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In Dr. Jayne Moneysmith’s 19th Century British Novel course (English 39395), Beth Crookston was asked to write a paper about any book and any topic from the assigned books. Crookston chose Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre and focused upon the madwoman in the attic — Bertha Mason, Rochester’s wife. In the end, Crookston asserts that Bertha “is the enigma that makes Jane and Mr. Rochester’s happiness possible.”

Bertha Mason: The Enigma

In Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre, the author introduces a mysterious character. This character, mistakenly thought by Jane to be someone else (Grace Poole), is actually Bertha Antoinetta Mason Rochester — Mr. Rochester’s wife! The discovery of Bertha is heartbreaking to Jane, but also more positively life altering. Bertha is the representation of many ideas in the novel: she is the insane, mysterious character in the attic. She is the raw sexuality suppressed by Jane and Mr. Rochester, which Charlotte Brontë represents as a sort of evil in her novel. Bertha’s craziness and sensuality are what bring Jane and Mr. Rochester together, which Brontë shows through the similarities and differences between Jane and Bertha, the use of imagery to enhance their descriptions, and how Bertha brought Jane and Mr. Rochester to God.

Bertha is a madwoman. According to Mr. Rochester, she comes from a long line of mad people: “Bertha Mason is mad; and she comes of a mad family; - idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkardl — as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before” (Brontë 289). Bertha and her whole family are insane, but for different reasons. Bertha is considered insane because of her intense sensuality.

Bertha is represented as a sort of taboo sexuality that is forbidden to the others. Brontë describes this when Bertha attacks Mr. Rochester: “One never knows what she has, sir: she is so cunning: it is
not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft...the lunatic [Bertha] sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled” (290). This sounds like sado-masochistic foreplay. In "Angel or Vampire—the Portrayal of Women’s Morality and Sensuality in Jane Eyre," Debra G. Waller elaborates on this insane/sexuality idea when she says: “The reference to sexuality as insanity is a clear link to Bertha Mason but Jane rejects it where Bertha did (or could) not and, shorn of her excessive passions, is awarded a happy, contented and conventional future as Rochester's wife/nurse and the mother of his children” (1). This point is proven more in the description of Bertha’s appearance. When Jane first sees Bertha, thinking the incidence a dream, Bertha is described as “Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face – it was a savage face” (Brontë 281). Jane rejects sexuality and insanity by showing her fear of Bertha. Jane is truly frightened of Bertha because she is ignorant not only of Bertha’s identity, but also of the way Bertha makes her feel: uncomfortable and scared. Helene Moglen writes of this same scene in her book length work Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived: “Bertha tears the wedding veil in two then leans over Jane’s bed in an attitude that suggests a fantasy of sexual violation” (126). It is obvious that there is a feeling of strong sexual taboo to Bertha’s character, be it violation, suggestive lesbianism, or just making Jane and Mr. Rochester uncomfortable with their feelings.

Whereas Jane rejects the sexuality/insanity issue with her fear and ignorance, Mr. Rochester is the one who introduced it into Thornfield Hall:

He recognized too late that Bertha’s sensuality, exciting before their marriage, is immoral, but his naiveté and the family pressures he experienced do not absolve him of the responsibility for his choice. His marriage and subsequent liaisons are ultimately unsatisfactory because they are based on sexual gratifications; none of the women offer the stability and morality necessary for true happiness. (Waller, “Avoiding Dangerous Sexuality in Jane Eyre”)

It is through his sensual desire for Bertha that he becomes trapped in his marriage, a marriage where he locks her in the attic because Bertha’s emotions have become raw and uncontrollable. In speculation, maybe Bertha became “insane” when she realized that her husband only married her for sex and money. This can be seen when Bertha destroys
Jane's wedding veil: "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...it removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them" (Brontë 281). Bertha tries the veil on and becomes irate. The woman obviously still has thinking processes (or at least feelings for Rochester) if she can try on the veil and look at herself in the mirror. Bertha destroys the veil, a symbol of marriage and purity, but does not hurt Jane, only causing fear and maybe a touch of foreshadowing.

There is a definite yin-yang, opposites-in-harmony feel to Bertha and Jane. As Moglen asserts, "it is the classic distinction between the Virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon: man projecting his own bifurcated nature onto women: Rochester divided between the elfin Jane and the vampire Bertha" (164). The differences between the two women are obvious: Bertha is a mad woman from the West Indies, locked in the attic, whereas Jane is an orphaned governess free to roam the gardens; Bertha is a black woman (or "purple" (281), as Brontë describes her), while Jane is a white woman. The opposites-in-harmony part of their relationship is more beneath the surface: Bertha is trapped physically and emotionally in the attic and her mind; Jane is trapped physically and emotionally in social classes — somewhere between the rich upper class and the poor lower class, depending on whether she is married or not.

The most interesting part of their relationship is that they both take it into their powers to escape the man who oppressed and disgraced them: Jane leaves on her own account in Chapter 27 after the secret of Bertha is exposed, and Bertha sets the house on fire and jumps to her death in Chapter 36. This is an opposites-in-harmony relationship because both women have opposite qualities and use opposite methods of doing what they want, but the outcomes of such situations are similar or at least harmonious. This is important because it shows how Bertha and Jane play off each other in the novel.

