

Analysis of the Function of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

This paper chooses Bertha, Mr. Rochester's mad wife as the object of analysis. This woman, always locked in the attic at Thornfield never appears on the stage openly. In fact, she works as another clue paralleling with the plot of the heroine. Bertha and Jane, just represent the two sides of women but are forced to be spiritually split off under patriarchy. They are sisters and comrades in the struggle for women's emancipation.

Key words: Bertha; Mad; Jane; Rochester; Irrational

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INTRODUCTION

As the legal wife of Mr. Rochester, Bertha Mazon never appears on the stage seen by the audience face to face. Throughout the novel, she only exists in the form of laughter, sounds, shadow and a series of accidents. On the first day when Jane went into Thornfield, Bertha declared her existence in a special way.

While I paced softly on, the last I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ears. It was a curious laugh—distinct, formal, mirthless. I stopped. The sound ceased, only for an instant. It began again, louder—for at first, though very distinct, it was very low. It passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to echo in every lonely chamber, though it originated but in one, and I could have pointed out the door whence the accents issued... for the laugh was as tragic, as preternatural a

laugh as any I ever heard; and, but that it was high noon, and that no circumstance of ghostliness accompanied the curious cackling; but that neither scene nor season favored fear, I should have been superstitiously afraid. (Bronte, 2003, p.9)

Only once, when Mr. Rochester and Jane's wedding had to be canceled, the mysterious woman was disclosed before readers,

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell; it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal; but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (p.279)

In Mr. Rochester's eyes, she has "a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw" (p.293). However, Jane seems never to show any hatred or enmity towards her "rival". She tries to stop Mr. Rochester from making the insulting remarks, "You are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: You speak of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad." (p.287)

1. ACCIDENTS

Who is Bertha on earth? What's the function of the mad woman in such a great novel? In the novel, she has made a deep impression on the readers by making several accidents. First, she sets a fire at midnight and nearly burns her husband to death. Second, she attacks her elder brother and nearly kills him with a knife. Third, on the night before Jane's wedding, she crept into Jane's bedroom and tore her wedding veil into two halves. Maybe, all these seem just to be accidents. However, so many times she and Jane stay so near to each other but she does not want to injure her. She is so strong that even Mr. Rochester or her brother cannot possibly control her. The only reason that she does not injure Jane is that she does not want to do so. The insane woman seems to be

clear-minded and makes the accidents on purpose, which reveals her real attitude towards life.

If we want to find Bertha's motive of making the accidents, we have to reread her story. She was born into a rich planter family in Jamaica of West India, beautiful and proud. However, her family has a genetic history of madness and every family member is doomed to break into madness sooner or later. Therefore, her father is eager to marry her off and find a notable family, that is, the Rochester's for her. Mr. Rochester is the second son of the family. According to British laws, only the first son has the right of inheritance. And his father is so niggardly that he does not want his property to be separated, so he finds the marriage for young Rochester. Bertha's father gives her a dowry of 30,000 pounds which is an enormous figure for the time. From the fact that Jane is very satisfied with her salary of 30 pounds a year at Thornfield, we can imagine the actual significance of Bertha's dowry. However, Mr. Rochester gets disappointed with his wife soon after their wedding.

I found her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger... whatever topic I started, immediately received from her a turn at once coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile---when I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled house-hold, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders. (p.292)

However, all these are just Mr. Rochester's one-sided narration. It is very difficult for the readers to know the truth. The only one point the readers are sure of is that Bertha is not happy in the marriage. She tries to kill her husband because she hates the man who cannot bring her the ideal happiness that every woman dreams to gain from marriage. She attempts to kill her brother probably because he has joined the scheme of marrying her off or getting rid of her as a burden at the price of 30,000 pounds. When Bertha crept into Jane's bedroom and found the wedding dress and the veil, what she thought of must not be the dress itself, but marriage. When she tore the veil, she was expressing her desperate attitude towards marriage which has ruined all her life.

2. THE RELATION BETWEEN BERTHA AND JANE

As soon as Jane stepped into Thornfield, Bertha came into the view of readers. The most extraordinary point is that she takes a very special form to exist. Laughter, sounds, shadow and all the accidents she has made show that the narration about Bertha is hidden and unclear. She works as a parallel of Jane in the novel. If Jane's existence is the overt clue of the novel, hers is the other covert clue which helps the author to realize the theme of

