the nurses and doctors there, who of course “*made contradictory statements to one another, as well as to my (Nellie’s) story.*”<sup>82</sup>

The jury decided to go for a visit to the insane asylum and once they got there, they saw it was clean. Plus, her friend Miss Anne Neville said to the jurors: “*When Miss Brown and I were brought here the nurses were cruel and the food was too bad to eat. We did not have enough clothing, and Miss Brown asked for more all the time. I thought she was very kind, for when a doctor promised her some clothing she said she would give it to me. Strange to say, ever since Miss Brown has been taken away everything is different. The nurses are very kind and we are given plenty to wear. The doctors come to see us often and the food is greatly improved.*”<sup>83</sup>

Miss Anne Neville knew that she was going to be examined by a crowd of men, and she was really afraid of it. Nellie was frustrated because she knew they were trying to cover up for the things that actually occurred there (“*The institution was on exhibition, and no fault could be found.*”)<sup>84</sup>

“*But the women I had spoken of, where were they? Not one was to be found where I had left them. If my assertions were not true in regard to these patients, why should the latter be changed, so to make me unable to find them? Miss Neville complained before the jury of being changed several times. When we visited the hall later she was returned to her old place.*

*Mary Hughes, of whom I had spoken as appearing sane, was not to be found. Some relatives had taken her away. Where, they knew not. The fair woman I spoke of, who had been sent here because she was poor, they said had been transferred to another island. They denied all knowledge of the Mexican woman, and said there never had been such a patient. Mrs. Cotter had been discharged, and Bridget McGuinness and Rebecca Farron had been transferred to other quarters. The German girl, Margaret, was not to be found, and Louise had been sent elsewhere from hall 6. The Frenchwoman, Josephine, a great, healthy woman, they said was dying of paralysis, and we could not see her. If I was wrong in my judgment of these patients' sanity, why was all this done? I saw Tillie Mayard, and she had changed so much for the worse that I shuddered when I looked at her.”*

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After that staging, Nellie said: “*I hardly expected the grand jury to sustain me, after they saw everything different from what it had been while I was there. Yet they did, and their report to the court advises all the changes made that I had proposed.*”<sup>86</sup> What this the reader can understand

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81 Ibid., Chapter XVII, “The Grand Jury Investigation”.

82 Ibid., Chapter XVII, “The Grand Jury Investigation”.

83 Ibid., Chapter XVII, “The Grand Jury Investigation”.

84 Ibid., Chapter XVII, “The Grand Jury Investigation”.

85 Ibid., Chapter XVII, “The Grand Jury Investigation”.

86 Ibid., Chapter XVII, “The Grand Jury Investigation”.

that the jurors determined Nellie wasn't lying and that there needed to be some drastic changes at the Island.

Nellie Bly knew she wanted to help those poor souls in the insane asylum and Nellie herself stated at the end of her book: *"I have one consolation for my work, on the strength of my story, the committee of appropriation provides \$1,000,000, more than was ever before given, for the benefit of the insane."*<sup>87</sup>

Nellie Bly's investigation confirmed the insane asylum's bad reputation, which was more like a place of confinement than a real cure: poor food, cold baths, poor hygiene and mistreatment were the rule; moreover, together with those who were really affected by psychiatric pathologies, poor emigrants and women repudiated by family members, healthy in mind but unwelcome to society, could not be found. That's why Nellie Bly decided to public her investigation, to show her readership *"especially its attempts to speak to the needs of the most vulnerable members of urban society: immigrants, women, the working poor, even the barely literate."*<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Chapter XVII, "The Grand Jury Investigation".

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., page 241.

# *The Madwoman Bertha Antoinetta Mason in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*

## *2.1. Charlotte Brontë, a modern writer*

*“To you I am neither man nor woman. I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me, the sole ground on which I accept your judgment.”*



When Charlotte Brontë was 31 she published under a pseudonym *Jane Eyre*, the story of a governess who eventually marries her employer, Edward Fairfax Rochester. This novel, the most acclaimed of her novels, could be defined as “gothic”, “romantic” or “female”, but the very thing is that it’s always a surprise, in the very authority, resonance, and inimitable voice of its heroine.<sup>89</sup>

Plus, it summarizes the demands for female rights and the reconciliation of the needs of the passionate individual as Jane is and the demands of the Christian duties of self-control and conscience. “*I resisted all the way*”<sup>90</sup> Jane Eyre states at the beginning of chapter II, and this attitude, this declaration of a unique and iconoclastic female rebelliousness, strikes the perfect note for the entire novel. That a woman will “resist” the terms of her destiny, social or spiritual, is not perhaps entirely new in English literature up to the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847: we have after all the willful heroines of certain of Shakespeare’s plays, and those of Jane Austen’s elegant comedies of manners.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, Preface to *Jane Eyre*, Bantam Classic, 1988.

<sup>90</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Classics, 2006, page 15.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

Charlotte Brontë was born on 21 april 1816 <sup>92</sup> in Market Street Thornton, west of Bradford in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and she was the third of six children, five daughters and one son, of the reverend Patrick Brontë. He was an Anglican priest of Irish descent, who later changed his original name into Brontë as a sign of admiration for Horatio Nelson, the navy officer who distinguished himself during the Napoleonic Wars and was named Duke of Brontë.

Charlotte's mother Maria Branwell was a Cornish woman who died when Charlotte was very young. This means that the parents were Celtic, and therefore the children were brought up to fantastic folklore stories. Maria died of cancer and she left five daughters, Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, and a son, Branwell, to be taken care of by her sister, Elizabeth.

In 1820, they settled at Haworth, a small village on the wide and desolate Yorkshire moors, where her father had been appointed perpetual curate of St Michael and All Angels Church. There, at home in Haworth Parsonage, Brontë acted as "*the motherly friend and guardian of her younger sisters*". <sup>93</sup> Isolation however did not mean lack of ideas and intellectuals or creative stimulus. Actually, Mr. Brontë often discussed history with his children and they read aloud together.

The children created a fantasy world which to them was as real as the real world. Charlotte and her surviving sisters were sent in August 1824 to Cowan Bridge school for clergymen's daughter, where they endured the harsh conditions that actually killed the two Brontë elder sisters. The discipline was incredibly harsh and Charlotte condemned the school education in *Jane Eyre*, under the thin disguise of the grim Lowood institution. The sisters were sent later to a milder school where Charlotte was recruited as a teacher.

The only boy in the family, Branwell, pursued a career as a painter. He was fundamentally unstable and weak-tempered, and eventually took refuge in alcohol and opium. Charlotte strongly felt the need to pay for his brother's debts and help the family financially.

Charlotte and her sisters had planned to open a school together, and in 1842 Charlotte and Emily were sent to Brussels as pupils to improve their qualification in French and German languages. Their talents brought them into the notice of Belgian teacher Constantin Héger, a Belgian teacher of the Victorian era, who appealed to Charlotte's sense of humour and affection. Their time at the school was cut short when their aunt Elizabeth Branwell, who had joined the family in Haworth to look after the children after their mother's death, died of internal obstruction in October 1842.

In 1844, Charlotte attempted to start a school in the parsonage, but no pupils showed up. In 1845, she came across some poems from Emily, and that led to the first publication of a joint volume of poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, the pseudonyms of Charlotte, Emily and Anne

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92 For all biographical information: Encyclopedia Britannica.

93 John Cousin, *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature*. E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910.



Brontë. The pseudonyms were assumed to prevent the prejudice on women on the part of the critics. Of the decision to use *noms de plume*, Charlotte wrote:

“Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called “feminine” – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.”<sup>94</sup>

Although only two copies of the collection of poems were sold, soon they were trying to place the novels they had written. Charlotte failed to place *The Professor*, but *Jane Eyre* was accepted at once, immediately published, and it was an instant success, which made Charlotte being the most prolific of the Brontë sisters. So *The Professor* was written before *Jane Eyre* and first submitted together with *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *Agnes Grey* by Anne Brontë. Subsequently, *The Professor* was resubmitted separately, and rejected by many publishing houses. It was published posthumously in 1857.

Though “Currer Bell” was an unknown author and of indeterminate sex, the novel was accepted almost immediately upon being offered to the publishing house of Smith, Elder; it was published within seven weeks and became an instant success. Like Brontë’s romantic hero Lord Byron, the new author “awoke one morning to find [herself] famous.”<sup>95</sup>

She was encouraged by her publisher to write another novel after the success of *The Professor*. In 1847, the Brontë sisters published three novels, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Agnes Grey*, the novels which will make them famous. In 1848 Charlotte Brontë began work on the manuscript of another novel, *Shirley, A Tale*. This is a social novel set in Yorkshire in 1811-1812, during the industrial depression resulting from the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Luddite uprisings in the Yorkshire textile industry.

The months that followed the publication of these three novels, however, were tragic. Their young brother Bromwell drifted between jobs and finally gave way to drugs and alcohol, dying in September 1848. Emily died in the December of that same year, and Anne in 1849.

In time, Charlotte went three times to London as a guest to her publisher. There she met Thackeray, an Indian-born English novelist, author and illustrator, known for his satirical works, who greatly appreciated her work. As a matter of fact, Charlotte decided to dedicate the third edition of *Jane Eyre* to him.

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<sup>94</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Biographical Notice of Ellis And Acton Bell*, from the preface to the 1910 edition of *Wuthering Heights*.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* Joyce Carol Oates.

In 1853, she published one of the most notable works of her, *Villette*. Charlotte married in 1854 with Arthur Bell Nicholls, Haworth's curate, and they spent their honeymoon in Ireland. Nicholls did not share his wife's intellectual wife, but Charlotte was happy to take up her duty of devoted wife. She started *Emma* in 1855, of which few pp. remain, but she died while she was pregnant.

## 2.2. *Jane Eyre* as a Gothic novel

To its first readers and even its publishers, *Jane Eyre* seemed to have come from nowhere: the novel was ascribed to the genderless figure of Currer Bell, the supposed editor of an obviously female narrative. Although the novel has not lost its power to surprise and provoke, it has established itself as a classic and popular love story. However, it insists on independence as forcefully as it recognizes the virtues of self-discipline, self-control. If *The Professor* seems to anticipate the realism of later novelists such as George Eliot and Anthony Trollope, *Jane Eyre* avowedly reverts to the Gothic novel, and specifically to the romantic Gothic, overlapping both romantic fiction and Gothic fiction.

Nightmare and dreams and supernatural elements are foregrounded. The desire to satisfy the taste for the weird, the strange and the harrowing produced with *Jane Eyre* an exceptionally fertile hybrid, encompassing many different genre, i.e. the Gothic novel, the Victorian governess novel, the autobiography, the *Bildungsroman*. It can be also a sort of psychological realism, the same which characterizes James's *Portrait of a Lady*, even while it relates to the romance, which is clearly a non-mimetic form.

*Jane Eyre*'s Gothic has been called by many critics a "new-Gothic", that is to say, the re-employment of traditional tropes and Gothic events for the primary aim of portraying a psychologically accurate character.

The first genre involved is the autobiography, as the subtitle says (*Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*). This subtitle was dropped when Charlotte Brontë abandoned the pseudonym. Many scholars, however, have found many similarities between the book and Charlotte's life: her period at the boarding school where two of her two sisters died. Charlotte draws not only from the Gothic but also from fairytales, such as Cinderella and Bluebeard. It also draws from the Bible, however, and also from myth for its structure and its themes.

About new psychological realism, it can be said that the governess was a very common figure in Victorian literature. A number of Victorian novels deal with governesses in ways that are similar in terms of plotline, characterization and scenes, as well as in their intentions, so that they can be said to belong to this particular subgenre. Most of these novels, however, are not so popular anymore. One of the last pieces of 19th century fiction to feature a governess is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, a ghost story which features an unnamed young governess to the niece and nephew of an extremely wealthy and well-travelled gentlemen, a bachelor, unnamed as well. The books which are referenced to in James's novel are precisely *Jane Eyre* and Ann Radcliffe's *The*

*Mysteries of Udolpho*. The protagonist asks herself: “Was there a “secret” at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?”<sup>96</sup>

Jane is puritanically hostile to Edward Rochester being such a wealthy young man, but she is tempted by him. The novel follows a *rags-to-riches* paradigm, strictly adhering to the rules of this archetype, as it records the rise of this impoverished, dispossessed young woman to love and prosperity. It also follows the pattern of the *Bildungsroman* as it records Jane’s search for her own identity through a series of ordeals. She meets with despair and injustice. The heroine insists repeatedly on independence, on the need for autonomy, on the need for freedom, on Jane’s belief in gender and social equality, on her determination to follow the dictates of her own conscience and of her own heart, and to achieve an intellectual as well as an emotional fulfillment as forcefully as it recognizes the importance of passionate commitment.

In the process of becoming an adult, Jane searches not only for romantic love, but also for a place where she feels valued, for something that can give her a sense of belonging: “*Much of the power of Jane Eyre derives from a dialectic the author unobtrusively pursues on several structural levels. For instance, in the largest, most spacious sense the novel is about character stimulated into growth—truly remarkable growth— by place: Jane Eyre, orphaned and presumably defenseless, and a mere girl, discovers the strength of her personality by way of the challenges of several contrasting environments— the Reed household, in which she is despised; Lowood School, where she discovers a model in Miss Temple and a spiritual sister in Helen Burns; Thornfield, where she cultivates, with agreeable naturalness, a measure of sexual power; Whitcross, where, at last, she acquires the semblance of a family; and Ferndean, Rochester’s retreat, a manor house of “considerable antiquity ... deep buried in a wood,” where she is at last wed.*”<sup>97</sup>

The rebelliousness of the novel’s tone, which is quite an unusual feature in Victorian literature, definitely accounts for its continuing popularity. *Jane Eyre* calls into question most of the early 19th century Victorian assumptions about family life and society’s major institutions: education, social class and religion, asking its readers to consider a variety of contemporary issues, that is to say, what is women’s position in society or what is the relation between Britain and its colonies, an issue which is clearly intimated by the figure of Bertha Mason, a creole young woman. *Jane Eyre* is a novel of personal growth, about finding one’s identity. The novel follows a psychological rather than a chronological progress and it can be considered the story of a pilgrimage, since it invokes at several points the symbolic journey of a Christian towards the celestial city as the home of the heart, i.e. *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*, a 1678 Christian allegory written by John Bunyan.

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<sup>96</sup> Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*, Wordsworth Classics, 2000, page 20.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

Jane is left as an infant to a cruel, abusive aunt, Mrs. Reed. Jane grows to be a small, quiet, withdrawn little girl. She is intelligent and keen, she possesses a strong sense of duty and justice. Although she has all these quality, she does not embody Mrs. Reed's conception of a proper child. Her son, John, bullies little Jane continuously. Jane's imagination and independence of spirit make her a stranger in Mrs. Reed's household. Even the servant are constantly and cruelly reminding Jane that she is a servant, that she is poor and worthless.

Jane does not sentimentalize herself as an orphaned child any more than she sentimentalizes other children. In the scene in which she confronts Mrs. Reed her voice is quite "savage"<sup>98</sup>:

*"I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick."*<sup>99</sup>

The novel opens on a general impression of confinement, or at least of the young heroine's inability to enjoy the open countryside. It's a very unconventional opening: "*There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.*"<sup>100</sup> The shrubbery is leafless; the winter sky overcast; the rain penetrating; Eliza, John, and Georgiana, and the despised orphan, Jane, are cooped up together in the house. As Sandra M. Gilbert states, "*Both the occasion ("that day") and the excursion (or the impossibility of one) are significant: the first is the real beginning of Jane's pilgrim's progress toward maturity; the second is a metaphor for the problems she must solve in order to attain maturity.*"<sup>101</sup>

In the first chapter, the impression the reader gets from Jane's overall picture and from that of the household is that of misunderstanding and persecution. When asked by her aunt to remain silent, Jane chooses to withdraw into a breakfast room, sit near a window and read a book, Bewick's *History of British Birds*, in which she finds a sort of protections from the Reeds but also an imaginary escape into faraway lands, as Norway, Siberia, Iceland, Greenland. She is hunted out by her cousin John, who reproaches her for reading a book which belongs to his family, and not to her.

When her cousin bullies her and makes her bleed from a cut on her head, she reacts calling him a murderer and defending herself. The whole family is convinced that Jane is a fury, a pit of passion from which poor John must be protected:

*"'Wicked and cruel boy!' I said. 'You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!'*

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98 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

99 Ibid., page 44.

100 Ibid., page 9.

101 Sandra M. Gilbert, *Plain Jane's Progress*, Signs, Summer, 1977, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Summer, 1977), pp. 779-804, published by: The University of Chicago Press, JSTOR, page 781.

*I had read Goldsmith's History of Rome, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, etc. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud."*<sup>102</sup>

At the end of the chapter, the reader learns Jane is confined in the Red Room because of her attitude. Locked in a room, she believes to be haunted by the presumably benign but nonetheless terrifying ghost of her uncle, the child is startled first not by a ghost but by her own reflection: "Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality; and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming up out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers."<sup>103</sup>

The child sees the mirror as another dimension and sees herself as spectral and demonic.

