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"I AM NOT AN ANGEL": CONTESTED IDENTITY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S JANE EYRE

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“I AM NOT AN ANGEL”: CONTESTED IDENTITY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE’S *JANE*

EYRE

Thesis

by

CYNTHIA MARIA URTEAGA

Submitted to Texas A&M International University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2023

Major Subject: English

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Approved as to style and content by:

Chair of Committee,	Paul Niemeyer
Committee Members	Charlene Summers
	Adam Kozaczka
	John Kilburn
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ABSTRACT

“I Am Not An Angel”: Contested Identity In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (May 2023)

Cynthia Maria Urteaga, B. A., Texas A&M International University;

Chair of Committee: Dr. Paul Niemeyer

This thesis explores identity in Charlotte Brontë’s magnum opus, *Jane Eyre* (1847). Using specific moments in the main character’s life, this thesis will examine the importance of self-defining truths and identity during a deeply restrictive time. This thesis will also incorporate Helene Cixous’ essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975) to better understand the importance of Brontë writing a female character who avowed her own identity and challenged anyone who imposed their own perception on to her character. This thesis aims to delineate the ways Jane challenges those around her, and even the reader, as she remains loyal to her truth.

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reader, I thank you for the opportunity. I would first like to thank the most important woman in my life who has taught me many of the lessons embodied in this text: my mother. She is brave and strong and so full of love it is often too incredible to witness. To this day, whenever I grow up, I want to be just like her. This text portrays a woman who knows herself, understands her worth, and is not afraid to voice her opinion. I think of my mom often when I read this book and I want to thank her for all her support, for she is my rock and driving force. I want to thank my dad and my brother for all their love and enthusiasm about this project. I want to thank my friends for all their kind words and supportive opinions.

I also want to thank my Chair of Committee: Dr. Paul Niemeyer, who has been instrumental in my academic career for the past 6 years. I have learned to appreciate literature in a deeper context under his guidance and I am truly grateful for the opportunity. I was reintroduced to *Jane Eyre* as a sophomore taking one of Dr. Niemeyer's classes and was offered new perspectives into the story. I had never thought too long and deep about just how nuanced the story can be, and I am immensely grateful to Dr. Niemeyer for that. I want to thank the rest of my committee, Dr. Charlene Summers, Dr. Adam Kozaczka, and Dr. John Kilburn. Thank you to Dr. Kozaczka for showing me different approaches to feminist theory and for offering great advice in during this process. Thank you to Dr. Summers for showing me how to analyze genre deeper and to use my voice. Finally, thank you to Dr. Kilburn for being a great former boss and for encouraging me in my academic endeavors. I have learned so much from each of them and they have deeply influenced the way I think.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Often, while writing this thesis and even when I think about this text, I found myself confusing Jane Eyre the character and *Jane Eyre* the text written by Charlotte Brontë in 1847. For the clarification of my reader(s), and my own, I will hereafter make the following distinction: I will simply refer to Jane Eyre the character as Jane, and the text will be referred to as *J.E.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
AUTHOR’S NOTE	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
PART I: INTRODUCTION	1
PART II: <i>JANE EYRE</i> : AN UNWILLING VICTIM	11
Jane and “The Laugh of the Medusa”	13
The Governess	22
PART III: DEFIANCE	26
Bertha Mason.....	26
Rochester.....	34
PART IV: CONCLUSION	41
NOTES	43
WORKS CITED.....	45
VITA	48

PART I:
INTRODUCTION¹

In her groundbreaking Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë wrote, “I am no angel [...] and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself.” (396). The novel offers a female protagonist, who despite everything she endures, knows herself and protests any imposed mistreatment that goes against her identity. The novel is remarkable for it offers a woman a place to express her individuality and resist anyone who might try to impose one on to her. Through her own experiences as a woman and a governess, Brontë offers personal commentary in a fictional tale where the heroine defines her own place in a society that wishes to reduce her existence to whatever role she must inhabit. Charlotte Brontë, publishing under the pseudonym Currer Bell depicts the different expectations placed on women during the period, and through its main character, offers a challenge to norms while also commenting on Victorian society.¹ Jane is a woman who is taught through physical and psychological punishment to keep her thoughts and desires to herself. In the beginning of the novel, Jane is introduced as a helpless orphan who must withstand the abuse inflicted upon her. Jane advocates for her place in the Reed home, but eventually learns it is better to internalize her true thoughts to avoid physical punishment. Yet, the reader is privy to her inner monologue where Jane has desires and thoughts that go beyond what is socially acceptable.

Throughout the novel, Jane allows her mind to roam free and to desire something more for herself. She communicates to the reader the importance of knowing oneself and always stays true to her values. Eventually, Jane learns to not express her rage externally; thus, she must learn to internalize and make sense of the structure around her that affects all women in distinct ways.

¹ This thesis follows the model of MLA 8 Style.

Through the main female character, Brontë can comment about female roles and laughs at the expectations placed on them. *J.E.* is a text about female identity and a portrayal of a heroine who is constantly protesting prejudice. Jane is an orphan, unwanted and alone, punished for being a burden to the only familial ties she has. Jane, since the beginning of the text, operates as an outsider of society. She is nothing but a burden to an aunt who wishes nothing more than to have her hidden and quiet. Jane is excluded from the family because she is not as the other “happy, little children” (7) and essentially, she is not normal. It is through punishment that Jane comes to truly understand her position in society. As her aunt locks her in the red room for being a precocious child, Jane learns that to survive she must not always express her thoughts. When she meets Helen Burns, she learns more about coexistence with the punisher but is still unable to be as forgiving. The female characters of the text teach Jane different lessons about what it is to operate in a society she is deeply excluded from. The scholarship I analyzed on the text has analyzed the different power structures clearly present throughout. Because the text is written by a woman who had discernable connections to the main character, one can understand how personal the text was to Brontë.

While conducting research into scholarship for this thesis, one of the main topics that critics and scholars gravitated to centered on gender. Womanhood is so central to the identity of the story that those analyzing the novel tend to naturally gravitate towards the topic. Scholars analyzed Jane’s story as that of a woman living in a strict society and how that shaped her characterization. On the other hand, early and modern critics were perplexed by the authorship of the text and wondered about who could have written. Early receptions of the novel. were mixed, as some praised the text for its innovations and others regarded it as a challenge to religious institutions for its lack of morality. An anonymous positive review on the text published on *The*

Era (1847) commented on its novelty and uniqueness. The reviewer wrote, “the story is [...] unlike all that we have read, with very few exceptions; and for power of thought and expression, we do not know its rival” (9). However, the author of this positive review believed that Currer Bell was clearly a man. They wrote, “[...] no woman could have penned [J.E.]” (9). Even the possibility of its authorship being a woman seemed preposterous to the reader, for the novel was nothing they had ever witnessed before. The novel also received harsh criticism that attacked Brontë’s work as an improbable tale about two beings who are both “so singularly unattractive that the readers feels they can have no vocation but to be brought together” (153). In 1848, Elizabeth Rigby, writing for the *Quarterly Review*, attacked the novel’s lack of morality and claimed that *J.E.* was just a rewritten *Pamela*.²As I see it, Pamela and Jane are only alike in gender, for the former strives for the acceptance of Mr. B, while Jane resists Mr. Rochester’s attempts at control. Brontë herself was not immune to criticism and responded accordingly. In the preface of the second edition of *J.E.*, Brontë criticized her critics and wrote,

[...] the timorous or carping few who doubt the tendency of such books as *J. E.*: in whose eyes whatever is unusual is wrong; whose ears detect in each protest against bigotry that parent of crime—an insult to piety [...] conventionality is not morality, self-righteousness is not religion [...] appearance should not be mistaken for truth (3).

In Brontë’s own life, she could be ruthless in criticism of her work or her sisters’ work, as she considered the act of writing a deeply personal and serious practice.³ *J.E.*, then, is a challenge to a reader who is so content in its own prejudices, that to see beyond previously established tropes and forms of writing is wrong and goes against their truth. Brontë challenges the expectations and sensibilities of her reader by toying with the traditional establishment of the Gothic.

