

Women in literature

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Literature pre-18th Century and the first wave of gothic literature presented women more like damsels in distress rather than heroines. This mirrored society who often perceived women in need of men for support. Modern gothic literature, however, began to challenge this. Carter's eponymous story, "The Bloody Chamber" is a rewriting of the French folktale "Bluebeard"; This story is of a nobleman who murders his wives in a small room of his archetypal gothic castle. The narrator and the protagonist are a young girl "tricked into betrayal", however, ironically the young girl is saved by her mother, in contrast to the original in which the protagonist is heroically saved by her brother.

Like a typical gothic story, the heroine is introduced as the trapped princess, imprisoned between the cold walls of the old castle, forbidden to access one room, the bloody chamber. Ultimately this proves to be a test of her obedience and the young girl's curiosity is punished and the result is near death.

However, she is saved by her mother. The mother, "without hesitation, raised [the] father's gun, took aim and put a bullet through [the] husband's head". Rachel Fletcher questions that the weapon "belonging to her father, suggests that she is still in need of her father's protection, [reaffirming] the tradition of the father as head of the family". However, when the girl's father "never returned from the wars", her mother had no choice but to fulfill the role of her father. The melodramatic description of the mother on horseback is unquestionably masculine. She is portrayed as a "wild thing", "legs exposed", holding the gun in hand. The mother states that she knew her daughter was at risk as a result of "maternal telepathy". This gives women

an almost supernatural strength in something that would usually be used to suppress them. Subsequently, Carter presents mothers to have an advantage over fathers and therefore in some way superior. Carter's subversive reworking of the typical "man saves woman" story, portrays that women are just as capable of "[raising the gun]", and not the vulnerable character their stereotype suggests. This is also seen in Carter's "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon", a reworking of the traditional tale of "Beauty and the Beast". However, in contrast to the original, it is the female that rescues the male; thus, the reversal of roles shows females to not only be independent but for men even to be reliant on women. After having found wealth in London, the female protagonist, Beauty, returns to the Beast – Mr. Lyon; who without beauty, "could not eat" or "go hunting" and feebly waited for death. The metamorphic portrayal of the man, as an animal and something to be feared, satirizes male chauvinism, which is undermined as he becomes less beast-like in his ability to hunt and kill. Carter's pathetic portrayal of the beast seems to mock the depiction of the man reliant on a woman. As Beauty saves the Beast she tamed his bestial nature and he is transformed into a human male. Therefore, proving that the female protagonist's in Carter's tales are not reliant on men to protect them and are even capable of saving the men.

Like Carter, Bronte also presents Jane Eyre to be independent, in the sense that she is not reliant on a male to survive. However, Eyre is presented as financially independent. During the 19th Century, Victorian women had to endure inequality within marriage and society, whilst men had more stability and financial status. Subsequently, the Victorian woman was often heavily

financially reliant on the husband. In the novel, after the revelation of Rochester's legal wife, Jane decides to leave, choosing independence over richness. Weeks passed, and yet despite Jane being "much exhausted, and suffering greatly" she refuses to return to the "bed [she] had left". Instead, Jane sleeps "on the cold, drenched ground" as the "rain descends". Bronte uses pathetic fallacy to portray the penetrating wind and rain reflect her discomfort and emphasize Jane's somber state of mind. This further highlights Jane's independence, despite great discomfort Eyre refuses to rely on a man to make it better. As a bildungsroman novel, the changes of emotions and maturity of identities as Jane Eyre's struggles through her hardship is evident. As the novel progresses Jane works her way up to a governess – one of the few jobs women could have in the Victorian Era – and earns her own money. Eventually, Jane returns to Mr. Rochester. Patrick Kelleher argues that "[Jane's] acceptance of Rochester sends out a very clear, and very sad message to all readers of this novel; Jane could not overcome her circumstances. She could not thrive independently, because a nineteenth-century woman of her social stature could not be in a position to do so". However, it is obvious she is not returning out of desperation as Kelleher suggests. After circumstances change, and Jane's fortunes change, Jane is able to return to Rochester as an equal. The return is not because she could not thrive on her own or lack of control, but the complete opposite. Jane returns, as his "second self, and best earthly companion", because she loves Rochester rather than because she depends on him. In both, the female is independent and not reliant on a male to solve the problem, like their gender stereotypes, suggest they should.