Obviously the image of the parentless child who is adopted and then branded as a stranger in the house will ring a bell in many Dickens's readers, i.e. *Great Expectations*. Jane resents the world, she is aware that she is no part of this family. She is even told that she is less than a servant: as a matter of fact, her aunt Mrs. Reed states: "(...) for you do nothing for your keep"<sup>104</sup>, because she doesn't work like servants do.



*Young Jane argues with her guardian Mrs. Reed of Gateshead, illustration by F. H. Townsend*

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102 Ibid., page 13.

103 Ibid., page 17-18.

104 Ibid. Charlotte Brontë, page 15.

What is striking is Jane's metaphors to describe John, "*a slave driver*" and "*a Roman emperor*". This tendency probably comes from Gothic novels, full of monks that keep dungeons full of young girls kept in slavery, sometimes even sexual slavery.

Jane speaks boldly and courageously even when bullied. For this, she is punished and brought in the Red Room, the room where her uncle died. Here she has a sort of hysterical fit, where she think her uncle's ghost is appearing. The Red Room scene and the hunted chamber bear obvious traces of the Gothic novels. On the locked room mystery, it can be said that it anticipates the second mystery of this kind in the second part of the novel, the secret of Rochester's confined wife. While locked in the Red Room, Jane is left alone with her own reflection in the mirror: this episode provides keys which constitute the matrix of the whole novel. One is that of rebellion as viewed in terms of madness, of insanity. Here, Jane can be compared with Edward's first wife.

After being called a fury, Jane is led to the Red Room by Bessy and Miss Abbot. She is compared to "*a mad cat*"<sup>105</sup>. John's provocations and Jane's reactions demonstrate that Jane is not part of the Reed family. This picture of the little child "mentally disturbed" is sharpened by her own conjectures about what others think, and later by Mrs. Reed's persistent doubts. The child thinks that her aunt must find her "*a precocious actress*", not a terrified child, "*a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity*"<sup>106</sup>, and that Abbot must give her credit for being "*a sort of infantine Guy Fawkes*."<sup>107</sup> Guy Fawkes (1570-1606) was one of the rebels responsible for the Catholic "Gunpowder Plot" detected on 5 November 1605, associated with incendiarism (a running theme in *Jane Eyre*).<sup>108</sup>

In a house full of people, Jane is completely alone and her only friend is a doll: "*Human beings must love something, and, in the dearth of worthier objects of affection, I contrived to find a pleasure in loving and cherishing a faded graven image, shabby as a miniature scarecrow.*"<sup>109</sup>

After the Red Room episode, she is sent to Lowood School. Before that, Mrs. Reed introduces Jane to the director of the institution, Mr. Brocklehurst. This cruel and inhuman character seems to find pleasure in mistreating the young girls, who are left to suffer from hunger and cold: "*My mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young persons before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven; these, I repeat, must be cut off.*"<sup>110</sup>

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105 Ibid., page 13.

106 Ibid., page 22.

107 Ibid., page 31.

108 Ibid., page 537 (notes on Chapter III).

109 Ibid., page 35.

110 Ibid., page 76.

In this school, girls are “de-sexed” by being called by their last names. Sadistically, he humiliates them and telling them the smallest sins will damn them for eternity. He always reminds them they are going to go to Hell:

“*Do you know where the wicked Jane Eyre go after death?*”

*‘They go to hell,’ was my ready and orthodox answer.*

*‘And what is hell? Can you tell me that?’*

*‘A pit full of fire.’*

*‘And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?’*

*‘No, sir.’*

*‘What must you do to avoid it?’”*<sup>111</sup>

At Lowood, Jane faces the same harsh, unjust treatment she received at Gateshead, but on a larger scale and in what is supposed to be a religious community. Both Gateshead, which symbolizes Jane’s moment of departure in her personal growth and Lowood, work as two distorted models of Victorian society. Mr. Brocklehurst represents a form of religion and religious doctrine which Jane firmly resents and rejects. Mr. Brocklehurst’s religious principles are a mockery of truly religious values. Anyone who deviates from his hypocritical standards will be cast out like a canker.

What is worst is that he preaches a doctrine of poverty (the girls are almost starving) and privation to his students (while his own family lives in luxury).

At one point, Mr. Brocklehurst refers to Jane as a careless girl for accidentally dropping her slate. He then humiliates her and punishes her in the most cruel way, by forcing her to stand on a stool for hours, which was a typical punishment of the time: “*Let her stand half an hour longer on that stool, and let no one speak to her during the remainder of the day.*”<sup>112</sup>

Her dear friend Helen will offer her something to eat:

“*(...) again Helen Burns was near me; the fading fires just showed her coming up the long, vacant room; she brought my coffee and bread.*

*‘Come, eat something,’ she said (...)*”<sup>113</sup>

The appalling physical conditions of Jane at Lowood are somewhat palliated with the relationship with Helen, who teaches Jane something very important, the value of endurance and self-denial, and especially of self-control, which will be very useful to her after her aborted marriage to Rochester:

“*Hush, Jane! you think too much of the love of human beings; you are too impulsive, too vehement; the sovereign hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you. Besides this earth, and besides the*

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111 Ibid., page 39.

112 Ibid., page 79.

113 Ibid., page 81.



*race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits: that world is round us, for it is everywhere; and those spirits watch us, for they are commissioned to guard us; and if we were dying in pain and shame, if scorn smote us on all sides, and hatred crushed us, angels see our tortures, recognise our innocence (if innocent we be: as I know you are of this charge which Mr. Brocklehurst has weakly and pompously repeated at second-hand from Mrs. Reed; for I read a sincere nature in your ardent eyes and on your clear front), and God waits only the separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward. Why, then, should we ever sink overwhelmed with distress, when life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness— to glory.”*<sup>114</sup>

The 80 pupils at Lowood are subjected to cold rooms, poor meals, and thin clothing. As a matter of fact, an outbreak of typhus fever lends the school public interest and leads to a relative improvement of the general conditions of the school. Helen dies of consumption. Thanks to her, Jane learns that all the values her friend has taught her are the best way to retain one's self-respect through adversity.

After this sad episode, Jane spends at the school eight more years, two of which as a teacher. She has a feeling that a phase of her life has ended and she is eager for new experiences. She answers an advertisement for a governess spot at Thornfield Hall, an isolated mansion. A housekeeper at Thornfield Hall, Alice Fairfax, replies to Jane's advertisement. Jane takes the position, teaching Adèle Varens, a young French girl.

Jane's driver is late when he picks her up from the station in the very small countryside. When she arrives at Thornfield, it's night time. Though she cannot distinguish much, she finds the interior "*cosy and agreeable.*"<sup>115</sup> At Thornfield Hall, she'll confront not only love but also the demon of the rage which has haunted her since childhood, since the dramatic and crucial Red Room episode and the hysterical fit she had there. At Thornfield, she trusts that with the help of the welcoming Mrs. Fairfax "*a fairer era of life*"<sup>116</sup> will begin for her.

From Mrs. Fairfax, who is a prim and proper elderly woman, Jane learns that Thornfield's owner travels regularly: "*Oh! his character is unimpeachable, I suppose. He is rather peculiar, perhaps: he has travelled a great deal, and seen a great deal of the world, I should think. I dare say he is clever, but I never had much conversation with him.*"<sup>117</sup> This is part of the Byronic sort of aura which surrounds the character.

Jane learns also that she will be tutoring Adèle, an eight year old French girl, whose mother was Céline Varens, a French dancer with whom Rochester used to have an affair. Mrs. Fairfax also tells Jane that Rochester is an eccentric man whose family has a history of violent behaviour.

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114 Ibid., page 82.

115 Ibid., page 113.

116 Ibid., page 116.

117 Ibid., page 124.

Suddenly, Jane hears a peal of a strange laughter while Mrs. Fairfax is showing her the house. This laughter is “mirthless”: “*While I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless.*”<sup>118</sup> It comes from the attic and it echoes throughout the mansion. Mrs. Fairfax is obviously embarrassed, and she summons a woman named Grace and orders her to make less noise and “*remember directions*”.<sup>119</sup> When Grace leaves, Mrs. Fairfax explains to Jane that she is a rather unpredictable seamstress.

Jane describes the first time she hear this laughter, who later the reader will come to know it's Bertha's mad mirthless laughter. Here, significantly enough, Charlotte Brontë alludes to Bluebeard, the story of a murderous husband who keeps the bodies of his wives in a locked chamber. Jane therefore imagines this part of Thornfield “*like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle*”.<sup>120</sup> In this folk tale, Bluebeard allows his bride to open every door but one in his absence: in the forbidden room, she discovers the bodies of her predecessors.

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Jane's belated meeting with Rochester is a sort of fairy-tale meeting. A few months after her arrival at Thornfield, he finally arrives. He appears on a tall steed against a bright moon, preceded by a lion-like dog, which reminds Jane of northern-England folk tale spirits. She thinks of a creature of legends which, assuming the form of a horse or a large dog, scares lonely travellers. After thinking this, she sees first the horse, then an enormous Newfoundland dog gliding through the bushes. Rochester's horse slips on a patch of ice. The man Jane sees is in his late thirties. She tells him she is a governess at Thornfield and she helps him recover from his fall.

Rochester with his “*dark face, stern features and ireful eyes*”<sup>121</sup> seems to be the perfect personification of masculine sexual power. Yet, his fall on the ice and Jane's helping him to rise again seems on the other hand to anticipate Jane's future place in his life.

Rochester is a dark-haired, melancholic man with a taste for distraction. He is largely reminiscent of Lord Byron and of the privileged, accursed, arrogant heroes populating Byron's works. The libertine, the self-exiled, the outsider, who enjoyed the Romantic pose of being at odds with society. Also like Byron, Rochester is an aristocrat. He is morose, gloomy, disdainful. He has also a very passionate nature. He has a penchant for mockery and self-mockery. He is a cynic. Most importantly, like Lord Byron he is restless. This facet of Rochester's personality increases the aura

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118 Ibid., page 126.

119 Ibid., page 127.

120 Ibid., page 126.

121 Ibid., page 134.

of exoticism surrounding him.<sup>122</sup> Rochester is primarily characterized as a traveller and by the restlessness he embodies. He embodies all that Jane longs for.

It is interesting to note that the Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne, began writing as children, creating a private mythology out of the exigencies of a motherless, isolated, and intensely private domestic life in Haworth Parsonage on the Yorkshire moor. In 1826, when Charlotte was ten, her father Patrick Brontë gave her brother, Branwell, a box of twelve wooden soldiers, which seemed to awaken a fervor of creativity in the children: they began making up stories in which the soldiers figured as characters. In time, they created plays, mimes, games, and serial stories transcribed in minute italic handwriting that mimics print; they were influenced by their father's storytelling and by their wide and promiscuous reading - among contemporaries, Scott, Byron, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and supernatural stories by James Hogg that appeared in serial form in Blackwood's Magazine. Out of the children's elaborate fantasizing grew two long-enduring partnerships between Emily and Anne (the "Gondal" sagas) and Charlotte and Branwell (the "Angrian" stories): Emily continued to live imaginatively in Gondal until she was at least twenty-seven years old, while Charlotte wrote her last Angrian story at the age of twenty-three.<sup>123</sup> Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is more clearly an adult's rendering of incestuous childhood obsession than are any of Charlotte Brontë's novels, but the romantically dangerous Rochester is most likely a remnant of the children's sensational world, the poetic antithesis of all that was dull, dreary, routine, and circumscribed in the world of Haworth Parsonage.<sup>124</sup>

Like Emily's Heathcliff, that Byronic, doomed hero; yet unlike Heathcliff—who after all starves himself to death in his deranged attachment to the past—since, by the novel's end, after he goes blind, Rochester does become domesticated.<sup>125</sup>

*"It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if*

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122 Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero, Types and Prototypes, Introduction*, pp. 3-13, published by University of Minnesota Press, page 3.

123 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

124 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

125 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

*they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.*"<sup>126</sup> This passage reads as a manifesto for women's rights, and as a critique to the constraining effect of gender prejudices in Victorian society. It can be said that Jane and Rochester do not begin their relationship as servant and master, but as spiritual equals, although socially they are not equal at all. As the narrative progresses this quality is emphasized by Brontë in other scenes as well.

At one point, Rochester imperiously orders Jane to "*resume your seat and answer my question*"<sup>127</sup> while he looks at her drawing. Rochester's response to the pictures reveals not so much his Byronic brooding, but his awareness of being before someone who is his equal, and he says, "*Who taught you to paint wind?*"<sup>128</sup> Jane actually begins to fall in love with him not because of his princely manners or his wealth, but rather in spite of the fact that he's her master, because he is her equal, and therefore he is qualified to judge her art.

Gilbert and Guber claim that *Jane Eyre* is a work permeated by angry fantasies, borrowing the mythic quest plot but not its devout substance of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. By borrowing this mythic quest plot, Brontë seems to have opened her eyes (and Jane's eyes as well) to women, to female realities around her, such as confinement, orphanhood, marginalization, starvation and even madness. Victorian critics subconsciously understood the subliminal intensity of Brontë's passion.

Matthew Arnold wrote that Charlotte's mind contains nothing but "*anger, rebellion and rage.*"<sup>129</sup> So it seems that it was not Jane's sexuality that shocked Victorians readers and reviewers. What really annoyed them was the anti-Christian refusal to accept the forms, the customs and the standards of society. What disturbed them was *Jane Eyre's* subliminal rebellious feminism, her refusal to submit to her social destiny, her anger.<sup>130</sup>

In the course of the novel, this develops into a Romantic polarity: the opposition between feeling and rationality, passion and reason. Rochester leaves suddenly and Jane finds out he has left for a house part at a local estate. During his absence, she is miserable and she gradually realizes she is falling in love with him. When he returns, he returns with a party of guests including the beautiful and haughty society lady Blanche Ingram. Jane jealously believes that Rochester is in love with this accomplished lady, who at one point also comments on the insufferableness of governesses. Behind her appearances, she is nothing but a fortune hunter.

Jane has to leave and go to attend her aunt, who is on her deathbed, following her son John's debauchery and apparent suicide. Jane, who has not entirely forgotten the abuses she suffered, tries

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126 Ibid. Charlotte Brontë, page 129.

127 Ibid. Charlotte Brontë, page 146.

128 Ibid. Charlotte Brontë, page 148.

129 Matthew Arnold, *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. George W. E. Russell (New York and London: Macmillan Co., 1896), 1:34.

130 Ibid., page 779.

to create a reconciliation with her aunt, but the latter refuses all attempts of appeasement. She dies unloved by her children and unrepentant off her cruelty towards little Jane.

Before dying, however, Mrs. Reed gives Jane a letter from her uncle, who had hoped to adopt Jane and make her his sole heir. The letter was indeed sent three years ago, but Mrs. Reed had vindictively kept this letter from Jane. Jane elicits an explanation of this conduct from her aunt, and Mrs. Reed finally says that she has disliked her from the very beginning, because she had disliked Jane's mother, Mrs. Reed's sister in law, because she was warmly loved by Mr. Reed. This jealousy was passed on upon her mother's death to little Jane.

When Jane returns to Thornfield, the guests have left. Rochester sadistically tells Jane he will soon marry Blanche, and that Jane and Adele will have to leave soon. Follows Jane's angry, passionate love declaration, which presents an unprecedented challenge to social boundaries. This declaration defies Victorian reverence to the ideal of reticence and restraint.

Jane appears eager not only for love, but also for liberty and gender equality. The two aspects ("*poor, obscure, plain and little*"<sup>131</sup> and fierce) of Jane's personality illustrate her nobility of spirit and her wish to assert the right to be herself. From Gateshead to the very end, Jane's mood is that of "*a revolted slave.*"<sup>132</sup> Her brain is "*in tumult,*"<sup>133</sup> and her heart is in "*insurrection.*"<sup>134</sup>:

*"Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are!"*<sup>135</sup>

Much like a Byronic hero, Rochester is not afraid to ignore social conventions when he falls in love with Jane. He has complete disregard for social rank. This is also apparent in his relationship with Jane. Rochester cares nothing of what people will think when he marries a former governess: "*You - poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are - I entreat to accept me as a husband*"<sup>136</sup>.

Rochester wants to marry after a very short betrothal. During this brief period, he keeps buying jewels and rich clothes for Jane, which she finds too extravagant for her.

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131 Ibid., page 292.

132 Ibid., page 18.

133 Ibid., page 19.

134 Ibid., page 19.

135 Ibid., page 292.

136 Ibid, page 294.

### 2.3. *Jane Eyre and her dark double Bertha Antoinetta Mason: angels or monsters?*

The wedding is interrupted by Bertha Antoinetta's brother, Mr. Mason, and an advocate, Mr. Briggs. That's the moment in which Jane finds out that Rochester married Bertha 15 years prior in Jamaica: "*The marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment.*"<sup>137</sup> Rochester could not say anything but "*Proceed*"<sup>138</sup> to the clergyman.