Relatedly, more contemporary critics argued that what shocked the Victorian reader was not Jane’s relationship with Rochester, but her defiance and persistent identity. In “Plain Jane’s Progress,” Sandra M. Gilbert points out that although the relationship between Jane and

Rochester is inherently driven by lust, what the Victorian reader was most shocked by was Jane's "rebellious feminism" (780). Readers were not disturbed, according to Gilbert, by the clear Byronic sexual energy of Rochester but by Jane's pride, passion, and self-determination.⁴ They also were not shocked by the undertones of the relationship—the clear power discrepancies between Jane and Rochester—or by the wife locked in the attic and the clear abuse of a child. The Victorian reader was more flustered with the "heroine's refusal to submit to her social destiny" (Gilbert 780). Jane's existence, a stand-in for the Victorian female existence, is expected to conform and submit before it can ever be claimed for herself. The criticism aimed at the text, however, falls into the trap of reducing Jane to her relationship.⁵ This trap only adheres to the Victorian standard for female identity, where women were defined by their relationships instead of their truth and character. This makes the text ripe for analysis, for the main character is emboldened by her own identity and does not magically transform as the story progresses. Jane is a character that is often asked or forced to relinquish control to those who are physically and socially stronger than she is. However, she refuses the domination and instead remains steady in using her voice to express her truth.

Moreover, scholarship on *J.E.* often resulted in the analysis of power structures and the Gothic genre. Power, in this text, is achievable only after great turbulations. Gothic novels, according to Maggie Kilgour, "raise questions about both personal identity and sexual identity" (37). The Gothic novel can be divided into male Gothic and female Gothic, and according to the frames of the genre, male identity is created on autonomy, while female autonomy is relational (Kilgour 37). Distinguishing the novel as a female Gothic text is crucial to delineate how a woman might play with gender roles within the confines of a male-dominated genre. The Gothic pushes these gender roles to their extreme, but the narrative serves different goals depending on

the author. In the male gothic, the narrative is more linear and expected according to the boundaries of the genre.⁶ The issues can be of familial rivalry, alienation, or status in power according to birth. The female Gothic offers a more circular pattern, as Kilgour denotes, for female identity (at that time) has more to do with her place in society than any other personal alienation. This is crucial to the identity of Jane, for her alienation is not from herself but from her relationships. Brontë plays with this idea by writing Jane as someone who knows who she is but must battle those around her to remain steady to her identity. In “Jane and the Other Mrs. Rochester: Excess and Restraint in *Jane Eyre*,” Peter Grudin claims that Brontë offers “a new twist on the old Gothic motifs of dark secrets, family curses, and monstrous or unearthly apparition” (145). When writing within the genre, Brontë incorporates ideas from both male and female gothic and further advances Jane as someone who can question the social order around her. Brontë’s subversion of the gothic allows her a place to write about shame and victimhood while also being able to comment in society and offer her own perspective about the state of the world at the time. The Gothic will be incorporated into this thesis to depict the ways the heroine defies power structures and lives to express her own experience. Diane Long Hoevler presents Brontë’s awareness of power structures and gender roles as a form of propaganda used to present “a new form of conduct for women” (Hoevler xv). Therefore, following this line of thought, I examine Jane’s characterization as something of a challenge to her social environment and time. The text serves as an example of what life can be for a woman, and although she is still limited by her position, Brontë writes Jane as someone who laughs at those who wish to define her within their own terms. *J.E.*, as a female Gothic novel, expands from the male-dominated gothic and presents a female character who refuses to be defined by her victimhood.

In “Speech and Silence in Jane Eyre,” Janet Freeman examines Jane’s dialogue throughout the text. She, like Hoevler, delineates Brontë’s awareness of power structures and analyzes Jane’s refusal to be silenced. Freeman claims, “Jane’s soul expands and exults as she commits herself to uttering fearlessly the exact truth” (686). Even the moments she must be silent are examples of an understanding of the world around her, for she is not silent for a lack of thought, but because it is futile to try and make others understand her. She commits herself to her truth, utters it fearlessly when called upon, and understands when she is powerless (Freeman 689). That is, Jane is a woman who knows who she is; it is society that wishes to redefine her. Jane is presented early in the text in direct conflict with one of her abusers and as a child who appears predestined to suffer. Yet, all these conflicts serve as lessons to teach the young Jane endurance.

Throughout the novel, Jane makes it clear to the reader that she behaves in a certain way to conform when she is overpowered but has a constant internal dialogue that defies such conformity. She is a woman who has desires, who can make sense of the world around her, and who comes to learn difficult lessons while trying to understand her place in society. The text, like most Gothic texts of the time, often punishes its female characters and serves as a perfect frame for victimhood. In *Brontë Transformations*, Patsy Stoneman claims that female characters must often use a hysteric voice to be heard in Victorian texts. However, she asserts that Jane does not fit such a mold. Of Jane, Stoneman writes, “[she is] not a hysterical heroine, because her access to the prevailing discourse about femininity offers her more power than a possible refusal of that discourse” (140). Jane actively participates in her own experience, while acknowledging her own place as a woman. Similarly, in “Enemies of Freedom,” John Hagan argues that Jane’s freedom is often tested especially in relation to Rochester, but for Jane “submission to the loved one must

not be total” (352). Even when confronted with the truth of his marriage, Jane maintains her truth and refuses to adhere to Rochester’s pleas.

Patsy Stoneman claims *Jane Eyre* can be read as a “hysterical text” (140) for the hysteric voice demands to be heard, however, Jane Eyre herself is not a hysterical heroine. Stoneman writes, Jane is “not a hysterical heroine, because her access to the prevailing discourse about femininity offers her more power than a possible refusal of that discourse” (140). Jane participates actively in using her voice, and it is in the moments when she would be considered her most hysterical, that she is ignored. For the reader, it can be easier to consider Bertha Mason as a hysterical character, but in her case the hysteria is not without reason. She is trapped by her marriage and by her illness. In many ways, Bertha Mason does not belong to society anymore and acts outside that framework.

Through Jane, it is important to look at the historical implications of the text and what it would have meant to for her to display such rebellious tendencies. With the idea of women’s identity, I will use Helene Cixous “The Laugh of the Medusa” to illustrate why it is so crucial for a female author to write a female heroine, who despite being of no social value to the strict Victorian standard, is able to cement her place and assert her truth. Although Jane is encouraged to repress her true self occasionally, she still remains loyal to herself. As Cixous writes, “by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (1873). Brontë writes herself and her widely female reader a new reality that goes far beyond the Victorian expectations of women. Cixous continues,

when I say ‘woman,’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to

their senses and to their meaning in history [...] it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the ‘dark’—that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute—there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman [...] what they have in common I will say [...] women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible (1873).

J.E. is a feminist text because the overpowered female protagonist has is never in search for her true self; she must make those around her accept her as she is. For the reader trying to ascribe a contemporary reading to *Jane Eyre*, the ending might be painful. Bonnie Zare, in “*Jane Eyre’s* Excruciating Ending,” argues that one of the reasons the ending is unbearable, is that Rochester tortures Jane as he does Bertha. In Zare’s argument, Rochester is Jane’s master in more ways than just being her employer. He exerts a dominance on Jane, both emotionally and spiritually, that is romanticized and normalized at the end of the text. However, it must be noted that she returns to Rochester at the end by choice. By that point, Jane is not desolate anymore, as she discovers she is in possession of wealth. It is convenient enough that by the time she returns, Bertha Mason is dead, and Rochester has received some sort of punishment. This might make the reading more bearable to the reader who is unable to overlook the ending as nothing more than a portrayal of Jane as “subservient to a man whose gentleness stems mainly from his physical helplessness, and thus it does not exemplify a markedly more reflective partnership than the traditional fairy-tale ending” (Zare 219). The final triumph of the text is that Jane gets to choose her own ending.

