

Becoming Jane Eyre: Getting Rid of The Androgynous Shadow

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During the time when *Jane Eyre* was written, England was working toward being at the height of its empire, with ideas of colonization and empire providing a “frame for England itself, a way of knowing what it was to be English” (Hall 180). Throughout Bronte’s novel, Jane and Rochester’s relationship is defined by their spiritual connection, grounded in a strong sense of English spirit. However, Jane’s role as governess at Thornfield creates her a class androgyny, performing work like a “middle-class mother” but like “both a working-class woman and man in the wages she received” (Poovey 857). Jane’s inferiority to Rochester due to this androgyny prevents their spiritual equality. In this way, Jane is similar to that of Rochester’s first wife, Bertha Mason who, due to her identity being Creole, is made racially androgynous. By virtue of her initial position as the daughter of a wealthy West Indian slave-owner, it can be argued that Bertha is to a certain extent colonizer rather than colonized before her marriage to Rochester. This idea is explored in Jean Rhys novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, an adaptation of Bertha’s story, when a servant girl named Amelie sings “the white cockroach she buy young man” (109). This idea that Bertha is the colonizer rather than the colonized is interesting, considering her position, and despite her racial ambiguity throughout the novel, as Bronte “stops short of using either “white” or “coloured”, “mulatto” or “black” to describe her, however, the Creole Bertha Mason Rochester’s racial classification remains unclear” (Berman 123). It is only when Rochester brings Bertha to England, essentially colonizing her through the movement of transatlantic trade, that she becomes physically imprisoned in the patriarchal house. In this essay, I will argue that Bertha Mason represents Jane’s anxieties about patriarchal oppression, as she strives to become an independent woman. Bertha shares the same androgyny as Jane, however whilst Jane obtains a class androgyny, Bertha has a racial androgyny.

Bronte grounds Jane’s identity in a strong sense of what it meant to be English during the time the novel was written, when the “authoritative middle-class subject emerged as white” (McKee 67).

Despite Jane's class androgyny in her role as a governess, she claims equality with Rochester via their spirits, stating prior to their engagement that she has "as much soul as [him]" and that her spirit addresses his "spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave and we stood at God's feet, equal, - as we are!" (161). Jane's assertion that herself and Rochester are "equal" comes on the basis of their intellectual and spiritual connections rather than class relations. For example, when the two characters meet on Hay Lane, Jane associates Rochester immediately with the folklore tale of the "Gytrash" (74), and he later tells her that he thought her to "have rather the look of another world" (77). Rochester then goes on to ask Jane whether she were waiting for the "men in green" (77), elves and gnomes from old English folklore that dressed in green to symbolize their affinity with the natural world. Jane does not actually disagree with Rochester's statement in the novel, and throughout she identifies her "free spirit with nature, with culture, and with England" (McKee 69). This is most clearly evident when considering the subject of her paintings, which she shows Rochester toward the beginning of their acquaintance. Upon presenting the paintings to Rochester, she comments on their composition, inspired by her "spiritual eye" (79). The reader can find within these paintings biblical and spiritual allusions, such as Jane's ability to draw the Greek "Latmos" simply out of her mind's eye. It is Rochester that draws the conclusion that the image he is looking at is in fact Latmos, the famous setting of a Greek legend where Selene first fell in love with Endymion, suggesting that he shares this same spirituality as Jane and identifying an underlying connection between the two. Rochester comments on the paintings, claiming that the "thoughts are elfish" (80), and begins to name Jane elf, fairy and sprite many times throughout the novel. Jane and Rochester's immediate spiritual connections both on Hay Lane and within the content of Jane's paintings allude to the tales of old English folklore, embodying the spirits of Bessie's story, an "alienated dimension of Englishness" in a world of encroaching modernity, reappearing among "certain socially marginal characters" (McKee 70). This alienated sense of Englishness, existing in an old English spirituality, allow Rochester and Jane to disconnect from the material world, with Jane telling Rochester that "wherever you are is my home" (156). Thus, as Jane's authoritative middle-class subject emerges as English, and thus white, whiteness can be read to "assume identity as an abstract, disembodied quality - of spirit and of mind - while "dark" persons are defined by material and bodily properties" (McKee 68).