Then, the narration is followed by the reading of a paper took from Mr. Briggs' pocket. He read out in a sort of official, nasal voice: "*I affirm and can prove that on the 20th of October A.D. - (a date of fifteen years back), Edward Fairfax Rochester, of Thornfield Hall, in the county of -, and of Ferndean Manor, in - shire, England, was married to my sister, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta his wife, a Creole, at—church, Spanish Town, Jamaica. The record of the marriage will be found in the register of that church—a copy of it is now in my possession. Signed, Richard Mason.*"<sup>139</sup>

Her brother Richard Mason stated that he saw Bertha living in Thornfield "*last April*"<sup>140</sup>. In time, Rochester could not do anything but prove his sin: "*I meant, however, to be a bigamist; but fate has out-manoeuvred me, or Providence has checked me,—perhaps the last. I am little better than a devil at this moment; and, as my pastor there would tell me, deserve no doubt the sternest judgments of God, even to the quenchless fire and deathless worm. Gentlemen, my plan is broken up:- what this lawyer and his client say is true: I have been married, and the woman to whom I was married lives! You say you never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at the house up yonder, Wood; but I daresay you have many a time inclined your ear to gossip about the mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward. Some have whispered to you that she is my bastard half-sister: some, my cast-off mistress. I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago,—Bertha Mason by name; sister of this resolute personage, who is now, with his quivering limbs and white cheeks, showing you what a stout heart men may bear.*"<sup>141</sup>

After saying that "*Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family*", which "*dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste*"<sup>142</sup>, Rochester commands everyone back to Thornfield to see his Creole

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137 Ibid., page 333.

138 Ibid., page 333.

139 Ibid., page 335.

140 Ibid., page 336.

141 Ibid., page 336.

142 Ibid., page 336.

wife. The mention of Bertha's mother suggests that insanity is not the only hereditary curse of the Mason family.<sup>143</sup>

After Richard Mason puts an end to Jane and Mr. Rochester's wedding, Rochester finally introduces Jane to Bertha. Even when Jane sees her with other witnesses and during the day, Bertha remains obscure and eludes realistic categorization: "*In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.*"<sup>144</sup> As one can see, Bertha is described with the use of the pronoun "it", as if she's really an animal.<sup>145</sup> But it needs to be pointed out that all the insane acts that Bertha has committed in the book has only been directed at either Rochester (biting him, scratching him, setting fire to his room) or the idea of marriage itself (tearing Jane's veil). For example, when she goes into Jane's room a night before her wedding, she only tears the veil, which shows her frustration with the idea of marriage, even though she had the potential to do a lot more:

*"It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell.'*

*'Did you see her face?'*

*'Not at first. But presently she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass.'*

*'And how were they?'*

*'Fearful and ghastly to me—oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!'*

*'Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.'*

*'This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?'*

*'You may.'*

*'Of the foul German spectre—the Vampyre'"*<sup>146</sup>

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143 Ibid., page 3.

144 Ibid., page 338.

145 Sandra M. Gilbert, "*Jane Eyre*" and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking, NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, Summer, 1998, Vol. 31, No. 3, Thirtieth Anniversary Issue: III (Summer, 1998), pp. 351-372, published by: Duke University Press, JSTOR;

146 Ibid., pp. 326-327.

As many critics points out, “*first seen darkly as a ghost, then as a goblin, as vampiric and lycanthropic, Bertha never really loses the mysterious qualities that make her very humanness suspect.*”<sup>147</sup> It is no wonder that Jane credits the reality of this ghostly visit only after she has found a tangible vestige of it the next morning (the torn veil) and that Rochester can ultimately convince her that all that she saw was Grace Poole, distorted by imperfectly dispelled nightmare.<sup>148</sup>

Also in chapters XII and XX, Jane feels there’s something’s wrong in Thornfield: as a matter of fact, she can hear “*eccentric murmurs*”<sup>149</sup> and “*a snarling, snatching sound almost like a dog quarelling*”<sup>150</sup>.

As Bertha is insane he cannot divorce her, due to her actions being uncontrollable and thus not legitimate grounds for divorce. Years of violence, insanity, and confinement in an attic destroy Bertha's looks: when she sees Bertha in the middle of the night, Jane describes Bertha as looking "savage", even going so far as to compare her with a "*German spectre—the Vampyre*"<sup>151</sup>. Bertha destroys Jane's wedding veil during Jane’s wedding eve. Despite not loving her, Rochester attempts to save Bertha from a fire she starts in the house when she again escapes. In recounting the history of their relationship, Rochester states: “*I thought I loved her. ... Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! ... I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her.*”<sup>152</sup>

Eventually, Bertha sets fire to Thornfield Hall at the end of the story and throws herself to her death from the roof. Even in death, Bertha is seeking only emancipation that has been snatched away from her by locking her up in the attic. She jumps off the house, openly affirming her identity – one last time. Bertha, through her suicide, rejects the confinement that she had been subjected to. She yearns for emancipation, which she can attain only through death, which she embraces, inverting all the previous scenes of confinement, reasserting her existence in a public spectacle, rejecting Rochester’s charity as well.

In the Preface of *Jane Eyre* by Joyce Carol Oates, it’s said that like *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* is a story of hunger. As the story shows, *Villette* is about Lucy Snowe, which travels from her native England to the fictional French-speaking city of Villette to teach at a girls' school, where she is drawn into adventure and romance.

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147 Peter Grudin, *Jane and the Other Mrs. Rochester: Excess and Restraint in "Jane Eyre"*, NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, Winter, 1977, Vol. 10, No. 2, Tenth Anniversary Issue: II (Winter, 1977), pp. 145-157, published by: Duke University Press, page 147.

148 Ibid., page 150.

149 Ibid., page 130.

150 Ibid., page 241.

151 Ibid., page 327.

152 Ibid., page 352.



In *Jane Eyre*, the young Jane Eyre supplants the formerly exotic Bertha, the Creole heiress whom Rochester recklessly married in his youth, is not a matter of moral ambiguity: for in her deranged and diseased state, Bertha is no longer a human woman but sheer appetite, and therefore beyond the range of Jane's (and presumably the reader's) sympathy. Her laughter is "*demonic*"<sup>153</sup>;, thought Jane Eyre. Jane is necessarily repelled, for this is an other quite truly other, lacking even the intelligence and sense of moral proportion so artfully voiced by Dr. Frankenstein's doomed monster. When Jane first sees Rochester's lawfully wedded wife the reader is as shocked as she.<sup>154</sup>

Jane Eyre's hunger and that of Bertha Mason are not seen to overlap, for one is always qualified by intellectual scrupulosity and a fierce sense of integrity; the other is, and was, sheerly animal. Jane goes against the grain of her deepest wishes; she renounces emotional fulfillment in the service of an ideal that includes, as "Currer Bell" carefully notes in the preface to the novel's second edition, "the world-redeeming creed of Christ."<sup>155</sup> Jane's self-banishment and the remarkably literal terms of her hunger - she comes close to starving after she flees Thornfield - identify her in fact as a kind of Christ: misunderstood, defiant, isolated, willing (almost) to die for her beliefs. The reiteration of "master" and "my master" in the narrative suggests Jane's ultimate if not immediate acknowledgement of her place in the hierarchy of a civilized cosmos; in this, she strikes a chord of willful submission not unlike that of Emily Dickinson, whose insistence upon "Master" as a force in her emotional life carried with it an air of obsessive conviction. How seemingly passive, how subtly aggressive! Jane Eyre is the ideal heroine as she is the ideal narrator of her romance.<sup>156</sup>

Bertha is not even a woman anymore, but: "*the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet.*"<sup>157</sup>

Rochester confesses to having married Bertha, the daughter of a West India planter and a merchant, in a trance of youthful prurience and to having discovered, after it was too late, that their natures were antithetical - her "*pygmy intellect*"<sup>158</sup> was "*common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher*"<sup>159</sup>; she was sexually promiscuous - "*her vices sprang up fast and rank*"<sup>160</sup>; and diseased - "*her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity.*"

<sup>161</sup> The fact that Bertha Mason suffers from atypical general paresis, the consequence of syphilitic

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153 Ibid., page 173.

154 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

155 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

156 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

157 Ibid., page 338.

158 Ibid., page 353.

159 Ibid., page 353.

160 Ibid., page 353.

161 Ibid., page 353.

infection, must be passed by in silence since, in realistic terms, Rochester too would be syphilitic; and would infect Jane Eyre if she married him. <sup>162</sup>

Criticism has made Rochester's first wife central because of its representation of women. It entails a monstrous representation of the female body, a bestial creature held in check by an ironically named Grace. This gothic portrayal of Bertha, who displays a wide range of bestial traits and appears tainted with the features of the savage, are obviously deployed by Brontë to underscore and highlight Bertha's reduction to bestiality. Her animalistic traits are an attempt to highlight the human nature of the lunatic and mentally insane, and in particular of female insanity.

This treatment of Rochester's insane wife is also telling of contemporary attitude towards female insanity and sexuality, two terms which are actually combined. Brontë's depiction of the aggressive, animalistic, threatening, vampire-like Bertha is a negative example of dangerous female excesses.

One point that seems incidental in *Jane Eyre* and which will become central in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is Bertha Mason's West Indian origin. This postcolonial 1962 by Jean Rhys is not only a prequel but also a feminist and postcolonial response to *Jane Eyre*. It described the background of Rochester's first marriage. In *Jane Eyre*, Jamaica and the West Indies are constructed as a sort of special other, while signs of bestiality and grotesquery are constantly displayed onto the body of the Creole woman. In other words, Bertha's body becomes the repository of the social space and of the political and social exploitation involved in colonialism. Bertha is described as "purple," "swelled," "blackened." <sup>163</sup> Rochester says she is not only insane, but also morally stained by intemperance, infidelity, impurity, profanity, madness and bestiality.

Rochester's ultimate secret, therefore, is a secret of inequality. As Jane learns, Rochester was forced to marry Bertha for her wealth. But love and equality never entered the equation. Being the second son of "a grasping man," <sup>164</sup> Rochester was forced by his father into this marriage, because all the money went to the first son. After college, his was sent straight to Jamaica to secure a wealthy marriage. In his melodramatic account of his married life, R actually refuses any responsibility. He acknowledges only an error, for which he entirely blames his father. He was dazzled by the heiress's tropical beauty; he blames "the idiotic rivalries of society, the prurience, the rashness, the blindness of youth." <sup>165</sup>

It was only after he married her that he found out about her unfortunate genetic legacy: "she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations." <sup>166</sup> This unfortunate legacy was apparently responsible for Bertha's psychic deterioration and also for her moral corruption.

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162 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

163 Ibid., page 327.

164 Ibid., page 351.

165 Ibid., page 352.

166 Ibid., page 337.

What Brontë seems to imply is that in a way Bertha deserved her fate, her insanity being the consequence of her unchecked sexuality and unchaste temperament, described as “*giant propensities*,” “*a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw*.”<sup>167</sup>

It's not so much insanity and the genetic flaws that Rochester finds disconcerting, but rather her depravity. The intemperate and unchaste Bertha coming from the appropriately warm West Indies typifies even better than Céline Varens Victorian racial prejudices and the association of exoticism and eroticism.

When Rochester asks Jane to be his wife, he promises her a life of travels. He believes that revisiting with Jane all the places he has already been will be for him a sort of purification. After his secret is unveiled, Rochester makes her another kind of proposal: to go live together in the south of France even though they are not married.

In Rochester's perspective, continental Europe and especially France are envisioned as a warmer, freer land, which affords escape from the stifling constraints and restraints of Victorian morality and from strict social and moral code of conduct.

This openly contrasts with the scene in which Rochester relates his liaison with Céline Varens, described in chapter XV. Rochester has almost ruined himself to please Céline, and he would have continued to do so, has she not betrayed him with a young French viscount. There was a duel and Rochester planted a bullet in one of his arms. In the third part of the novel, Brontë contrasts Rochester's virile power against St. John Rivers's “Apollo-like” handsomeness, replicating the contrast between Rochester and the etiolated viscount.

Rochester has always denied that Adele is his daughter. Note that the child “*inherited probably from her mother*”<sup>168</sup> a superficiality of mind not compatible with the English character.

On the one hand, readers have deception and venality of the part of the French dancer, highlighting Victorian and especially nationalistic prejudices and puritan moralizing towards anything French (“*slime and mud of Paris*”<sup>169</sup>); on the other, the parental responsibility and philanthropy displayed by Rochester, a natural propensity of the English character according to Brontë. The largely unsympathetic portrayal of Céline, in whose person are concentrated boredom, wile and immorality which is typical of the stage, foreshadows and anticipates Brontë's monstrous characterization of Bertha.

Bertha can be considered as Jane's dark double<sup>170</sup>, a sort of persecutory and dark colonial double who is kept locked on the third floor of the mansion. The devil woman of unbridled animal

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167 Ibid., page 353.

168 Ibid., page 170.

169 Ibid., page 170.

170 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), pp. 360- 362.

passion, whose vocabulary is that of a “*professed harlot*,”<sup>171</sup> is a sort of grotesque synecdoche of the colonies as a place of backwardness, lawlessness and barbarism which must be checked by British rule. Created out of Brontë’s and Victorian cultural fears of sexuality, Bertha functions in the text primarily as a sort of warning exemplum of the dangers of sex as well as the dangers of degeneration.

Jane Eyre possesses many of the qualities of the so-called “angel”: she is pure, moral, and controlled in her behavior. Yet, at the same time, she is extremely passionate, independent, and courageous. She refuses to submit to a position of inferiority to the men in her life, even when faced with a choice between love and autonomy, and ultimately triumphs over social expectations. Moreover, Jane’s childhood adventures demonstrate much of the same rebelliousness and anger that characterize the “monster.” It is clear that Jane’s appearance of control is only something that she learned during her time at Lowood School; she still maintains the same fiery spirit that defined her character as a child.

With the character of Bertha Mason, Brontë has a more difficult time when it comes to blending the distinctions between angel and monster. The readers only meet Bertha when she is in the depths of madness, having been confined in the third-story attic of Thornfield for nearly fifteen years, and there is not enough interaction between her and the other characters to demonstrate any “angelic” behavior. Yet, Bertha’s position as the obstacle to Jane’s happiness with Mr. Rochester, as well as her state of complete imprisonment, suggest that her madness may have been partially manufactured by the male-dominated society that forced her to give up her wealth in marriage to Mr. Rochester. Moreover, the similarities between Bertha’s behavior in the third-story attic and Jane’s actions as a child in the red-room suggest that neither character is full angel or full monster but rather a combination of the two.

Though the slave metaphor is used to refer to Jane’s situation, slavery in the colonies is curiously never alluded to. Significantly, the slave metaphor connected with Jane’s early awareness of injustice is safely referred to a far away long forgotten Roman history, and not the socially and historically closer matter of the West Indies. The 20.000 pounds inherited by Jane from her uncle must have had its source in Jamaica and sugar plantations.

The potential identification and also the overlapping of the two female characters paved the way for the strange night meeting between the two, on the night before Jane’s wedding, when she is suddenly visited by this “*fearful and ghastly*”<sup>172</sup> figure which Jane sees through a glass. This detail reinforces the validity of the image of the double. Bertha takes Jane’s wedding veil, throws it maniacally over her head, rends it and throwing it to the floor, steps over it.

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171 Ibid., page 355.

172 Ibid., page 327.

This strange visit could be read both as a clear symptom of Bertha's jealousy, but it could also be read as a warning signal sent to Jane. If the veil is torn to pieces, perhaps then the wedding cannot take place.

After the discovery, Jane escapes. She has also been accused by many critics as coward, because she refuses to marry Rochester, despite his pleadings, after their abortive wedding and the revelation of Bertha's existence.<sup>173</sup>

Jane may be accused of not having enough faith or trust in Rochester (for example, when suddenly reversing her previous beliefs, she says that she "*will keep the law given by God*"<sup>174</sup> and leaves Rochester) but in a sense he has caused this reaction himself. It was he who did not have enough faith in Jane in the first place to tell her his story openly. It was he who would have betrayed her into a false marriage.<sup>175</sup>

When she feels the force of Rochester's revelation, she feels like the little girl at the start of the novel, looking at the bleak world from her window-seat: "*Jane Eyre, who had been an ardent, expectant woman—almost a bride, was a cold, solitary girl again: her life was pale, her prospects were desolate. A Christmas frost had come at mid-summer; a white December had whirled over June; ice glazed the ripe apples, drifts crushed the blowing roses.*"<sup>176</sup>

She is saved by clergyman St. John Rivers and his two sisters, Mary and Diana. Not wanting to be discovered by Rochester, Jane assumes the name of Jane Elliot. Her true name however is eventually revealed, and this leads to the discovery that the Rivers are related to her.



*St. John Rivers admits Jane to Moor House, illustration by F. H. Townsend*

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173 Arnold Shapiro, *In Defense of Jane Eyre*, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Autumn, 1968, Vo. 8, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1968, pp. 681-298, page 681.

174 *Ibid.*, page 365.

175 *Ibid.*, page 691.

176 *Ibid.*, page 341.

St. John is a dedicated but narrow-minded man in his ideas of duty and sacrifice. He proposes to Jane that she accompany him in his mission to India. This minister is construed by Brontë as a sort of foil to Rochester. His very serenity, his almost inhuman composure in the face of death in the concluding lines of the novel, though consistent with his Christian stoicism, betrays something almost inhuman. He offers Jane a marriage of spirituality, a life of principles.

