

Week 6: Jane Eyre
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Lecture 30
Lecture 6E: Gothic Rebellion, The Domestic and the Colony

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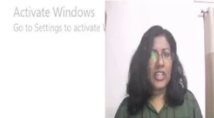
Hello, and welcome to lectures on Jane Eyre. In today's session, I will be discussing the idea of the Gothic in relation to the novel. I will also be discussing issues of Gothic Rebellion in relation to The Domestic and The Colony.

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The Gothic Narrative



- “to read Jane Eyre for its Gothic elements involves identifying the formal scenes (such as descriptions of the vampiric Bertha Mason, or Jane’s incarceration in the red-room, for example) which are clearly indebted to the Gothic. However, the novel’s use of the Gothic is more sophisticated than that, because it structures how Jane’s struggle for social and economic visibility is staged within a Gothic drama which challenges certain readerly expectations of the romantic novel...” (Smith, 2013, p.76)



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There are two things in this piece of criticism by Smith. Firstly, there are certain formal elements of the Gothic, certain Gothic tropes in the novel Jane Eyre. For example, we have the role of Bertha Mason, who is almost vampiric, she is mad, she is out to seek vengeance on Rochester and his friends. Secondly, we also have Jane’s literal incarceration in the red room, which is clearly a classic example of the Gothic women being incarcerated, put in prison is a very good example of the Gothic attribute. So these are formal aspects.

However, there are more sophisticated use of the notion of the Gothic in this novel, Jane Eyre. Jane Eyre has a very interesting romantic plot. There is romance between Jane Eyre and Rochester. And Jane Eyre does not fit the description of a typical heroine of a

romance in those times. She is not rich, she is not very beautiful and she is not from the higher ranks in society. Of course, she is a gentleman's daughter, she is a clergyman's daughter, yet she does not possess those classic, social and cultural markers which make her an ideal fit for a woman who would marry into the nobility, who would become the mistress of a country house.

Therefore, the very absence of expected signifiers in relation to the central female protagonist makes it a very interesting novel. Further, the very fact that Jane struggles for visibility, social and economic visibility, makes it a novel with darker overtones. And we also need to remember that, there is a very clear Gothic subtext too. So all these factors including the assertion of rights on the part of Jane Eyre makes this novel a sophisticated Gothic of sorts. The fact that a working woman can assert her right to romance and assert her right to economic independence, makes this novel a Gothic novel of female rebellion.

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The Gothic Narrative



- "That the novel's ostensible love story is challenged by a scepticism about what 'love' means (and obligates one to) indicates the presence of a radicalism which some conservatively minded contemporary reviewers found deeply troubling. Elizabeth Rigby in 1848 wrote in The Quarterly Review that Brontë's narrator 'is throughout the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit', and went on to claim that 'The tone of mind and thought which fostered Chartism and rebellion is the same which has also written Jane Eyre.'" (Smith, 2013, p.76)

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The novel puts certain questions in front of the reader, which shakes up the conservatively minded reviewers of that time. Jane Eyre when she is making her declaration of love argues for an equality with Rochester despite the fact that Rochester has enormous wealth and possesses, his station from a higher rank in life, Jane argues that essentially both of them are equals in the eyes of God. So such assertion, such declarations of equality is deeply rebellious and considered to be radical on the part of conservative reviewers.

In fact, The Quarterly Review argues that the narrator of Jane Eyre is unregenerate and undisciplined. In fact, the same spirit that goes into the making of the narrator of Jane Eyre is the one that also forms the minds of charters. Charters were those who protested for rights. So the same spirit of rebellion that runs in the society also runs in the figure of the narrator of Jane Eyre.

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The Gothic Narrative



- “According to the novelist Margaret Oliphant, writing in 1855, Jane Eyre effected ‘the most alarming revolution of modern times’ in changing the direction of the novel of romantic love. This revolutionary aspect of the novel is closely related to how Brontë uses the Gothic. It also, however, relates to how the novel compromises what was understood as literary realism at the time. In Wuthering Heights, its ostensible construction of a realistic world is challenged by a Gothic narrative which exposes what the claims for realism tend to conceal – in this instance an unaccommodated language of rebellion.” (Smith, 2013, p.76)

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“According to the novelist Margaret Oliphant, writing in 1855, Jane Eyre effected the most alarming revolution of modern times in changing the direction of the novel of romantic love. This revolutionary aspect of the novel is closely related to how Bronte uses the Gothic. It also, however, relates to how the novel compromises, what was understood as literary realism at the time. In *Wuthering Heights*, its ostensible construction of a realistic world is challenged by a Gothic narrative, which exposes what the claims for realism tend to conceal - in this instance an unaccommodated language of rebellion.”