the novel. Although she holds a hostile attitude towards her husband and brother, she never intends to hurt Jane while Jane also holds a sympathetic attitude towards Bertha. Superficially the two women do not have any similarities. After all, Jane is easy-going, kind-hearted, generous, independent, self-respected, open-minded and reasonable while Bertha is just the opposite. She is rude, arrogant, rebellious, narrow-minded, degraded, impulsive and unreasonable. However, it seems that there is a special intimacy between the two women since Bertha never wants to hurt Jane and Jane always shows sympathy to Bertha. And if we think over, we may find this woman has something in common with Jane. The mad woman in the attic is just like the little Jane confined to the red chamber where she has suffered and tortured. In other words, Bertha is the miniature of Jane in the childhood when she had no reason at all. In Jane's fantasy, the little Jane who cries, shouts and laughs in the red room has grown up into a mad woman locked in the attic, who cannot get love, respect and is not happy at all. The punishment received in the childhood for losing reason gives Jane a good lesson which she will never forget all life even if she is tempted by love.

Bertha is the counterpart of Jane. She represents the stage of woman's childhood, also the irrational side of woman while Jane represents the rational side. When they are put together, there will be a complete woman. In patriarchal society, under pressure from men, women are spiritually split-off. In order to win equality with men, women have to have their irrationality locked into the attic. Only in this way, can they possibly win the respect from men.

3. RELATION BETWEEN THE TWO WOMEN AND ROCHESTER

Although Mr. Rochester criticizes his wife for her degeneration, he never wants to control himself.

Yet I could not live alone; so I tried the companionship of mistresses. The first I chose was Celine Varens---another of those steps which make a man spurn himself when he recalls them. You already know what she was, and how my liaison with her terminated. She had two successors: an Italian, Giacinta, and a German, Clara; both considered singularly handsome. What was their beauty to me in a few weeks? Giacinta was unprincipled and violent; I tired of her in three months. Clara was honest and quiet; but heavy, mindless, and unimpressible; not one whit to my taste. I was glad to give her a sufficient sum to set her up in a good line of business, and so get decently rid of her. (p.297)

When Rochester comments on the women who have love affairs with him, he is so arbitrary and selfish that these women are just like animals who have no feelings and self-respect. He is just like a monarch who can choose any woman he likes in his kingdom. Faced with such a tyrant, Bertha rebels against him with all her strength

and passion. At midnight, she creeps into her husband's bedroom, sets a fire and attempts to burn him to death. She bites her brother "like a tigress" while Rochester has to "get the knife from her". No doubt, the war between Bertha and patriarchy is public and openly while Bertha behaves as a brave warrior. However, in spite of all the attempts and rebellious deeds, she is locked in the attic. As her rational counterpart, Jane always keeps cool-minded. In fact, just like Bertha, she has been trying to rebel against the patriarchal system with Rochester as the representative. The only difference lies in that Jane makes successful use of her reason and wisdom.

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automation? — a machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! —I have as much soul as you — and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: It is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal — as we are! (p.240)

The quoted dialogue above is one of the most famous one in western literature. At the end of the passage, Charlotte Bronte put forward the most important word for women, that is, "equal". Bertha and Jane, as the two sides of women, are sisters and comrades fighting on the battlefield against patriarchy.

Readers must be deeply impressed by the scene that the first time when Jane encountered Rochester. Rochester is riding on a horse but when he saw Jane, he fell off the horseback. In Jane's descriptions,

The horse followed— a tall steed, and on its back a rider. The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash: it was always alone; and goblins, to my notions, though they might tenant the dumb carcasses of beasts, could scarce covet shelter in the common-place human form. No Gytrash was this—only a traveller taking a short cut to Millcote. He passed, and went on; a few steps, and I turned; a sliding

sound and an exclamation of "What the deuce is to do now?" and a clattering tumble, arrested my attentions. Man and horse were down; they had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway. (p.104)

The Mr. Rochester on the horseback is just the embodiment of men far superior to women. The moment that Rochester fell off the horse symbolizes that the position of men like god will be shaken with the awakening of women's emancipation. When Jane appears within the sight of Rochester, the order of men deciding everything will be broken. Before Jane's appearance, women only have the unreasonable struggle which Bertha is making, which men only regard as women's madness. However, after a series of failures, women have come to realize that only with reason and wisdom, could they win equality and respect from men. However, Jane and Bertha, the spiritually split-off woman will fight as two forces forever, openly and secretly.

SUMMARY

At the end of the novel, Jane and Rochester live happily together. However, it is far from being a satisfactory ending. It can only be called a compromise. Maybe without the money left by Jane's uncle, without the fact that Rochester has got half blind, it is very difficult for the woman writer to accept that poor, common-looking Jane to marry the rich Rochester in spite of so many similarities between the two souls. The mad Bertha has not died in the fire. She has always remained in the subconscious of woman, wild and irrational, which is an inseparable part of woman.

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