With these thoughts in mind, this thesis will tackle the ways this novel portrays a story of female freedom, agency, and identity. I will examine the way in which the novel presents a character that has always been identified by others but resists their designations. It is imperative to consider how the societal expectations influenced the approach Brontë wrote Jane’s character and to understand the internal and external struggles of her identity. I will examine Jane’s

childhood, her relationship to Rochester, and the punishment she endures at the hands of the Reeds to demonstrate how the character is always defiant. I will use the female Gothic as it is the identity of the text that serves as a tool for Brontë to write a strong woman. I will examine different situations where Jane must assert her truth and be defiant while still have no real social standing. I will analyze Jane's early relationship to the Reeds, her role as a governess, and her relationship to Rochester. I will use Cixous "The Laugh of the Medusa" to further contextualize the importance of Jane using her voice as a weapon when her identity is threatened. Moreover, I will incorporate analysis into Bertha Mason, as she is a woman with no real agency throughout the text, and how she still actively participates in the narrative. Bertha's death leads to Jane's ending with Mr. Rochester in a marriage of equality and maturity. Thornfield Hall must be destroyed, and Rochester must be punished to secure Jane's happy ending. It is unrealistic in the sense that the text is fiction, but digging deeper, one can see behind the surreal and find a social commentary. Brontë was able to accommodate the perfect ending for the heroine, but also show Victorian women a transgressive narrative. *Jane Eyre*, the text, is aware of its limitations. The text is less concerned with the fantasy of the impossible and more concerned with the possible within "the horror of the real" (Becker 35). Therefore, the text offers a critique of the temporary and fictional solutions for its women. I will look at different situations that required Jane to be firm in her identity. Moreover, I will analyze how different characters impacted her to be steadfast to her truth. I will show that this story is not a quest for identity, for the protagonist knows who she is, and that this is the story of a woman who must tell society that everything they think of her is wrong.

I argue that trying to define Jane, even as the reader of the text, is futile and contradicts the goal of the entire text. Because she knows her identity, it is my belief that Jane mocks those

who just wish her to behave to their expectations. She is not a good orphan girl just because her aunt wants her to be. I think of this text as a challenge to the reader as much as Jane is a constant challenge to those around her. Jane is telling us, at every moment, to take her as she is. She is not a good child, for to act “good” would mean to let herself be mistreated and abused. She is not a good governess, for to be a good governess she must bite her tongue and be dishonest around Rochester. She is not a good potential wife, for to be a good wife she needs to be second to Rochester’s wife locked away in the attic. To be good, as I see Jane, is to completely betray herself and her womanhood. Jane is never interested in being good, in being accepted, and even in being loved, as she only wants to be someone with an identity and expression of her own. This thesis explores the ways Jane laughs about what everyone thinks a woman should be, as society can punish her, but ultimately, she will not be silenced.

PART II:

JANE EYRE: AN UNWILLING VICTIM

The Victorian Era saw women become more socially active than ever before in their society and this resulted in a period where feminist ideals were more prominent than ever. Advocators of female education, such as Mary Wollstonecraft who came before the Victorian Era, focused their writings on the importance of young girls living under better standards. There was a deep desire in women to be more educated, and as Josephine Butler advocates in “The Education and Employment of Women,” “the desire for education which is widely felt by English women...springs...from the conviction that for many women to get knowledge is the only way to get bread” (Butler 7-8). Perhaps for the first time in a more modern society, women had the opportunity to make a life even if they did not find a husband. The idea of femininity in Victorian times centered on women following strict codes of behavior and composure. Understandably, Charlotte Brontë had personal insight of the expectations imposed on women and depicted such parameters in *J.E.* However, Brontë’s main character played within the boundaries and constructs that were expected of the Victorian woman. Jane learns early in the text that expressing rage at unfair punishment would only beget even more abuse, so she begins to draw inwards. She is punished for being an outspoken outsider so unlike the other “happy little children” (Brontë 7). Jane, since the beginning of her story, quickly proves to be an outcast who has thoughts and feelings beyond what would have been socially approved for someone in her social condition.

Jane’s abuse at the hands of the family is unrelenting, but she finds solace in *Bewick’s History of British Birds*, which is perhaps one of the only moments while living with the Reeds that she is truly content. As an orphan, fairy tales were impossible for someone in Jane’s

position, yet, at that time, becoming a bird was her form of escapism and joy. She could ignore her reality as she thought, “with Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way [...] I wished fervently [John] might not discover my hiding-place” (Brontë 9). Nonetheless, Jane is found by the tyrant of the family. The altercation between Jane and John Reed is crucial for various reasons but most importantly because after the incident when she is punished and taken to the Red Room, Jane truly learns how unfair life can be. She is an orphan who is nothing but a burden to an aunt who wishes nothing more than to have her hidden and quiet. The novel opens with a brutal depiction of what life was like for the orphaned child. Jane is attacked by her abusive cousin, John Reed, who is bigger and stronger than she is. He taunts Jane and physically attacks her, yet she refuses to put up with the abuse. Jane sees the injustice in his behavior and exclaims, “wicked and cruel boy! [...] you are like a murderer!” (Brontë 12). She must fight back to her oppressor and even though she is without any social standing in the Reed home, Jane refuses to put up with her abuse. To put up with this treatment would be to agree with her aunt that she is the problem in the household. Such assertion would involve becoming a victim of the Reeds and letting them dictate and control her reality. Her situation is beyond her control and entirely unfair, but it would be a complete self-betrayal to quietly withstand the abuse.

It is in the red room that Jane comes to truly understand her position in society. Jane tells the reader:

Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one's favour? [...] I dared commit no fault: I strove to fulfill every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen, and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night (Brontë 18-19).

She is to always be an outsider looking in and no matter how hard she might try to please others, she is never to be an active participant in a society that could never understand her. Jane chooses to instead be boldened by that realization. She realizes how unjust the situation is (Brontë 19)

and rationalizes her feelings in a manner that would be otherwise extremely uncommon for a child. Jane sees the abuse she is subjected to, and although she might not understand the exact reasons why her aunt despises her, she can see the unfairness of her situation. The reader is introduced early on to the idea that Jane is not like the other characters around her. She never fits in and goes as far as to challenge and pose a threat to the adult authority figures in the novel. She is an outsider in a world that does not want to see her. She is an enigma because her behavior is dangerous and at odds with everything she should be.

Those around Jane always try to define her existence into what they deem as acceptable parameters, yet she refuses their projections. Brontë depicts Jane in different roles to show that she has no confusion as to whom she is, but it is everyone around her who must come to understand her. This is not to say that those around her do not try to define her and silence her. The text, as I see it, is not one of self-discovery or fulfilling a coming-of-age trope. This is a story about a woman who must learn to use her voice deliberately and express her thoughts and emotions in a matter that will not garner her immediate retribution. The beginning of the story shows Jane's struggle to express the truth of her mistreatment but that just results in more mistreatment. Therefore, the character is taught, through punishment, that voicing her inner thoughts is not always self-beneficial. Punishment in this text, I argue, is not used to teach Jane how to find power in her voice, but instead to navigate through a world where she operates as an outsider.

Jane and "The Laugh of the Medusa"

In reading *J.E*, it is useful to think of Helene Cixous' ideas of the New Woman in the essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa." By writing about the New Woman, Hélène Cixous speaks of "woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject

who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (1869). Woman presents a world of new representation and exploration for her self. Cixous does not write about women as “herself” but as “her self,” meaning, woman is a self who should be independent from societal constraints. Women, according to Cixous, must write about their own experience as they understand and separate themselves from male lenses who can never truly depict their existence. Cixous writes: “I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I too overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs” (1869). Cixous believes women not only need to write their own accounts but to also be part of their text.⁷ In doing so, there is a birth of a New Woman who plants her place in history and in the narrative she created. Woman can come to understand herself as mother, a sexual being, and an active participant of society through *écriture féminine*, or feminine writing as proposed by Cixous. Although Cixous and “The Laugh of the Medusa” came much later than the publication of *J.E.*, the text can still serve as an example of what Cixous meant when she explained female identity and representation.

When describing female creation, Cixous uses writing as her main method. Since this is a written medium, Brontë creates a character who depicts Cixous’ ideas of women having power even when they are shunned from society. Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” offers a new perspective of a woman who has long been understood in a specific lens. Even at the hands of her abuser, Mrs. Reed, Jane refuses to be defined by someone else.

Jane says,

SPEAK I must: I had been trodden on severely, and MUST turn, but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist? I gathered my energies and launched them in this blunt scene—‘I am not deceitful: if I were, I should say I loved you; but I declare I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except John Reed; and this book about the liar, you may give to your girl, Georgina, for it is she who tells lies, and not I’ (51).

When women tell their own story, they can laugh about the ways in which they have been misunderstood when they are written by men. In Greek mythology, Medusa is nothing but a monster that one should avoid seeing at all costs. The mythical creature can be rewritten by The New Woman through feminine writing as proposed by Cixous. If Medusa is to be written by woman, then one can see that she might be smiling, and is not the deadly creature that she has been described as in masculine parameters (Cixous 1878). Medusa is cursed by the male gaze that writes her and exists in this form because of him. Here, Cixous is directly toying with a depiction that has been understood to be of death and directly changes the meaning of Medusa to something more accessible. The Medusa laughs when woman writes her because The New Woman is finally born from the mother (writer) who created her. If her story was written entirely by women, it is unclear if Medusa would turn everything she looks at to stone, or if that is simply a myth imposed on her when he failed to understand her. Just as Medusa can be rewritten, Brontë rewrites a Victorian governess whose existence goes beyond the parameters and labels given to her by society. Just like Medusa, Jane is the one who is laughing at others' expectations of her existence.