Margaret Oliphant, a novelist of that time saw this novel *Jane Eyre* as revolutionary, as radical. The reason being *Jane Eyre* apparently changed the way in which romantic love was structured in narratives. For the first time, we see a heroine who is disregarding the markers of class and wealth and rank when she is declaring her love for the man. So these declarations, these utterances on the part of *Jane Eyre* is something that is extremely unconventional.

For the first time, we have a kind of an interclass marriage happening in terms of *Jane Eyre* and Rochester. Of course, the novel ultimately makes Jane come into a lot of money and therefore Jane becomes very propertied and wealthy on her own right towards the end of the novel. But at the middle of this narrative, at the middle of the novel *Jane Eyre*, when Jane is expressing her love for Rochester, she apparently thinks that he is not going to reciprocate her feelings and at that point, she is just expressing her feelings, her emotions, which she believes to be entirely reasonable and just. So that is a radical moment when she thinks that these elements, these markers, these signifiers of class and wealth and station are not going to have any impact on her declaration of love. So that was extremely revolutionary in terms of narrative structuring of romance.

Further, the language of this novel is rebellious. And the critic here argues that, the Gothic framework made it easy for Charlotte Bronte to embed this novel, to suffuse this novel with such a language. He refers to it as the unaccommodated language of rebellion,

the language that overflows its boundaries is what is being used by Charlotte Bronte and it becomes easy for her to do it with regard to Jane Eyre because of its Gothic subtext, because of its Gothic framework.

Something very similar also happens in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* apparently possesses a very realistic world, a rough world, especially in relation to the Earnshaws, who are contrasted with the Lintons, who stand for sophistication and apparently, for culture. Even within that world of realism, Emily Bronte undercuts it with an unbounded language of rebellion. So something similar is happening with relation to these two novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

In *Jane Eyre*, there is a different kind of Gothic, especially in relation to the incarcerated Bertha Mason. However, it is not, the world of *Jane Eyre* is not very dissimilar to the world of *Wuthering Heights*, where Cathy, the central female character, Cathy Earnshaw becomes Cathy Linton, Catherine Linton, that character has a very strong relation to the Gothic in the way she relates to the outsider figure Heathcliff. So, realism is undercut by the world of Gothic and the language of Gothic.

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Bertha Mason and Gothic Rebellion



- “Bertha appears to represent a world of rebellion and sexual freedom which has been circumscribed by her incarceration within Rochester’s house. This theme of incarceration therefore refers back to Jane’s incarceration in the red-room. Also, Bertha is described as racially ‘other’” (Smith, 2013, 78)

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“Bertha appears to represent a world of rebellion and sexual freedom which has been circumscribed by her incarceration within Rochester's house. This theme of incarceration, therefore, refers back to Jane's incarceration in the red room. Also, Bertha is described as racially ‘other’”

Bertha Mason stands for a very apparent Gothic trope as we have discussed. It is a Gothic trope of madness and a madness is a classic envelope of Gothicism. However, in terms of the feminist framework, in terms of how feminist read Gothic, such an exhibition of unreason on the part of women is also considered as a kind of rebellion against the patriarchal world. Furthermore, Bertha Mason is also associated with sexual freedom just as Rochester is. So this kind of sexual freedom is also seen as a feminist marker, a marker of rebellion. She is also incarcerated just as Jane Eyre husband too.

So incarceration is a part of growing up for a female in those times. And the very fact that both Bertha and Jane rebel against sexual boundaries also make them especially rebellious. There is a slight accommodation with regard to Jane Eyre and that happens when she comes to know about the past of Rochester, when she realizes that Rochester is a married man, she refuses to live in sin with him. So that accommodation is something that is invested in Jane Eyre to make her a figure who is homely and pure, one who is going to be the angel within the domestic set up.

Despite these caveats associated with Jane Eyre, we see the sexual passion in Jane Eyre in her reaction, in her expression of love for Rochester. She is not the shrinking violet that we have seen in many of 19th century and 18th century fiction. So, there is an element of passion and sexual expression in Jane Eyre and Bertha which make them twins, which give them the sisterhood of rebellion against authority, against patriarchal authority. Bertha is described as the other. She is a racial other. She is a creole however, but she is an other. She is a foreigner.

