



Mapping The Feminine Matrix: A Case Study Of Race And Gender In Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre

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In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte attempts to depict a complete female identity, and she expresses her heroine's consciousness. Psychological development and the dramas of the inner life are represented in dreams, hallucinations, visions, surrealistic paintings, and masquerades; the sexual experiences of the female body are expressed spatially through elaborate and rhythmically recurring images of rooms and houses. Jane's growth is further structured through a pattern of literary, biblical, and mythological allusion. Charlotte Bronte's most profound innovation, however is the division of the Victorian female psyche into its extreme components of mind and body, which she externalizes as two characters, Helen Burns and Bertha Mason. Both Helen and Bertha function not only at realistic levels in the narrative and imply an explicit connection to Victorian sexual ideology, but they also operate in an archetypal dimension of the story.

Bronte gives us not one, but three faces of Jane and she resolves her heroine's psychic dilemma by literally and metaphorically destroying the two polar personalities to make way for the full strength and development of the central consciousness, for the integration of the spirit, and the body. Thus *Jane Eyre* anticipates and indeed formulates the deadly combat between the 'Angel in the House' and the devil in the flesh that is evident in the fiction of Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, and other twentieth century British women – novelists.

The novel opens at Gateshead, with Jane's transition from the passivity and genderlessness of childhood into a turbulent puberty. This emotional menarche is clearly suggested, despite the fact that Jane is only ten years old, by the accumulation of incident and detail on the psychic level. 'I can never get away from Gates

head, till I am a woman', she tells Mr. Llyod, the apothecary and having passed through the gate, she has evidently entered upon womanhood by the end of Chapter 4.

Her adolescence is marked first by her sudden and unprecedented revolt against the Reeds, a self-assertiveness that incurs severe punishment and ostracism, but also wins her freedom from the family. It is also coloured by her pervasive awareness of the 'animal' aspects of her being – her body, with its unfeminine needs and appetites, and her passions, especially rage. From the undifferentiated awareness of her 'physical inferiority' to the Reed children, Jane becomes minutely conscious both of the 'disgusting and ugly physical sadism of John Reed, and of her own warm blood and fluttering eyes. The famous scene of violence with which the novel begins, John Reed's assault on Jane and her passionate counterattack, associates the moment of rebellion and autonomy with blood – letting and incarceration in the densely symbolic red-room. It is thus as if the mysterious crime for which the Reeds were punishing Jane were the crime of growing up. The red-room to which Jane is sentenced by Mrs. Reed for her display of anger and passion is a paradigm of female inner space.

With its deadly and bloody connotations its Freudian wealth of secret compartments, wardrobes, drawers, and jewel chest, the red-room has strong associations with the adult female body; Mrs. Reed, of course, is a widow in her prime. Jane's ritual imprisonment here, and the subsequent episodes of ostracism at Gateshead, where she is forbidden to eat, play, or socialize with other members of the family, is an adolescent rite of passage that has curious anthropological affinities to the menarchal ceremonies of Eskimo or South Sea Island tribes. The passage into womanhood stresses the lethal and fleshly aspects of adult female sexuality. The 'mad cat', the 'bad animal' (as John Reed calls Jane) who is shut up and punished will reappear later in the novel as the totally animalistic, maddened, and brutalized Bertha Mason; her secret chamber is simply another red-room at the top of another house.

The obsession with the 'animal' appetites and manifestations of the body, and the extreme revulsion from female sexuality are also articulated through one of the submerged literary allusions in the text to Gulliver's Travels. This book has been one of the Jane's favourites, but after her experience in the red-room it becomes an ominous and portentous fable; Gulliver seems no longer a canny adventurer, but 'a most desolate wanderer' in most dreaded and dangerous regions, a pilgrim in the adult world like herself. Like Gulliver, Jane moves from the nursery world of Lilliput to an encounter with the threatening and Brobdingnagian Reverend Brocklehurst ('what a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! what a great nose! And what a mouth! And what large, prominent teeth!') and an increasing Calvinist awareness of the 'vile body' that lends to the climactic encounter with Bertha, the female Yahoo in her foul den.

Lowood School, where Jane is sent by her aunt, is the penitentiary for which the red-room was the tribunal. Like Lowick, Casaubon's home in Middlemarch. Lowood represents sexual diminishment and repression. In this pseudo-convent, Jane undergoes a prolonged sensual discipline. Here the girls are systematically 'starved' (in Yorkshire dialect, the word means 'frozen' as well as 'hungry'), and deprived of all

sensory gratification. Clad in stiff brown dresses, which gave an air of oddity ‘even to the prettiest’, and shorn of their hair, the last sign of their femininity, the girls of Lowood are instructed in the chastity they will need for their future lives as poor teachers and governesses. Brocklehurst proclaims that his mission ‘is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh.

