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Bertha's "madness" as a feminist outcry in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* tells the story of an orphaned English girl, Jane Eyre. During the course of the novel Jane encounters numerous challenges including heartbreak, after her wedding is canceled. Jane eventually marries the love of her life, Edward Rochester. This was only after his first wife Bertha Mason dies. Throughout the novel Bertha is illustrated as a madwoman who hinders Rochester's marriage to Jane. The novel *Jane Eyre* only describes Bertha from the perspective of Jane and Rochester.

Brontë presents Bertha as a "beast". However, Bertha is not just a madwoman, she is a representation of inequality based on gender, ethnicity, and sexuality during the Victorian Era. I intend to show Bertha from a humanized perspective, the perspective of a woman struggling in a patriarchal society. Bertha is a symbolic representation of Victorian society's attitude towards gender, ethnicity and race, and sexuality. Bertha Mason is a symbol of all that Jane wants to be but cannot be because of gender inequality.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book "The Madwoman in the Attic" discusses the Victorian literature from a feminist perspective. They present *Jane Eyre* as a feminist novel. Bertha Mason depicts what happens to women whenever they do not conform to societal expectations. The novel is a "feminist tract and a social argument for social betterness of governesses and equal rights for women" (Gilbert and Gubar 338). The character Bertha Mason is popularly interpreted as Jane's dark double. Jane's personality is juxtaposed by two characters, "one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the

free, uninhibited often criminal self” (Gilbert and Gubar 360). Jane represents the socially acceptable woman while Bertha represents the “rebellious” woman.

Before the couple could get married Bertha acts as Jane’s double, carrying out all her true desires. This is exemplified on numerous occasions “What Bertha does... is what Jane wants to do” (Gilbert and Gubar 359). When Jane had reservations about marrying Rochester Bertha comes into action. Bertha destroys Jane’s wedding dress for her, “disliking the vapory veil”... Jane Eyre wants to tear the garments up... Bertha does it for her” (Gilbert and Gubar 359). Bertha “helps” Jane out even further by putting off the wedding she already had reservations about. When Jane was “fearing the inexorable “bridal day,” and Jane would like to put off. Bertha does that for her too” (Gilbert and Gubar 359).

Additionally, when Jane disliked the idea of marrying Rochester without being his equal. Bertha’s physical appearance sufficed for what she lacked. Jane wished to “be his equal in size and strength” (Gilbert and Gubar 359). Bertha exemplifies this in her physical appearance as she is “a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband” (Gilbert and Gubar 359). Bertha is all that Jane desires, but these desires must be suppressed to conform to the Victorian standards of a woman. She cannot present her desire to be her husband’s equal from the perspective of herself. Therefore, her dark double, Bertha Mason is implemented.

The character Bertha Mason not only represents Jane’s double, but she also represents the treatment of women during the Victorian Era. As Jane’s double, Bertha is Jane’s “hunger, rebellion and rage” (Gilbert and Gubar 348). She represents the emotions of women during the Victorian era. Bertha Mason is “the most threatening- avatar of Jane” (Gilbert and Gubar 359). She is the woman that the Victorian society considers a risk to their misogynist structures. Gilbert and Gubar argues that sexual inequality is exemplified in the relationship between Rochester and Jane.

Jane was reluctant to marry Rochester on account of their inequality. The couple does not marry until Jane's dark double Bertha dies. Jane's inheritance moves her from the position of just a governess. Rochester is left handicapped and Thornfield Hall is destroyed, he slightly stripped of his strength as a man. This in some way makes them "equal".