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Gothic Rebellion



“and this notion of otherness is linked to Jane’s ‘otherness’. Jane’s ‘outsider’ status, which is later dramatised in her socially awkward role of a governess (as an ‘upper’ servant who is not part of the family), is only alleviated when she accidentally (or perhaps providentially) discovers members of her family who admit her into their home when she is close to starvation after leaving Rochester. The book is written from the point of view of the mature Jane, who describes her childhood self in terms that echo the later perceptions of the ‘mad’ Bertha”. (Smith, 2013, p.79)



“And this notion of otherness is linked to Jane’s otherness. Jane’s outsider status which is later dramatised in her socially awkward role of a governess, as an upper servant who is not part of the family, is only alleviated when she accidentally or perhaps providentially discovers members of her family who admit her into their home when she is close to starvation after leaving Rochester. The book is written from the point of view of the mature Jane, who describes her childhood self in terms that echo the later perceptions of the mad Bertha.”

Jane is an other just as Bertha is an other. Both are outsiders. Bertha is an outsider because she is not British. She is from the colony. Jane is an outsider because she does not belong to the same social class as Rochester. She is an outsider to the nobility. She is not wealthy when she falls in love with Rochester. So those aspects make her an other. She is also an other because she is a governess. She is an employee. She is a servant, but she is not a servant like the ones who labor with their hands. Hers is a labor which is associated with education. So she is an upper servant. She is not entirely someone who does not have class and yet she is within the margins. She is within the borders of respectability because of her indeterminate status.

So it becomes very difficult to accommodate Jane until she finds members of her family who take her in and give her a job, give her support and sustenance and ultimately she

comes into property through their connection. And at that point, she is properly gentrified, which makes her easy to marry Rochester eventually. So one can see the indeterminate status of Jane emerging from the fact that she is a gentleman's daughter, but at the same time, she is an upper servant. She is genteel, but she is also a governess. So all these elements make her an outsider figure who has symbolic associations with the mad Bertha.

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Gothic and Imperialism



- “Ever since Gayatri Spivak famously accused *Jane Eyre* of advancing feminist individualism via ‘the axiomatics of imperialism’, it has been difficult to read Brontë’s story of female maturation and self-determination without suspicion.”

- Source: Anna Neill (2019) Epigenetic emergence: reading for growth in *Jane Eyre*, *Textual Practice*, 33:7, 1071-1086, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2017.1417897](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1417897)
- Image source: <https://bookriot.com/2015/10/16/throw-jane-eyre-birthday-party/>



“Ever since Gayatri Spivak famously accused *Jane Eyre* of advancing feminist individualism via the axiomatics of imperialism, it has been difficult to read Brontë’s story of female maturation and self-determination without suspicion.” Spivak has accused *Jane Eyre*, the novel, of advancing the feminist movement by sacrificing the sovereignty of nations. Remember that St. John is a missionary who is about to leave for India to perform missionary work in the colony that belongs to Great Britain. Such an accusation of imperialist tendencies on the part of *Jane Eyre* makes this novel slightly suspicious to put it mildly. Therefore, notions of female maturity, self-determination and independence are problematized by the kind of cultural work that this novel performs.

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The Mad Wife

- “In Spivak’s account, Rochester’s mad wife, figured as the barely human native female, has only a weak entitlement under the letter of the law – one that is easily overshadowed by the Englishwoman’s greater spiritual claim: as a rational human subject, Jane is implicitly an end in herself; as a soul bearer, she cannot be mastered by the man who has power over her as animalistic, un-souled Bertha can be.”



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Here this criticism points out the list of factors on the part of Bertha which makes it easy for the man to overpower her. She is not a rational human subject. She being Bertha. She is not rational because she is mad. She is un-souled. She is animalistic, because of her unreason. Therefore, it becomes easy for Rochester to overpower her and incarcerate her and she has no power.

However, that’s not the case with Jane Eyre. She is an Englishwoman. She is not a native. She is not a foreigner. She is an Englishwoman. She is sane. She is rational. She is a rational human subject. Therefore, she is a soul bearer. She possesses the healthy soul. Therefore, it becomes difficult for Rochester to overpower Jane as he had overpowered Bertha. So she is a greater spiritual power over Bertha and over Rochester.

