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ENGLISH

The Fallen Woman and the Corrupt Aristocrat

The Ideological Function of Céline Varens and Blanche
Ingram in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Title: The Fallen Woman and the Corrupt Aristocrat: The Ideological Function of Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to examine how the minor characters Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram are depicted in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The essay's claim is that the minor characters are created to be bad female characters in order to highlight the protagonist Jane Eyre's position as a female role model and an independent character. By conducting a combination between a contextualized and a resistant reading, the essay exemplifies how the depiction of Céline and Blanche influence the character Jane and describes what effect this has on the general opinion of the novel. In extension, the essay argues that it is problematic to create an emancipated female character at the expense of other female characters and thereby questions the readings of *Jane Eyre* as a novel seeking emancipation for all women.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, Blanche Ingram, Céline Varens, Victorian stereotypes, Gender, Class, The Fallen Woman, Corrupt Aristocracy

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Theory and Method	3
2.1 Theory	3
2.2 Method	4
3. Analysis	6
3.1 The Ideological Function of Céline and Blanche	6
3.2 Contextualizing Céline Varens	7
3.3 Céline and Jane	9
3.4 Contextualizing Blanche Ingram	12
3.5 Blanche and Jane	14
3.6 Problematizing the Ideological Function	16
4. Conclusion.....	18
5. List of References.....	20

1. Introduction

On the back of my 2012 Penguin copy of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the novel is described as a "story of a defiant, fiercely intelligent woman who refuses to accept her appointed place in society". The interpretation of Jane Eyre as a female character seeking emancipation within the Victorian patriarchal society has become the dominant reading of novel and thus, Brontë's protagonist has become a symbol for women's refusal to abide by female norms of submission.

However, despite the impact this reading has had, I argue that it is also important to problematize the character Jane's status as a female role model since her independence is always presented in contrast to something - or rather someone - else. While Brontë's aim with the novel was to shed light on the woman question, her focus seems to be solely on the white middle class wives and mothers. Thus, in order to free Jane from patriarchy, Brontë ensnares minorities, lower class- and immoral women seemingly without any hesitation. Consequently, in contrast to the seemingly progressive Jane, the other female characters in the novel remain static within gender and class structures. I argue that while Jane is created to be "a defiant, fiercely intelligent woman", female characters like Céline Varens, Blanche Ingram and Bertha Mason are depicted as the very opposite in order to emphasize the progressive and desirable characteristics in Brontë's carefully constructed protagonist.

In this essay, I will argue the importance of acknowledging this act of projection of less desirable characteristics onto "lesser" women by focusing on how the minor characters are created to embody certain Victorian stereotypes. Previously, research has focused on the colonial treatment of Bertha Mason and my essay will continue on in the same tradition by examining two other female characters from *Jane Eyre*, the French dancer Céline Varens and the beautiful Lady Ingram. By reading the novel with these characters in mind and with the help of my theory and method, I will argue that Céline and Blanche are sacrificed in order to create the mythical character Jane and her legendary reputation. In order to describe how this process is carried out, I have four research questions that I will respond to in the analysis portion of this essay.

- How are Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram portrayed in *Jane Eyre*?
- What effect does comparing these characters to the protagonist Jane have on our perception of the characters?
- Which characteristics are emphasized in Jane as a result of the comparison?

- Why is this comparison problematic when today reading *Jane Eyre* as a novel which criticizes patriarchy and advocates female emancipation?

2. Theory and Method

2.1 Theory

Jane Eyre is a work of fiction which has been extensively and critically analyzed through various different perspectives since its publication. The vast amount of previous research emphasizes how important and influential the novel has been over the years and that it remains so to this day. In my essay, I will continue the critical research by focusing on a relatively underexplored part of *Jane Eyre*. To do this, I will build on previous relevant and influential research to establish my place in the discourse. Because the starting point of my essay is to examine the portrayal of different kinds of women it will be crucial that the theory I choose has an intersectional perspective and therefore perceives how “various forms of discrimination centered on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, and other forms of identity, do not work independently but interact to produce particularized forms of social oppression” (Oxford Reference, 2013 Online).

Firstly, most of the dominant readings of *Jane Eyre* have been carried out from a feminist perspective. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s pioneering anthology *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) has had an enormous influence on literary criticism on *Jane Eyre* and consequently, also on my reading of the novel. In Gilbert and Gubar’s text, the authors add psychoanalytic theory to their feminist analysis and argue *Jane Eyre* has both an overt and a covert story. In their analysis, mad Bertha functions as a symbol of female rage against women’s submission. Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist analysis will be relevant to my essay since they describe how the minor characters are created to further Jane’s struggle for emancipation.

However, despite the importance that *The Mad Woman in the Attic* has had for the readings of *Jane Eyre*, it has also been criticized for seeing Bertha Mason as only a Freudian symbol and not through a colonial point of view. Therefore the inclusion of Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of Bertha’s colonial heritage in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985) will contribute to my understanding of stereotypical characterization in the novel. Despite the fact that I will not examine Céline and Blanche from a postcolonial point of view, Spivak’s description of how Bertha is sacrificed in order to benefit the character Jane will be a relevant perspective in my essay since I claim that Blanche and Céline are similarly used for the greater good of the novel.