Jane almost accepts, when she hears a voice that calls to her: that is Rochester. As she points out, the voice “*seemed in ME-not in the external world.*”<sup>177</sup>

This transcendent, telepathic summoning of Jane seems to have the logic of wistful fantasies which is typical of fairytales and gothic romances. The deserving are rewarded the undeserving are punished. Dreams, premonitions and visions have their place in the novel and in certain instances, they seem to guide Jane as she embarks upon her journey of self-discovery and self-realization. In addition, Jane had since childhood a fascination for magic and the unexplained; it is precisely such unexplainable and supernatural occurrence that reunites Jane at the end of the novel.

As Joyce Carol Oates states in the *Preface*, Brontë’s authorial strategy is to balance one kind of temptation with its obverse: if Rochester is all romantic passion, urging her to succumb to emotional excess, St. John Rivers is all Christian ambition, urging her to attempt a spiritual asceticism of which she knows herself incapable.<sup>178</sup> The miraculously realized “family” of Diana, Mary, and Rivers himself strikes us as a benign adumbration of the novel’s original household, in which Jane was despised by Eliza, Georgiana, and the spectacularly loathsome John Reed.<sup>179</sup>

St. John's efforts to convince Jane to marry him, and his arguments that it would be sinful to resist, are meant to prevent her from returning to Rochester and her idolatrous past.<sup>180</sup> When St. John casually remarks that Rochester “*must have been a bad man,*”<sup>181</sup> Jane replies: “*You don't know him - don't pronounce an opinion upon him.*”<sup>182</sup> While Rochester sees Jane as the medium of his salvation, St. John views himself as the medium of Jane's salvation. Indeed, St. John effectively argues that Jane should make him into her idol.<sup>183</sup> Like his double Brocklehurst, he regards himself as an extension of God's will. He scorns humankind: “*I am the servant of an infallible master. I am not going out under human guidance, subject to the defective laws and erring control of my feeble fellow-worms.*”<sup>184</sup> He even declares that serving him is the same as serving God: if she “reject[s]” his offer of marriage, he argues, “*it is not me you deny, but God.*”<sup>185</sup> St. John thus exploits his

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177 Ibid., page 486.

178 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

179 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

180 Kathleen Vejvoda, *Idolatry in Jane Eyre*, Victorian Literature and Culture, 2003, Vol. 31, No. 1, Victorian Religion (2003), pp. 241-261, published by: Cambridge University Press Stable, JSTOR, page 253.

181 Ibid., page 440.

182 Ibid., page 440.

183 Ibid., page 253.

184 Ibid., page 4863.

185 Ibid., page 471.

culture's assumptions about women's vulnerability to idolatry: "*Refuse to be my wife, and you limit yourself for ever to a track of selfish ease and barren obscurity. Tremble lest in that case you should be numbered with those who have denied the faith and are worse than infidels!*"<sup>186</sup>

Jane returns to Thornfield to find it just a blackened ruin, and the master maimed and blind, a result of his failed attempt to save his mad wife from the flames.

The providential theme superseding through the agency of miracle and coincidence, the realism and the harsh realism of the first part of the novel, means that what Jane at the end receives is what was always meant for her, that is, love and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the money she acquires is no mysterious gratuity but rather an inheritance that ties her to family, home and class by its assertion of family kinship.

The blend of Christian values and Gothic horrors (mainly expressed by the West-Indian Wife and suppressed eroticism) satisfied readers in the Victorian era and ever after. It is hardly surprising that this novel has inspired so many adaptations over the last hundred years. The latest is directed by Fukunaga by 2011.

The film opens on a panoramic shot of a weeping Jane in a desperate flight from Thornfield on the Yorkshire moors. She dashes across the bare landscape as if she were pursued by demons or rather her own demons, and menaced by a ghostly wind-bore voice.

The narrative begins with Jane as an adult rather than as a child, disrupting the linear plot of the autobiography and the Victorian Bildungsroman. Then her earlier life unfolds through flashback that compress many stages into visually potent scene and images.

In Fukunaga's film, Jane's construction as an agent parallels Bertha's opposing construction as a non-agent. The scene with Bertha ripping the veil cements the very odd connection between Jane and Bertha; it changes the viewers' perception of both Jane's and Bertha's subjectivity; it changes traditional, codified Victorian views of female insanity.

The end of *Jane Eyre* follows the symmetrical scheme of the novel: Rochester is changed and transformed, as the *cliché* wants. He has now achieved a humanity that he never had before. Rochester, following the novel's design, must be altered too in some respect, but it is probably incorrect to read his blinding as a species of castration. Not only is the blind and crippled Rochester no less masculine than before, but, more significantly, it was never the case that Jane Eyre, for all her inexperience, shrank from either her master's passion or her own: the issue was not Jane's sexual timidity but her shrewd understanding that, should she become his mistress, she would lose Rochester's respect. One might say, inevitably lose his respect. These were the hardly secret terms of Victorian mores, and Jane Eyre would have to have been a very naive young woman, as self-deluded as George Eliot's Hetty, to have believed otherwise. And Jane is anything but naive.<sup>187</sup>

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186 Ibid., page 471.

187 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

His feelings about life are completely different from what they were: “*Hitherto I have hated to be helped-to be led: henceforth, I feel, I shall hate it no more. I did not like to put my hand into a hireling's, but it is pleasant to feel it circled by Jane's little fingers.*”<sup>188</sup> He admits that he was wrong when he tried to change Jane: “*The third day from this must be our wed ding-day Jane. Never mind fine clothes and jewels, now: all that is not worth a fillip.*”<sup>189</sup> He was wrong when he asked Jane to stay with him after the revelation of his marriage: “*I would have sullied my innocent flower-breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me.*”<sup>190</sup> He is certain he has expiated his sin. The day he called out to her, he accepted the justness of his punishment: “*I longed for thee, Jane! Oh, I longed for thee both with soul and flesh! I asked of God, at once in anguish and humility, if I had not been long enough desolate, afflicted, tormented; and might not soon taste bliss and peace once more. That I merited all I endured, I acknowledged-that I could scarcely endure more, I pleaded; and the alpha and omega of my heart's wishes broke involuntarily from my lips in the words-"Jane! Jane! Jane!"*”<sup>191</sup>

“*Reader, I married him,*” Jane announces boldly in the novel’s final chapter. The message is that Jane married Edward - not that Edward married Jane. What greater triumph for the orphan, the governess, the small, plain, and “Quaker-like” virgin?<sup>192</sup>

*Jane Eyre* may have elements of fantasy in it, may rely on a sort of "magic" as a plot device, but it is concerned with real problems of a real world, and the solutions it offers, one hopes, are also real.<sup>193</sup>

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188 Ibid., page 513.

189 Ibid., page 514.

190 Ibid., page 514.

191 Ibid., page 515.

192 Ibid. Joyce Carol Oates.

193 Ibid., page 698.



## 2.4. Bertha Mason: an abused wife or just "the madwoman in the attic"?

“A life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story.”<sup>194</sup>



*Bertha Mason in the foreground,*  
an illustration by F. H. Townsend for the second edition of *Jane Eyre*



*Bertha Mason smashed on the pavement*  
after throwing herself off the roof when Thornfield Hall is on fire

Bertha Antoinetta Mason has always been recognized with the phrase and attribute “*the madwoman in the attic*”. The phrase itself is actually the title of the groundbreaking book of feminist literary criticism by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, written in 1979, which is called *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

These two scholars introduced a revolutionary approach to the exploration of the works of female authors of the 19th century, from Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë to Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. As many critics state, “*literary achievement for the nineteenth-century woman, they claim, was psychologically costly because it required defiance of the misogynist strictures and structures of Victorian patriarchy. Defiance had to be hidden; suppressed, it smoldered as a pure rage revealed in the furious madwoman who disrupts or ruptures so many*

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194 Ibid., page 36.

women's texts.”<sup>195</sup> Gilbert and Gubar derived this theory of the woman writer from Harold Bloom's “anxiety of influence”.<sup>196</sup> That theory had created authorship as an exclusively male phenomenon.

Their rereading was aimed at uncovering the patriarchal influences in their work and their use of ‘metaphorical trousers’ which goes beyond the use of male pseudonyms, as the Brontë sisters did, and examines the use of strategies used to disguise their criticism of patriarchy.

In the 700-page text, Gilbert and Gubar use the figure of Bertha Mason as the so-called “Madwoman in the Attic” to make an argument about perceptions toward female literary characters during the time period. According to Gilbert and Gubar, all female characters in male-authored books can be categorized as either the “angel” or the “monster”: the “angel” character was pure, dispassionate, and submissive; in other words, the ideal female figure in a male-dominated society, the “monster” female character was sensual, passionate, rebellious, and decidedly uncontrollable. This one caused anxiety among men.

Although Bertha does serve as one of the seeming villains of the novel, she should be seen more as a critique of a society in which passionate woman are viewed as monsters or madwomen.

Jane Eyre possesses many of the qualities of the so-called “angel in the house”: she is pure, moral, and controlled in her behaviour. But, at the same time, she is extremely passionate, independent and courageous. She refuses to submit to a position of inferiority to the men in her life, even when faced with a choice between love and autonomy: “*I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.*”<sup>197</sup>

Jane wants to maintain her distance and her individuality. She will not be another Celine Varens: “*I only want an easy mind, sir; not crushed by crowded obligations.*”<sup>198</sup> Yet she realizes that he is everything to her: “*My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than my world: almost my hope of heaven.*”<sup>199</sup>

Moreover, Jane's childhood adventures demonstrate much of the same rebelliousness and anger that characterize the “monster”. It is clear that Jane's appearance of control is only something that she learned during her time at Lowood School; she still maintains the same fiery spirit that defined her character as a child.

Whether she is construed as the champion of female rebellion, or as the image of monstrosity that Jane Eyre must reject in the course of her *Bildung*, “*Bertha Mason continues to*

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195 Nina Baym, *The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory*, Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, Spring - Autumn, 1984, Vol. 3, No. 1-2, Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship (Spring Autumn, 1984), pp. 45-59, published by: University of Tulsa, page 47.

196 Ibid., page 47.

197 Ibid., page 293.

198 Ibid., page 311.

199 Ibid., page 316.

*compel feminist criticism to address the highly problematic yet omnipresent conjunction of madness and femininity.*"<sup>200</sup>

Gilbert and Gubar read Rochester's first wife as "*Jane's truest and darkest double. (...) the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress.*"<sup>201</sup> With the character of Bertha Mason, Brontë has a more difficult time when it comes to blending the distinctions between angel and monster. The readers only meet Bertha when she is in the depths of madness, having been confined in the third-story attic of Thornfield for nearly fifteen years, and there is not enough interaction between her and the other characters to demonstrate any "angelic" behavior. Yet, Bertha's position as the obstacle to Jane's happiness with Mr. Rochester, as well as her state of complete imprisonment, suggest that her madness may have been partially manufactured by the male-dominated society that forced her to give up her wealth in marriage to Mr. Rochester. Moreover, the similarities between Bertha's behavior in the third-story attic and Jane's actions as a child in the red-room suggest that neither character is full angel or full monster but rather a combination of the two.

While Brontë does not differentiate between angel and monster in her portrayal of Jane and Bertha, she does, however, argue for moderation of the passions in all of her characters. Mr. Rochester and Bertha both have too much passion in their lives, while St. John Rivers has too little. Bertha's passion manifests as madness, while Mr. Rochester's passion is displayed in his debauched behavior on the continent and his determination to make Jane his mistress. St. John, on the other hand, suppresses all of his passion and love for Rosamond Oliver, and thus becomes a cold and aloof man whose only desire is to fulfill his duty to God. Of the three characters, Mr. Rochester is the only one who eventually achieves a balance of passion; after Jane's departure from Thornfield and the loss of his eyesight, he becomes much more spiritual and is able to achieve the same emotional moderation that Jane exhibits throughout the novel. Although Bertha does serve as one of the seeming villains of the novel, she should be seen more as a critique of a society in which passionate women are viewed as monsters or madwomen. Charlotte Brontë's act of writing a novel – particularly such a Gothic one – was no doubt equally threatening to the men of her time period. In some ways, Brontë's decision to merge the identities of the "angel" and the "monster" in the two primary female characters of her novel can be seen as a personal statement about the conflict between passion and passivity in her own life.

The initial connection between Jane and Bertha is largely literary<sup>202</sup>: "*The orphaned governess who comes to stay at the venerable and "vault-like" country mansion has her relatives in "The Mysteries of Udolpho" and in "The Turn of the Screw" as she momentarily ascribes the strange laugh*

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200 Valerie Beattie, *The Mystery at Thornfield: representations of madness in Jane Eyre*, *Studies in the Novel*, winter 1996, Vol. 28, No. 4 (winter 1996), pp. 493-505, published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR, page 493.

201 *Ibid.*, page 360.

202 *Ibid.*, page 149.

*emanating from a third-floor room to a ghostly agent. Thornfield reminds us of Northanger Abbey as the romantic heroine is deflated by Mrs. Fairfax's attribution of the laughter to a tipling servant. Of course, the final explanation lurks beneath this one. It is something more frightening and pernicious than any mere Gothic ghost, more malicious and proposeful, and yet, within this realistic context, just as mysterious.”*<sup>203</sup>

Bertha Mason is a denied a voice and a life and all the reader knows about her is from Jane and Edward's points of view. As a matter of fact, “*among Charlotte Brontë outrages on her madwoman is the denial of ability to speak; Bertha will never get to tell her own story. (Jean Rhys corrected this in Wide Sargasso Sea.)*”<sup>204</sup>

Christiane Makward<sup>205</sup>, one of the important translators of and commentators on French feminism, describes the female language: “*open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body, i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or 'didactic' languages.*”<sup>206</sup> This seems a guarantee of continued oppression.<sup>207</sup>

Domna C. Stanton, another sponsor of French feminist theory in this country, writes, “*recurring identification of the female in écriture féminine with madness, antireason, primitive darkness, mystery*” represents a “*revalorization of traditional 'feminine' stereotypes.*”<sup>208</sup>

She lives like an animal, does not see the light of day, and is deprived of any basic human dignity, such as clothes or basic hygiene. A drunk and negligent carer is her custodian while he proclaims he is a bachelor.

But what are the reasons which led to her dismal situation?

Edward Rochester was his father's second and youngest son, who was banished to the colonies, to marry a wealthy Jamaican heiress, while his older brother, Rowland was destined to inherit the family estate. When Edward arrived in Jamaica to comply with the arranged marriage and gain her generous dowry, he discovered that Bertha was Creole and came from a family of mad women; a fact which did not deter his determination to marry her and claim his dowry. It would seem, perhaps because he was a member of the English gentry, that an honest occupation was out of the question. A dowry was his only option, and he accepted it eagerly, in spite of his wife's ethnicity and family history.

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203 Ibid., page 149.

204 Ibid., page 48.

205 Ibid., page 49.

206 Christiane Makward, *To Be or Not to Be... a Feminist Speaker*, in *The Future of Difference*, eds. Alice Jardine and Hester Eisenstein (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), page 96.

207 Ibid., page 49.

208 Domna C. Stanton, *Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Dis-Connection*, in *The Future of Difference*, page 86.

Edward Rochester, who was a fortunate man, finally did inherit Thornfield Hall and the Rochester Estate, because his father and his brother both died four years after he married Bertha. He was then free to return to England, with his mad wife, and reclaim his inheritance. He decided to lock Bertha away and travel around Europe, living the gay life of a rich bachelor with his wife's fortune in his pocket. It was during this time that he had an affair with the French opera singer, Céline Varens, which resulted in the birth of Adele, although he always denied paternity. It was to look after Adele that Jane Eyre first arrived at Thornfield Hall.

The idea of a married woman locked in an attic by her husband is repulsive to contemporary audiences. However, "*Brontë's readership in the middle of the 19th century would have considered that Mr Rochester's refusal to place Bertha in an institution denoted nobility, not perversity.*"<sup>209</sup>

As Sarah Wise examines in a number of disputed lunacy cases, ranging from the 1820s to the 1890s, even England's private asylums used brutal measures such as the use of strait-waistcoat, manacling, the darkened room, and the cold-water-shock treatment. Families with a mad relative often confined the person at home without the need of any legal or medical certification, and sympathy was shown to those who cared for their insane at home, often secretly, due to the shame the situation cast on the family: "*The majority of the population either knew this, or believed it to be a fact, and so home-based care would therefore have been seen as the option of a hero, not of a scoundrel. Bertha was Mr Rochester's 'filthy burden'*"<sup>210</sup>.<sup>211</sup>

Immense sympathy was often shown to those who struggled to care for their insane at home. A landmark governmental report (or 'blue book') was published in 1844 and it is plausible that the author may have read it; from the age of five she had been reading the newspapers, political journals and blue books that her father regularly bought. The 1844 *Supplemental Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy, Relative to the General Condition of the Insane in Wales*<sup>212</sup> revealed shocking cases of the rural poor attempting to keep violent lunatics at home.<sup>213</sup> It made for pitiful reading, as attics, barns, and shuttered wings of farmhouses disclosed their shaggy-haired maniacs. Fear of the new and burgeoning state-run asylum system, together with the deep shame that many felt at having an insane spouse or family member, caused a great number of people to try to care for the patient secretly, at home.

