

The burden of feminism in jane eyre

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Two popular feminist theorists, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have said in their essay "The Madwoman in the Attic" that there is a trend in literary history that places women characters into one of two stereotypes: either the "passive angel" or the "active monster". The "angel in the house" image is one of a domesticated woman whose ultimate goal is to please and tend to her husband (Gilbert 55-57). Jane Eyre, while often described as a strong female character, obviously sets herself well into this stereotype. Early in the novel, she is sent to be educated at the Lowood Institute and earns an education in feminine submission, no doubt, as later she seeks employment as the ultimate example of domestic subservience—a governess. It is obvious that Charlotte Brontë intends to convey Jane in the role of the "angel" as Jane willfully engages in her governess role and tends to Rochester's wishes to gain his acceptance. The more Jane falls in love with Rochester, the further he plays with her emotions, and any feminist ideals she may have demonstrated as a rebellious child begin to give way to inferiority and compliance. Jane fully takes on the role of the angel as she essentially believes herself to be weaker and unworthy of his love. This is common throughout the novel, as Jane is often placing upon herself a mental stigma that she is a lesser person and does not deserve happiness. Some particular "angelic" instances of Jane's are demonstrated through her subservience to Rochester throughout the fire scene, Mr. Mason's being bitten and the commands she is given to care for him, and the end of the novel in which she aids him back to health. (Brontë ch. 15, 20, 38)

Rochester's role in the novel, and in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is that of the classifier of images, as he literally refers to Jane as his "angel" and utilizes

his patriarchal power as a way to label her. The monster, in the case of Jane Eyre, would be the character of Bertha Mason. In most cases, the stereotype of the “ monster” is actually representative of the darker side of the angel. (Gilbert 359-361) In the case of Brontë’s novel, Bertha Mason provides the binary to nearly every characteristic of Jane’s personality—she is the rage to Jane’s repression, the rebellion to her tolerance, the “ big woman...of virile force” to the “ poor, obscure, plain, and little” Jane (Brontë ch. 26, 23). Even their respective marriages to Rochester are opposing—Bertha’s for sex and money and Jane’s for love and equality. Bertha essentially is the psychic split between the woman who submits to the patriarch and the lunatic who rebels. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the “ madwoman in the attic” stereotype is achieved when a woman character rejects the role to be subservient to the husband and society and is “ sexually fallen” (Gilbert 355-356). This demonizes the woman and disavows her place in society. Bertha dramatically exemplifies this as she refuses to play into the “ perfect wife” role for Rochester. In return, he strips her of her humanity, places her under the image of an animal, and literally locks her away from the world. Rochester’s chief role as setting the stereotypes for these two women through labeling is accomplished in Bertha’s instance as he willfully alters her given birth name. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha is actually introduced as Antoinette Mason. However, in attempting to place his patriarchal power over Antoinette and to tame her “ monstrous” tendencies, Rochester dehumanizes her and gives her a name of his own creation. In accepting this new moniker, Bertha is acquiescing to her role not only as the “ madwoman in the attic”, but also as the colonized other. (Spivak 249-251) Rochester

certainly utilizes his power of patriarchal sexual desire over her as his relationship with Antoinette is largely based on erotic relations. "I watched her die many times in my way, not in hers," he says regarding their communal relations (Rhys 55). The fact that most of their relationship was conducted through sexual communication demonstrates Rochester's arching of power over Antoinette, now Bertha, through sexual dominance. Furthermore, it solidifies her placement as the "monster" in that she is now "sexually fallen." The feminist theory of the "angel in the house" v. the "madwoman in the attic" is important to both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Jane as the protagonist and Bertha as the antagonist demonstrate the characteristics engrained in these stereotypes and further play into the patriarchal society's ideals. Jane is essentially intended to be a strong feminist character, which is indeed demonstrated through her evasion of Rochester's sexual advances, eventual gain of financial independence, and marriage to Rochester (her own power made evident through the statement "Reader, I married him"). (Brontë ch. 38) Despite her ultimate independence of self, Jane's role as the angel stereotype is undeniable. The role of Bertha Mason is one of a dehumanized animal, a creature intended only for Rochester to utilize his power and dominate. It is interesting to note that while both of these stereotypes ultimately give up their power to the patriarch, it is only the angel who has the ability to possibly find independence. (Cho 107) This is perhaps due to the idea that Bertha is, in fact, the repressed side of Jane's personality. Bertha can never find her place in society as she has been stripped fully of her humanity; the only way for her to escape her fate is through death. With the death of her monstrous