Both Carter and Bronte establish that women have as much power, if not more, within their relationships with men, defying the patriarchal stereotypes of the society of the time. Carter portrays women to be in control of their sexuality, in order to gain power in relationships, therefore defying the physical stereotype that women's sexuality should be reserved for men's pleasure only. In "The Company of Wolves" Carter explores the portrayal of a strong female protagonist, who uses her sexuality to obtain control from male dominance. During the 1980s the feminist movement cried out for increased rights on sexual harassment and violence, with little progression. It was not unusual for a man to objectify women through sexual harassment, with violence often used as a means of control over women. In contrast, the young girl embraces her sexuality in an act of deception to gain power. Alike the original, the story climaxes with the wolf having attacked and killed the Grandmother. In order to avoid the same fate, the young protagonist, seduces the wolf, in an act of deception – using her sexuality rather than be defined by it. The women's fate is determined by their response to fear. The Grandmother chooses religion as defense and the werewolf mocks, using the blasphemous language "Call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you but it won't do you any good". She is killed, just like the old man at the beginning of the story who was eaten by a wolf after "[singing] to Jesus all day". Carter shows that God cannot save the girl from the wolf and his animal instincts, and uses the Grandmas fear and belief to mock her lack of rationality. The young girl, on the other hand, knows "fear did her no good" and is aware of the control her sexuality grants her. Rather than await salvation from the male woodcutter, like in the original French

version or a hunter in the Brothers Grimm adaption of the tale, the female protagonist gains dominance using her sexuality. She does not fear the wolf, but instead “ took off her scarlet shawl”, “ the color of sacrifices”, and “ feely gave [him a] kiss”. The protagonist is not forced to seduce the wolf but does it out her own free will to gain power. The young girl uses her virginity – her “ immaculate” “ integument flesh” as a sacrifice to gain power. She uses her perceived weakness and vulnerability as a strength. In doing so she “ laughed at him full in the face” as “ she ripped off his shirt”. The outburst of laughter places the young girl in control, and in turn, rejects the wolf’s sadomasochistic plan. The young girl knows she is “ nobody’s meat”, seizing his clothes and throwing them in the fire. Carter’s symbol of “ meat” suggests that masculinity can be as deadly and dangerous to a woman as any carnivore. The allusion to meat reflects the feminist perspective on the representation of women in society, as mere sexualized objects of flesh for the consumption of men. However, the young girl refuses to be defined by her sexuality and uses it for her advantage. The clever act is described, by Kimberly Lau, as more likely a “ script of a traditional pornographic film”. This would suggest that the act was more for male enjoyment and the young protagonist is simply falling into her patriarchal role. However, it should be interpreted that, the shift in focus from the wolf to the young girl, foreshadows the switch in control from this point – “ she bundled up her shawl”, “ she drew her blouse over her head” and “ she combed out her hair”. The repeated use of the pronoun “ she” proves that the female protagonist held control in the situation. The young girl successfully gained

dominance by taking control of her sexuality rather than allow it to be exploited.

Whereas in Carter's collection women used their sexuality to gain power in relationships, Jane Eyre in Bronte's novel gains power in the relationship by refusing to be objectified. During the social context in which "Jane Eyre" is written, the common myth perpetrated by authors and society enforced the idea that the man in the relationship should hold the power. A woman's place was in the home, accommodating for the family. In this view, it would be expected that Mr. Rochester, a man of high stature, would hold the control within the relationship. However, Jane's drive for independence means that she maintains control. Bronte uses jewelry as a symbol of restraint and sexual oppression in the novel to highlight Mr. Rochester's attempt to objectify Jane. Shortly after the pair's engagement, Rochester talks of "certain jewels" he has had sent for Jane. Jane strongly declined them for "jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural", and yet Rochester states he will put the "diamond chain around [her] neck" and "clasp the bracelet around [her] fine wrists". Bronte's imagery creates a sense of imprisonment which only causes Jane's resistance to growing stronger. She alone wants to keep control over her appearance, telling Rochester "don't flatter me". In denying the jewels, Jane Eyre denies Rochester's control over her. Jane merely rejects the idea of being objectified for "the more he brought [her] the more [her] cheek burned with a sense of degradation". The use of jewelry as a symbol of control is also used in Carter's, opening story "The Bloody Chamber". As a wedding gift, the protagonist is presented with "a choker of rubies- like a slit throat". During the French Revolution, Female

French aristocrats wore red ribbons around their necks as a way of protesting the death of those who had lost their lives to the guillotine. Subsequently, the ruby choker, in *The Bloody Chamber*, is ironically used not as a symbol of defiance but control. The choker which not only sexualizes the girl but is also a symbol of restraint and control, foreshadowing the marriage to be restrictive and result in death. Throughout the novel, *Eyre* can be seen to pursue independence and by refusing to marry Rochester, after the revelation of his marriage to Bertha, Jane maintains control over the situation. His attitude towards her refusal reflects the attitude towards women in Victorian society. Women were not deemed capable enough to reject a marriage proposal, as it was considered a woman's purpose to be married. For many rejecting a marriage proposal was seen as rejecting God, and his wishes. This is reflected by Elizabeth Rigby's criticism, who deemed *Jane Eyre* to be "murmuring against God's appointment". However, Jane cannot deny her strong sense of independence and subsequently remains in control of the relationship. Despite this, Jane Violette states that "Mr Rochester controls [Eyre's] life in almost every aspect". Arguably, this was the case at the beginning as Jane was an employee of Mr Rochester, however, as Jane grows in confidence she is no longer controlled by Rochester, and in some sense can be seen to have just as much power as him in the relationship. Ultimately, after the fire, the relationship between the two is rekindled and the novel ends with Jane and Rochester married. Jane states "Reader, I married him". The assertive pronoun "I" suggests that she was in control. Rather than it being "he married me", which would have been expected in a Victorian society, which saw women as passive,

Jane asserts herself; She is the dominant figure in the relationship. At the beginning of the novel, Jane has very little; she has no family, no social rank or fortune, and yet with her strong sense of independence, Jane is able to seek an education and a job. Her ability to express herself and assert her independence, makes her loved by Rochester and gives her power over him.