When woman first writes, according to Cixous' essay, she can be filled with so much embarrassment that the act alone exemplifies her guilt, and she immediately yearns forgiveness. Writing is inherently personal and exposes the authors to society's opinions, and as woman writes, she becomes a more active participant of that society. But to Cixous, that shame must be buried until the next time she can write again, as this shame is only a natural reaction to discovering something new within herself. The New Woman rebirths herself over and over when she writes through this feminine writing (*écriture féminine*). Women can only discover themselves once they liberate their own sexuality as part of their existence. That is, the New

Woman realizes she has desires and begins to act on them instead of burying them away. They begin this process with their bodies, because “by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (1873). When woman liberates the shame that comes with being woman, when she can make herself perceived, that is when this New Woman can be born. This woman is not afraid of her own desires, her own experience, and her self as woman for women. The New Woman should be separated from The Old Woman in this process of self-discovery. That is, she should not be thinking about the constraints she has always adhered to but should instead envision something else for herself. The New Woman is the one who recognizes she has long been misinterpreted through the masculine gaze of literature that has failed to represent and describe her adequately. She recognizes that women have been “muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts” (Cixous 1879).

When considering the text to highlight a new possibility for women, one can see the importance of Helene Cixous’ *écriture féminine* and the relevance of Brontë writing *J.E.* as a Gothic text. *J.E.*, therefore, can be understood as a method of communication between a female writer and Victorian women.⁸ Jane has desires and while she begins in an unequal relationship with Rochester, by the end of the novel the two are in an equal marriage. Hoevler writes, “the female gothic novelistic tradition became a coded system whereby women authors covertly communicated to other women—their largely female reading reader—their ambivalent rejection of an outward complicity with the dominant sexual ideologies of their culture” (5). Brontë’s

protagonist does not shy away from longing for something more and being aware of the role she should fulfill. As Jane ponders,

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 (167).

Ultimately, *J.E.* is about freedom and different ways women can experience liberation in the nineteenth century. Bertha Mason, mad and limited by all accounts, spends most of the novel outside the attic. She haunts Rochester, Thornfield Hall, and Jane Eyre. Moreover, she gets revenged on the husband who imprisoned her and blinds him. Brontë's depiction might seem stereotypical and not truly feminist, but she rewards Bertha in the end. Perhaps death should not be a reward, but in this case, it was the only way for the character. Bertha must die so Jane can have the happy ending. After blinding Rochester, Brontë upholds Jane as the victor who can choose her own future. The end of the novel is nothing but a representation of the limited power the Gothic heroine (and women) can wield. It is formidable for the female character to triumph and choose her own destiny. Of course, the entire story is fictional, but Brontë still communicated to her readers that there could be something else beyond what society expected from them. Charlotte Brontë's text plays within the boundaries of the Gothic by writing women who should be victims for all intents and purposes but depicts them in a way where they can assert some sort of power.

Charlotte Brontë tests her female characters in her most lauded novel *J.E.* (1847) while also inadvertently embodying Cixous' idea of female writing. The story is written by a woman, about women, and it impacts a female reader. Before the heroine of the text can triumph, she

must endure a series of turbulations to emerge from the confines of her status and even her gender. *J.E.* is a feminist text because the subjugated protagonist remains true to herself when her identity is threatened. Cixous writes,

I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood [...] a world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation [...] I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow (1876).

Jane is a woman, who through experiences of physical, emotional, and mental punishment, learns valuable lessons in patience. Jane is punished when she expresses her true desires and thoughts, therefore, she must endure. She longs for more but is prevented from expressing how she feels. The text is a journey of self-discovery but also of an internalized rage inside the main character who is also extremely alienated from those around her. She experiences inner turmoil with having a sense of being an outsider but still having to remain cool and collected through such feelings. She is unable to express her identity and must behave according to her place in society. As the heroine of the text, Jane is punished physically and emotionally throughout the story. Jane's voice, albeit not completely silenced, is controlled, and deliberate as her journey progresses. During the opening scene of the text, Mrs. Reed tells Jane, "I do not like cavillers or questioners [...] and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent" (Brontë 7). This is perhaps one of the most crucial lessons Jane comes to understand in the text, for it is not always in her best interest to express herself. It is her punishment in the red room that teaches her a conscious power of self-control, where restraint and reason are imperative to her survival. We, the reader, can witness her wrath at the injustice she has to face, but we are also privy to the way she learns the control she exerts later in the text. Yet, Jane does not hesitate in fighting back against her at first,

I resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me. The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather OUT of myself, as the French would say: I was conscious that a moment's mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths. (Brontë 14)

Fighting back, though, only alienates her further and merits her more punishment. Punishment, in this way, is not used as a tool to make the reader better empathize with Jane, as we are already privy to her internal process. Punishment is used as a central device to better understand why the heroine operates the way she does. Jane confides deeply in her reader (Sternlieb 457) as the story progresses, as we are truly the only ones who witness her thoughts. As her reader, we of course are expected to be moved by the injustice being inflicted upon a child, but we are also expected to understand the real Jane and the one who presents herself to the world from that point on.

Her inner world is much more nuanced and ambitious than an orphan is allowed. Jane longs for a life she might never be able to live, as she muses,

Who blames me? Many, no doubt; and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes. Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third storey, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it—and, certainly, they were many and glowing; to let my heart be heaved by the exultant movement, which, while it swelled it in trouble, expanded it with life; and, best of all, to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence. 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. (166-167).

As an orphan and a woman living during the Victorian era, Jane's existence is disregarded and marginalized. The villains of the novel are those who try to impose their own projections on Jane. These individuals are the opponents of freedom and honesty (Shapiro 685), as they try to subvert Jane and force her to conform in a reality of struggle and pain. Jane must learn to

conform only from the outside, for internally she is free to think as she pleases and acknowledge her identity. The Reeds hate Jane because she is different, because she refuses to conform to their expectations, and because she does not hesitate in sharing her feelings. Even as a child, Jane does not behave the same way her cousins do. She is unable to fight back against John's abuse and the person in charge of her care just punishes her more, so she draws inwards to avoid more torture. This does not mean Jane's identity is extracted from her being in any way, if anything she learns that withholding her true self is crucial to her survival.

Jane's lesson on survival continues when she meets Helen Burns. Helen teaches Jane that even when everything seems lost and she is alone, she still has herself. When Jane tells Helen that she would rather die than live an existence of solitude and hatred where no one loves her, Helen helps her understand the reliability of her identity. Helen tells Jane, "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 as feeble as you" (Brontë 104). Even though her life up to that point has been one of pain, and even if Jane herself is not very pious, Helen helps her forget her sorrows and the injustice of the Reeds. Piety in the text is not used excessively but it does help Helen cement Jane's faith in herself further.

As with some Victorian women, Brontë was concerned about "the state of her own soul" (Griesinger 30). In the text, punishment comes with salvation, and Brontë, unlike some of the Victorian authors of her time, did not reject her faith. Throughout the text, religious duty is depicted with different characters. Mrs. Reed does her duty in sheltering Jane because she is ultimately a pious woman. Helen Burns is punished but still does not hate her punisher, unlike Jane. Rochester is bound to Bertha Mason and Jane's self-identity is truly tested, for she refuses to enter a polygamous marriage. Moreover, Jane is tested by the men around her who want to

assert some form of dominance on her. In “Jane’s Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in Jane Eyre” Maria Lamonaca writes, “by for discerning for herself what she perceives to be God’s will, Jane effectively resists Rochester’s and St. John’s attempts to possess her spirit as well as her body” (246). Although by most accounts Brontë was aware of Christianity and her beliefs, she resists the control that John Reed, Rochester, and St. John wish to exert on her.