side, Jane can now follow her own will and realize her identity, thus achieving her happy ending and expanding outside the image of submission and into one of feminine independence. The “angel” v. “monster” dichotomy heavily influenced female writers of the Victorian era. In response to the pressures of being female writers in a literary patriarchy, these writers often felt that they were figuratively crippled by the debilitating options their culture offered them. This often led them to transfer their senses of “anxiety of authorship” into their novels’ characters as physical and mental illnesses. Throughout the nineteenth century, most mental illnesses were thought to be “female diseases” of maladjustment to the social environment, and eventually even served as bedrock to the definition of femininity. (Gilbert 53-78). Anorexia, one of the most prevalent “female diseases”, is often seen on the surface as being caused by vanity and low self esteem. This may be true; however, a more deep-lying cause can be found in the woman’s wish to literally reduce her body in the hopes of achieving invisibility or escaping into death. It is not a stretch to say that Charlotte Brontë expressed her anxiety of authorship and feelings of imprisonment in her own gender by creating Jane as a character attempting to escape through the physical disorder of anorexia. In fact, the “angel in the house” character in literature often suffered from literal sickness in an attempt to demonstrate her conditioned femininity. (Gilbert 55) The scene in the Red Room is the first instance in which we see Jane’s analytical view of her self and her situation in the patriarchal society. As she views her image in a “great looking glass” she meditates on the injustices of her life and determines to find a way out. (Newman 32-35) She wishes for “some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable

oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (Brontë ch. 2). After realizing her acts of revolution against her oppressors only lead her into further trouble, Jane learns to embrace the role of the “ angel” and takes on the feminine ideal of subservience, invisibility, and suppression. She learns at the Lowood Institute that there is a sort of social righteousness in female starvation, as Mr. Brocklehurst often starves the young women in an attempt to build character and nobility. Jane soon learns to embrace her newfound virtues of being little, plain, genteel, and obscure in society. She utilizes her small size and self-inflicted invisibility to seek out small recessed spaces in the scenery and retreat unto herself and her own thoughts. In doing so, she is playing into the socially acceptable female role of a “ proper lady” who “ must not actively solicit the look or engage in obvious display” (Newman 33). It is not enough to simply note Jane is small, pale, and plain. It is important to understand that Jane is taking on anorexia as a way to disappear and hide from the overarching oppression of both the Victorian society and her own personal situations. Unfortunately, through this process of coping, she sets upon herself a hazardous physical illness. As Brontë’s novel spans the course of one female’s life and growth, we are able to chart Jane’s developing a poor body and becoming wan and sickly. Her appearance therefore is often at odds with the physical descriptions of the many other desirable female characters in the novel — such as Blanch Ingram and Celine Varnes. Not only does Jane not fit in with the upper class or patriarchy, but, with her continual self-deprivation, she causes herself to stand out even within her own suppressed gender. Eventually, Jane’s continual starvation and repression of

hunger creates the psychic split we see between her and Bertha. Bertha's madness is representational of the anger, rage, and hunger Jane wishes to express, and Bertha's multiple attacks and outbursts can be seen as the physical acts of Jane's inward concerns. For instance, Thornfield is representational to Jane of her own angelic servitude and Rochester's socially given power. Bertha later sets out in a rage to destroy the house and herself almost as if she were acting out Jane's own desire to be rid of Rochester's mastery. (Gilbert 360) It seems that Jane Eyre is therefore an almost cautionary tale of how one's own repression of these unsavory emotions can erupt and ultimately result in death and destruction. Setting Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason into Gilbert and Gubar's theory of "angels" vs. "madwomen" reveals a great deal of potential feministic subtext in Charlotte Brontë's novel. The notion of the suppression of the patriarchy was a heavy influence on Brontë and is manifest in her female characters. Jane Eyre, a clever, independent woman, reverts herself to submission and subservience to be the "angel of the house" for Rochester. While she clearly is his mental equal and moral superior, the socially important qualities such as money and gender ultimately leave her as his inferior. Bertha Mason is even further substandard as she lacks the ability to control her own morality and mind; she is for that reason dubbed the "madwoman" and stripped of all her human rights. The binary opposition of the two women concretizes a psychic split that, ironically, connects them: Jane is the angel only because Bertha is the monster. Jane continually searches for invisibility and safety against the patriarchal world by seeking solace through anorexia. She utilizes the disease as a way to repress her hunger, anger, and rage and thus be the

perfect “ angel in the house.” Without the release of an outward manifestation of her anger—as seen in Bertha—Jane could not set the feminine example that Brontë intended for her novel.