Therefore, Jane's anxieties about marriage, about becoming material by becoming patriarchal property, manifest in the "dark" form of Bertha Mason. When Jane first encounters Bertha, she describes her physically as "fearful and ghastly" with a "discoloured" and "savage" face, with "swelled and dark" lips (181). It is clear from her introduction that Bertha presents an excess that is neither

masculine nor feminine. Although Jane likens Bertha to a woman, the figure is “tall and large” with “thick dark hair” (181), clearly contrasting the slight and fair Jane who embodies the English spirit. As well as this, Bertha’s physical excess is also clear on her face, her “swelled and dark” lips signifying her distance from English heritage. Indirect pronouns such as “that” and “it” also permeate Jane’s initial description of Bertha, suggesting that she cannot assign a gender to the figure and isolating “it” to an unfamiliar Other. Moreover, Jane’s assertion that Bertha’s face was “discoloured” prevents her race being determined; “Uncertainty about whether Bertha is or is not white marks the impurity Victorians assigned to colonial whiteness” (McKee 67). Thus, Bertha’s gender androgyny and racial ambiguity are linked. Likewise, Jane, by refusing to categorize Bertha as a certain race despite reader assumptions that she was white, is allowed to assert authority over her, establishing “hierarchies within whiteness” (Thomas 12). This is particularly clear in the way Jane discusses Bertha, obtaining authority over how the reader realizes the figure from the perspective of her first-person narration. Bronte uses reader knowledge of the Creole stereotype that pervaded Victorian England to emphasize Bertha’s material associations, and uses this to ““disassociate” a pure English race from its corrupt West Indian line” (Sharpe 46). On describing Bertha’s heritage, Rochester states that Bertha came from “a mad family”, and that in particular “her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard” (186). Bronte’s use of the definitive “the” to describe the “Creole” highlights the stereotype she is evoking, to assert a sense of colonial control over how Bertha is perceived. The interlinking ideas of drunkenness and madness in Rochester’s description of the figure of “the Creole” also links this racial image to the prominent anxieties surrounding modernity at the time, as sinful acts such as drunkenness were viewed as the “inevitable consequences of the progress of “civilization”” (Gupta 88). As Rochester and Jane’s roles are those of civilizers, their categorization of Bertha in this stereotype allows for a greater social control over her. Both concepts, drunkenness and madness, evoke ideas of excess, by which Bertha is physically represented by Jane’s description of her. These associations between Bertha and “material corruption” can also be linked to a “corruption of the spirit that ensues when material considerations – both Rochester’s interest in Bertha’s fortune and his own sensuality – overpower his judgement and cause him to marry her” (McKee 71). Rochester expresses to Jane his lack of spiritual connection to Bertha, stating that he found her tastes “obnoxious” and her cast of mind “singularly incapable of being led to anything higher” (195), this idea of progressing to a “higher” sense of mind correlating to spiritual progress. Therefore, it was solely Bertha’s material assets that caused him to marry her. This pattern recurs when Rochester discusses his other mistresses, Bertha Mason is a geographical type also manifested in Rochester’s other relationships, his “series of European mistresses, each conforming to

a hackneyed national stereotype” (Berman 123). This suggests that there is something different about Jane and Rochester’s romance, that the sense of English spirit that connects them, allows their relationship to transcend material boundaries. Taking on the role of colonizer through her description of Bertha Mason, Jane assures herself of her Englishness and therefore spiritual connection herself and Rochester share. However, Rochester is associated with the material burdens of Bertha Mason, making them materially unequal, his spirit corrupted perhaps by this material excess he obtains in the form of Bertha. After learning of Bertha’s existence, and that her marriage to Rochester was “for sex, for money, for everything but love and equality” (Gilbert 793), Jane’s anxieties regarding Rochester’s material power over her manifest in the form of his materially excessive wife. Jane uses her natural freedom, associated with empire and the “natural” Englishness she possesses, to thus escape the materiality of marriage.