Charlotte Brontë was the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, and the Victorian Era can be defined by religion and duty. The characters in the novel often act the way they do because that is what is expected of them. However, Brontë depicts Jane as someone who has a natural duty to herself and her truth. That is why it becomes more apparent that Jane is different from everyone around her, as she voices her truth and understands her integrity. I believe that Brontë leaves the question of Mrs. Reed’s morality in the hands of the reader. Is she a good and pious woman because she kept a promise to her husband and housed Jane? Or is she a cruel woman who does not deserve any forgiveness? The question for Jane, however, is not difficult to answer. At the beginning of the novel, Jane expresses the intolerability of the abuse she must endure and lets Mrs. Reed know how evil she thinks she is. Even on her deathbed, Mrs. Reed continues her hatred of Jane as she says:

‘I have had more trouble with that child than any one would believe. Such a burden to be left on my hands—and so much annoyance as she caused me, daily and hourly, with her incomprehensible disposition, and her sudden starts of temper, and her continual, unnatural watchings of one’s movements! I declare she talked to me once like something mad, or like a fiend—no child ever spoke or looked as she did; I was glad to get her away from the house. What did they do with her at Lowood? The fever broke out there, and many of the pupils died. She, however, did not die: but I said she did—I wish she had died! [...] hated it the first time I set my eyes on it—a sickly, whining, pining thing! It would wail in its cradle all night long—not screaming heartily like any other child, but whimpering and moaning. Reed pitied it; and he used to nurse it and notice it as if it had been his own: more, indeed, than he ever noticed his own at that age. He would try to make my children friendly to the little beggar: the darlings could not bear it, and he was angry with them when they showed their dislike. (Brontë 352-353).

When speaking about Jane, Mrs. Reed calls her “it,” further alienating her from humanity and her own family. By objectifying her in this manner, she can remove herself from feelings of guilt about how she treated Jane, for an object does not feel. It is easy for characters such as Mrs. Reed and even Rochester to forget that Jane is human with human emotions. Mrs. Reed provides for her because her husband wanted her to, while Rochester uses her to absolve himself of all his sins. For both characters, Jane can be a Christian salvation, a means to an end, but never someone who occupies space and has feelings. No one is ever concerned about Jane the person. By distancing Jane from her humanity, as Mrs. Reed does at the beginning of the novel, she can treat her in ways other than humanely.

Hoevler writes, “Jane learns a valuable lesson, however, by seeing the impotence and corruption of the family’s authority figure [...] she learns very early that power structures like families function essentially as protection rackets” (305). Those who are supposed to protect her never do, so Brontë allows Jane a choice in deciding who should take on this role. Jane is aware of the power structures within this social order. The child Jane Eyre is silent and silenced, but at the same time, finds her voice to tell her story while addressing the reader directly. She knows she has an reader and refers to the reader directly throughout the novel. Her story, then, demands to be heard.

The Governess

One of these crucial roles that help Jane depict herself, and perhaps the most important one, is the role of the governess. The role of the governess during the Victorian era was much more progressive than the typical role of other women, specifically married women. Victorian governesses were granted different freedoms that had not been available to other women, mainly their education and employment, and had a more active participation in the houses where they

were hired. Governesses travelled by themselves to and from their employer's home, they had substantial authoritative roles within the children's lives—much more than their own mothers sometimes—and were paid working women (Peterson 22-26). In this manner, the governess was considerably much more independent and autonomous than a wife could ever be at that time, as she played an active role in the decisions of the household. Ladies had to be educated to become a governess and they were often significantly more educated than the men who employed them. Becoming a governess, for an orphan such as Jane, was the best option available that could free her from the Reeds forever.

The Victorian governess was a crucial advancement to women's rights and education. However, the men were still making the final decisions as to how the young girls would be educated, as the schools were established by the male-dominated government. In essence, young girls being educated in the Victorian Era were mostly expected to be used in upholding the Victorian values that had kept them as subjugated participants in this society. From her disadvantaged societal place, however, being an educated governess helps cement Jane's identity. As a governess, Jane is still not truly in a position of power where she can choose her future, but she becomes more intellectually independent. Jane is ambitious in what she wants for herself as she ponders,

[...] I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen—that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach. I valued what was good in Mrs. Fairfax, and what was good in Adele; but I believed in the existence of other and more vivid kinds of goodness, and what I believed in I wished to behold. (166)

Being an educated woman and working as a governess only puts Jane in a somewhat higher position in education than a wife of a middle-class man would have, but still not on true equal standing socially. By being a governess, Jane does not fit into the roles of servants or

gentry (Peters 59). Although she is on a higher standing than the other servants, she is still below Rochester and Blanche Ingram. Of governesses, Blanche says, “I have just one word to say of the whole tribe; they are a nuisance, not that I ever suffered much from them; I took care to turn the tables” (Brontë 269). Yet, Jane decides to be a different sort of governess. Although Adele is a difficult pupil, Jane does not mind teaching the child. Of Adele, Jane says, “she made reasonable progress, entertained for me a vivacious, though perhaps not very profound affection; and by her simplicity, gay prattle, and efforts to please, inspired me, in return, with a degree of attachment sufficient to make us both content in each other’s society” (165). With Adele, Jane demonstrates a patience and affection that was never offered in her own childhood, as her own upbringing was marked by hatred (Moers 42). She distances herself from the teaching methods of Mr. Brocklehurst, Miss Scatcherd and even Mrs. Reed and instead, understands that the child has a personality of her own.

The belief that women’s intellect was sensitive and incapable of making rational decisions was one of the main arguments against female education in the Victorian era. The educated women of the time were seen as anomalies, for “[...] the obstacles to women acquiring an education meant that any woman who had successfully done so was abhorred as an aberration—an unwomanly woman for whom the acquisition of reason had destroyed her natural femininity” (Schwartz 674). The educated governess went against the expectations of female behavior, and although they were essential to uphold the societal order and educate children, these women would be seen as different. By the time she was employed as Adele’s governess, Jane was already accustomed to being an outsider and pariah. She was one step above a wife in terms of knowledge and authority of the children, but still not a respected individual. In the requirements of the household, governesses were not on the same status as other female domestic

servants. Compared to other domestic employments, the role of the governess might seem quaint. Beyond educating the children, not too much was expected from the governess, and they were in many ways, invisible. M. Jeanne Peterson notes, “the governess has no social position worthy of attention, [...] she was at best unenvied and at worst the object of mild scorn, and all she sought was survival in genteel obscurity” (8). With their education, the governess could be placed somewhere in between a servant and a housewife in the social hierarchy of the Victorian era. They had no true authority in the households of their employment, yet, they could have more autonomy than the mother of the children they were educating. The governess was hired to enforce Victorian values, yet her very employment was a direct contradiction of such values. Jane’s nature, however, forbade her from conforming to this expectation imposed by her role as a governess. Just because she was hidden in obscurity and still without any social position Jane never stopped longing for something more. However, Jane’s employment as a governess helps cultivate her independence, as the role contradicted most expectations of respectable women in Victorian society. Employing a woman as a teacher, someone who travelled to her employer’s house, or a woman who lived in the home she worked as a teacher for the children was the opposite of the expectations of gender roles at the time. In a sense, a governess was much more independent than a wife. Jane, alone in the world, already possessed an innate streak of independence by the time she became a governess, as ladies had to be educated to become one. Furthermore, if they did not have any relatives who could give them a home, then they had to seek employment themselves. That notion contradicts the gender norms of the time, for female roles did not demand they find employment. Albeit the employment of a governess was within the home, but it still highlighted a sense of independence that other Victorian women did not have.

Part III: Defiance

Bertha Mason

The idea of victimhood is prevalent throughout the text as Jane suffers the calamities of being an outsider. As previously mentioned, Brontë uses victimhood as a tool to portray her heroine as someone with an identity of her own. In this way, victimhood is a device and not Jane's persona. Jane's problem, as delineated by the circumstances of the text, is that she is an orphan, a woman, and an outsider. As Arnold Shapiro writes, "society has standards for even its youngest members, and one must comply or be cast out" (685). When one is born into a condition beyond their control, it is practically impossible to escape the societal standard they are boxed in. The crucial idea that Brontë explores early in the text, as I see it, is the refusal to impose an identity on someone else. She writes her female protagonist to always express some sort of agency, even as a child. The novel is one of self-imposed definition where the female heroine must surpass numerous quests to finally be perceived in a manner that is true to her essence. However, Brontë also depicts the opposite of this by writing a character who has no agency, control, and identity. Such is the case of the "so called Madwoman" Bertha Mason Rochester.

