

Jane Eyre

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Lecture 28

Gothic Subtexts; Madness and Femininity

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)



Week 6: *Jane Eyre* Lecture 6C: Gothic Subtexts; Madness and Femininity



Image source: <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2017/08/10/how-charlotte-bronte-came-to-write-jane-eyre>

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Hello and welcome to week six lectures on Jane Eyre in today's session, I am going to talk about a particular Gothic subtext in relation to a tale called Bluebeard. Then I will discuss the issue of madness, the notion of femininity in relation to the gothic narrative of Jane Eyre.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:38)

Bluebeard tale and *Jane Eyre*



- “Perhaps this popularity can also be accredited to Charles Perrault, a French folklorist and fairy-tale writer in the late 1600s; Perrault gripped Europe and Britain with gruesome fairy tales embedded with lessons for social behaviour Brontë alludes to Perrault’s most gruesome tale, Bluebeard, as Jane tours Thornfield for the first time (and perhaps also through the naming of Jane’s French instructor, Madame Pierrot)”

• (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)

• <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca//index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>



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In the previous lecture, I discussed how narratives of the macabre, narratives of the bizarre and the dark were very popular in the time in which the novel was produced, which was early 19th century. Now “this popularity can also be accredited to Charles Perrault, a French folklorist and fairy tale writer in the late 1600s. Perrault gripped Europe and Britain with gruesome fairy tales embedded with lessons for social behaviour. Bronte alludes to Perrault's most gruesome tale, Bluebeard, as Jane tours Thornfield for the first time, and perhaps also through the naming of Jane's French instructor Madame Pierrot.”

In the previous lecture, I talked about how narratives of grave robbers were very popular and how people bought into those narratives and consumed them avidly and we are told that this popularity for the dark narratives was also set in motion by a figure called Charles Perrault, who was a French folklorist and a fairytale writer. And this fairy tale was used to teach lessons for good behaviour, good social behaviour.

And in *Jane Eyre*, a particular fairy tale is alluded to by the central female character, that is Jane and that tale relates to the tale of the Bluebeard and Jane, when she is taken through Thornfield hall, when she is given a tour, she makes an illusion to that. So there are references in the narrative of *Jane Eyre*, which connects the story with this gruesome fairy tale.

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Reference to Bluebeard



- “Mrs. Fairfax stayed behind a moment to fasten the trap-door. I, by dint of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase. I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating the front and back rooms of the third story – narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle”.

- (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)

- <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca//index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>



Now, this is the exact moment in the story where we come across that reference. Jane is inside Thornfield hall, and she is being led through the hall by Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper.

“Mrs. Fairfax stayed behind a moment to fasten the trap-door. I, by dint of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase. I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating front and back rooms of the third story, narrow low and dim with only one little window at the end, and looking with its two rows of small black doors, all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle.”

So that is the reference that we are going to discuss in a little bit of detail. Now, first reading of this passage itself, will tell the reader that this is a gothic moment in the story. The castle is not very inviting, Thornfield hall becomes a castle like space for the visitor, the trap door, the attic, narrow staircase, the way in which the heroine lingers, as all gothic heroine’s do in passages, within castles, the repetition of the word narrow small and dim, not very well lit, a small window, giving us all, a lot of impression, that this is a space of incarceration. Door’s are shut, there is black door symbolically suggesting bleakness and gloominess. And at the end of this passage, there is this reference to the gruesome fairy tale of the Bluebeard.

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Bluebeard Tale



- “Bluebeard was a hideously ugly man who persuaded his neighbour’s youngest daughter to marry him; she settled in his remote fortress with the help of an elderly maid... He left for business one day and gave his new wife the keys to all of the doors and windows in his secretive castle; this gift came with a warning not to open one particular door lest she will receive his wrath. Curiosity consumes the young woman and she opens the door to find the bodies of Bluebeard’s ex-wives hanging around the room, drenched in blood.”