As Sarah Wise points out, "*three decades after publication, Jane Eyre was still the point of reference for those addressing the problem of family confinement and its potential for abuse. In 1879 the influential British Medical Journal worried that there was still 'no law to prevent a Mr*

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209 Sarah Wise, *Gaslight Stories: The Madwoman in the Attic*, in *Psychology Today*;

210 *Ibid.*, page 356.

211 *Ibid.* Sarah Wise.

212 Her Majesty's Stationery Office (1844) *Supplemental Report of the Metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy, Relative to the General Condition of the Insane in Wales*; available online: <https://archive.org/details-39002079238789.med.yale.edu>

213 *Ibid.* Sarah Wise.

Rochester from locking up his mad wife in the attic of a mansion, with a keeper'. Government attempts to persuade people to offer up their lunatic spouses, children, parents and siblings for certification and inspection had been a failure. At the end of the nineteenth century, families still preferred secrecy.”<sup>214</sup>

It can be said that, in the largest sense, *Jane Eyre* is a protest novel: a protest against “all that would stifle or repress the individual”<sup>215</sup>, so against the inhuman treatment of human beings. The famous review of the book, in the *Quarterly Review*<sup>216</sup>, was correct when it complained that the novel was “pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor; which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment—there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence... We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*.”<sup>217</sup>

At the same time, *Jane Eyre* could be considered an extension of what Charlotte Brontë began in *The Professor; A Tale*: published posthumously in 1857, the novel is about a young man called William Crimsworth. It's written in a first-person narrative and it shows his maturation and his career as a teacher in Brussels, and his personal relationship. Charlotte Brontë in this novel showed the inhumanity of the businessman, the person who would use others for profit. In *The Professor: A Tale*, the author enlarges the protest.

These parallels between Jane and Bertha may at first seem somewhat strained.<sup>218</sup> Jane, after all, is poor, plain, little, pale, neat, and quiet; while Bertha is rich, large, florid, sensual, and extravagant; indeed, she was once even beautiful, somewhat, Rochester notes, “in the style of *Blanche Ingram*: tall, dark, and majestic.”<sup>219</sup>

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214 Ibid. Sarah Wise.

215 Ibid., page 683.

216 Ibid., page 683.

217 *Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair*, *Quarterly Review*, LXXXIV (1848), 173-174. Kathleen Tillotson in *her Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford, 1954).

218 Ibid., page 797.

219 Ibid., page 352.

## 2.5. Resistance, rebellion and marriage

In the novel *Jane Eyre* the author manages to portray the themes of resistance, rebellion and marriage through out it continuously. She shows her readership that a young woman growing up in the Victorian Era can both prove herself as an individual, despite all the obstacles a girl like her may face.

Nancy Pell, in her essay *Resistance, Rebellion, and Marriage: The Economics of Jane Eyre*, written in 1977, states: “Two allusions in the novel to actual rebellions in English history suggest Charlotte Brontë, awareness that Jane's struggle for a wider life has significant historical implications. First, after a lesson at Lowood school on tonnage and poundage in the early reign of Charles I,9 Helen Burns confesses her admiration for the Stuart king.”<sup>220</sup>

This quote taken from her essay, Nancy Pell describes the rebellious actions of Jane Eyre and the comparison between the history of the Victorian Era and herself. The author argues in her paper that *Jane Eyre* was a book of many complex issues, but she chose to focus only on the themes of resistance, rebellion and marriage.

In this quote, she mentions Helen Burns, Jane's only friend at Lowood School. Nancy Pell notices that Charlotte Brontë was adding historical references to her novel when she mentions Helen's admiration for Charles I. This important fact shows *Jane Eyre's* readers that during the course of the novel, characters may provide many examples of rebellion and resistance. Whether the rebellion was carried out, was typically only done by Jane herself and the reader can see this when she stands up to her aunt Mrs. Reed and various other characters that were doubtful of her intelligence. One of the points that Nancy Pell was trying to prove was that it was because of a character like Jane Eyre that other writers were inspired to create novels based upon their strong and smart female characters. Some critics say that Charlotte's novel *Jane Eyre* sparked an era of the beginning of feminism and that the author herself is a complete modern woman.

In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brontë's romantic individualism and rebellion of feeling are controlled and structured by an underlying social and economic critique of bourgeois patriarchal authority: “Although this does not describe the entire scope of the novel, which includes countercurrents and qualifications as well, the formal and dramatic elements of a social critique are manifest in Jane's resistance to the illegitimate power of John Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, and St. John Rivers; allusions to actual historical incidents involving regicide and rebellion; and, finally, the dynamics of Rochester's two marriages-both his marriage to Jane and his earlier marriage to Bertha Mason.”

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220 Nancy Pell, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Marriage: The Economics of Jane Eyre*, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Mar., 1977, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Mar., 1977), pp. 397-420, published by: University of California Press, page 405.

221 *Ibid.*, page 399.

The dramatic presentation of Jane Eyre's struggles at Gateshead Hall involves the reader not only in the child's awareness of her oppression but also in the analysis of its source.<sup>222</sup> She describes her habitual mood as "*humiliation, self-doubt, forlorn depression*".<sup>223</sup>

As Nancy Pell states, the immediate origin of Jane's oppression is young John Reed: "*You are a dependant, mama 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, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years.*"<sup>224</sup>

John Reed's position as sole male heir gives him an absolute power to burn his dependent female cousin.

Another character who literally devastated Jane's life is the Reverend Robert Brocklehurst, the "*straight, narrow, sable-clad*" man<sup>225</sup>, personifies the religious aspect of self suppression and constraint that Jane will meet again in Helen Burns and St. John Rivers. Charlotte Brontë's picture of established spiritual authority in Jane Eyre is devastating.

Out of any of the characters in *Jane Eyre*, Jane was the most resistant character by far even as a child. As a matter of fact, Jane herself says at the beginning of chapter II: "*I resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbott were disposed to entertain me.*"<sup>226</sup> Here, the reader comes to know that even as a child Jane didn't like to be told what to do, also knew when to stand up for herself when she felt she was being treated unfairly. This quote demonstrates Jane's ability to be resistant and that it manifested when she was a young child.

Jane has alter opinions about marriage throughout the novel. When St. John asks her hand, she states: "*Nonsense, again! Marry! I don't want to marry, and never shall marry. (...) That is saying too much: such hazardous affirmations are a proof of the excitement under which you labour.*" "*It is not saying too much: I know what I feel, and how averse are my inclinations to the bare thought of marriage.*"<sup>227</sup> But, if one looks back to Rochester's proposal of marriage, she acted in a complete different way: "*'Put it', she said, 'on the fourth finger of my left hand, and I am yours, and you are mine, and we shall leave Earth, and make our own heaven yonder.*"<sup>228</sup>

"*Another illustration of this dominance is Jane and Rochester's unsuccessful wedding ceremony. At the altar, there are no less than five men present, all with an active interest in the marriage ceremony: Rochester, the bridegroom, the priest and his clerk who are there to perform*

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222 Ibid., page 399.

223 Ibid., page 19.

224 Ibid., page 13.

225 Ibid., page 38.

226 Ibid., page 15.

227 Ibid., page 447.

228 Ibid., page 308.



*the marriage, and Mr Biggs and Mr Mason who are there to interrupt the marriage. By contrast, Jane is the only woman attending. The marriage is shown as an affair governed entirely by patriarchal interests and the fact that Jane's presence has been ensured by her future husband's deception only serves to emphasise this point."*<sup>229</sup>

In this point, one can notice that this author has the same ideas as Nancy ell in terms of marriage and she says that the strong men in the novel were always around Jane, and she was able to hold her ground and not to be invaded by them. There is a historical significance to the wedding ceremony between Rochester and Jane. It was by his deception that they were there in the first place and once Jane understood this, she made the decision to leave the ceremony. It can be seen (as the author states) that they were brought there by love, but it was Rochester's lack of truth that show us that "every rose has its thorn". We understand through the examples in the book that there is true love shown but it can be contradicted by a character like Rochester himself or St.John. The author Marie Carlsson shows that there are many examples of marriage and love in the novel and Charlotte Brontë's use of examples make it clear that both Jane and Rochester were in fact in love with each other despite the up's and down's they faced throughout the novel.<sup>230</sup>

Concluding, in the novel the author manages to portray the themes of resistance, rebellion and marriage through out it continuously. She shows us that a young woman growing up in the Victorian era can both prove themselves as individuals using resistance and rebellion and fall in love while doing so, despite the obstacles and individual like her may face.

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229 Marie Carlsson, *Patriarchal structures and male characters in Jane Eyre*, Rep. Mid Sweden University Department of Humanities English Studies, 01 Jan. 1997. Web.

230 Ibid. Marie Carlsson.

## 2.6. Colonialism and race

Other aspects of Brontë's earlier stories suggest her knowledge of events in the British West Indies. Charlotte Brontë uses references to colonized races to represent various social situations in British society: "*female subordination in sexual relationships, female insurrection and rage against male domination, and the oppressive class position of the female without family ties and a middle-class income.*"<sup>231</sup>

Colonialism is also present in each of Brontë's major novels. In both *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* the men with whom the heroines are in love either leave or threaten to leave Europe for places of European colonization, and both men imagine their relationships with colonized people as standing in for their relationships with white women.<sup>232</sup> In *Shirley*, Louis Moore proposes to go to North America and live with the Indians, and immediately suggests that he will take one of the "sordid savages," rather than Shirley, as his wife.<sup>233</sup> At the end of the work *Villette*, "*M. Paul departs for the French West Indian colony of Guadeloupe, to look after an estate there instead of marrying Lucy. Such an estate would indeed have needed supervision in the early 1850s, as the French slaves had just been emancipated in 1848.*"<sup>234</sup>

Even in the two existing chapters of Brontë's final and unfinished novel *Emma*, race relations play an important role: the heroine's blackness suggests her "*social disenfranchisement due to her gender, age, and social class.*"<sup>235</sup> Speaking of *Jane Eyre*, it's important to understand the difficulty of entering in contact with its politics. Race is not only explicitly present in this novel, "*but it is a major evil upon which the plot turns.*"<sup>236</sup> Here, the fiction writer and essayist Tyrese Coleman states that Charlotte Brontë's feminist is actually an odiously racist, which dehumanizes people of color, that is to say that one of the most important novel of the time is actually a racist novel.

As a matter of fact, the real subject of the colonialism theme is the creole Bertha Antoinetta Mason, considered the mad, drunken West Indian wife locked in the attic, only appears in the novel after about a third of its action has taken place.<sup>237</sup>

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231 Susan L. Meyer, *Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of "Jane Eyre"*, *Victorian Studies*, Winter, 1990, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Winter, 1990), pp. 247-268, published by: Indiana University Press, JSTOR, page 249.

232 *Ibid.*, page 247.

233 Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), page 30.

234 *Ibid.*, page 247.

235 *Ibid.*, page 249.

236 Tyrese L. Coleman, *Reading Jane Eyre While Black, The Privilege of Escapism is Not Allowed for Me*, August 28, 2017, Web.

237 *Ibid.*, page 252.

The emphasis on Bertha's coloring in the passage in which Jane describes to Rochester what she has seen reflected in the mirror - "discoloured face", "purple", "blackened" are the typical stereotypes which mark Bertha as non-white. Also the use of the specific word "savage" underlines this fact.

In an important reading of the significance of colonialism in this novel, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her major essay *Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism* describes Bertha as a "white Jamaican Creole"<sup>238</sup> who cannot be seen in the novel as a "native 'subject'"<sup>239</sup> indeterminately placed between human and animal and then excluded from the humanity which the novel's feminism claims for Jane's character.<sup>240</sup>

Spivak is thus able to designate Bertha as either native or white in order to criticize both Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as manifestations of exclusive feminist individualism.<sup>241</sup> *Jane Eyre*, she argues, gives the white Jane individuality at the expense of the "native" Bertha; *Wide Sargasso Sea*, on the other hand, she contends, retells the story of *Jane Eyre* from Bertha's perspective and merely "rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native."<sup>242</sup> This deep key-concept will be largely seen and analysed in the next chapter.

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238 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference (Autumn, 1985), pp. 243-261, JSTOR, page 247.

239 *Ibid.*, page 248.

240 *Ibid.*, page 250.

241 *Ibid.*, page 251.

242 *Ibid.*, page 253.

## *The emancipated “Bertha” Antoinetta Cosway “Mason” in Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea*

### *3.1. The Inscrutable Miss Jean Rhys: writing in the margins*

Jean Rhys, whose original name is Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, was born on August 24 1890 in Roseau (Dominica), in the West Indies. Her father, William Rees Williams, was a Welsh doctor and her mother, Minna Williams, born Lockhart, was a third-generation Dominican Creole<sup>243</sup> of Scots ancestry. Although an Anglican Protestant, Rhys attended a convent school. She was fascinated by the Catholic rituals and also the integration of blacks and whites in church. Eventually from the age of 16, she was sent in England to live with her aunt, where she was sent for a better education in Cambridge. She attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London in 1909. Life here for her was not very easy for her identity: her classmates ridiculed her for being a foreigner and she was told she would never “learn proper English.”

She is one of the most notable West Indian novelists, who earned acclaim for her early works set in the bohemian world of Europe in the ‘20s and ‘30s but who stopped writing for nearly three decades, until she wrote a successful novel set in the West Indies. She entered in the ‘20s the so-called “Lost Generation” of the Latin Quarter: this was considered a generation of writers active right after World War I. She attended two terms at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London by 1909.

In 1919, Rhys married Willem Johan Marie Jean Lenglet, a French-Dutch journalist, spy, and songwriter. He was the first of her three husbands. They had two children, a son who died young and a daughter, but they divorced in 1933. The next year, Jean Rhys married Leslie Tilden-Smith, an English editor. In 1936, they went briefly to Dominica, the first time Rhys had returned since she had left for school, where she found her family estate deteriorating and island conditions less agreeable. In 1937, Rhys began a friendship with a Jamaican-born English novelist and poet of Anglo-Irish descent, Eliot Bliss, author of *Saraband* and *Luminous Isle*. The two women shared Caribbean backgrounds. In 1939, Jean Rhys and Tilden-Smith moved to Devon, where they lived

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243 Before 1850, four meanings of Creole were in circulation:

- 1) White people of Spanish descent naturalized by birth in Spanish America;
- 2) People of non-aboriginal descent naturalized by birth in the West Indies;
- 3) Non-aboriginal people "of different colours" (white or "negro") born in Spanish America (Johnson and Walker);
- 4) White people of European descent naturalized by birth in the West Indies.

The entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or, a *Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Miscellaneous Literature* (1815-1824) records the first two meanings: *CREOLES, a name originally given to the families descended from the Spaniards who first settled at Mexico in America. These are much more numerous than the Spaniards properly so called, and the Mullettoes, which two other species of inhabitants they distinguish; and are excluded from all considerable employments. It is now used in a more extensive sense, and applied to all natives of the West Indies* (Millar).

for several years. He died in 1945. In 1947, Rhys married Max Hamer, a solicitor who was a cousin of Tilden-Smith. He was convicted of fraud and imprisoned after their marriage. He died in 1966.

Wandering above the European centrism, she walked away from her Caribbean origins, and as a matter of fact her novels, her characters and themes are characterized by the typical European features, as her two groups of stories, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927) and *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (1968), and the *Postures* (written in 1928 and published in the US as *Quartet* in 1929), *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939).

So, between 1928 and 1939 she wrote four novels: *Postures*, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark*, and *Good Morning, Midnight*. Although each novel centers upon one woman, “the four individuals are manifestations of the same psychological type-so much so that if we read the novels in the order of their internal chronology, we find in them one, fairly sequential story, albeit the principal figure suffers a change of name from novel to novel.”<sup>244</sup>

This story begins with *Voyage in the Dark*: it tells of the semi-tragic story of the protagonist Anna Morgan, who is moved from her Caribbean home to England after the death of her father. In Southsea she is picked up by Walter Jeffries, an older man, who meets her later in London and seduces her. He takes care of her, and she falls desperately in love with him until he leaves her. From that moment on, she begins a downward spiral. As a matter of fact, Anna drifts from one man to another in the context of pre-war London. In March 1914, three months pregnant by an unknown man, she begs money from Walter for an abortion. She almost dies from the bungled operation, but at the end of the novel the reader will find out that she will be alright and ready to start a new life.

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The story resumes in *Quartet*. The year is now 1922, and the heroine, twenty-eight years old, is named Marya Hughes. She is married to Stephan Zelli, and they live in Paris. Stephan, a mystery man, appears to be a fence for stolen *objets d'art*. In September, 1922, he is arrested for larceny, and the destitute Marya is taken up by a British couple, Hugh Heidler and his wife Lois. Soon Hugh makes love to her with the knowledge and connivance of his wife. Although Marya is repulsed by the situation, she transfers her love to H. J. and cannot break away from him. When Stephan is released from prison, he has to leave France; but before he leaves, Marya sleeps with him. Heidler, because she has "betrayed" him, breaks with her and sends her to Cannes. The novel ends in a flurry of melodrama: Stephan and Marya return to Paris; he threatens to kill H. J.; she cries out that she will betray Stephan to the police; Stephan throws her aside and goes off with another woman of

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244 Elgin W. Mellow, *Character and Themes in the Novels of Jean Rhys*, Contemporary Literature, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 458-475, published by: University of Wisconsin Press, JSTOR, page 460.