The more common criticism of the text is often aimed at Brontë's characterization of Bertha Mason.⁹ Bertha Mason is the violent and insane first wife of Mr. Rochester. Bertha was the only daughter of a prominent family of Creole descent. Rochester was encouraged to marry Bertha by his father, but the marriage was doomed from the start. Bertha, according to Rochester, was sought after and incredibly beautiful. However, he was not aware that insanity ran in her family. Eventually, after the marriage, Bertha's mental health quickly declined, and Rochester imprisoned her in the third-floor room of Thornfield Hall. Rochester does not only

conceal Bertha Mason and locks her away from the world, but by this action, he also hides her identity. Bertha Mason is not to be seen and is only heard at night (when everyone else is supposed to be asleep). She is reduced from a mad woman to a ghost and her identity becomes something that must not be seen.

Bertha is only heard at night, thus signifying something wicked about her. She can only come out in the darkness, for during the day she is hidden and has her humanity excluded. Ultimately, Bertha's illness causes her to become more animalistic. Once she is thought of as a savage, Rochester can negate her humanity further by completely hiding her from the world. Because she is mad, she is a danger to herself and to those around her, so the only option is to lock her away. However, is this justified or just a pretense for Rochester to hide a wife he never wanted? By locking her away, Rochester can pretend she does not even exist and negate her to live a life somewhat to his standards. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar claim Bertha Mason's madness is a metaphor for female rage. With this idea, she can only truly escape by dying. Gilbert and Gubar mention that Bertha Mason often acts in a way Jane wishes she could (361) and the authors argue that Bertha "not only acts for Jane, she also acts like Jane" (361). Although Bertha is imprisoned, she acts out her anger in a way Jane had not done so since childhood. As a child, Jane was punished like an animal and howled and bawled while she was locked away. Jane, unlike Bertha, operates within the hierarchies of society and cannot express her rage the same way she did as a child. As an adult, she learns to internalize her feelings and behave. Bertha on the other hand, is stripped from her humanity and locked away. The reader is never privy to her truth and must assume that whatever Rochester tells Jane about Bertha is somewhat factual.

Rochester often strips Bertha of her humanity, just as he does with Jane by calling her an elf, changeling, or fairy.¹⁰ Rochester calls Bertha “it” as he says, “and I could not rid myself of it...for the doctors now discovered that my wife was mad—her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity” (331). Bertha becomes something instead of someone. She is an issue Rochester must keep hidden to marry Jane. However, Brontë does not depict Bertha and Jane as helpless victims who must conform every time they suffer a slight. Jane learns at the hands of the Reeds to not fight back every time she is slighted, and Helen Burns shows her the importance of forgiveness, but she still feels every slight done to her. On the other hand, the reader can never truly understand all the slights Bertha has had to endure, for she is unable to speak her story. The madwoman in the attic serves as a foil to the main character who has the agency to tell her story.

Perhaps being locked away only worsens Bertha’s condition and she is not as far gone as Rochester claimed. In “Madness and Civilization,” Foucault asserts madness is not stagnant but changes according to the society it inhabits. That is, madness depends more on culture and society as the latter determines its experience. When thinking of Bertha Mason, the reader can only hypothesize about her condition. Early in the nineteenth century, there was evidence that supported the theory that women were less likely to suffer from mental illness than men. In an 1845 study into asylums, John Thurman wrote, “in every institution the statistics of which I have examined, in which the experience has extended over more than a very short period of years, the proportion of recoveries in women has exceeded, often to a great extent, that in men” (Observations and Essays 28). That same year Parliament passed the Lunatics Act of 1845, where it was required for adequate asylum to be provided for everyone. “Lunatics” of lower class were sent to public hospitals, while wealthier patients were taken care of at home (Showalter

160). The prevalence of female patients showed first in the lower classes, but eventually society saw an increase in female patients of wealthier families. These women were locked away in their homes and often outdoor relief was not available to them (Showalter 162). These women were often imprisoned because of their condition by their own mothers, husbands, or any family they had. Brontë never explains the extent of Bertha Mason's "madness" in *J.E.* but depicts the story of a woman locked away because of her condition. Bertha Mason, despite being crucial to the story, never speaks throughout the novel and the reader must believe what is said about her. The only sounds Bertha Mason ever makes are animalistic and hysterical, and the reader never knows how much the confinement might have affected her condition. Madness and hysteria, in the Victorian period, became something of a popular culture fascination. Showalter writes,

[it] is notable 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. English folklore reflects in 'mad-songs' and ballads an ancient association of madness, confinement, and women; but until the middle of the century, records showed that men were far more likely to be confined as insane (159)

As Showalter claims, there seemed to be almost a glamorization in popular culture about the "madwoman." In these stories, women did not have to be confined to an asylum, hidden from the world, and unheard. They could satisfy the morbid curiosity of a reader who wanted to know more about a societal pariah. These women, at least in fiction, could exist somewhat beyond their confinement. They could come forth, roam the halls of their imprisonment, but never had the true agency to express their thoughts or feelings. Brontë added on to this fascination by writing a plot-twist that centers around a madwoman.

Even as someone who has no agency and is imprisoned, the reader still witnesses Bertha outside of her confinement. Bertha Mason, limited by her mental illness, is not entirely trapped in the novel. She is the character that is supposed to be the most powerless but spends more time

outside the attic throughout the narrative. She physically haunts Thornfield despite her limitations. In terms of power relations, Bertha Mason refuses to be silenced by her husband and captor. Thornfield Hall is supposed to be her prison, but Bertha Mason spends a considerable amount of time outside the confines of the third-floor room. Jane at first thinks that Thornfield is being haunted by a supernatural being but the reader, along with Jane, later learns that the specter is Rochester's wife.

Bertha Mason, beyond being the mentally ill and unwanted wife of Jane's love interest, also serves as a commentary about Brontë's idea of victimhood. In this novel the sufferer does not have to conform to their circumstance entirely and be invisible. Jane learns to turn inwards to avoid physical punishment at the hands of the Reeds, but Bertha, even because of her condition, is still heard when she is imprisoned. Once again, Gilbert and Gubar claim Bertha Mason's madness is a metaphor for female rage. Female rage in this text, then, is not quiet and conforming to what is socially acceptable. Female rage is loud, ruthless, and demands to be heard. It is paradoxical that although Bertha is powerless and physically imprisoned, she still spends a significant amount of the narrative outside her confinement. Beyond experimenting within power structures of the Gothic, Brontë offers a new perspective in this society. The women of the text, although subjugated by their society and gender, do not conform to the imprisonment that is placed upon them. The Gothic genre is often associated with monsters, confinement, and the supernatural. Monsters in this text are different than Mary Shelley's created monster. *J.E.* offers monsters in Jane and Bertha Mason. The former is a monster refusing containment within the boundaries of her social class and gender, and the latter is trapped and savage-like.

Catherine Spooner mentions that the savage-like behavior of Bertha Mason can be a form of “impassioned protest” (140). Therefore, to act monstrous in the Gothic female text is to refuse conformity. Jane also questions, “Why? —am I monster?” I said: “is it impossible that Mr. Rochester should have a sincere affection for me?” (403). These women do not stay silent when confronting their oppressors. Bertha Mason haunts Thornfield Hall and spends a significant time outside of her prison. Jane on the other hand, expresses her rage to her aunt and does not cower to Rochester. These female characters of the text do not suffer in silence or become helpless victims to an unfair circumstance. Brontë grants Bertha Mason and Jane the space to depict a rebellious rage that serves as a protest to their conditions.

The victims of the text do not ever have to conform and use their conditions as a tool to advance their story. Bertha Mason does not have a truth established in the text beyond what we know according to Rochester, but she does play a part in finishing Jane’s story. Bertha’s rage is a form of protest and equivalent to being part of a truth that has otherwise been denied to her. Rochester goes as far as to negate Bertha’s existence as his wife as he says,

I have for the first time found what I can truly love—I have found you[...] you are my sympathy—my good self—my good angel [...] I am bound to you with a strong attachment [...] I think you good, gifted, lovely : a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my centre and spring of life, wraps my existence about you, and, kindling in pure powerful flame, fuses you and me in one [...]to tell me that I had already a wife is empty mockery; you know that I had but a hideous demon (Brontë 480)

For Rochester, Bertha has never truly existed as his wife, for her illness makes her identity less valuable to Rochester. She is a madwoman, a phantom haunting the halls, but never truly his wife. She can be considered Rochester’s victim but not his true equal. As a result of this idea, the female victim is rewarded, or killed, but is allowed to prevail in her own agency either way. Jane suffered her share and was eventually compensated. On the other hand, Bertha Mason’s was imprisoned by Rochester but took part in punishing him by the end of the novel.