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Gothic and Imperialism



- “Brontë’s raced depiction of the mad creole is at the heart of Jane’s liberation from patriarchal tyranny. This is because *Jane Eyre’s* twinned targets of reform – the management of the (especially female) insane and a post-Emancipation Jamaican society in which intemperance and licentiousness were thought to constitute an infectious moral malady – link the development of just domestic arrangements to imperial governance”.

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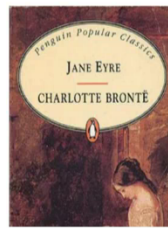
Jane Eyre’s immense patience is predicated on Bertha, the mad creole. Jane Eyre’s escape from patriarchal tyranny is associated with the mad Bertha. At the revelation, Jane is given the chance to escape from the clutches of Rochester and to recuperate within a family which will treat her as an equal, instil in her the strength to further fight, further assert herself within the greater society as a proper bred woman. Jane Eyre has two important targets of reformation. One is the management of the madwoman. The madwoman here is symbolized by the creole Bertha Mason and the other is managing a society in which, there is greater licentiousness, a licentiousness that is infectious. And the subject is that the Bertha Mason has infected Rochester.

So the management of insanity and the management of moral malady is invested on Jane Eyre, who returns to the company of Rochester in the absence of the madwoman to

recover him morally over to the right side, the good side, to home ground. So there is a very strong link between domestic management and imperial governance. The domestic management is symbolically the management of the household of Rochester and imperial governance is about managing the insane, the morally problematic figures in the colony. So this is a very, very complex novel because of the various cultural functions that the novel performs in relation to the Gothic, in relation to imperialism.

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Gothic and Empire



- “All the evidence suggests that it is impossible to talk about female independence and marriage equality in the novel without suppressing the histories of slavery, colonialism, and empire that lie behind them”.

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“All the evidence suggests that it is impossible to talk about female independence and marriage equality in the novel without suppressing the histories of slavery, colonialism, and empire that lie behind them.” This is the big subtext of *Jane Eyre*. There is imperialism, there is colonialism and slavery as discourses that crisscross the novel. And over that set of subtext, *Jane Eyre* has embarked on this narrative of romance in this novel. So the empire's colony seems to attack people on the home space and the home space is embodied by *Jane Eyre* and the colonial vengeance seems to be embedded in Bertha Mason.

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The Marriage Plot and Empire

- “In Spivak’s account of the novel, missionary work creates an ideological bridge between the gothic ‘madwoman in the attic’ narrative and the vocational alternative to the marriage plot represented by the St John Rivers story: the glorious deeds of the coloniser will transform ignorant animals into rational human subjects.”

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“In Spivak’s account of the novel, missionary work creates an ideological bridge between the Gothic madwoman in the attic narrative and the vocational alternative to the marriage plot represented by the St. John Rivers story: the glorious deeds of the colonizer will transform ignorant animals into rational human subjects.”

There is this missionary plot in *Jane Eyre*. The missionary plot is centered on St. John Rivers, who is going to embark on a journey to India to perform missionary service for the benefit of the population in the colony. And we are told about the nature of the colonized population through the figure of Bertha Mason. The colonized person would be non-rational, animalistic and almost vampiric. That is the message that is coded within the novel through the figure of Bertha Mason.

Now one can see the connection between the missionary plot and the Gothic plot. The Gothic is a powerful mode because it refracts a lot of concerns in a novel. The Gothic refracts the concerns of the colonized very, very powerfully through the figure of Bertha Mason. There are also connections between the marriage plot and the missionary plot as well. St. John offers marriage to Jane Eyre who rejects it because it seems to be an empty marriage for her. Of course, there is missionary work, good work for the benefit of non-

rational creatures, but it is not a marriage of passion and friendship and it is not a marriage with Rochester.

So the mad woman in the attic plot/ Gothic plot is very powerfully connected to the plot of the empire as well. While missionary service is offered as an alternative to passion to Jane Eyre, she refuses it. She refuses a life of service without passion.

So the missionary plot fails with regard to Jane Eyre and the marriage plot is eliminated of its dissident characteristics. The marriage plot is sanitized in some ways. So that the romantic trajectory, the courtship plot between Rochester and Jane Eyre can come to fruition. For that plot to prosper the colonial presence must be eliminated and it is removed from the home space and once that happens, the marriage plot thrives.

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