Additionally, Bertha's "madness" is not merely just speaking to being mentally ill. From a feminist perspective, "the ability to "go mad" also functions as a class marker of higher sensibility" (E. J. Donaldson 100). Bertha's madness is a metaphor for an enlightenment on feminist issues. Jane's resentment of the patriarchal society is brought to life through her dark double. This is further supported by the way Bertha is treated after her husband noticed her mental illness. "In the novel, restraint and isolation is presented as necessary conditions of raving madness" (E. J. Donaldson 107). "Madness" was treated in the same manner women were, they were restrained and isolated if they had issues with the Victorian society's expectations of women. "Once Bertha is declared mad, she, "of course," must be sequestered. "since the medical men had pronounced her mad, she had, of course been shut up" (E. J. Donaldson 107). Because Bertha was unable to conform to societal expectations, she had to be "shut up".

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is clearly exemplified in Bertha Mason throughout the novel *Jane Eyre*. Her story is never told from her perspective, the perspective of a woman is not valued. She is cast aside as "madwoman". Bronte presents Bertha as a woman whose story is told from the side of her resentful husband. I argue that Bertha represents an abused wife during the Victorian Era. Throughout the novel Bertha was never given a chance to speak, her story was never told from her perspective. This is much like the silence many women faced in society. Bertha rebels against the conforming to society, "The figure of Bertha Mason is a

rebellious woman subverting the patriarchal order by burning down her husband's her appeal" (E. J. Donaldson 100). She represents women's desire to rebel against misogyny. Furthermore, Bertha is the "hinderance" that prevents Rochester's marriage to Jane, she is 'the obstacle preventing Jane and Edward's ultimate happiness" (L. E. Donaldson 66). Everyone but Rochester is held accountable for his marriage to Bertha. First, he blames his father for his marriage to Bertha. He insists that he was tricked into marrying her and he had not loved her. Rochester married Bertha after he finished college, his father sent him to Jamaica to "espouse a wife already courted" (Bronte 352). He claimed that it was an arranged marriage. Shortly after they got married the couple moved to England. Then Bertha began to show signs of mental illness. Rochester never stopped to examine the effects of moving to a new country had on Bertha. He simply insisted that she was mad for reasons non inclusive of her environment and her marriage. He eventually turns to locking her away on account of her mental illness. He holds no accountability for his wife mental illness, nor his attempts to keep her a secret. As such, when Jane finds out that Rochester is already married, Rochester blames Bertha for her position as he tells Jane that Bertha "came from a mad family" (Bronte 337).

Bertha is described as an animal, instead of as a victim of Mr. Rochester's deceit. The novel characterizes Rochester as victim, despite his deceitfulness. Rochester's deceptive ways are illustrated through his actions. Parkinson points out, "his willingness to lock Bertha away, his abandonment of his many mistresses and his intent to commit bigamy with Jane demonstrates his attention to his own needs over those of the women in his life" (Parkinson 20). Rochester overlooks the importance of being honest with Jane. The entire beginning of their relationship was based on lies, as he failed to reveal the fact that his wife was locked away in his attic. Yet he somehow turns out to be the victim.

Bertha, like many women of the Victorian Era suffered a terrible fate; she was silenced. When Bertha was declared mad, she was locked away from any form of socialization. She spent over ten years without any family support or prospect of a better future, it is no wonder she was mad. Meanwhile her husband attempted to move on and start a new life. Rochester was granted opportunities that a woman would never dream of during the Victorian Era. He was able to at least attempt to move on, while Bertha struggled with mental illness. Bertha is a victim of gender inequality. Since, Rochester is a man, he can try to build a life after the failure of his marriage to a “mad woman”. He can travel the world and have sexual relationships with other women. Then he returns home and falls in love and attempts to remarry under the same roof of Thornfield that Bertha is confined to. All these examples represent gender inequalities of the Victorian Era. Society was not set up for women to thrive, women were set to be doomed. Bertha is a representation of gender inequality. Wives were not afforded the same opportunities as husband.