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Now, let us see what this tale is about. “Bluebeard was a hideously ugly man who persuaded his neighbour’s youngest daughter to marry him. She settled in his remote fortress with the help of an elderly maid. He left for business one day and gave his new wife, the keys to all of the doors and windows in his secretive castle. This gift came with a warning not to open one particular door lest she will receive his wrath. Curiosity consumes the young woman, and she opens the door to find the bodies of Bluebeard’s ex-wives hanging around the room drenched in blood.”

So this is a perfectly macabre, gruesome gothic tale. You can see that the fortress is a classic gothic trope in this tale. There is this man called Bluebeard, who is extremely ugly. He convinces the neighbour to give his daughter in marriage to him. And there is just an elderly maid to look after the house. And one fine day, he gives the keys of the house to this new wife and asks her not to open one particular door. And of course she does not obey. She is filled with curiosity and she opens that particular door to find the dead bodies of Bluebeard's ex-wives.

So this is the reference that Jane makes, when she is visiting Thornfield hall. So you can see how the setting in itself suggests an entire narrative, a narrative of gruesome death and the idea of incarceration and particularly evil male figure, who is orchestrating this entire scenario. So Jane has all these narratives as Gothic subtext in her psyche when she is visiting Thornfield hall.

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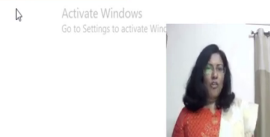
Bluebeard Tale and *Jane Eyre*



- “Bluebeard comes home just before she escapes; however, the wife’s brothers rescue her by killing Bluebeard upon his arrival. This tale parallels Jane’s relationship with Rochester in a multitude of ways. Both Bluebeard’s ex-wives and Bertha in *Jane Eyre* are locked away from society, emphasizing the Victorian ideals of a woman’s obedience to the man; neither Bertha nor Bluebeard’s wife listen to their orders; both rebel and find themselves punished for breaking patriarchal standards.”

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To continue with the tale of the Bluebeard. “Bluebeard comes home just before she escapes. However, the wife’s brothers rescue her by killing Bluebeard upon his arrival, this tale parallels Jane’s relationship with Rochester in a multitude of ways. Both Bluebeard’s ex-wives and Bertha in *Jane Eyre* are locked away from society, emphasizing the Victorian ideals of a woman’s obedience to the man, neither Bertha nor Bluebeard’s wife listen to the orders, both rebel and find themselves punished for breaking patriarchal standards.”

So on the one hand we have the tale of the Bluebeard, which is resolved neatly with the brothers rescuing the wife from the clutches of Bluebeard, who is killed by the brothers. And what is significant to us, in terms of the Bluebeard tale is that, there is a parallel between this gruesome fairy tale, and this 19th century novel *Jane Eyre*. There is a kind of a tradition of continuity, especially in relation to how the female is betrayed within big castle like domestic set up.

So, what the critique here is trying to do is compare the wife of Bluebeard the latest, the newest wife of Bluebeard with, Jane and Bertha. Bertha, of course, the first wife of Rochester is literally locked away by Rochester. She is locked away from society. Nobody knows her existence. She is for all intents and purposes dead to the world. She is that absent signifier, whereas Jane, though she is very much present, she is also in a sense within the power of Rochester, who is her master, who is her employer and who has a lot of control over *Jane Eyre*, emotionally and physically.

So, Jane Eyre also refuses to listen to this master figure Rochester, Bertha escapes constantly from her prison, which is within, Thornfield hall, she escapes, her jail and tries to attack several people in the household. And Jane Eyre also escapes Rochester's power by fleeing Thornfield hall at a particular moment in this story.

So, in this set of parallel narratives, Jane resembling, Bertha, Jane Eyre, and Berta resembling Bluebeard's wife, we are told symbolically about the idea of the female rebel, female rebel does not obey, does not follow the word of the patriarch. So none of the women figures here alluded to kind of, obey the patriarchal rules and regulations and they pay the price.