By acknowledging her characters' weaknesses, Brontë can outwit an otherwise weak position and construct a place of strength while letting Bertha and Jane be active participants in their story. However, before they can find a form of liberation, both Bertha and Jane must suffer.

Punishment, whether it is physical or emotional, is a tool Brontë uses to strengthen and eventually release the female characters. Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason Rochester embody two women who, after intense turbulence, earn their own agency as they both choose their future by the end of the novel. Brontë handles female punishment differently in the text according to their persona, behavior, and even their physical appearance.

Jane is subjected to intense discipline early in the Red Room and as she is tied to a chair to control her. Here, it is useful to consider Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, when considering the magnitude of what Mrs. Reed is exerting over Jane. Foucault writes,

in discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen [...] visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them [...] this fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection [...] the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification [...] this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially by arranging objects [...] the examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification (187).

Traditionally, as Foucault notes, those who were punished could be obscured and power was visible. Yet, in discipline, the subject becomes much more visible. They are unable to hide and in being seen they must submit to domination. In this way, even when Jane is hiding from John Reed, she is his object to look for and abuse. When Mrs. Reed disciplines her, she is nothing but a burden who can be tormented. Mrs. Reed, then, can ignore Jane's "frantic anguish and wild sobs" (23) because it is easier to abuse an object than a person. As Foucault notes, "power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective [...] they are imbued, through and through, with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives" (94-95).

There is a goal in Mrs. Reed punishment of Jane, as she wants the child to behave in what she considers acceptable behavior. Mrs. Reed does not care for Jane the person but most mold Jane the object of her derision. There is no morality tied to Mrs. Reed's punishment of Jane; she is something that must be controlled. Discipline becomes the result of this punishment, as the object becomes accustomed to the proper behavior that is expected of it. Foucault writes, "discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (170). The novel pores over the idea that a woman's place in society is often predetermined before she even understands it herself. Jane Eyre is punished for being a burden to the Reeds, for being an orphan, a governess, and a woman. Bertha Mason is punished for being a wicked being who cannot control herself. While Bertha Mason is imprisoned because of her condition, Jane Eyre is imprisoned by her societal status.

The Victorian woman belonged first to society, then perhaps to her husband, but never to herself. With this idea in mind, this thesis will explore the identity of the women who refuse to conform to those norms. As Jane Eyre's mind is free to roam and go inwards, Bertha Mason's mind is out of her control. The reader is never privy to Bertha's thoughts, as one can only analyze her through her actions. Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre are foils of each other, where the former is not only a prisoner to her society but also to her mind. Eventually, by the end of the text both women find their place and an individual form of agency.

The heroine is already alienated from society, so her personal alienation is internal, external, and tied to her inherent existence. In the female Gothic text, the conflict is resolved by bringing her back to the security of the social hierarchies. Jane is excluded from the social hierarchies as she is a destitute orphan but by the end of the novel the author resolves this issue. On the other hand, Bertha Mason cannot be brought back to any social order, for she is not

an active participant of society anymore. She is alienated even through her familial relationships, as it is Rochester who eventually decides she must be imprisoned. Since Bertha's separation from society is beyond her control and because of her illness, the only true resolution that can come to the character by the end of the narrative is her death. Her death also denotes a form of social order because it finally gives Jane the path to complete her character arc.

Rochester

The most crucial relationship in the text that sparks debate amongst the readers and critics alike is the one between Jane and Mr. Rochester.¹¹ The relationship between Rochester and Jane is also crucial to analyze as the female character is the one who holds the true power in the dynamic, yet that does not stop him from trying to define her. Rochester is above Jane in status, gender, and age. He is "old enough to be [her] father" (204) and this is perhaps a reminder to Jane that no matter how much she connects to Rochester, they are not equal. Rochester is not only her master but also has experienced the world in ways Jane only dreamed of. He knows the true autonomy and freedom Jane longs for, and the reader is constantly reminded of this truth. Where Jane is an orphan trapped in Lowood, Rochester can travel and bask in his freedom. The dynamics between the characters is one of a constant tension where even if he is fascinated by Jane, Rochester still tries to instill his authority. He tells Jane,

[do] you agree with me that I have a right to be a little masterful, abrupt, perhaps exacting sometimes, on the grounds I stated, namely, that I am old enough to be your father, and that I have battled through a varied experience with many men of many nations, and roamed over half the world, while you have lived quietly with one set of people in one house" (Brontë 204).

Yet, Jane still resists this control as she responds,

'Do as you please, sir [...] I don't think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience' (Brontë 204).

For Jane, authority and societal placement does not depend on one's societal standing and privilege. She does not look at Rochester as someone who is above her more than in name and gender, for she challenges him in a way that is completely improper and forthright. She and Rochester develop a rapport where they can openly speak and understand each other, and Jane welcomes the openness he provides for her. Upon meeting Rochester, Jane is fascinated by his enigmatic presence that only becomes more constant when she realizes he is her employer. Rochester provides Jane space to be herself and share her ideas openly without having to fear his reaction. He is not angry when she responds honestly to his inquiries and throws back her own somewhat scathing retorts, but the fact that she has ideas of her own fascinates him even more. This, however, does not mean that Rochester avoids trying to define Jane to his own terms.

Rochester tries to typify Jane as a bird, but she rejects this label and insists on human status. He likes Jane's fiery strength, but for him Jane is a "fairy" (374) or a "bird" (386) at those times. If he were to think of her as a woman asserting her independence, then his position as sole master would be threatened. Consequently, even though Rochester's motives in marginalizing Jane are not malicious (as are the Reeds' and the Ingrams'), as is true for many of the characters in the novel, Rochester can deal more easily with Jane if he can view her as other than normal (64). Perhaps that alludes to his own wife, whose insanity places her outside of what is acceptable in society, and Rochester is known to not heed to societal rules. However, more crucially, Jane Eyre has characteristics that are completely absent in Bertha Mason. It is easier to understand, thus, that Rochester is drawn to Jane Eyre because she is everything Bertha Mason can never be. Jane is drawn to Rochester immediately and is attracted to his physical presence. However, she also understands their positions in society and wishes to maintain distance to avoid jeopardizing her integrity. Their relationship, constrained by their societal positions at first,

becomes one where they crave being around each other. Yet, in each of their meetings, Jane seems to be the one in constant control. When they first meet and Rochester falls off the horse, Jane is there to help him. Their first meeting awakens something in her as she ponders,

The incident had occurred and was gone for me: it WAS an incident of no moment, no romance, no interest in a sense; yet it marked with change one single hour of a monotonous life. My help had been needed and claimed; I had given it: I was pleased to have done something; trivial, transitory though the deed was, it was yet an active thing, and I was weary of an existence all passive. (Brontë 176)

Brontë puts Jane in a position of power when she first meets Rochester. That is, he is the one who needs her to save him and depends entirely on her actions. Rochester, the male figure, should be the dominant one in his relationship with Jane, but even in their first encounter, she is the one who rescues him. For the Victorian period, Jane having more stereotypically masculine traits than any of the other female characters in the text is a statement. Jane comes back to Rochester an independent woman, as she says, after inheriting five thousand pounds and the novel neatly resolves itself. However, Rochester needs to be punished to be worthy of marrying Jane. Becker explains, “gothic texture relies on romance conventions concerning flamboyant villains, harmless lovers, and wildly distressed heroines” (46). When considering Bertha Mason’s imprisonment, Rochester is perceived as the villain by scholars such as Janet H. Freeman and Catherine Spooner. The real villain of the novel, as I see it, is the belief that an individual can exert any sort of control over another. Everything goes wrong for those who try to control Jane and to dictate the ways she must behave. Yes, she suffers at their hands and finds herself alone in the world, but she refuses to renounce herself and her truth. Brontë gives life-lessons to the characters who harm others in this text. Rochester is blinded by Bertha but then liberated by Jane’s love.