Racial Inequality

Bertha’s race and ethnicity also represents how Victorian society treated black women. The characterization of Bertha as a creole woman indicates racial and ethnic difference of the Victorian Era. The character Bertha Mason represents society’s treatment of creole people. As a creole woman living in England, Bertha is destined to be treated as an outcast. This problem worsens when she becomes mentally ill. Nygren suggest that, “Bertha already has less access to justice because of her colonial subject position, and her mental illness only compounds the problem” (Nygren 117). In Bertha’s case, society was already against her because of ethnicity, and her mental illness only made things worse. As Alexandra Nygren discusses Bertha Mason’s mental illness as a disability and the inequality towards Bertha, she argues that Rochester’s treatment towards Bertha would not have been the same if she was not a creole woman. Nygren states that Bertha is, a “disabled female subject who is a casualty of patriarchal,

colonialist, and ableist hegemony” (Nygren 4). Bertha represents how creole women were treated during the Victorian Era. Bertha had no resources nor family in England and as a creole woman during the Victorian Era, the odds were already set against her. Nygren points out the fact that Bertha is treated worse than how a typical mad person would be treated in during the nineteenth century:

“In the nineteenth century, relatively little was known or understood about mental illness, and those who suffered from it were often placed in institutions, yet Bertha is not treated this way. As both disabled and a colonial subject, she is locked up in the attic of her husband” (Nygren 6).

The odds were always against Bertha, she was stuck in a foreign country, in an unhappy marriage. Ultimately her fate was to live under these circumstances for the rest of her life, she was locked away from civilization. This illustrates an unfair treatment towards women. In Bertha’s case, the treatment worsened on account of her ethnicity. She is in a desperate situation, with no family in England and the law set against her, there was nothing that she could do.

As a Creole-English woman, Bertha is a foreigner to England, which influenced the unfairness towards her. Bronte implies that Bertha is of black heritage, this is evident in Jane’s description of Bertha. Jane described Bertha as having a “discolored face” (Bronte 327), which is a description that suggests a complexion of a black person. Although Bertha’s ethnicity is ambiguous, it is fair to assume that she is a fair-skinned black woman due to her mixed heritage. Her black heritage is further implied in the description Jane gives, from her ‘dark hair’ to her “discolored” face. Additionally, Lori Pollok points out that Bertha is described as the daughter of “Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antonietta Mason, his wife, a Creole” (Pollok). If Bertha’s mother is a creole, she is a creole also. It is important to note that creole referred to persons of mixed race, both black and white.

This indicates that Bertha is of black descent. Furthermore, Rochester also stated that Bertha's family wanted to "secure me (Rochester), because I was of a good race" (Bronte 352). This statement confirms the belief that Bertha is of a black woman.

Furthermore, even though Bertha might have the appearance of a white woman, as a creole white woman, she was still seen as inferior. Alberton points out that, "European writers in the West Indies sought to associate creoles with the native Caribbean population, as a way of distancing them from 'civilized' Europeans, this was particularly the case of creole women, who were often depicted as self-wiled, decadent and untrustworthy-" (Alberton). This is true in terms of the representation Bronte presents through the character Bertha Mason. She represents ethnic prejudices of the Victorian era.

The character Bertha Mason is portrayed as a black woman, this influenced the inequality she faced. Although slavery was abolished racism was still a dominant part of the Victorian society. This is highlighted in the character Bertha Mason. Racial prejudice played an important part in the novel *Jane Eyre*, had Bertha been an English woman, the treatment she received would have been different. I would like to compare Bertha's experiences to Jane's. Firstly, a comparison of Jane's experience of being locked in the Red Room to that of Bertha being locked away in the attic shows unfairness towards Bertha because of her race. When Jane is locked in the Red Room for one night and she falls ill from a nervous breakdown, while Bertha is locked away for over 10 years and is shunned for her mental illness. I argue that had Bertha been a white woman, like Jane, her husband would have been more supportive towards her. Rochester insists that he never loved Bertha and if Jane ever becomes mentally ill, he would have never treated her that way, he would instead, "receive you [Jane] in an embrace at least as fond as it would be restrictive. I should not shrink from you with disgust as I did from her" (Bronte 347).