245 Ibid., page 461.

the district.<sup>246</sup> One can say that Rhys's unhappy love affairs and her time in Paris seem to have influenced her writing.

The story reaches its end in *Good Morning, Midnight*. The novel is about a woman called Sasha Jansen, who is financially unstable. Her past haunts her. Sure enough it includes a bad marriage and her child's death. As a conclusion, she drinks a lot and takes sleeping pills.

The story in the four novels is the one of “*the spiritual progress of a woman from the joy of childhood into the ordeal of adolescent love and sexual experience, through a resulting bitterness, grief, and selfish isolation, toward a position which will allow her to develop a compassionate understanding of the human situation.*”<sup>247</sup>

Only her most important romance *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written in 1966, shows in a very realistic way the relationships between the ethnic groups and the social classes, which influenced the organization of the Creole dynasties. The peculiarity of the events narrated is that of intertwining an intertextual relationship with another work, that is, of not belonging entirely to an original story, in its own right, created exclusively by the author. They constitute, as a matter of fact, a sort of prequel of a narrative universe infinitely better known than that of Rhys: as a matter of fact, *Jane Eyre* is the female Bildungsroman *par excellence*.

The 2003 book and stage play *After Mrs Rochester* by Polly Teale is based on it and thanks to it Jean Rhys won the W.H. Smith Literary Award in 1967. Started forty years after her departure from the Dominican Republic, this novel has as its heroine Antoinette Cosway, the first Antillean wife of Mr. Rochester: it describes the happy childhood and the acute honey sensation with Rochester. The description of the Coulibiri plantation after the conquest of independence, the identity crisis of the Creole woman, fragile and willful, hostile both towards blacks and towards other men, are presented with delicacy and benevolence. Rochester himself notices in *Wide Sargasso Sea* that “*Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either.*”<sup>248</sup> He separates himself firmly from “they”, so from Creoles with mixed blood, dangerous, and “aimless” in a world in which they belong nowhere.

Apparently, for those readers who ignore this link or simply don't know *Jane Eyre*, the story is that of a Jamaican Creole little girl who is given in marriage to the young second son of a wealthy English family, in an arranged marriage by their respective fathers. Although the story is set in the period immediately following the enactment of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which formally abolished slavery in the territories of the British Empire, the dynamics that influence the existence of the protagonist highlight a worse type of subjugation of slavery itself.

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246 Ibid., page 461.

247 Ibid., page 462.

248 Jordan Stouck, *Distilling Identities: Jean Rhys's "Mixing Cocktails" and Feminine Creole Process*, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Summer 2003, Vol. 3, No. 3, Jean Rhys (Summer 2003), pp. 27-36, JSTOR, page 28.

“*Wide Sargasso Sea* is both an imaginative tour de force and a novel valuable in its own right.”<sup>249</sup> It places the earlier novels in a new perspective which shows that Jean Rhys is not one of the also-rans but a master of her genre. In her novels she depicts the character of one particular type of woman, while exploring certain human themes and constantly attempting to develop a close relationship between style and content.<sup>250</sup> In his *New York Times* review of *Wide Sargasso Sea*<sup>251</sup>, Walter Allen pointed out that Charlotte Brontë's Mrs. Rochester summed up “*the nature of the heroine who appears under various names throughout Jean Rhys's fiction.*”<sup>252</sup> As a matter of fact, the reader can notice that the most basic experience treated by the author Jean Rhys concerns “*the woman's childhood.*”<sup>253</sup> Continuing, he states that “*she is a young woman, generally Creole in origin and artistic in leanings, who is hopelessly and helplessly at sea in her relations with men, a passive victim, doomed to destruction.*”<sup>254</sup> The woman upon whom Rhys centers her attention is indeed always a victim.<sup>255</sup>

Jean Rhys died in Exeter on 14 May 1979, at the age of 88, before completing her own autobiography. In 1979, the incomplete text was published posthumously under the title *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*.

The question of identity in Jean Rhys' life and works is really connected to the condition of exile that shaped her perceptions and those of her characters: “*Rhys was truly a woman without a country.*”<sup>256</sup> England, where she lived for most of her adult life, was a cold place for the writer. Recognition came too late to her to compensate for a lifetime of loneliness.<sup>257</sup> She was the daughter of a Welsh father and a white Creole mother, and she felt exiled even before she moved to England for her own education, because she was cut off from the black community in Dominica.<sup>258</sup> Thus Rhys suffered from what Amon Saba Saakana describes as “*the mental condition of double alienation.*”<sup>259</sup>

The literary nature of exile has been examined by Edward Said, Andrew Gurr, and Michael Seidel, among others.<sup>260</sup> According to Gurr<sup>261</sup>, a contemporary literary scholar who specializes in William Shakespeare and English Renaissance theatre, “*exile has had an ‘enormously constructive’*

249 Ibid., page 458.

250 Ibid., page 458.

251 Ibid., page 462.

252 Walter Allen, 18 June 1967, page 5.

253 Ibid., page 463.

254 Ibid., page 5.

255 Ibid., page 463.

256 Lucy Wilson, *European or Caribbean: Jean Rhys and the Language of Exile*, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, *Women and Words* (1989), pp. 68-72, published by: University of Nebraska Press, JSTOR, page 68.

257 Ibid., page 68.

258 Christine Jordis, *Jean Rhys ou la perspective de l'exile*, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, July-August 1983, page 159.

259 Amon Saba Saakana, *The Colonial Legacy in Caribbean Literature* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1987), 1:61.

260 Ibid, page 68.

261 Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), page 9.

*effect on writers who were born in the colonies and fled to the metropolis, since it creates in them 'a stronger sense of home' and thus 'a clearer sense of [their] own identity' than is available to their metropolitan counterparts.*"<sup>262</sup>

Concerning the author herself and her life through her novels, Diana Trilling, an American literary critic and author, one of the New York Intellectuals, used to say that Rhys is not writing about "woman" at all and certainly not about "the plight of the sensitive woman"<sup>263</sup>: her novels "*are far from being exercises in female literary narcissism; she deals with something more palpable, the hard terror of psychological isolation.*"<sup>264</sup>

In most of her novels, *Wide Sargasso Sea* in particular, the author "*closes off the possibilities for dismissing the marginal woman who exists so disconcertingly at the center of her narratives, and open sup the possibility that someone may yet hear the other side of an old, familiar story.*"<sup>265</sup> Her Creole background and heritage influenced most of her works. Therefore, in her books Jean Rhys intended to demonstrate how the other, the different could abandon his-her marginal role and become essential: "*Like Antoinette (and Jane) Rhys grew up feeling orphaned, believing nothing she said or did could please a loveless mother and an indifferent aunt (Smile Please 15, 28, 30, and passim). Half-Creole, she was deeply aware of the residual bitterness and contempt with which her parents' black servants regarded their employers. Like Antoinette, she was bonded to a beautiful Dominican landscape she was reluctant to leave. (...) Much like Jane, Rhys sought to assuage her loneliness by immersing herself in English narratives. At the age of seventeen she left Roseau for London where she began writing, as most women autobiographers do, to shape the randomness of a fragmented childhood and chequered adulthood into sustained narrative. All her narratives evoke Dominica in juxtaposition with England (...) Never able to adjust to England's inhospitable climate, nor to the Englishmen who ultimately rejected her, Rhys understood Brontë surrounded by cheerless moors and vulnerable to the married men unwilling to return her ardor.*"<sup>266</sup>

As a matter of fact, as biographical material became more available, such critics increasingly treated the historical Jean Rhys as a gloss on her own characters. In her essay, Molly Hite underlines how Teresa O'Connor, who wrote *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels*<sup>267</sup>, is representative in this topic: "Certainly boredom and domination figure in Rhys's work as themes but they are symptoms and

262 Ibid., page 68.

263 Molly Hite, *Chapter Title: Writing in the Margins: Jean Rhys*, Book Title: *The Other Side of the Story*, Book Subtitle: *Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives*, published by: Cornell University Press, page 20.

264 Diana Trilling, *The Liberated Heroine*, Times Literary Supplement, 13 October 1978, 1164. See also A. Alvarez, *The Best Living English Novelist*, which admires the "unblinking truthfulness" of the novels but minimizes their political implications in New Critical terms and thus, inadvertently, trivializes Rhys's political intelligence: she "*is absolutely nonintellectual: no axe to grind, no ideas to tout*"(p. 7).

265 Ibid., page 54.

266 Rose Kamel, *Before I Was Set Free": The Creole Wife in "Jane Eyre" and "Wide Sargasso Sea"*, The Journal of Narrative Technique, Winter, 1995, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter, 1995), pp. 1-22, published by Journal of Narrative Theory, page 13.

267 Ibid., page 20.



*results of a deeper malaise: the dislocation and alienation that comes from having neither a true home, metaphorically and literally, nor a loving mother, which for many may be the equivalent-and no way of fabricating either. It was Rhys's mother's indifference to her which forced Rhys to become indifferent in return. It is her heroines' statelessness, homelessness and lack of familial and deep ties that lead to their malaise.”*<sup>268</sup>



*Jean Rhys and Mollie Stoner in the 1970s*

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268 Teresa F. O'Connor, *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 35.

### 3.2. Why re-writing Bertha's story?

How many times have readers asked themselves what happens to the secondary characters in a novel, who they really are, what do they feel? How many times have readers tried to imagine the lives of the derelict, of those "bad guys" that the writer proposes to us but of whom, after all, we know nothing, what past did they have, why are they so restless and disturbing?

In short, the whole submerged world of the characters "in doubt", which are on the background, which sometimes even constitute the triggering reason, the spark of the whole story, while remaining in the shadows, because little or nothing is known about them, now comes afloat: it was enough to play a little with the imagination, mixing it with historical reality.

Jean Rhys cultivated this interest in the marginalized and passed it on to us through what is considered his masterpiece, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

She too, like the main character of the novel, who is none other than the crazy wife of *Jane Eyre's* Mr Rochester, has Creole origins. To be more precise she is the daughter of a Welsh father and a Creole mother of Scottish origin. But there is more: even Jean Rhys, the pseudonym of Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, like the anti-heroine Antoinette - Bertha, is somehow "forgotten".

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a 1966 novel. It is a feminist and anti-colonial response to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, which describes the background to Mr. Rochester's marriage from the point of view of his first wife Antoinette Cosway, a Creole heiress. Antoinette Cosway is Rhys' version of Brontë's "madwoman in the attic". This novel could be considered a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, for which Rhys won the WH Smith Literary Award in 1967.

From beloved Jamaica to cold and inhospitable England, the novel, initially set in Jamaica, opens a short while after the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 ended slavery in the British Empire on 1834. The Slavery Abolition Act freed more than 800,000 enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and South Africa as well as a small number in Canada.

What *Wide Sargasso Se* explores is "negotiation of the space between audiences and performers, sanity and madness, expectation and fulfilment, acting and being."<sup>269</sup> As a matter of fact, the Sargasso Sea lies between Europe and the West Indies and it's difficult to navigate, like the human situation in the novel: "The living dead here, the zombis and revenants, are not victims of vampires but of colonialism."<sup>270</sup>

It's interesting to notice that soon after *Good Morning, Midnight* was published in 1939, Jean Rhys second husband gave her a copy of *Jane Eyre*. She became very exited about n idea for a new novel and wrote approximately half of it; her husband then typed it out from her chaotic

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269 Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Penguin Classics, 2000, page VII.

270 Ibid. Introducion to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, page XI.

handwritten version. Then they had a furious row and she burnt the typescript to punish him; the book, like Brontë's mad Mrs Rochester, perished in the flames, and parts of the handwritten version also got lost.<sup>271</sup>

About the title she was thinking to give to the novel, Jean Rhys herself said: "*I think of calling it 'The First Mrs Rochester' with profound apologies to Charlotte Brontë and a deep curtsey too. But I suppose that won't do. (...)*"<sup>272</sup>

Rhys' letters show how she was obsessed with Brontë's novel: "*It is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any of the other mad Creoles.*"<sup>273</sup> She simply wanted to describe the real cruelty of Mr Rochester to his unwanted wife.

Antoinette as a white Jamaican Creole turns out to be a stranger to anyone: for blacks because she is in fact white, despite being a native of the Caribbean islands, and besides, she does not belong to that a class of enslaved people of which blacks belong; and for whites because she is a "black white", she is not an integral part of civilized and very pure English society.

Not only. Antoinette is also the daughter of a woman considered mentally insane - madness which, it needs to be must specified, was born following a catastrophic event in which the woman loses her youngest son, Pierre, brother of the protagonist.

Antoinette's story is told from the time of her youth in Jamaica, to her unhappy marriage to a certain unnamed English gentleman, who renames her "Bertha", declares her mad, takes her to England, and isolates her away from the rest of the world. Antoinette is caught in an oppressive patriarchal society in which she fully belongs neither to Europe nor to Jamaica, but only to his husband.

In this novel, the protagonist Antoinette relates the story of her life from childhood to her arranged marriage to an unnamed Englishman. The novel is set into three parts: "*Structurally, Wide Sargasso Sea's three parts similarly interrogate the problem of knowing. The first, narrated by Antoinette, may be read as an anti-bildungsroman, where instead of learning 'who [s]he is, either literally (by discovering his lineage and patrimony), or figuratively (by choosing [her] value system); what the world is like, both physically and socially; and how [s]he will fit into that world in the future'*"<sup>274</sup>, Antoinette accumulates primarily hostile experiences. The Abolition of Slavery destabilizes her childhood, leaving her with an existential crisis and a death wish that drives her recurring dream. Part II, mostly narrated by the nameless Rochester,<sup>3</sup> presents his unstable, culture-shocked interpretation of both Antoinette and the Caribbean. As his constructed self—a democratic, English, Enlightenment man—meets resistance, Rochester finds himself unwillingly

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271 Ibid. Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, page VIII.

272 Jean Rhys, *Letters*, page 50, 9 March 1949, to Peggy Kirkklydy.

273 Jean Rhys, *Letters*, page 153, 29 March 1958, to Francis Wyndham.

274 Judith E. Dearlove, *The Failure of the Bildungsroman: Jean Rhys and Voyagein the Dark*, Jean Rhys Review 8.1-2 (1997), pp. 24-30, page 24.

*drawn to a Nietzschean life force that he ultimately and fatally rejects. Part III, introduced by Grace Poole but narrated by Antoinette, locates the action within Jane Eyre and culminates in the fire of Antoinette's recurring dream. The dream fire positions Antoinette as a freed slave burning down the master's house."*<sup>275</sup>

Part one takes place in Coulibri, in a sugar plantation in Jamaica, and is narrated by Antoinette as a child. Since the abolition of slavery, the estate has become derelict and her family has been put into poverty. Antoinette's mother, Annette, must remarry to wealthy Englishman called Mr. Mason, who is hoping to exploit his new wife's situation. Angry at the returning prosperity of their oppressors, freed slaves living in Coulibri burn down Annette's house, killing Antoinette's brother, Pierre. As Annette had been struggling with her mental health, the grief of losing her son wakes her sanity. Mr. Mason sends her to live with a couple who torment her until she dies.

In an uncanny doubling of her mother's story, which has been prophesied by malicious neighbours ("*Now we are madooned. Now what will become of us?*"<sup>276</sup>), Antoinette re-enacts her mother's experience: she marries an Englishman and is driven mad by the tension between his assumptions about her and demands on her, and her precarious sense of where she belongs.<sup>277</sup>

Both Antoinette and her mother are ghosts in their own lifetimes, as the author herself was in hers; she, as a matter of fact, wrote to Francis Wyndham: "*I am no longer a doll, but a kind of ghost.*"<sup>278</sup>

Part two alternates between the points of view of Antoinette and her husband - even though Rhys never calls him by name - during their honeymoon excursion to Granbois, Dominica. Likely catalysts for Antoinette's downfall are the mutual suspicions that develop between the couple, and the machinations of Daniel, who claims he is Antoinette's illegitimate half-brother; he impugns Antoinette's reputation and mental state and demands money to keep quiet. Antoinette's old nurse Christophine openly distrusts the Englishman. Christophine is loyal to both Annette and her daughter, and she exercises an huge authority within the household.

His apparent belief in the stories about Antoinette's family and past aggravate the situation; her husband is unfaithful and emotionally abusive. Upon learning of the madness of the latter's mother ("*Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother.*"<sup>279</sup>), he begins to believe the infamous accusations made against his wife by a stepbrother Daniel Cosway (as a matter of fact, Daniel wrote a letter to Rochester that informed him of the madness that runs in Antoinette's family), so much so that, right away, the relationship between the two deteriorates. Antoinette, madly in love, tries in

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<sup>275</sup> Jennifer Gilchrist, *Women, Slavery, and the Problem of Freedom in Wide Sargasso Sea*, Twentieth Century Literature, fall 2012, Vol. 58, No. 3 (fall 2012), pp. 462-494, published by Duke University Press, page 466-467.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. Jean Rhys, page 6.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. Introduction of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, page XIII.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. *Letters*, page 281.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., page 27.

every way to bring her husband closer to herself, even by resorting to magic potions, but in doing so she pushes him further and further away: “*I did not love her. I was thirsty for her. But that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did.*”<sup>280</sup> He begins to call her “Bertha” rather than her real name and flaunts his affairs in front of her to cause her pain. Antoinette's increased sense of paranoia and the bitter disappointment of her failing marriage unbalance her already precarious mental and emotional state. She flees to the house of Christophine, the servant woman who raised her. Antoinette pleads with Christophine for an *obeah* potion<sup>281</sup> to attempt to reignite her husband's love, which Christophine reluctantly gives her. Antoinette returns home but the love potion acts like a poison on her husband. Subsequently he refuses Christophine's offer of help for his wife and takes her to England.

