

Week 6: Jane Eyre

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Lecture 29

Lecture 6D: Gothic Rebellion and Symbols: Thornfield Hall and Bertha Mason

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Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertha_Mason



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Lecture 6D Gothic Rebellion and Symbols: Thornfield Hall
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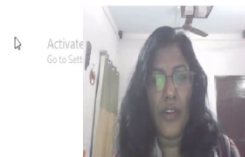
Hello, and welcome to week six's lectures on Jane Eyre. In today's session, I will be continuing the discussion on Gothic Rebellion and Gothic Symbols. I will be focusing in particular the character of the Hall, Thornfield and the character Bertha Mason.

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Gothic: Madness, Femininity and Oppression



- “Her role within the realist Bildungsroman is as significant as Jane’s: that she overflows its boundaries adds to her importance rather than detracts from it. Eugenia DeLamotte’s approach is typical of interpretations that focus on the gothic elements of the novel, posing Bertha as a foil to its realist/materialist feminism. This interpretive framework necessitates that she view Bertha as the evil Other (in this case to both Jane and Rochester).” (Beattie, 1996, p.493)



“Her role within the realist Bildungsroman is as significant as Jane’s: that she overflows its boundaries adds to her importance rather than detracts from it. Eugenia DeLamotte’s approach is typical of interpretations that focus on the Gothic elements of the novel, posing Bertha as a foil to its realist slash materialist feminism. This interpretive framework necessitates that she view Bertha as the evil other.”

The nature of this piece of criticism is to evaluate Bertha Mason’s role within the realist Bildungsroman. And when we refer to the word Bildungsroman, we are essentially thinking about the character of Jane Eyre, and how she grows into a mature individual and achieves fulfilment in real life Rochester. Now, the criticism here on the slide is suggesting that Bertha Mason’s role is as important, as significant as Jane Eyre’s within the framework of the realist Bildungsroman.

In fact, I would argue that this novel is not just about the Bildungsroman of a particular character such as Jane. In fact, many critics have suggested that this story is as much about Bertha Mason as it is about Jane’s and the very fact that Jane is uncontained, she is not kept within the boundaries that she is supposed to be within. And the very fact that she constantly breaks barriers, overflows its boundaries suggest that she is a critical figure within this narrative.

In fact, critics have tried to juxtapose Bertha Mason as a Gothic character and offset her, treat her as a foil to the realist materialist narrative in relation to feminism. So this kind of binary, the Gothic versus materialist feminism does not really work. We cannot treat Bertha as the evil other and Jane as the representative of domestic goodness. So this kind of black and white interpretive framework of this novel Jane Eyre is not foolproof.

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Thornfield Hall



- Thornfield is undeniably the most "Gothic" of all the residences in the novel: to a much more marked degree than Gateshead or Lowood, its lineaments and character are personal and symbolic, and this I believe is part of Bronte's strategy of generic dislocation. The country house has traditionally been presented as a symbol of stability and solidity; but here it has become the cradle of the unpredictable, the disruptive, and the terrifying (Parama Roy, 1989, p.718)



Let us now talk about the nature of Thornfield Hall. “Thornfield is undeniably the most Gothic of all the residences in the novel: to a much more marked degree than Gateshead or Lowood, its lineaments and character are personal and symbolic, and this I believe is part of Bronte’s strategy of generic dislocation. The country house has traditionally been presented as a symbol of stability and solidity; but here it has become the cradle of the unpredictable, the disruptive, and the terrifying.”

So the entire idea is, the critical perspective of Parama Roy and what this critic here argues is essentially a strategy of generic dislocation. Thornfield represents a country house narrative. However, within Jane Eyre, within the novel Jane Eyre, this house, this country house is also representative of a different tradition, and that is the Gothic. And when these two narratives come together then the ramifications, the implications of this particular Hall become numerous. Now

in terms of the country house narrative, the country house represents the character and nature of the particular individual who is at the head of it, and at the same time, it represents the heritage of the family that has been owning that property across time and therefore, the house in itself derives a particular set of values and symbolic significances.

Now we need to understand that the country house represents a particular set of meanings for the people around it. It represents stability, it represents trend, it represents richness, it represents livelihood, you can think about Pemberley for example, which is a country house, in the novel by Jane Austen called *Pride and Prejudice*, and Darcy as its master is an ideal head of that particular domestic setup. And now, when we think about Pemberley we know what it stands for, it stands for righteousness, it stands for generosity, it stands for integrity, and those values also mirror the values of Mr. Darcy.