Rochester makes it explicitly clear that he would not have treated Jane in the same manner he has treated his wife, Bertha. This unfairness is tied to Bertha's ethnicity, Rochester describes Bertha as having a "nature a wholly alien to mine; her cast of minds common, low, narrow and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher" (Bronte 353). Rochester's scornful description of his wife correlates how he illtreats her. For Rochester, putting Bertha in a facility for mental illness was not even an option. She was cast aside and left to suffer. The attic of Thornfield Hill only worsened Bertha's "already present" mental illness.

In novel Bertha is characterized in a mysterious manner, and when Jane finally sees Bertha, she describes her as "some strange wild animal... covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a man" (Bronte 338). This is evidence of Jane's participation in hegemony. Jane believes that she is superior to Bertha. Parkinson points out that, "Jane's choice of pronouns- it- refuses Bertha a female identity". As a woman, Jane does not equate herself to Bertha, which is somewhat odd because Jane is compassionate towards others. Jane acknowledges the fact that Bertha, "cannot help being mad" (Bronte 347), however this acknowledgement is not accompanied by sympathy. Jane sees Bertha as the "colonial Other" many writers wrote about. Bertha is the "colonial other, and the ableist hegemony erases Bertha's personhood" (Nygren 118). Bronte depicts Bertha as "dark and savage, in contrast to Jane's own pale, Anglican countenance" (Nygren 2). She is not given the same platform as Jane, she is seen as the opposite, a 'monstrous' and 'hideous hyena'.

Sexual inequality

The character Bertha Mason also represents Victorian attitudes towards women and sexuality. Sexual inequality was an issue, women were not permitted the same sexual freedom as men. Although Rochester admits to having sexual relationships with women, he degrades Bertha

on account of her sexuality. Rochester accuses Bertha of fornication. Once again, this indicates inequality towards women. Rochester's hatred towards Bertha is not just on account of her madness. Peter Grundin states that, "He hates her for the particular excess that precipitated the outbreak of hereditary madness" (Grundin 148). Rochester is disgusted by Bertha because he believes that she is promiscuous. As he justifies his disgust and the reasons why Bertha should be blamed for her own madness, Rochester exclaimed:

"What a pigmy intellect she had- and what giant propensities entailed on me! Bertha Mason, - the true daughter of an infamous mother, - dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (Bronte 353).

Bertha's sexuality was obviously an issue. Rochester insists that Bertha is an embarrassment to him, and she is impure. Through Rochester uses her past to justify her present misfortunes. Bertha is presented as lacking restraints. Remarkably Grundin suggests that, "madness is not an issue but is instead a persistent metaphor for sexual license in a woman" (Grundin 157). This theory confirms sexual inequality towards women. Bertha's mental illness is tied to her sexuality. During the Victorian era, women were degraded for having explored their sexuality. Grundin adds that, "Sexual license in a woman is unforgivable, irreversible, and literally unspeakable" (Grundin 157). Perhaps, Bertha was not a just a mad woman, she was sexually repressed. Bertha is the "consequence of unrestrained passion" (Grundin 157). Bertha does not only represent Jane's double, as an individual, she stands as a powerful representation of gender inequality during the Victorian Era. Additionally, Nygren asserts that Rochester blames Bertha for her own misfortunes by "insinuating that she had contracted syphilis through lascivious behavior" (Nygren 118). Which if true, is by no means connected to mental illness. Once again,

Bertha's sexuality is presented as an issue. When Bertha's sexual behavior is brought to light by Rochester, she is even further shunned. Parkinson suggests that this "empathically distances Bertha from Victorian standards of womanhood" (Parkinson 20).

Bertha Mason is Jane's dark double; she represents Jane's resistance towards conforming to society's expectation. *Jane Eyre* is a feminist novel and Bertha characterizes the struggles women face. During the Victorian Era women were face with gender inequality. As a representation of black woman, Bertha's issues were compounded on account of her race and ethnicity.

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