Moreover, Jane uses animalistic imagery when describing Bertha to emphasize her own role as civilizer, defining her as “other” through her animalistic depiction of her. For example, upon first seeing Bertha in the attic, Jane describes her as “snatch[ing] and growl[ing] like some strange wild animal” (187). The adjective “strange” connotes that this creature is unlike any Jane has encountered before, suggesting perhaps that she does not represent an animal that is native to England, thus emphasizing her sense of foreignness. Moreover, Bertha is not simply an animal, but an animal “covered with clothing”, it’s “grizzled hair, wild as a mane” (187). Jane’s inability to define Bertha as either human or beast creates a colonial language reminiscent of ‘savages’, in which the human figure is reduced by their relations to the animal kingdom and inability to fully become civilized, justifying the right of the English “civilizers” to assert control over them. However, Jane’s description of Bertha as “the clothed hyena” (187) incites an aspect of fear. Choosing to represent Bertha as a predatory animal, such as the hyena, highlights the threat of the existence of such uncivilized beings existing in England. If Rochester’s marriage to Bertha resulted in his spiritual corruption, then the threat of the foreign “Other” to the empire has proven itself very real. During this period, “works like *Jane Eyre* cleared a space for a new female subjectivity but did so only “by grounding ‘woman’s mission’ in the moral and racial superiority of the colonist as civilizer”” (Sharpe 28); the power Jane is able to possess within her relationship with Rochester, then, originates from the privileged power of her race. However, as Jane is not able to effectively colonize Bertha, due to the Bertha’s racial androgyny, the androgynous shadow haunts her, preventing her from obtaining the equality she desires.

It is interesting to note that Jane’s attempts to animalize Bertha, and make her the androgynous “it”, are resonant of Mrs. Reed’s treatment of Jane earlier in the novel. When Jane goes to visit her

aunt on her deathbed, Mrs. Reed, delirious, tells Jane of how she hated her as a child, stating “I hated it [Jane] the first time I set eyes on it” (145). Mrs. Reed’s ostracization of Jane, however, comes as a result of her class inferiority to her relations. In the early chapters of the novel, when Jane is at Gateshead, her Aunt Reed describes her as a “rat” and “cat”. These small animals diminish Jane’s position as representative of vermin within the Reed household, as Jane is not socially equal to the Reed family and yet financially dependent on them. Moreover, “rat” and “cat” are both English animals, so one receives a sense of domestic ostracization rather than racial ostracization. The small animals reflect her small stature, which suggests her lack of wealth in comparison to the hearty and full Reed children, presenting her as parasitic for, “as long as Jane remains financially dependent she remains both outside the Reed’s family and outside their social circle” (Peters 60). Aunt Reed also states that when Jane addresses her directly as a young child, she felt “fear as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice” (152). Describing Jane as both an “animal” and obtaining the voice of a “man” creates clear associations between Jane’s androgyny and her ambiguous class role in the Reed household. Through her relations, Jane is both tenuously tied to the Reed family and yet ranked “less than a servant” (6), highlighting how her liminal class position permeates her character from birth.

Jean Rhys explores these parallels between Bertha and Jane more keenly in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, exploring the life of Bertha Mason before she marries Rochester; “In Rhys’ hands the Creole heiress has much in common with the fiery little governess who becomes Rochester’s second wife” (Cowart 49). In her re-writing of Bertha’s story, Rhys mirrors Bertha’s upbringing very similarly to Jane’s, both girls orphaned and sent to reformatory schools in their early lives. Whilst Jane is deemed an animal by the Reed family, as previously discussed, due to her class inferiority, Bertha is deemed a “white cockroach” many times by various black characters in Spanish Town throughout the novel. Whilst cockroaches are thought to represent adaptability, this label is used ironically by the malicious callers to emphasize the Creole’s inability to adapt to West Indian society, due to tensions left behind after the abolition of slavery. Bertha’s racial ambiguity, that prevents her from fully being accepted by either the white or black communities in Spanish Town, is mirrored in Jane’s inability to be accepted as either servant or gentry at both Gateshead and Thornfield. However, whilst Jane is able to alter her class position, Bertha is ultimately confined to a racially ambiguous role of the “white cockroach”.

Furthermore, “Both girls come into a fortune and “relations,” but where Antoinette’s , [Antoinette “Bertha” Mason], fortune makes her the victim of a fortune hunter, Jane’s makes her independent enough to approach the same fortune hunter – Rochester – as an equal.” (Cowart 50).