This part is the most important one of the whole novel: the two main characters get married but there is no love, at least not from Mr Rochester who, rather, seems fascinated by the exotic world in which his young bride is immersed, and in which she is imbued: the Caribbean universe becomes for the two spouses the magic bubble in which to move, dragged as they are by a mutual physical passion; Rochester is faced with a new world, in which flora is confused with fauna, in which there is no division between fairytale and reality, although it is a darkly colored fairytale, much more like a nightmare. than to the dream, as he will be able to see later.

To undermine the precarious family menage comes jealousy, which strikes Antoinette like an invasive disease and which, in the eyes of Rochester and all the servants, turns into pure madness, so much is she led to exasperation by the girl. Here, then, is the true story of Jane Eyre's great absentee, of the nervous shadow that wandered in the attic of the Rochester house.

Part three is the shortest part of the novel; it is from the perspective of Antoinette, renamed by her husband as Bertha. She is largely confined to "the attic" of Thornfield Hall, the mansion she calls the "Great House". The story traces her relationship with Grace Poole, the servant who is tasked with guarding her, as well as her disintegrating life with the Englishman, as he hides her from the world. He makes empty promises to come to her more but sees less of her. He ventures away to pursue relationships with other women—and eventually with the young governess. Antoinette is clearly mad and has little understanding of how much time she has been confined. She fixates on options of freedom including her stepbrother Richard who, however, will not interfere with her husband, so she attacks him with a stolen knife. Expressing her thoughts in stream of consciousness, Antoinette dreams of flames engulfing the house and her freedom from the life she

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280 Ibid., page 58.

281 A system of spiritual healing and justice-making practices developed among enslaved West Africans in the West Indies: “*Obeah was a secret African religion that survived the period of slavery in spite of the colonizers' prohibition that the slaves practice any religion from which they might draw for empowerment. It is traditionally represented as a source of resistance that assisted in.*” (Mardorossian, page 1078)

has there, and believes it is her destiny to fulfill the vision. Waking from her dream she escapes her room, and sets the fire.

The novel itself anticipated late twentieth century preoccupations in fiction and in critical theory, for instance, the resurgence of interest in the Gothic imagination.<sup>282</sup> *Jane Eyre* is of course itself a Gothic text, with its mad Creole locked away but haunting the lives of her tormented husband and the innocent Jane Eyre. But in *Jane Eyre*, however, the narrative trajectory is clearly defined, through a series of mysteries that are resolved in turn: the demonic figure is identified and Rochester's attempt at bigamy thwarted as he is about to marry Jane. Also Jane's poverty and suffering are rewarded when she is revealed to have inherited her uncle's money and to have congenial relations. Jane's obsessive anxiety about Rochester's fate subsides when she discovers him, crippled and blinded but a widower, after his first wife has set fire to Thornfield and leapt from the battlements.<sup>283</sup>

The Gothic imagination expresses itself differently in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*: the emphasis is not on the solution of mysteries, "but on the recognition of them."<sup>284</sup> For example, when Rochester asked Antoinette whether there is another side to Daniel Cosway's story, she replied: "There is always the other side, always."<sup>285</sup>

What really haunts the reader of this novel is the knowledge of what will happen to the main character Antoinette. And the sense that secrets are hidden because people do not want to see what they see, or know what they know. For example, Antoinette prays for her mother in the convent as though she were dead; Antoinette describes herself and her family being driven out of Coulibri by a fire, but when Daniel tells Rochester about Annette's second marriage he makes no mention of a fire.

As shown in *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s introduction in Penguin Classics Edition, the reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea* who has already read *Jane Eyre* is possessed by a sense of *déjà-vu*: especially from the moment that names like "Mason" begin to appear, and it strengthens as Rochester plans to return to Spanish Town with Antoinette, but sketches a house with an attic that is surrounded by English trees. Doing so, the narrative is both familiar and unfamiliar.

Rhys, however, develops "Bertha" Antoinetta Mason into a more complex character: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the little Cosway is a strong woman who rebels against and overcomes the colonial and patriarchal oppressions that face her as a result of her West Indian identity. Rhys' novel depicts Antoinette's ultimate vengeance on Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre* as a valid response to this oppression. By shifting points of view and rewriting certain events in Brontë's text, Rhys subverts the colonialist framework out of which *Jane Eyre* and Brontë herself came.

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282 Ibid. Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, page X.

283 Ibid. Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, page X.

284 Ibid. Introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, page X.

285 Ibid., page 82.

### 3.3. Historical context of “Wide Sargasso Sea”: Jean Rhys and feminine Creole process, between and beyond boundaries

“It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English.”<sup>286</sup>

*Wide Sargasso Sea* emerges within a huge postcolonial literature. Such literature subverts the imperial privilege of the West in order to give voice to that “outside” which has been silent. It is time that the world hears the other side of the story, the voice of denigrated native cultures, “the point of view of those who have been considered inferior for unjustified reasons.”<sup>287</sup>

According to Achebe, the novel, like the whole postcolonial literature, “works to disrupt the literary and philosophical basis of Western civilization.”<sup>288</sup>

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Longstreet Professor of English at Emory University, states, the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. This “fact” causes, not only in the study of British literature but in the study of the literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of imperialism, “a narrative in literary history, of the ‘worlding’ of what is now called ‘the Third World.’”<sup>289</sup> She sums up *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*: “I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister’s consolidation.”<sup>290</sup>

In her essay, she attempts to examine the operation of the “worlding” of what is today “the Third World” by what has become a cult text of feminism: she talks about *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as *Jane Eyre*’s reinscription. Doing so, she “will incite a degree of rage against the imperialist narrativization of history.”<sup>291</sup>

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286 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, “Race,” Writing, and Difference (Autumn, 1985), pp. 243-261, published by The University of Chicago Press, JSTOR, page 243.

287 Silvia Cappello, *Postcolonial Discourse in “Wide Sargasso Sea”: Creole Discourse vs. European Discourse, Periphery vs. Center, and Marginalized People vs. White Supremacy*, *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Summer 2009, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer 2009), pp. 47-54, published by Maurice Lee, page 47.

288 *Ibid.*, page 47.

289 *Ibid.*, page 243.

290 *Ibid.*, page 251.

291 *Ibid.*, page 244.

Considering the figure of Bertha Mason, it can be said that she's "a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism"<sup>292</sup>. Through Bertha Mason, the white Jamaican Creole, Brontë renders the human-animal frontier as "acceptably indeterminate"<sup>293</sup>:

*"In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not ... tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face."*<sup>294</sup>

In a matching passage, given in the voice of Rochester speaking to Jane, Brontë presents "the imperative for a shift beyond the Law as divine injunction rather than human motive"<sup>295</sup>. In the terms of Spivak's essay, it can be said that this is the register not of mere marriage or sexual reproduction but of "Europe and its not-yet-human Other, of soul making"<sup>296</sup>. The field of imperial conquest is here inscribed as Hell:

*"One night I had been awakened by her yells—(since the medical men had pronounced her mad, she had, of course, been shut up)—it was a fiery West Indian night; one of the description that frequently precede the hurricanes of those climates. Being unable to sleep in bed, I got up and opened the window. The air was like sulphur- steams—I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly round the room; the sea, which I could hear from thence, rumbled dull like an earthquake—black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannon-ball—she threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest. I was physically influenced by the atmosphere and scene, and my ears were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out; wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language!—no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary than she: though two rooms off, I heard every word—the thin partitions of the West India house opposing but slight obstruction to her wolfish cries.*

*'This life,' said I at last, 'is hell: this is the air—those are the sounds of the bottomless pit! I have a right to deliver myself from it if I can. The sufferings of this mortal state will leave me with the heavy flesh that now cumpers my soul. Of the fanatic's burning eternity I have no fear: there is not a future state worse than this present one—let me break away, and go home to God!'*

*'I said this whilst I knelt down at, and unlocked a trunk which contained a brace of loaded pistols: I mean to shoot myself. I only entertained the intention for a moment; for, not being insane, the crisis of exquisite and unalloyed despair, which had originated the wish and design of selfdestruction, was past in a second.*

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292 Ibid., page 247.

293 Ibid., page 247.

294 Ibid., page 338.

295 Ibid., page 247.

296 Ibid., page 247.



*'A wind fresh from Europe blew over the ocean and rushed through the open casement: the storm broke, streamed, thundered, blazed, and the air grew pure. I then framed and fixed a resolution. While I walked under the dripping orange-trees of my wet garden, and amongst its drenched pomegranates and pine-apples, and while the refulgent dawn of the tropics kindled round me—I reasoned thus, Jane—and now listen; for it was true Wisdom that consoled me in that hour, and showed me the right path to follow.*

*'The sweet wind from Europe was still whispering in the refreshed leaves, and the Atlantic was thundering in glorious liberty; my heart, dried up and scorched for a long time, swelled to the tone, and filled with living blood—my being longed for renewal—my soul thirsted for a pure draught. I saw hope revive—and felt regeneration possible. From a flowery arch at the bottom of my garden I gazed over the sea—bluer than the sky: the old world was beyond; clear prospects opened thus:-*

*'Go,' said Hope, 'and live again in Europe: there it is not known what a sullied name you bear, nor what a filthy burden is bound to you. You may take the maniac with you to England; confine her with due attendance and precautions at Thornfield: then travel yourself to what clime you will, and form what new tie you like. That woman, who has so abused your long-suffering, so sullied your name, so outraged your honour, so blighted your youth, is not your wife, nor are you her husband. See that she is cared for as her condition demands, and you have done all that God and humanity require of you.'*"<sup>297</sup>

As mentioned above, when Jean Rhys read *Jane Eyre* as a child, she was so moved by the character of Bertha Mason that she thought "to write her a life"<sup>298</sup>: as Spivak states, "*Wide Sargasso Sea is that life.*"<sup>299</sup>

In the figure of Antoinette, whom in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester renames as Bertha with violence, as an act of colonization, "*Jean Rhys suggests that so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism.*"<sup>300</sup> Antoinette, as a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation in Jamaica, is caught "*between the English imperialist and the black native.*"<sup>301</sup>

Spivak analyses how much the postcolonial author reinscribes some thematics of Narcissus in terms of Bertha's behaviour. As a matter of fact, there are many images of mirroring in the text. In one passage, Tia, the little black servant girl who is Antoinette's close companion, says: "*We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with*

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297 Ibid., pp. 354-356.

298 Jean Rhys, in an interview with Elizabeth Vreeland, quoted in Nancy Harrison, *An Introduction to the Writing Practice of Jean Rhys: The Novel as Women's Text* (Rutherford, N. J., forthcoming). This is an excellent, detailed study of Rhys.

299 Ibid., page 249.

300 Ibid., page 250.

301 Ibid., page 250.

*Tia and I will be like her. (...) When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. (...) We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass.”*

Spivak also notices that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus' madness is disclosed when he recognizes his Other as his self: “*Iste ego sum.*” Rhys makes Antoinette see her self as her Other. In part three of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette acts out *Jane Eyre*'s famous conclusion and recognizes herself as the so-called “ghost” in the attic of Thornfield Hall: “*I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her-the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her.*”<sup>302</sup> The gilt frame encloses a mirror: as Narcissus' pool reflects the selfed Other, “*so this ‘pool’ reflects the Othered self.*”<sup>303</sup>

Plus, “*I called ‘Tia’ and jumped and woke.*”<sup>304</sup> It is now, at the very end of the book, that Antoinette-Bertha can say: “*Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do.*”<sup>305</sup> Readers can read this as her having been brought into the England of the British novel: Spivak notices that “*in this fictive England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation.*”<sup>306</sup>

In conclusion, Spivak claims that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is deeply linked and bound by the power of the European novel. Saying that, she underlines the most powerful suggestion in the postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*: “*Jane Eyre can be read as the orchestration and staging of the selfimmolation of Bertha Mason as ‘good wife’.*”<sup>307</sup>

Gayatri Spivak has also noted that “*imperialism and its territorial and subject-constituting project are a violent deconstruction of oppositions.*”<sup>308</sup> This is to say that if the British religious mission abroad describes itself as bringing knowledge to non-Western people, it was because their cultures were based on “*ignorance and superstition*”.<sup>309</sup> However, rather than create cultures that perfectly emulated the British “model,” imperialism instead brought together all the “*cultural differences*”.<sup>310</sup>

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302 Ibid., page 123.

303 Ibid., page 250.

304 Ibid., page 124.

305 Ibid., page 124.

306 Ibid., page 251.

307 Ibid., page 259.

308 Ibid., page 249.

309 M. M. Adjarian, *Between and beyond Boundaries in Wide Sargasso Sea*, *College Literature*, Feb., 1995, Vol. 22, No. 1, *Third World Women's Inscriptions* (Feb., 1995), pp. 202-209, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press, JSTOR, page 208.

310 Ibid., page 208.

Bertha, like the author herself, is from the Caribbean: both are members of colonized. By contrast, both Brontë and Jane Eyre are English, so members of the dominant colonizing culture. Bertha is a no-voice character in *Jane Eyre*, while in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Bertha is able to speak her story: “*what is significant about these observations is is that they suggest the political nature of Rhys's choices.*”<sup>311</sup> That is to say that Jean Rhys, by giving her main character a singular voice and by freeing her from silence, “*crosses boundaries.*”<sup>312</sup>

By doing so, Bertha is not only the main character in Jean Rhys’ novel, but it can be seen as also a choice to speak about the lives of Creole heiresses of the nineteenth century: “*The character thus inhabits a zone of "inbetween,"*”<sup>313</sup> as suggested by the very name Rhys gives her. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha Mason becomes Antoinette Cosway: “*Antoinette*” is Bertha’s real name in *Jane Eyre*, but “*Cosway*” is the writer’s own addition.”<sup>314</sup> Antoinette” is Bertha’s real name in *Jane Eyre*, but “*Cosway*” is the writer’s own addition. That Rhys calls the character by a name Brontë chose but did not actively use suggests how she is acknowledging Brontë’s influence on her as writer. At the same time, Rhys modifies that appellation with a surname that comes from Bertha’s white Creole father rather than her English stepfather: “*This demonstrates how the writer is also attempting to break away from total identification with what Brontë and her work symbolize: English culture on the one hand and tacit acceptance of British colonialism on the other.*”<sup>315</sup>

As mentioned many times before, the novel is conventionally understood as a “prequel” to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* as Elaine Savory puts it, Rhys’s version comprises “the story of the woman when he was young. More to the point, for the purposes of the research and analysis, is Savory’s insistence that “*Rhys revisioned Jane Eyre’s lurid description of the Creole wife, which reflected nineteenth-century British stereotypes about white Creoles.*”<sup>316</sup> If Rhys’s goal in this text was to rescue and valorise Bertha Mason from the marginalisation that suffered in *Jane Eyre*, then she accomplished this aim on many ways, putting a new postcolonial paradigm: “*Wide Sargasso Sea is a writing back to Jane Eyre done before such intertextuality became identified as a widespread postcolonial response to colonial literary canons*”, as Savory states.

As many critics agree on, colonial issues of race and gender identity are arguably front and centre in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: “*As Bertha Mason is reinscribed and reinserted into the new identitarian framework figured by Antoinette Cosway, the backstory of how this young Jamaican*

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311 Ibid., page 202.

312 Ibid., page 203.

313 Karen Caplan discusses this term as a space inhabited by oppositional consciousnesses, that is, those who exist somewhere between the various centers and margins of (white male) power structures.

314 Ibid., page 203.

315 Ibid., page 203.

316 Elaine Savory, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2009), page 79.

*Creole became, or was made into, the madwoman in the attic becomes the novel's prime consideration*", and this is the key point of the novel.<sup>317</sup>

There are many descriptive passages and character sentences, in which is evident that Antoinette is consistently figured as the Other, as not English at all. When she walks at the prospect of marrying Edward Rochester, he insists that "*I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl.*"<sup>318</sup> By stating this, Rochester marks Antoinette negatively as a stranger. This has to do also with the language which has been used by the author herself: in *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft and Tiffin distinguish between the Standard British English inherited from the Empire and the English which the language has evolved in postcolonial countries: "*Jean Rhys uses in her novel both Standard British English (in order to represent the European discourse in the character of Rochester) and the Jamaican varieties of English as the language of the periphery, such as Creole and the English of black community.*"<sup>319</sup>

Rochester, representant of the European and power, rejects all the varieties of English which are not "British" and pure at all, and therefore he refuses Creole as a language he does not like and cannot get completely (i.e. "*Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible.*"<sup>320</sup>)

Jean Rhys, by describing Antoinette's sense of belonging implies the need for right to a sense of solidarity in Creole community and a just integration because "*the Lord makes no distinction between black and white, black and white the same for Him.*"<sup>321</sup>

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317 H. Adlai Murdoch, Chapter Title: *The Discourses of Jean Rhys: Resistance, Ambivalence and Creole Indeterminacy*, from "Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches, Editors: Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran, published by Edimburgh University Press, JSTOR, page 159.