Both Carter and Bronte present their female protagonists to be psychologically equal to their male counterparts, in contrast to the stereotype of the time. In Carter's "The Tiger's bride" the protagonist defies the traditional stereotype of the emotional women, by choosing to show psychological strength rather than emotion. During the 1980's, despite much progress for women in society, women were still presented, in the media and in literature, to be psychologically inferior to men – with psychological stereotypes such as women to be over-emotional and irrational very much still exists. Strong women of the time, such as the contemporary Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, were denigrated for being psychologically superior to the men they were up against. In response, Carter challenged the stereotype that women were mentally unstable and in fact, pushed the idea that women are psychologically equal. The protagonist of "The tiger's Bride", Beauty, is forced to live with the Beast as a result of a lost bet between him and her father. The next day the Beast shares his "sole desire is to see the pretty young lady unclothed nude". As he asks Beauty "remained standing, "[her] eyes level with [his]". In refusing to sit, the heroine attempts to establish herself as an equal; she shows no fear in front of the beast, instead "let out a raucous guffaw". In doing so, she belittles his request and makes him cry "a tear... of shame". Ironically it is the male in

the narrative that is presented as emotional not the female. Like in “ The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”, Carter twists the original perception to show the heroine to be psychologically equal. Carter uses animalistic metaphors to present how psychological superiority can grant equality. Rather than holding the role of the vulnerable “ lamb”, the heroine transforms into a “ beautiful” tiger, after establishing that “ the lamb must learn to run with the tigers”. The heroine does not deny that she was in a vulnerable position – as “ the lamb” – but rather than be oppressed, uses her psychological strength to “ run with the tiger” and find equality.

Similarly, Bronte establishes that Jane may not be equal in physical or social stature to Mr. Rochester, but she is very much psychologically equal.

Throughout the novel, Mr. Rochester on the most part treats Jane as an equal, evening going as far as to describe Jane as his “ second-self”.

However, Rochester often turns to belittle her physical nature, due to the fact that they are equal in intelligence and mind. During an argument, he states he “ could bend [Jane] with [his] finger and thumb”, referencing her “ weary little wandering feet”. The repeated reference to her vulnerable small physical nature, highlights that is where he feels superior. Bronte makes a clear distinction between psychological and physical equality. Despite the fact that Jane is a woman and is far smaller and weaker than Mr. Rochester, she is still able to think and feel just like him. At the time in which “ Jane Eyre” was written, the novel was seen to be so revolutionary that Bronte published “ Jane Eyre” under the male pseudonym, Currer Bell. Some critics argue that the use of the male name undermines Bronte’s message that women can be psychologically equal to a man. Kimber Trivett states that “

the adoption of a male pseudonym in itself reflects an underlying social prejudice towards females". This is clearly seen, as during the 1800's it was not uncommon for female writers to utilize male names in order to write about topics deemed unfeminine. However, therefore it does not undermine her message that women can be psychologically equal to men, it strengthens it. Bronte published her revolutionary novel, in order to prove such and it would hardly have been possible under a female's name due to the stigma at the time. Ultimately, in both novels females are portrayed to be psychologically equal to men in both intelligence and drive; subsequently, both texts defy the stereotype that women are less mentally stable than men.

The use of narrative voice within "Jane Eyre" allows Bronte to defy the stereotype that women should be silenced. As a first-person narrative the novel is a personal account, allowing Jane Eyre's story to be heard. During the Victorian era, women have deemed merely the property of their husbands, and subsequently, the woman's right to voice her opinion was suppressed. Therefore, for Jane, addressing the reader becomes an escape from a patriarchal society. From the beginning of the novel, it is evident that Jane was intent on telling her story. She states "speak I must". The directive "must" expresses her obligation and drive to "speak" and be heard. Subsequently, Bronte establishes the women's right to be heard as a necessity rather than a privilege. Bronte's pedagogic approach, when addressing the reader creates an almost didactic tone. Jane's addresses to the reader are with the intention of informing the reader and encouraging them to listen and learn from her story and her growth. After leaving

Thornfield, Jane finds herself homeless. When recounting her ordeal Eyre states “ Do not ask me, reader, to give a minute account of that day”. The past tense nature of her narrative highlight that she wants the reader not to focus on her past struggles but on her ability to grow from it. Her address to the reader reflects her urge to speak and be heard during a time in which women were silenced. With the gift of speech, Jane is also given a story, she is enabled to tell her life and say listen to my words. In effect, Bronte wrote a first-person novel in order to grant a voice to women in a society where women were silenced and encourage people to listen