The dynamic between Jane Eyre and Rochester is one of passion and conflict. Jane is drawn to him and desires his physical company, while Rochester sees her as a form of salvation. That is not to say that he does not love her or is incapable of loving her, but there is more to the dynamic on Rochester's part than just pure emotion. They can communicate in a way that only they understand. Jane must hide her thoughts and feelings throughout the novel to avoid punishment but with Rochester she does not hesitate to answer honestly. When he questions her, Jane's answers come naturally and without deception, yet Rochester often fails to see Jane as his equal. He often attempts to depersonalize her and/or objectify her, thus removing trying to strip her of her identity. On the other hand, Jane never tries to deceive him, as is honest with Rochester whenever he questions her, "You examine me, Miss Eyre," said he: 'do you think me handsome?' (Brontë 200). Jane opts to be honest with Rochester as she ponders and says, "I should, if I had deliberated, have replied to this question by something conventionally vague and polite; but the answer somehow slipped from my tongue before I was aware— 'No, sir'" (Brontë 200). But the honesty she displays is often not mutual. Jane is truly herself when she is around Rochester. In "Marriage in *Jane Eyre*: from Contracts to Conversation," James Phillips writes,

the equality between Rochester and Jane is not something that can be taken for granted, but something that must be constructed and acknowledged, socially and sentimentally, again and again, because it is an equality between contingent, mutable and malleable human beings. (205)

Jane and Rochester, despite being completely different, complement each other and come to exist as equals. They can understand each other because they speak a language of their own and reserve judgement. She answers his questions candidly and without having to consider what he wants to hear. Through her life, she only ever knew punishment after self-expression, and such

was not the case with Rochester. It is through this idea that Jane is drawn to Rochester even more, yet that is not to say that Rochester always respects her identity.

When the two become engaged, Rochester makes the attempt to turn Jane into a perfect wife. He tells Jane about all his plans for her, their future, and their travels. He does all this without asking her what she wants and expects from their marriage and without considering that she might have other desires. Then, Rochester calls her an “angel” (Brontë 396), to which Jane replies, “I am not an angel, and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself” (396). Rochester’s attempts to turn Jane into an idyllic wife and discard her identity are unsuccessful as his secret is revealed. After Rochester’s deception is revealed, he begs Jane to marry him despite Bertha Mason. She does not cower to his pleas and instead, with perhaps the most important words that delineate who she is, strikes back at Rochester as she says,

I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane, with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations are all I have at this hour to stand by; there I plant my foot (343).

Jane can assert her character and resist the man she loves because giving in would mean completely negating her entire being. Every moment in the story led her to this point where she finally finds happiness and is loved by someone. As a child, Jane dreamt of being loved because the alternative was too horrible for her to comprehend. Yet, at that point, she was able to resist and negate what she wanted the most. Begging Jane, Rochester says,

Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it— the savage, beautiful creature! If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose. Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven before

I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place. And it is you, spirit—with will and energy, and virtue and purity—that I want: not alone your brittle frame. Of yourself you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will, you will elude the grasp like an essence—you will vanish ere I inhale your fragrance. Oh! come, Jane, come!’ (Brontë 485)

The entire story culminated in the point where the heroine is tested, and she is successful in walking away from what she wants most. To stay with Rochester at that point, would mean a complete self-negation and betrayal that contradicts everything the character stands for.

Throughout the narrative, she subverted those who were trying to control her and dominate her identity and the final act of leaving Rochester just cements what we already know: Jane is true and loyal only to herself. In the conclusion, *Jane Eyre* ends in a restoration of order but with the power roles reversed. Brontë writes,

I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward’s society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result. (688)

She marries Rochester as a choice, never because she is expected to return his favor or owes him anything. Rochester is blinded (and punished), and Jane can truly emerge in a position of power.

She bides her time, is patient, and ultimately succeeds. The text does not need a wildly distressed heroine, as Becker remarks, but can depict a different sort of heroine. The two, Jane and Rochester, can begin their relationship on equal ground, as she can be independent without needing to rely on Rochester for anything.¹² Their marriage, then, can be more equitable than anything else. Lauren Owsley writes,

Jane's ultimate marriage and pregnancy seemingly diminish her desire for independence and her resistance to socially constructed norms of appropriate femininity. However, these concessions on Jane's part of her prized self-sufficiency are not sacrifices of her earned agency, but, alternatively, cognitive choices that she can afford to make as a result of her purchased societal station. (54).

It is crucial to note that Jane choosing her own ending circumvents the criticism that the text is not feminist or progressive enough because she marries Rochester at the end. She has a choice and picks her own destiny, thus asserting herself. Rochester, impaired, can depend on Jane in the marriage. However, Jane does not need to depend on Rochester even for money. Brontë's ending presented a new possibility for Victorian women where passion can play an active role in their lives.

Part IV: Conclusion

The female protagonist in *J.E* demonstrates the difficult conditions of a Victorian woman's life. In its opening moments, the story depicts a child who is completely alone and helpless in the world. Jane is attacked by her cousin and later punished by her aunt for fighting back to completely unjustified abuse. The novel is about a child who grows up to be a woman unafraid of voicing her truth when she is pushed to the brink. The story is one of a learned patience where the heroine must often bite her tongue to avoid punishment, but when all the injustice becomes too much to bear, Jane speaks her truth.

Jane was influenced and shaped by her childhood but was ultimately not defined by it. The story centers Jane as someone who learns early what social hierarchies and power constructs do to individuals like her who have no true family or protector. Instead of becoming destitute and helpless, she learns how to adapt and overcome. Jane endures a traumatic childhood full of unwarranted punishment but triumphs in the end by living an almost fairy-tale like life with Rochester. The text challenges the expectations of the Gothic genre and pushes back on the tropes embodied by the women of such texts. Jane is not innocent and naïve but thoughtful and true to herself. She does not have the qualities of the gothic heroines who are victims to their circumstances, as she is someone who resists succumbing to the control of those more powerful than her.

Jane earns her happy ending because she refuses to cede the limit power and truth she owns. The story is one of patience and persistence where the female lead knows who she is and must make those around her accept her existence. Through different turbulations, Jane asserts her character and identity and cements her place in a society that would prefer to keep her quiet. She manages to get others to see her as she is and avoid their definitions. She does not need Rochester's, or the

Reeds, or even the reader's pity; Jane only needs enough space to use her voice and cement her identity.

NOTES

¹ *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Elizabeth Gaskell for more biographical information about Brontë's childhood and how she was educated.

² Other criticisms of the text include Lady Georgina Fullerton in *The Christian Remembrancer* (1848) and James Lorimer in *North British Review* (1849).

³ Juliet Barker writes about Brontë's life in *The Brontës*. Barker discusses just how ruthless Charlotte could be when she disapproved of her sisters' manuscripts and how she would destroy their work when she did not agree with their writing.

⁴ See Michel Foucault's "We 'Other Victorians'" from *The History of Sexuality* (1-15) for further discussion on repression.

⁵ Suzanne Keen's "Victorian Renovations of the Novel: Narrative Annexes and the Boundaries of Representation" for an analysis of anti-Christian labels ascribed to the text.

⁶ Sources I used to arrive at this idea: Maria Lamonaca's "Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in 'Jane Eyre,'" Suzan VanZanten Gallagher's "Jane Eyre and Christianity," and Diane Long Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism*.

⁷ Cixous is used to discuss the female gaze, postmodernism, and queer theory. See Susan Bowers' "Medusa and the Female Gaze," Alexander Schlutz' "Recovering the Beauty of Medusa," and Lauren Goodlad's "Towards a Victorianist's Theory of Androgynous Experiment."

⁸ See Susan Sniader Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (3-24), as the author discusses the importance of "voice" when reading feminist works. Sniader Lanser mentions that marginalized communities (in this instance, women) must rely in using their voices as weapons. Thus, the method of communication between the author and Victorian women was one of rebellion.

⁹ See “Bertha and the Critics” (275-278) by Laurence Lerner for examples as to how often Bertha Mason is reduced to her madness instead of the character itself. This is ironic as critics often fall into the same tropes, they accuse Brontë of exploiting.

¹⁰ See, Beattie, Valerie. “The Mystery at Thornfield: Representations of Madness in ‘Jane Eyre’” 493–505, for further discussion into idolatry in *J.E.* In this context, idolatry is used to alienate Jane from her humanity, or to convert her into what Rochester wishes her to be.

¹¹ Esther Godfrey discusses this dynamic in “Jane Eyre, from Governess to Girl Bride.”

¹² See Martin Francis’ “The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Masculinity” 637-652 for further commentary about the male figure being more submissive to the female figure.

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