Bluebeard's ex-wives are killed off. Whereas Jane of course, is given a different ending. We will come to that, as we progress through the lecture sessions. What is important for us to realize is that, the female characters are rebellious, patriarchal power is getting disrupted constantly in this novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:21)

Gothic Curiosity



- “Immediately after the unnerving opening tour of Thornfield, Jane hears an eerie laugh, snapping the reader back into her reality. This encounter leaves Jane curious and inquisitive about Rochester himself, leading her down the path of a gothic, shadowy romance she herself cannot decipher.”
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So there is a reference to Bluebeard which erupts in the mind of Jane, when she experiences the interiority of Thornfield hall and at the end of the tour, she hears the laugh of Bertha. Of course, at that point, she does not know, that, it comes from the first wife who was locked up, in the hall, yet this, noise, this inexplicable noise, suggest to Jane that there is something very strange about, Thornfield hall and she wants to know more.

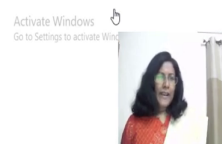
And this curiosity is an attribute of the gothic heroine, and along the way, this trajectory of curiosity and inquisitiveness on the part of Jane also makes her fall in love with this dark figure and a shadowy, romantic trajectory is built, in terms of Jane and Rochester. And when she resolves the gothic, the dark plot of Thornfield hall, she will also know more about the central, male character, the romantic hero, Rochester.

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Gothic: Madness and Femininity



- “Whether she is construed as the champion of female rebellion, or as the image of monstrosity that Jane Eyre must reject in the course of her Bildung, Bertha Mason, Charlotte Bronte's paradigmatic madwoman, continues to compel feminist criticism to address the highly problematic yet omnipresent conjunction of madness and femininity. This interaction between feminist literary criticism and the text of madness in Jane Eyre continues to yield uneasy conclusions, and madness remains one of feminism's central contradictions”. (Beattie, 1996, p.493)



Now let me move on to the notions of madness and femininity. “Whether she is construed as the champion of female rebellion or as the image of monstrosity that Jane Eyre must reject in the course of her Bildung, Bertha Mason, Charlotte Bronte's paradigmatic madwoman continues to compel feminist criticism to address the highly problematic yet omnipresent conjunction of madness and femininity. This interaction between feminist literary criticism and the text of madness in Jane Eyre continues to yield uneasy conclusions, and madness remains one of feminism's central contradictions.”

This is a very important critique, which brings up two central ideas, the notion of madness and the notion of the feminine and suggests that these are central to the notion of feminism. The idea of feminism.

Now, Bertha Mason is at the heart of it, Bertha Mason is important because Jane Eyre, the central heroine of the novel must reject this character, Bertha Mason in order to attain that happily ever after with Rochester. So this is a gothic narrative, but with a difference, Jane Eyre is a gothic novel, but with a difference. In this gothic novel, Rochester is not the typical gothic villain. The readers are not supposed to reject him as utterly evil. The readers are let to know that Jane Eyre will help recover Rochester to the good side.

So for that process to be complete, this outsider figure, this figure of madness that is Bertha Mason must be eliminated from the narrative. So how is she going to be eliminated? The

narrative tells us that Bertha Mason is mad. So madness is the opposite of the ideal of the feminine, the feminine figure rejects the notion of madness. And what this critic here suggests is that it is very difficult for feminist literary criticism to come to terms with madness, because madness, while it is being rejected in this particular novel through Jane Eyre, the ideal heroine, yet madness is a symbol of female rebellion.

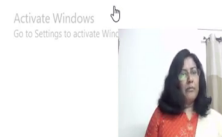
Madness, is that great force, which opposes the regulations, the standards of patriarchy, therefore, the idea of madness and femininity, becomes extremely complicated in this novel Jane Eyre. While Jane Eyre in order to reach that romantic resolution with Rochester must get rid of the figure of Bertha Mason, while getting rid of Bertha, she is also perhaps rejecting the idea of the female rebel, which is encoded in that concept of madness.