Now that kind of simple association of meanings become problematic when we think about Thornfield Hall within the framework of *Jane Eyre* because as we know, we have several narratives, jostling or primacy. We have the country house narrative, we have the Gothic narrative and one of the most important areas in which these two narratives overlap is that of the domestic setup and its inhabitants. So, while on the one hand we expect the country house to be stable, strong and sustainable, in the case of *Jane Eyre*, Thornfield Hall becomes an unpredictable, mysterious, oppressive and terrifying space as well.

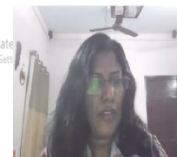
It becomes terrifying to *Jane Eyre*, the governess, she is terrified by the sounds and noises, and the eerie sounds that she hears coming from a particular quarter of the hall, it is a disruptive space with Bertha Mason haunting the hall, and there is an aura of mystery within the hall and that is a problematic ambiance for *Jane Eyre*.

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The Gothic House



- “The Gothic house is a slippery thing, never totally possessed or "placed" by the senses or the rational mind. This ontological indeterminacy is matched by the most minimal sense of social interaction in the great house. There are hardly any references to tenants or to the business of running an estate. There are no clergymen and, saving one trip to the church for the "wedding," no one in the great house ever appears to attend religious services”(Parama Roy, 1989, p.718).



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So this criticism is pointing to a set of factors, which suggest that the Thornfield Hall is not participating in any of the activities that are expected of a country house. What is rather interesting is the idea that it is very difficult to pin down the nature of the house as Gothic, at least according to this critic, Roy. She suggests that the Gothic establishment can be arrived at in a sense by looking at the absences. There is hardly any gathering, there is hardly any reference to tenants. There are no mention of the details, the details of the various businesses involved when an estate is functioning very efficiently. There are no references to church visits and all these absences suggests that there is lacuna of social interaction in terms of this great house.

Of course there are visitations, by a party of people and that is rare and it is done in such a way to prove that perhaps the romantic narrative that is developing in terms of Jane and Rochester might not really happen because Rochester has his eye on a particular social. So what I am trying

to get at here is that, the house, the country house of Rochester is not really participating in the social economy of the rest of the society. So these absences suggest that there is a kind of a Gothic underpinning to the house as well as to the character of, the head of that household.

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The House and its Inmates



- “There are hardly any servants apart from the functional Mrs. Fairfax and Grace Poole. Rochester's solitary attempt at fraternization is not a success; the guests at his house party are shallow, vain, and beneath contempt. The heroine herself is endowed with attributes that would contribute nothing to the smooth functioning of a great house-pride, sexual vitality, a cantankerous independence, and a fierce insistence on her own rights” (Parama Roy, 1989, p.718).



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So once again, Parama Roy is arguing that the nature of this country house is not akin to those that we are easily expected to see in terms of such houses. It is a house where the usual signifiers, that suggest a very methodical and proper functioning of that particular house are missing. The servants are not many, there is just the function of Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper and Grace Poole, who looks after Bertha Mason and the heroine is not somebody who would efficiently assist in terms of the smooth functioning of a great house.

Remember, once again, Jane Austen’s Persuasion and Anne Elliot helps in terms of the smooth functioning of that great house. That is not the case with Jane Eyre here. Despite the fact that she

is the heroine of the novel and even though the readers empathize with her and recognize that she is a character, who is the predominant figure in the novel, we realize that she does nothing to ensure that the great house-pride is asserted because she is an employee and not a character whom we normally expect as readers to become its mistress.

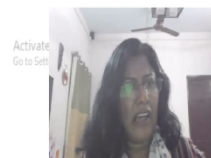
So, there are all these factors, which suggests that the house is not genuinely participating in the usual rituals associated with the country house. And Rochester's attempt at socialization, which I just pointed out in terms of the party or friends that he brings, among which there is a particular socialite, whom we kind of assume is the one that Rochester is eventually going to marry. Despite all these attempts, we realize that the characters that he brings to the house are shallow, vain and contemptible.

On the other hand, the heroine is not somebody who is traditionally perceived to enrich the nature of such a great house because she possesses characteristics which are rebellious, she has a sexual vitality, she is fiercely independent, she asserts her own rights. So all these factors are not something which essentially belong to a woman who assists in the strengthening, who assists in the functioning of such a house that we call the country house.