As an institution, Lowood disciplines its inmates by attempting to destroy their individuality at the same time that it punishes and starves their sexuality. Distinctions between the little girls and the ‘great girls’, the pre-adolescents and the young women, are obliterated by the uniform all are forced to wear. The purpose of Brocklehurst in starving the “vile bodies” is to create the intensely spiritualized creature, the Victorians idealized as the ‘Angel in the House’. Virtually sexless, this creature as Alexander Welsh provocatively suggests in ‘The City of Dickens’, is in fact the ‘Angel of Death’, who has mystical powers of intercessions in the supernatural order, and whose separation from the body is the projection of the Victorian terror of the physical reminders of birth and mortality.

The Angel of Lowood is Helen Burns, the perfect victim and the representation of the feminine spirit in its most disembodied form. Helen is a tribute to the Lowood system: pious, intellectual, indifferent to her material surroundings, resigned to the abuse of her body, and inevitably, consumptive. She is one extreme aspect of Jane’s personality, for Jane too is tempted by the world of the spirit and the intellect, and has a strong streak of masochism. Helen is the woman who would make a perfect bride for St. John Rivers; she is his female counterpart. But although Helen, ‘with the aspect of an angel’, inspires Jane to transcend the body and its passions, Jane, rebellious on her ‘pedestal of infamy’ in the classroom, resists the force of spiritual institutionalization, as she will later resist the physical institutionalization of marriage with Rochester. Ultimately, it is Helen’s death that provides the climax of the Lowood experience. She dies in Jane’s arms, and Jane achieves a kind of victory: the harsh regime of Lowood is modified, its formants palliated. Like Bertha Mason, Helen is sacrificed to make way for Jane’s fuller freedom.

The animal aspects of womanhood, which have been severely repressed during Jane’s sojourn at Lowood, reassert themselves when, at eighteen, she goes as governess to Thornfield Hall. Bertha Mason, who is confined to, and who is the ‘third story’ of Thornfield is the incarnation of the flesh, of female sexuality in its most irredeemably bestial and terrifying form. Bronte’s treatment of the myth of the Mad wife is brilliantly comprehensive and reverberative, and rich with historical, medical, and sociological implications, as well as with psychological force.

Bertha Mason is a Creole heiress whom Rochester has married in order to restore his family fortunes. After the tidal waves of melodrama die down the sequence concerning Thornfield Hall resolves into certain specific components.

There is Rochester himself who once in order to escape the horror of his situation flew through Europe half-mad and finally of course there is *Jane Eyre* who in the climactic scene “stands grave and quiet at the mouth of hell looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon”. In this crucial scene we witness on a literal level, the unmasking of the ‘monster’ or the demon. Yet who exactly is the monster in the scene and what are the consequences of supporting Rochester’s assertion that it is Bertha who is the monster?

Historically the term Creole refers to all people born in the Caribbean regardless of ethnic origin. The Caribbean islands have always had an ethnically mixed population. This population comprised people of both European and African descent. With the passage of time, particularly as the exploitation of slave labour by the plantation owners was both economic and sexual, ethnic origins became increasingly blurred. The repeated references in the novel to the ‘foreign complexions’ of Bertha and Richard Mason point toward their mixed ethnicity. Their fortune is like that of Jane’s uncle John Eyre and fortune that have been made from plantation labour which in turn is grounded in the slave trade. Therefore, the inheritance that binds Bertha and Rochester together as well as the inheritance that gives Jane her economic independence come from the same exploitative source.

Even the abolition of slave trade in 1807 was due primarily to economic compulsions. The Industrial Revolution had rendered such agricultural economies less profitable than before. A contemporary account puts in the following way the relationship between Britain and the West Indies. The sources – J.S. Mill’s essay “Of the Competition of Different Countries in the same Market” “West Indian colonies cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own ... but as the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and few other tropical commodities. All the capital employed is English capital; almost all the industry is carried on for English uses; there is little production of anything except staple commodities, and these are sent to England not to be exchanged for things exported to the colonies and consumed by its inhabitants but to be sold in England for the benefit of the proprietors there”.

In this model of colonial exploitation British capital opened up their trade with the Caribbean which was exploited for its raw materials and cheap labour. The profits earned from this enterprise were ploughed back not into the Caribbean colonies but into Britain.

This paradigm is repeated in the personal, and the economic exploitation of Bertha by Rochester, Rochester marries Bertha solely for the dowry that she brings in and surely it is preposterous on the part of Rochester to shift the blame of this onto his father and brother. When Bertha overcome by her mental illness ceases to be a companion to Rochester, he retains her money and makes a series of alternative arrangements in his private life. However much the reader may attach to the fact of Bertha’s lunacy, its relationship to this pattern of economic and sexual exploitation cannot be ignored.