Mark Jackson, in his article "Passion, Contradiction, and Imagery in Charlotte Brontë's Jane," adds another similarity by saying, "Jane appears almost as emotionally overwrought as the crazed Bertha. Such uncontrollable emotions, of course, play a crucial role in the novel" (1). To Jane, there is a possibility of madness with her feelings, which is shown when she seems on the edge of emotional sanity as she leaves Mr. Rochester:

May your eyes never shed such stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears as poured from mine. May you never
appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless and so agonized as in that hour left my lips: for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love. (Brontë 317)

Jane has reached the breaking point in her emotions because she feels Mr. Rochester used her. This passion is also shown with the imagery of fire.

Fire is an image used throughout the entire novel. In the beginning, there is a sense of fire in the “red-room”: “Daylight began to forsake the red-room...My habitual mood of humiliation, self-doubt, forlorn depression, feel damp on the embers of my decaying ire” (Brontë 28). Jane is confined to the “red-room” for punishment and this dampens the fire within her angry soul. This specific fire image foreshadows the rest of the images in the story.

The next major image is the burning of Mr. Rochester’s bed: “Tongues of flame darted round the bed: the curtains were on fire. In the midst of blaze and vapour; Mr. Rochester lay stretched motionless, in deep sleep” (Brontë 153). Jane saves Mr. Rochester from this fire, when he seems unaware of the danger since he was in a “deep sleep.” This part is significant because the fire represents Bertha – both the fire and Bertha being passionate (with the “Tongues of flame” darting “round the bed” calling up sensual imagery) and insane. Jane saving Mr. Rochester from the fire is also like Jane saving him from Bertha.

One of the last images of fire is the burning down of Thornfield Hall: “Thornfield Hall is quite a ruin: it was burnt down just last harvest time...The fire broke out at dead of night...the building was one mass of flame” (Brontë 415). It is in this fire that Bertha dies:

She was a big woman, and had long, black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed Mr. Rochester ascend through the skylight on the roof: we heard him call “Bertha!” We saw him approach her; and then, ma'am, she yelled, and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement. (Brontë 417)

Bertha makes an unforgettable exit, using the fire and the height of the building to her advantage. In her article “Images of Passion in Jane Eyre,” Wendy Vaughton theorizes:

The image of fire might symbolize signifying first sinfulness, then rebirth. Since the passionate love that
Rochester and Jane first held was sinful, it was accomplished by images of fire and burning – possibly a portrait of Hell...In the fire that destroyed Thornfield, Rochester proved his worthiness to Jane by attempting to save Bertha from the blaze. (1)

And it is through the fire that Mr. Rochester is crippled, which weakens him and causes him to turn to God and to Jane.

It is the intense sensual vibe of Bertha that brings out the Christianity in Jane and Mr. Rochester. It is after Jane finds out about Bertha’s existence that she leaves because she “finds God.” “I lay faint; longing to be dead. One idea only still throbbed life-like in me – a remembrance of God...’What am I to do?’ But the answer my mind gave – ‘Leave Thornfield at once’ – was so prompt, so dread, that I stopped my ears” (Brontë 193). George P. Landow, in his article “Typology and Characterization (1): Moral Placement in Jane Eyre,” says this appealing to God occurs because “Jane worshipped a man instead of God, and she made an idol of Rochester, worshipping a false god and as it turned out, a false man as well” (1). Therefore, Jane turns to God in order to save herself.

Mr. Rochester also turns to God after he is crippled in the fire. He shows his new spirituality to Jane when he says, “The world may laugh – may call me absurd, selfish – but it does not signify. My very soul demands you: it will be satisfied: or it will take deadly vengeance on its frame” (Brontë 424). Mr. Rochester finds God when he realizes he did wrong by lying:

My heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. He sees not as man sees, but far clearer: judges not as man judges, but far more wisely. I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flower – breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me...I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death...I began sometimes to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere. (Brontë 435)

At the end of the novel, Mr. Rochester recognizes that he has a soul, whereas in the beginning, he seemed unsure if it existed – until he met Jane.

In his article “Spiritual Revelation in Jane Eyre,” Mark Jackson writes:
Rochester's newly found faith and his ensuing change of character make possible his marriage with Jane. The discovery of God, then ties together all the loose ends of the novel, fulfills true love, and closes the book with an overall affirming message that two impasioned souls can unite in marriage after all, if the Lord wills it.

(1)

The ending of the novel does have nice closure: Jane and Mr. Rochester are happy, they start a family, Mr. Rochester gets (some) of his sight back, and Bertha is dead and gone. The absence of Bertha's sexually insane presence is what allows Jane and Mr. Rochester to finally come together. Jane no longer has sexual aggressions to hide, and Mr. Rochester is no longer a bigamist. It is Bertha who caused them to separate and do some soul searching before they could be together. Once she was gone, they were united at last. It is Bertha who is the enigma that makes Jane and Mr. Rochester's happiness possible. Bertha Antoinetta Mason Rochester was more than just the madwoman in the attic.

Works Cited