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Gothic: Madness, Femininity and Oppression



- In "The Madwoman and Her Languages," Nina Baym deplores "the work Bronte has put into defining Bertha out of humanity" (p. 48), and proceeds to take feminist literary theory (ranging from French-affiliated feminisms to deconstruction) to task for its valorization of madness which, for her, "seems a guarantee of continued oppression" (p. 49).



"In "The Mad Woman and Her Languages," Nina Baym deplores the work Bronte has put into defining Berta out of humanity and proceeds to take feminist literary theory ranging from French affiliated feminisms, to deconstruction, to task for its valorization of madness, which for horror seems a guarantee of continued oppression."

So we see how madness is a classic gothic trope and we associate madness with rebellion and Bertha Mason is a classic rebel of sorts, when she attacks certain figures in the novel Jane Eyre we see her act as, her way of retaliation, retaliation for the kind of oppression that she is experiencing within Thornfield hall.

So this particular cryptic Nina Baym criticizes Charlotte Bronte for making Bertha inhuman by making her mad, what Charlotte Bronte does is allow the continued oppression of Bertha. And she also makes it possible for Bertha to be killed off.

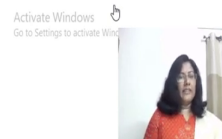
Madness is rejected from the narrative, from the world of Jane and Rochester, and thus rebellion too. So while Bronte is criticized, she was also criticizing, that is the critic, Nina Baym is also criticizing, French, affiliated feminisms to deconstruction for valorising this kind of madness only to kind of reject it or allow it to be oppressed.

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Gothic: Madness, Femininity and Oppression



- “Hence the conceptual impasse implied in the statement that follows the colon in her title: “Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory.” On the opposite side the most obvious approach is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential *The Madwoman in the Attic*, called after Bertha herself”. (Beattie, 1996, p.493)



“Hence the conceptual impasse implied in the statement that follows the colon in her title: “Why I do not do feminist literature theory?” On the opposite side the most obvious approach is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s influential *The Madwoman in the Attic* called after Bertha herself.”

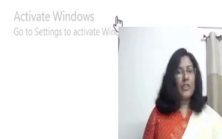
So by this kind of rejection of Bertha, what is suggested is that there is a deadlock, a conceptual deadlock, when issues of madness are discussed within the framework of feminist criticism. Nevertheless, the other side is the obvious, critical standpoint of Sandra Gilbert and Gubar's very influential work titled *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and they are making a very clear reference to Bertha Mason herself.

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Gothic: Madness, Femininity and Oppression



- 'While in their chapter on female creativity they argue that, "Specifically, a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her" (p. 17), in the chapter on Jane Eyre they reproduce the same repressive logic by examining Jane and Bertha in these very terms, referring to Jane as a "sane version of Bertha" (p. 366) and viewing "the loathsome Bertha" (p. 369) solely as a negative example from which Jane must be freed'. (Beattie, 1996, p.493)



“While in their chapter on female creativity, they argue that specifically a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend the greater, the extreme images of angel and monster, which male authors have generated for her. In the chapter on Jane Eyre, they reproduce the same repressive logic by examining Jane and Bertha in these very terms, referring to Jane as a sane version of Bertha and viewing the loathsome Berta, solely as a negative example from which Jane must be freed.”

What Beattie here is attempting to do is lay out the contradictions in the argument of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar about Jane Eyre, the novel. On the one hand, they argue that a female writer must go beyond the binary of angel and monster, because these two categories are those which have been offered to society by male authors, who cannot go beyond, transcend the good and the evil extremes of femininity.

So, while they argue this kind of, rejection of binary, they go on to examine Jane, the central, female character in the novel as a version of Bertha, they call her the sane version of Bertha, the good side of Bertha, and thus they problematize that binary. Jane could become Bertha if pushed to the extreme and Bertha could have been Jane, except for the fact that she is a foreigner who had been brought to England by Rochester.

So, this very close resemblance of the two female characters, Jane and Bertha complicates the binary in the reading of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. So in the latter chapter, in their work, they also argue that Jane must be rescued from Bertha. Jane must be freed from Bertha,

therefore suggesting that, Bertha is the evil monster, which has to be eliminated from the narrative for Jane to have a happy ending. So this kind of argument, complicated argument must come to terms with the binary in a very, very real manner before issues of madness and notions of monster can be reconciled once for all.