The relations that Bertha and Jane encounter are very different, as Bertha's stepfather, Mr. Mason, is a West Indian Planter and Merchant from England. His role as Englishman and Merchant intertwine when Mason helps arrange Bertha's marriage to Rochester, passing her wealth from one Englishman to another. This aids representations of Bertha as the colonized, here suffering both a racial and gendered colonization. Before Mr. Mason's arrival in Spanish Town Bertha was largely independent, however after her stepfather aids her marriage to Rochester she is no longer entitled to her fortune and eventually finishes physically imprisoned in England. Even when Jane is at Thornfield, the role of governess she assumes keeps her trapped in a position of class ambiguity that prevents her rising to be equal with Rochester. Sandra Gilbert suggests that "Women in Jane's world, acting as agents for men, may be the keepers of other women. But both keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains." (789). Thus, despite Jane being able to utilize the "hierarchies of whiteness" existing within the novel, she is still ultimately oppressed in the patriarchal environment of Thornfield Hall. Bronte subtly hints that Jane understands this to be her position during a game of charades, where Rochester and his party must act out the word "bridewell", the name of a famous prison (116). They decide to separate the images, beginning with that of a wedding ceremony to denote "bride". The links here between "bride" and "bridewell" foreshadows Bertha Mason's imprisonment after her marriage, and suggests that Jane understands the patriarchal oppression she would be exposed to, if she entered into a marriage with Rochester unequal. Throughout Bronte's narrative, Jane tries to escape the imprisonment she has carried with her since her time in the Red Room at the beginning of the novel. In order to avoid this same kind of economic dependency in marriage, due to her lower-class role, Jane must escape her marriage to Rochester – Bertha's mirrored imprisonment proving only the harsh truth of marriage.

It is on the point of marriage where Bertha and Jane's stories, thus, begin to digress; both Rhys and Bronte make a wider comment about the patriarchal oppression on women, which Jane is able to escape. Jane's anxieties toward marriage seem to stem from her understanding of the lack of equality between herself and Rochester, despite her claim that their spirits are equal. Sandra Gilbert suggests that it is due to Rochester's previous sexual experience, and marriage, that himself and Jane cannot be equal. She suggests that his "puzzling transvestism" when dressing up as Sibyl, the female gypsy, "may be seen as a semiconscious attempt to reduce the sexual advantage his masculinity gives him", however himself and Jane are both able to "recognize the hollowness of such a ruse" (792). When encountering the gypsy woman, Jane first describes her face as, "all brown and black" (124). Returning to an earlier idea posed that darkness in *Jane Eyre* represents materiality, then, this line highlights Jane determining the materiality of Rochester's disguise, and therefore that it is unable to alter their spiritual alignment.

Moreover, the woman Rochester impersonates is of a much lower social standing to himself, suggesting that he is perhaps attempting to obtain this same class androgyny that Jane possesses in her role as governess. However, as this ruse fails, it highlights that at the time of the novel's composition, "social elites understood class difference as moral and not merely economic phenomena" (Griffin 74). As his ruse is material, Rochester is unable to alter his integral morality that comes with his class. Jane's inferiority to Rochester therefore cannot be solved by marriage, as it would be a marriage in which he had the social and sexual advantage. This is typical of the Bronte novels, defying the popular domestic genre conventions of the era to challenge the patriarchal order. They instead "transpose these excessive conflicts and desires into a psychological register – harnessing their power to a new kind of plot" (Berman 124). The psychological register that Berman refers to is perhaps the way that Jane's anxieties toward this inequality once more can be read as manifesting in Bertha, most pertinent on the evening of her wedding.

Jane's anxiety about herself and Rochester's sexual inequality is particularly potent on the eve of her wedding. When Bertha enters Jane's room the night before Jane and Rochester are due to be married, she tears her veil, an act which many critics, most notably Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have suggested represents Jane's unconscious desire to not marry Rochester. What is more, however, is that Jane, upon seeing Bertha in this scene, deems the figure she sees as remindful of the "foul German spectre - the Vampyre" (181). Ideas from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* regarding concepts of vampirism as "generated by racial enervation and the decline of the empire" (Arata 465), can be read in Bertha's racial impurity and androgyny as the figure of the Creole. Bronte's use of the mythical creature, creates Bertha as English invader, especially considering the assumed "impurity" of her blood as a Creole woman. This again conceptually links Bertha to the role of colonizer and yet simultaneously justifies her oppression. Moreover, the figure of the female vampire was often thought to represent repressed female sexual desires, giving her the penetrative power usually attributed to men. The female vampire possessed both "those features typically figured as feminine for a Victorian audience: beauty, weakness, and a general languor, as well as those typically figured as masculine: sexual desire, strength and power over others" (Wisker 153). The sexual power Bertha possesses over Rochester in his version of their courtship is a prime example of this, claiming that she "flattered" him and "lavishly displayed" her charms throughout her seduction, using her sexual prowess to "secure" him (195). Although the vampire wasn't to become a prominent figure in gothic literature until later in the century, the underpinning attitude is reflective of racial prejudices in the 19th century, aiding the reading of Bertha as an androgynous figure. Though these ideas of vampirism were not directly represented in literature