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The Gothic House

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So what is the ultimate significance of these ideas. The fact that the house is not participating very greatly in the cultural routine of society, what is the suggestion here? The suggestion is that the house is not a genuine country house, that is one thing, or it is a house that is failing at what it is expected to be.

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The House and its Inmates



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What we can assume from all these arguments made by Parama Roy is that the country house logic is rejected in this novel. Along with it, we can see that the narrative of the country house also fractures from within, because the house is unable to sustain itself as a symbolic as well as a literal head of the society around it. Which is why we see a series of failures on the part of the house and its master, there are hardly any servants, the house does not become the center of social gatherings, there is no female character who can suitably become the mistress of this country house. The only female is somebody who is embodying principles that are against the values of the country house.

For example, we just saw how Jane Eyre represents a series of values such as sexual vitality, her fierce streak of independence, her rhetoric of rights, and all these did not become the sort of attributes of the mistress of a country house. Therefore, we can reasonably assume that the

country house narrative and logic is disrupted in this novel and what becomes predominant is the narrative of Gothic.

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Country-house Norms



- “Country-house norms and values are thus quite overtly rejected in Jane Eyre. Jane and Rochester are both victims of the conventions of the English landed class- he by virtue of being an insider, she (as we have seen) by virtue of being an outsider. It may not unreasonably be argued that Rochester’s miseries and corruption stem from his subservience to the demands of his station”. (Parama Roy, 1989, p.719)



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Thus, as I have discussed, the country house values are eliminated, rejected in Jane Eyre. In fact, Parama Roy goes on to argue that both Jane and Rochester become victims of this kind of country house logic. He becomes a victim by having to bend to the regulations of the country house traditions. He has to be subservient to the demands of his station and she becomes, she being a reference to Jane Eyre, she has to become an outsider because she is an employee. So because of all these factors, we see that Jane and Rochester becomes victims of certain regulations associated with the country house norms.

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Country-house world



- “His wife Bertha, whose marriage to him is arranged to ensure his financial status as a son of a great house, is a symbol of all that is diseased, limiting, and hateful about the country-house world. The charades played out in Thornfield are the most obvious emblem of the roles the country-house world forces on the individual”. (Parama Roy, 1989, p.719)



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The crucial point here is the marriage of Rochester to Bertha Mason. In order to sustain the wealth of the great house Thornfield, Rochester is forced to marry Bertha who brings him plenty, who brings him a lot of wealth. So one can see how the idea of the country house becomes so unsustainable that somebody from the outside, somebody from the colonies have to come to the aid of the country house, and when she does so, there are further problems within the domain of the country house. So this is a failing concept. This is a failing argument, the country-house is a failing argument and when one tries to sustain it through a variety of means, there are further fractures within the home.

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Bertha Mason



- “The status of Bertha in this moral scheme has been the subject of extensive discussion. Gilbert and Gubar, among others, seek to endow the West Indian madwoman with a voice of her own, and to establish the sisterhood of the two Mrs. Rochesters. According to their reading, this sisterhood is mirrored in Thornfield itself”:
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So, we saw in the previous session how there is a symbolic connection between the two Mrs. Rochesters. One is Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, the other is Jane Eyre the second Mrs. Rochester. Now, this subject has been one of the central concerns of this novel and what Parama Roy argues is that this sisterhood is mirrored in the Hall itself.

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Thornfield Hall



- “Thornfield is “the house of Jane's life, its floors and walls the architecture of her experience.” The attic, where all the pollutions of the house are concentrated, is the locus of Jane's furies and discontent. And Bertha, the genius of the attic, is Jane's “truest and darkest double,” enacting against Rochester and Thornfield all of Jane's camouflaged hostilities”. (Parama Roy, 1989, p.719)



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One can see that there is a close association between Jane Eyre and the Hall itself in a very, very symbolic way. One can argue that Thornfield Hall comes into being when Jane enters that space, therefore, the house becomes the house of Jane’s life. All its floors and walls reflect the experience of Jane. They come into being through Jane’s eyes, through her vision. In fact, Jane’s anger and discontent are figured in the personality of Bertha Mason herself.

In fact, Parama Roy calls Bertha Mason, the genius of the attic, because she is Jane’s truest double. She is her twin, Bertha Mason is her twin and together, Bertha and Jane react against, rebel against Rochester and Thornfield Hall and they protest against the hostilities that are embedded structurally and ideologically within the hall and all that it stands for.