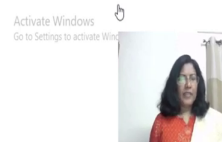
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Gothic: Madness, Femininity and Oppression



- “In this, Gilbert and Gubar's analysis is representative of a considerable body of feminist criticism which, setting out to explicate the role of madness in Jane Eyre does little more than replicate ideologically problematic nineteenth-century attitudes to it.”

(Beattie, 1996, p.493)



“In this, Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis is representative of a considerable body of feminist criticism, which setting out to explicate the role of madness in Jane Eyre, does little more than replicate ideologically problematic 19th century attitudes to it.”

So what we understand from the contradictory approaches of Gilbert and Gubar, towards, Jane and Bertha is that the notion of madness is highly problematic in relation to the idea of rebellion, therefore, by trying to transcend binary, what Gilbert and Gubar end up doing is that they reinforce existing problematic attitudes, which have their origin in the 19th century to the notion of madness.

So Bertha, Bertha’s madness is a kind of rebellion, which cannot be easily explained away as something irrational, which have to be driven away from the text in order for Jane's rationality to triumph. Jane's rationality, as well as Jane's morality and what she stands for in that narrative to triumph. So it is a critical point, which have to be very carefully and very sensitively addressed.

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Gothic: Madness, Femininity and Oppression



- "Above all, what becomes apparent in the divergent positions of Baym (madness blocks feminist interpretation) and Gilbert and Gubar (madness provides feminists with an essential metaphor in a theory of female subversion of patriarchy) is not only that Bertha enacts a split within feminist literary theory regarding interpretations of female madness, but more tellingly, she throws into relief the theoretical and political inconsistencies upon which readings of her are based, betraying materialist/socialist and psychoanalytic feminism's recurring anxiety with the relation of madness to femininity. Feminist literary criticism has yet to come to terms with this madwoman in the attic." (Beattie, 1996, p.493)

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"Above all, what becomes apparent in the divergent positions of Baym, (madness blocks feminist interpretation) and Gilbert and Gubar, (madness provides feminists with an essential metaphor in a theory of female subversion of patriarchy) is not only that Berta enacts a split within feminist literary theory regarding interpretations of female madness, but more tellingly, she throws into relief, the theoretical and political inconsistencies upon which readings of her are based betraying materialist, socialist and psychoanalytic feminism's recurring anxiety within the relation of madness to femininity. Feminist literary criticism has yet to come to terms with this madwoman in the attic."

So this extended criticism very clearly captures the problematic position of the idea of madness within the framework of feminist interpretation, as well as other materialists and socialists and psychoanalytic interpretations. Madness is a complex phenomena in relation to the feminine and it cannot be very easily reconciled within the framework of a patriarchal romance.

So how do we address, Bertha's presence in Jane Eyre, we address her in these ways. Firstly, Bertha is a character from the gothic tradition. She is like one of those wives of Bluebeard. She is a wife who is oppressed, a foreign wife, brought from the colony and shut up within the mansion of Rochester's Thornfield hall.

So she is a heroine of sorts who is persecuted by the gothic male, within Thornfield hall. That is one narrative about Bertha, which we need to kind of address. Secondly, we have a romantic narrative, in relation to Jane and Rochester, and in order for their romance to come to fruition, this gothic narrative has to be removed from the narrative.

So the gothic tradition is set aside. It is pushed to the margins by placing Bertha within a locked up room in Thornfield hall. And when she dies, when she kills herself in that fire, which she herself creates, the Gothic tradition is set on fire and very conveniently, Bertha is eliminated from the narrative leaving space, giving room to Rochester and Jane to get engaged and marry.

So the two traditions need to be recognized. So we need to look at the literary subtexts of this novel before attempting to reconcile the notion of madness with various, theoretical interpretations.

Thank you for watching. We will continue in the next session.