until a later date, the ideology behind them were nonetheless in circulation. Gothic literature was thought to expose the tensions between “the conventional order and the demonized Other” (Wisker 153), therefore the genre of Bronte’s text lends itself to the exploration of Jane’s desire to be married and yet anxiety of the oppression she will face in this patriarchal institution.

Jean Rhys highlights the power Rochester exerts over Bertha in their marriage in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She writes from the position of the outsider from the outset of her novel, emphasizing Bertha’s ostracization in Spanish Town, due to her previously discussed racial ambiguity. However, even when the narration switches to that of Bertha’s unnamed husband, the reader gets a sense of the patriarchal authority he exerts as English colonizer. Rochester’s name is never revealed to the reader in the novel, simply that he is English, allowing parallels to be drawn between Bertha’s marriage narrative and a colonial narrative in which the English figure possesses the most power. This is an important concept to consider in the following scene from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when Bertha asks Rochester “Why did you make me want to live?”, to which Rochester replies “Because I wished it” (Rhys 97). This line suggests that Rochester has power over Bertha’s life now, he is completely in control of her. In what should be a potentially romantic exchange, Rhys undercuts ideas of love with the dominance and possession of the patriarchal “I”. Bertha goes on to question what would happen if Rochester didn’t wish her to be alive, which manifests in her imprisonment at Thornfield. In her decision to jump from the roof of Thornfield, Bertha rids herself of this patriarchal control over her life, claiming in *Wide Sargasso Sea* that it is something that she “must” do. Suicide was deemed a “male activity” during this time, therefore experts “simultaneously labelled women who killed themselves as “masculine” (Kushner 20-1). Rather than contributing to Bertha’s androgyny however, this masculine act allows Bertha to claim a position on the patriarchal hierarchy that once oppressed her, reclaiming power back over her own body and life. In her escape from Thornfield, Jane similarly escapes this patriarchal oppression, effectively destroying her wealth and therefore her claims to class. She rids herself of association with the name Jane Eyre, and thus her ties to patriarchal inheritance, allowing her metaphorical rebirth in terms of her class status. Although the novel does not provide an exact timeline of how Jane and Bertha’s stories interlink after Jane’s escape from Thornfield, it can be assumed that Bertha’s death correlates somewhat with Jane’s inheritance of her fortune. By destroying her androgynous self in both senses, Jane is able to reclaim her class position as Jane Eyre, and progress to becoming a financially independent woman. Rather than becoming sexually mature, Jane has become economically mature and reached independence, allowing her to finally be spiritual equals with Rochester. This is expressed when Jane hears Rochester calling to her at the moment when, by a sublime force, he was actually

calling out to her from miles away (269), highlighting their spiritual connection as transcending material boundaries. Additionally, when Jane returns to Thornfield, a server at the inn which Jane visits begins to recount to her, her own tale, stating that he had often wished “that Miss Eyre had been sunk in the sea before she came to Thornfield Hall” (274). It is clear that the man does not recognize Jane, or associate her at all with her previous position as governess, highlighting her material transition as well as her spiritual.

Written at a time when the “increasing effects of industrialism and capitalism coincided with the process that undermined and reinstated gender identities” (Godfrey 854), Charlotte Bronte explores gender fluidity in terms of race and class, as Jane negotiates her position in a patriarchal universe. Jane’s bid for equality, despite her initial intellectual and spiritual connection with Rochester, can thus only be negotiated within these terms. Through Bertha’s narrative, Bronte comments on the realities of marriage in Victorian England, using Jane’s changing identity from Eyre to Elliot and back again to negotiate a narrative of progress that is liberated of the patriarchal dependency assumed in marriage. In order to become Jane Eyre for the second time, Jane must be rid of her androgynous shadow, manifested in the form of Bertha, in order to achieve economic security. It is only then that she can truly approach Rochester as equal.

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