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Rochester and Thornfield



- “This argument, set forth in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is ingenious and largely well reasoned, but at least a little misleading. We cannot ignore or trivialize the homology between Rochester and Thornfield on the one hand and Bertha and Rochester on the other. Not only is there a physical similitude between the landed gentleman and his country house; his destiny is intimately wedded to that of his house, and this affinity is validated by the apocalyptic event in which fire destroys the one and maims the other” (Parama Roy, 1989, p.719)



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While one can argue that there is a close association between Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason and that the two figures are twins, doubles of one another, there is also a very strong similarity, association, kinship between Rochester and Thornfield Hall. There is also a homology in association, a resemblance between Bertha and Rochester.

So the country house is representative of the values of its master. The destiny of Rochester is the destiny of the house. In order for the house to survive, Rochester has to marry Bertha Mason, the rich woman from West Indies. And therefore, when the house is attacked, the house is under threat, when the house is burned down, the Master is also maimed in the process, is injured in the process. So the attack on Thornfield on the part of Bertha Mason is an attack on the person of

Rochester. It is an attack on the country house values; it is an attack on the principles that undergird the country house.

So thus, one can very strongly argue that Bertha and Rochester are twins, are doubles of one another, they are mirrors of one another and Rochester's destiny is very, very closely intertwined with the destiny of Thornfield Hall.

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Bertha and Rochester



- "Bertha too has a subliminal rapport with her reluctant husband. In her size and strength and powerful appetites, she has obvious resemblances to Rochester. She is a pyromaniac, and he is described in the imagery of fire. Even their vices are of a kind: he marries her because "[his] senses were excited," and he maintains a succession of mistresses after the failure of their marriage; she is "unchaste," and her infidelities accelerate her descent into the madness that accompanies the tertiary stage of syphilis". (Parama Roy, 1989, p.719)



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Here, Parama Roy very clearly lays out the close bond between Rochester and Bertha in terms of the values that they hold dear. Both of them have powerful appetites. In this kind of characterization, they are mirrors of one another, their vices are similar. She is addicted to fire and one can see that the imagery of fire is used to describe Rochester. And at the failure of the marriage, she is disloyal just as Rochester is. He maintains a series of mistresses. And therefore,

one can see how the madness of Bertha Mason is also connected to the character that she has built for herself, which is a mirror to her husband, Rochester. So one cannot absolutely disassociate the two and say that she is not similar to Rochester.

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Bertha Mason



- “She is not simply an alien demon, but a part of his suppressed life (she is married to him, after all, and much though he abominates the fact, and avoids acknowledging her existence, she is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh"), and she continually emerges in violent and unpredictable ways” (Parama Roy, 1989, p.719-720).



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What Roy here is stating is that she is not completely a stranger to Rochester. She is not completely an alien demon, she has the same thoughts and follies as her husband has. In fact, she is the bone of his bone and the flesh of his flesh, which means that she is representative of the suppressed qualities that he displays. Therefore, when she emerges in violent and unpredictable ways, she is manifesting some of the attributes that Rochester perhaps has suppressed. So she also becomes an embodiment of the repressed nature of Rochester himself. Therefore, one cannot simply argue that she is a woman from the colony and therefore, her attributes are representative of that other world, the alien world, the strange world which is outside of Britain.

How do we ultimately assess Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre and Rochester in relation to Thornfield Hall? As I have been discussing with the help of series of critiques posed by scholars such as

Parama Roy, that there are several undercurrents in the novel Jane Eyre. And some of these narratives are in relation to the central spatiality of domesticity, Thornfield Hall. And Thornfield Hall is not just any house, it is a country house, which means it is economically responsible for the well-being of the landless laborers, who work on the lands of Rochester.

But that kind of principle, that kind of economic bond between the country house of Rochester and its tenants is missing in the novel. There are hardly any references to the functioning of the country house, which makes us wonder what is its purpose? And that leads us to the second aspect of the house.

This house is present in Jane Eyre not to indicate its functioning within society, it becomes a leftover, a cultural leftover and a leftover without any economic significance becomes a dark space. And it is in relation to that dark space the entire narrative of Jane Eyre, Rochester and Bertha Mason is woven. Rochester becomes a problematic figure and Jane Eyre enters the world of Rochester to recover him from the dark side by eliminating his connection to Bertha Mason, a measure of happiness is ensured for Rochester and Jane Eyre.

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