318 Ibid., page 48.

319 Ibid., page 47.

320 Ibid., page 52.

321 Ibid., page 5.

### 3.4. *Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre: who are the heroes and heroines and who are the victims?*

At this point, one might ask: who are the real heroes - heroines and who are the victims in all the stories? Who is right and who is wrong?

The author of *Wide Sargasso Sea* completely distorts these points of views, making those who were previously considered "mad" and an antagonist a real target easy to judge, characterized by continuous attacks by supporters of the Western culture: "*All her heroines are in one way or other victims of men, the mad captive of Thornfield Hall is interpreted as the most hideous example of the power exercised by men over women.*"<sup>322</sup> Her point of departure is of course Charlotte Brontë's description of Bertha Rochester as seen for the first time by Jane Eyre ("*In the deep shade (...)*"<sup>323</sup>) As Dennis Porter states, "*Such 'madness' is accepted by Jane Eyre, though not altogether by her author, as a given. The subhuman creature is explained in terms of a degenerate heredity.*"<sup>324</sup> As a matter of fact, Antoinetta is the "mad daughter of a mad mother". But Jean Rhys takes her readership back to the beginnings of her journey that led the little girl from Jamaica to the attic at Thornfield: "*The thematic continuity with Jean Rhys's preceding novels resides in the fact that she affirms in Wide Sargasso Sea that Bertha Rochester was not born mad but made so, and made so, both singly and collectively, by men.*"<sup>325</sup>

Often analysed before, what is central in Jean Rhys's vision of the nineteenth-century Antilles is her sense of "*suspicion, fear, and hate*"<sup>326</sup>. As a matter of fact colonial society that had institutionalized slavery means "*a society deeply divided according to a complicated caste system founded on gradations of skin color and place of birth.*"<sup>327</sup> Using the words of a linguist, the deep existence of Creoles is "*largely due to the process - discovery, exploration, trade, conquest, slavery, migration, colonialism, nationalism - that have brought the peoples of Europe and the peoples of the rest of the world to share a common destiny.*"<sup>328</sup>

As a Creole girl whose mother is from another island, she is attacked and mocked not only by black people, but also by the Creole ladies of Jamaica: "*She is a 'white cockroach' to the former*

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322 Dennis Porter, *Of Heroines and Victims: Jean Rhys and Jane Eyre*, The Massachusetts Review, Autumn, 1976, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 1976), pp. 540-552, published by The Massachusetts Review, Inc., JSTOR, page 540.

323 Ibid., page 338.

324 Ibid., page 540.

325 Ibid., page 540.

326 Ibid., page 542.

327 Ibid., page 542.

328 In the editor's *Introduction from Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, ed. Dell Hymes (Cambridge University Press, 1971), page 5.

and a 'white nigger' to the latter"<sup>329</sup>. Though white, she is less than "English": as the daughter of a former slave-owning planter, she is mocked by the slaves as a poor white girl.

Rochester's entering to her life leads to a pretext for Jean Rhys to describe the true character of the Byronic hero so much described by Brontë: "*Rochester's failure to care enough for the feelings and the fate of his vulnerable child-bride is represented by Jean Rhys as a paradigm of male cruelty towards women. For in her version, it is not Rochester who is the innocent party; it is not he who is deceived and trapped into an alliance with a mad heiress, but she who is sought out by a fortune hunter and his family, sexually exploited for a time, and when once she has grown dependent on his love and his lovemaking, rejected.*"<sup>330</sup>: "*You want her money, but you don't want her, It is in your mind to pretend she is mad.*"<sup>331</sup> Rochester simply plays "the part" he "was expected to play"<sup>332</sup>.

Rochester is of course the most conventional character in Charlotte Brontë's novel, "*an embodiment of the darkly brooding Byronic hero stricken with romantic melancholy, on the one hand, and as a wish-fulfillment figure, a dominant highly sexualized male, on the other.*"<sup>333</sup>

Rochester in this novel is a more complex character than in Brontë's novel. In part two, at the point when he prepares to leave the Caribbean to take Antoinette with him, he makes the important and cruel decision to render his wife lifeless and mad: "*I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour; I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.*"<sup>334</sup>

In terms of Rochester's complexity, there's another quote important to notice and to note, which makes him a very confuse character who cannot take control on his own life: "*How can one discover the truth, I thought, and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me the truth. Not my father nor Richard Mason, certainly not the girl I had married. I stood still, so sure I was being watched that I looked over my shoulder. Nothing but the trees and the green light under the trees. A track was just visible and I went on, glancing from side to side and sometimes quickly behind me. This was why I stubbed my foot on a stone and nearly fell. The stone I had tripped on was not a boulder but part of a paved road. There had been a paved road through this forest. The track led to a large clear space. Here were the ruins of a stone house and round the ruins rose trees that had*

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329 Ibid., page 543.

330 Ibid., page 543.

331 Ibid., page 103.

332 Ibid., page 46.

333 Ibid., page 544.

334 Ibid., page 111.

*grown to an incredible height. At the back of the ruins a wild orange tree covered with fruit, the leaves a dark green. A beautiful place.”* <sup>335</sup>

Given by Rochester himself, he's starting questioning about his marriage to Antoinette.

As Dennis Porter points out, *“the two themes of colonialism and male sexuality come together most strikingly during the meeting between Rochester and the demonic Daniel Mason”* <sup>336</sup>: It is, in any case, *“Daniel Mason's function to play Iago to Rochester's swaggering Othello, only on this occasion, in terms of color, the roles are reversed”*. <sup>337</sup> It is Daniel Mason who wakes the white Rochester's fears in relation to his colonial bride: *“'Give my love to your wife - my sister,' he called after me venomously. 'You are not the first to kiss her pretty face. Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour - not yellow like me. But my sister just the same...’”* <sup>338</sup>

Daniel Mason is saying that for Rochester his wife is *“doubly contaminated”* <sup>339</sup>. Firstly, she is often linked to the “yellow-skinned” Daniel: *“She is derived at the very least from a perverted source, from a lecherous, alcoholic father who had sexual relations with black women”* <sup>340</sup>. Secondly, he is tormented by the fact that his wife was not pure at all, but sexually violated before he married her.

As frequently stated, Jean Rhys's novel creates a critical essay on the nineteenth-century work. From the point of view of the author, Jane Eyre's own question concerning the mystery around Thornfield attic *“receives no satisfactory answer in Charlotte Brontë's novel”* <sup>341</sup>: *“'What crime was this, that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner? What mystery, that broke out, now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night? What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?’”* <sup>342</sup>

Jean Rhys's answer is that the so-called “creature” was first of all a simple woman, who had the misfortune to have lived in such a place like Jamaica in the 1830's, *“a white planter's white daughter, who discovered she did not belong where she was born and had no place else to go, a woman put up for sale by one man and purchased for his own purposes by another.”* <sup>343</sup>

The contrast between the two women main characters is really illuminating. Although Jane Eyre begins as disadvantaged, she has a rebirth and a sense of herself that are lacking in Antoinette Cosway. From the opening chapter of the nineteenth century novel, Jane Eyre is designed as a

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335 Ibid., page 65.

336 Ibid., page 544.

337 Ibid., page 544.

338 Ibid., page 80.

339 Ibid., page 544.

340 Ibid., page 544.

341 Ibid., page 545.

342 Ibid., page 243.

343 Ibid., page 545-546.

woman who must fight to survive: “*The Creole girl, instead, grows up in a place without books or stories and she can only find support in a traditional system during the years of her education.*”<sup>344</sup>

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344 Ibid., page 549.



### 3.4. Women, slavery, freedom: “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name.”<sup>345</sup>

Two elements of this postcolonial novel stand out: the treatment of the characters and the narrative style.

Let's start with the protagonist: Antoinette, as already highlighted earlier, also has another name, Bertha. The identity of Antoinette, as one proceeds with the reading, is losing strength, or rather, the outlines become more and more bland, almost indefinite, because the two complementary souls of madness are confused: the one of Bertha and that of Antoinette. What appears as a family defect becomes the identity's crisis of the protagonist, which is not only hindered by the servants, but also by her husband:

“‘Don't laugh like that, Bertha.’

‘My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?’

‘Because it's a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.

‘It doesn't matter,’ she said.”<sup>346</sup>

Rochester, in a brutal way, moves away his wife Antoinette: as soon as he wakes up from the bewitching torpor caused by the woman's fascination, he violently dodges her and makes fun of her - subtly, as in the passage quoted above, making her realize that he aware of his family drama. This overwhelmingly repulsive attitude overwhelms the sensitivity of a fragile woman, whose psychological balance is already severely compromised, and who in essence is considered crazy. Her reasons are not listened to, she is robbed of everything, even the memory of her beloved place, Coulibri, where she had spent her childhood: “*In renaming Antoinette Bertha, the husband does not succeed in changing her, but in splitting her identity. This split subjectivity becomes the fate that she must confront. (...) The identity of the husband is constituted by the history and narrative of Europe and is dependent upon the ‘breaking up’ of Antoinette, the Creole woman.*”<sup>347</sup>

In response, Bertha states: “*He hates me now. I hear him every night walking up and down the veranda. Up and down. When he passes my door he says. “Good-night, Bertha.” he never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name. “I hope you'll sleep well, Bertha” - it cannot be worse, I said. That one night he came I might sleep afterwards. I sleep so badly now. And I Dream.*”<sup>348</sup>

Mary Lou Emery provides an alternative gloss on the text, stressing specific sites and images of domination and possession: “*Rochester soon grows to despise both the island with its*

345 Ibid., page 94.

346 Ibid., page 86.

347 Veronica Marie Gregg, *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, page 98.

348 Ibid., page 71.

*strange intensity and his wife. (...) Branding her like a slave, he renames her Bertha. (...) Their marriage, an exchange of property and sexuality, repeats master-slave relations; husband and wife enact the traditional rites of possession and revolt.”*<sup>349</sup>

Arguably, here, Rochester's slave-like domination, possession and division of Antoinette as other are what ultimately drive her to destruction.<sup>350</sup>

A cruel expropriation of personality is accompanied by the characterization of the other characters, the so-called "blacks": *“I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. (...) One day a little girl followed me singing: ‘Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ I walked fast, but she walked faster: ‘White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody wants you. Go away.’”*<sup>351</sup>

The vision offered by Jean Rhys is interesting, because in this case, in the perspective of the proclamation of the new Slavery Abolition Act, it is the whites, not the blacks, who are humanly and psychologically “enslaved”. Antoinette is constantly ridiculed and mistreated both by them and by the white Rochester, who nevertheless recognizes in her nothing but the wild nature of a poor madwoman: *“Within the context of slavery the status of white Creole women remained peculiar, indeed anomalous, and after Emancipation in 1833 they were even more isolated from the women of color they had colonized. In Wide Sargasso Sea Antoinette Cosway's narrative, a dream-like telescoping of time and place, parallels the Creole's historical displacement. After Emancipation the Cosways are socially "marooned"-to use Antoinette's mother's reiterated word (18, 26), which recalls the maroon rebellions decimating sugar plantations during slavery. A penniless widow attended by former slaves, Annette lives marginally in Coulibri, once the estate of her white planter husband. She and her children (Antoinette and a retarded son Pierre) are ostracized by the closed ranks of expatriate whites and despised by their black servants who revile them as "white cockroaches.”*<sup>352</sup>

Violence, in Rhys's novel, is analyzed from two different points of view, the one of blacks and the one of whites, two different forms of the same cruelty expressed perfectly - from a stylistic and narrative angle - through the dialogues: pungent, direct, stinging. Nothing different can be said about the writing of Jean Rhys except that it is so sincere as to hurt those who come across it, and this is perhaps one of the highest expressions of his literary talent.

Concerning madness and particularly Bertha's arrival to it, in part three of the novel, narrated by Antoinette herself imprisoned in Thornfield Hall, there's a clear passage in which the main character explains her own captivity in the attic: *“There is no looking glass here and I don't*

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349 Mary Lou Emery, *The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in Voyage in the Dark and Wide Sargasso Sea*, page 427.

350 Ibid., page 163.

351 Ibid., page 9.

352 Ibid., pp. 3-4;

*know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?”*<sup>353</sup>

As the reader can notice, she remains active and perceptive at the same time about her situation and the surroundings, with a lucidity that goes against her madness. She notices the absence of a mirror, as it would provide a reflection of her existence.

The mirror is an important symbol in Jean Rhys' novel: Annette, Antoinette's mother, constantly looked for her own reflection. By putting Antoinette in a “mirrorless” attic which can also be called a “prison”, completely alone, Rochester becomes the only master of her. He has already deprived her of her name, erasing her existence as Antoinette. She's now without a real name, without a face, becoming the ghost which Jane Eyre always fears.

Whoever reads this novel cannot fail to find strong similarities between the protagonists Antoniette and Jane, especially in the attack when the sad events that mark the childhood and adolescence of the two heroines are told. However, Rhys's novel appears even more tragic: through the narrative voice of the protagonist, the painful journey of a Creole girl in a desperate search for redemption, both in social and personal life, is described with emphasis and profound lyricism.

*Wide Sargasso Sea*, in short, tries to attribute a human and living image to a character described in an almost animal form in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha, who in the latter novel represents a negative entity, the impediment that stands between Jane, Rochester and a happy life, here is an innocent victim, a character who moves because in her we glimpsed a lonely, desperate woman, who entrusted her life to a man in the vain hope of being able to receive that love and that consideration that in all her fragile existence she had never had.

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353 Ibid., page 117.

## Conclusion

“It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”<sup>354</sup>

This research aimed to identify and highlight the historical and geographic eternity enjoyed by all the great characters of literature.

If the concept of “eternity” of literature has been able to continue and perpetuate for centuries, if novels and texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are read nowadays by a wide number of readers is because they represent the entire cultural heritage. That’s why critics like Scholes and Kellogg used to say that to understand the present it needs to be known the past of all the things<sup>355</sup>.

The results obtained in this study indicated how two texts of the past such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, so distant from each other from a geographical and historical point of view, are similar not only from a linguistically, but also from a content point of view, in which the same identical character is described by two writers so different from each other, with different stories, cultures and personal backgrounds.

One of the topics that is best described, sometimes in a latent way, is the one of the patriarchal society in which “Bertha” Antoinetta Mason lives. Male power, wielded by the secondary characters in this research, is heavily criticized by both writers in both novels. Men evolves, as well as women. All over the time, women have fought for a position in society.

Now the main goal is to achieve equality.

*Jane Eyre* has always been considered an icon of feminism, and the main conclusion of this research is to demonstrate that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is too.

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid. Charlotte Brontë, p. 129/130.

<sup>355</sup> “Per capire il nostro presente dobbiamo conoscere il nostro passato.”

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *La natura della narrativa*, translation by R. Zelocchi, Bologna, Il Mulino, Biblioteca, 2000, page 71.

In principle, women could not have aspirations that did not include marriage or family. Jane Eyre's character is one of the first to break this concept: the protagonist follows her independence by studying and working as a governess. Throughout the work, her spirit and intelligence are highlighted, and they demonstrate that women, as well as men, are subject to passions and dreams.

One of the ideas shared by many critics and scholars is that the two women, Jane and Antoinette, could be seen as similar; sure enough, while Jane represents the face of women in the society, “Bertha” Antoinetta is the representation of the instinct, that is to say the suppressed part that emerges after so many abuses suffered. Thinking of *Jane Eyre's* plot, it can be said and concluded that Jane's happy ending with the Byronic Mr. Rochester is made possible only thanks to Bertha's sacrifice and thanks to the negative role she plays in the story.

In Jean Rhys' novel, Antoinette is represented as part of a huge and oppressive patriarchal society, poised between the European world and the predominantly black world of the West Indies, thus becoming the embodiment of the existential drama of the Creoles.

Jean Rhys wanted to offer the point of view of the other, the alienated, the madwoman. Implicit in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the idea that the monstrosity of the other, like the bestiality described in *Jane Eyre*, is not really the consequence of a racial difference, but of a brutal scheme inside of which “Bertha”, the different of the novel, finds herself imprisoned.

The *Wide Sargasso Sea* explores the complicated system of relationships between men and women and develops postcolonial themes such as racism, deportation and colonialism.

The link between the two books is important: the ending.

The ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is perfectly connected to the ending of *Jane Eyre* as “Bertha” Antoinetta, gripped by a moment of lucidity, decides her destiny.

The choice of method is not accidental: the fire reminds her of home, the warmth of Jamaica. As her end approaches, she thinks that now she will be able to be free. In this tragic point of view, death is her only chance. Her imprisonment is compared to the memory of her little parrot whose wings were broken in order not to fly, but which with death has regained its freedom.

The character of “Bertha”, before all of the studies on her character discussed in this research, has been often deemed as different and strange. But only thanks to this diversity she plays a key role in the novels: she helps people and the readers recognize that being different is not a bad issue and it does not imply not having culture and morals.

Being different is what makes people human.

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