In fact, the link between mental degradation and colonization is opened up through one kind of fiction called the *Imperial Gothic*. This fiction exposes colonial exploitation without necessarily critiquing colonization itself but by revealing the decline of the human into a beast under such a regime. It offers “insistent images of decline and fall, or of civilization turning into the opposite” and here, this can be seen when in the climactic scene Bertha is described as a beast in a very straight forward and harsh language.

This extract which shows the unmasking of the alleged demon is a fair example of the Imperial Gothic. Rochester with the group confronts Bertha in all her degradation. She is shown in a reversal of Darwinian progression as going on all fours as opposed to the others, particularly Jane’s who stood upright. This bestial nature Rochester alleges is a perpetual threat to his pattern of life and it is with this threat that he has to deal. Rochester may exhibit Bertha in her degradation as the justification of his conduct. But such a revelation of Bertha may be considered as the heaviest indictment of his conduct that can be imagined. Repeated references are made in this scene as well as elsewhere to the decline of Bertha from the human to the bestial and to her brutish nature. Is this the cause or the consequences of the brutal economic and emotional exploitation to which she is subjected? Rochester urges repeatedly that it is not the cause but history testifies that it is the consequence.

In a classic reworking of Jane Eyre in 1966 titled *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, the author places Bertha at the center of the story and tells it from her point of view. In this novel both race and gender intensify the exploitation that Rochester unleashes on Bertha. Brontë’s text also contextualises these pressures in the following extract “the clothed hyena rose up and stood tall on its hind feet...”

She is not presented here as a mad woman, so much a caged beast of prey guarded by her keeper. Not even vestiges of human dignity are accorded. Earlier we have seen that Bertha had already been presented as a Gothic beast. Bertha therefore is throughout presented as a clothed hyena, it being the lowest predator...

The narrative compels the reader to look at a powerless subject at a moment when she is stripped off every shred of human decency. This extract therefore clearly points out to the degradation of her mind under colonization. Hyena is the symbol of degradation of the body that accompanies the mind. It also points out to the way in which the politics of colonization and the power structures of sexuality are implicated in each other. The forms of sexual exchange brought about by colonialism were themselves both mirrors or consequences or the modes of economic exchange of bodies and of goods or rather of bodies as goods. Bertha, when she is sold into marital slavery along with her dowry, she becomes a commodity. And the consequence of this trade is the violence that is visited on her body and mind. Later Rochester refers to what seems to him to be her degraded and degrading sexual appetite when he says, “... what a pigmy intellect she had...” Rochester’s view of Bertha is very much that of the ruler who has to check any tendency on the part of his subject to revolt. In a sense therefore both Bertha and Rochester, may be seen as prisoners of a colonial bind that neither can escape. The sexuality of both these characters is determined by their historical context too. The reason why Bertha evokes

our sympathy and not Rochester is that Bertha's transgressions are punished, while Rochester's are accepted. Bertha is reviled by Rochester as "intemperate and unchaste" but his own subsequent libertinism is explained away by his claim that all he seeks is a woman who is "the antipodes of the Creole".

Bronte's portrayal of Bertha contains within it unspoken but deeply felt contemporary fears that coloured Victorian England. Beast or human is a question that has a particular resonance since within a dozen years of the publication of *Jane Eyre*, Victorian England was to be plunged into the revolutionary science that of Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin and other. Bertha, therefore, is an important character in the novel as she embodies the anxieties of an age that would need to reinvent itself in a Post Darwinian World.

In precise contrast to the angelic Helen, Bertha is big, as big as Rochester, corpulent, florid and violent. When Jane sees her in the chamber on the third storey, she is almost subhuman.

Like Gulliver observing the Yahoos, Jane is pushed almost to the brink of breakdown by her recognition of aspects of herself in this 'clothed hyena'. Much of Bertha's dehumanization, Rochester's account makes clear, is the result of her confinement not its cause. After ten years of imprisonment, Bertha has become a caged beast. Given the lunacy laws in England, incidentally Rochester has kept the dowry for which he married her, but cannot file for divorce even in the ecclesiastical courts. Rochester's complicity in the destruction of his wife's spirit is indicated in Jane's recognition of the third storey's resemblance to a corridor in 'Bluebeard's castle', in Rochester's account of his sexual exploitation of Bertha, Ce'line, Giacinta, and Clara, and in Jane's uneasy awareness that his smile "was such as a sultan might bestow on a slave".

Madness is explicitly associated with female sexual passion, with the body, with the fiery emotions Jane admits to feeling for Rochester. In trying to persuade her to become his mistress, Rochester argues that Jane is a special case: "If you were mad", he asks, 'do you think I should hate you?' 'I do indeed, sir', Jane replies; and she is surely correct. Thus it becomes inevitable that Bertha's death, the purging of the lusts of the flesh, must precede any successful union between Rochester and Jane. When they finally marry, they have become equals, not only because, Rochester, in losing his hand and his sight, has learned how it feels to be helpless and how to accept help, but also because Jane, in destroying the dark passion of her own psyche, has become truly her "own mistress".

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