In addition, Marxist readings of *Jane Eyre* will also be relevant to my essay since I will be examining three women of different social classes. Jina Politi’s “Jane Eyre Class-ified”

(1997) discusses *Jane Eyre* from a class perspective and questions the general opinion of the character Jane's revolutionary aim. Thereby, Politi's insight will help me to examine how the general interpretation of Jane as a defiant woman has been established which will make it easier for me to resist aligning myself with this kind of reading.

By regarding all this previous research, I have decided that instead of choosing to either use feminist, postcolonial or Marxist theory, I will combine these perspectives. I believe that this will give me the best opportunity to understand the difference between the female characters of the novel in terms for sexuality, class and nationality. Therefore, the theory I will be using in my essay is socialist feminist literary criticism. The aim of socialist feminist theory is

[...] to understand women's subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation. (Holmstrom 1)

Socialist feminist theory will be useful for me since it acknowledges the oppression of women, like feminist theory, and also perceives how people's situation is also influenced by other forms of oppression, like Marxist theory and postcolonial theory. Reading *Jane Eyre* from a socialist feminist perspective will allow me to perceive not only the differences between men and women, but also between women of different social classes. Therefore, socialist feminist theory problematizes Jane's white middle-class independence and perceives how it is created in contrast to the women who do not fit within the norm. Socialist feminist critic Cora Kaplan's "Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism" will be the starting point for my analysis. In her text, which focuses on Bertha's guardian Grace Poole, Kaplan emphasizes the combination of social and sexual inscriptions when creating the female characters of Victorian literature. This perspective will be of high relevance as I will in this essay analyze the difference between three female characters.

2.2 Method

The method of this essay will be a combination of contextualized reading and a resistant reading. By combining these two approaches, I will be able to both examine the historical context of the Victorian characters, at the same time as I study the story from a different perspective than the author perhaps intended.

Firstly, because of the Victorian period's strict categorization of people, gender- and class wise, understanding the context and society around the categories will be vital to my essay.

Especially important will be the dichotomy between the good and the bad women as described by Pykett in *“The ‘Improper’ Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing”* (1992), Mitchell in *“The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835 – 1880”* (1989) and Welter in *“The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860”* (1966). As this previous research shows, stereotypical depictions of women were used for specific literary tropes during the Victorian era and *Jane Eyre* is not an exception. By tracing and examining the stereotypical descriptions of women during the 19th century, I will be able to contextualize Céline and Blanche and thereby understand what their function is in the novel.

The second method I will use in my essay is the resistant reading which was introduced by American feminist Judith Fetterley who was in turn influenced by Adrienne Rich’s influential text *“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision”* (1972). Rich describes the method as *“the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction”* (18). However, while Fetterley’s aim is to expose the *“ideas and mythologies about women and men”* (xx), I will expose the mythologies about different kinds of women *“which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature”* (xx). The method of this essay will be deciding not to be an *“assenting reader”* (xxii) and aligning myself with Brontë’s protagonist, but instead to reject the conventional interpretation and try to perceive how and why minor characters are portrayed in a certain way in the novel. Using this method, I will be able to focus my attention on the marginalized minor characters, like Céline and Blanche, and examine how their portrayal affects the novel.

It is the combination of these two methods that I will use in my essay. I claim that to be able to align myself with minor characters in the novel, I need to understand the characters and what function they play in the narrative. Only then will I be able to look at the novel with fresh eyes and draw any real conclusions.

3. Analysis

3.1 The Ideological Function of Céline and Blanche

This essay argues that by examining the characters Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram it becomes apparent that they do not play one, but two roles in *Jane Eyre's* narrative. The first one, which is the most obvious, is to further the novel's love story by creating jealousy in Jane and tying her closer to Rochester.

While this function is important to the narrative, I claim that the other role that Céline and Blanche play has a greater effect on the novel as a whole. This second role is of an ideological and political nature and is used to highlight desirable characteristics in the character Jane Eyre. I argue that Céline and Blanche function as foil characters for the good and seemingly independent Jane, which, in extension, leads to a general interpretation of Jane as an even more emancipated and morally upstanding character in comparison.

As previously mentioned, I am not the first person who has discussed the minor characters in this way. Gilbert and Gubar describe Céline and Blanche's function as "important negative 'role-models' for Jane" who "suggest problems that she must overcome before she can reach the independent maturity which is the goal of her pilgrimage" (350). Céline and Blanche, in their opinion, become examples of female transgression and through that warn Jane of what will happen if she follows down the same path. In extension, thereby, by using Céline and Blanche as warning examples, it is made sure that Jane is taught to stay good and moral.

In addition, Spivak takes the analysis one step further as she argues that by making the minor characters cautionary examples for Jane, Brontë sacrifices them in order to benefit the white middle-class character. She writes that

[Bertha] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British Fiction. (251)

While Gilbert and Gubar perceive Bertha, Blanche and Céline solely as symbols of moral depravity, Spivak importantly enough questions why it is specifically these characters that are deemed as bad women. It is not a coincidence that it is the Jamaican creole, the Frenchwoman and the aristocrat who are portrayed as over sexualized, mad and cruel characters within the Victorian context. In fact, creating bad characters in order to heighten the goodness of the middle class protagonist was a common trope used during the Victorian era. Kaplan writes

that respectable middle class women attributed unwanted characteristics onto lesser women in order to highlight their own “True Womanhood” (167). They were

[...] projecting and displacing on to women of lower social standing and women of color, as well as on the “traditionally corrupt” aristocracy, all that was deemed vicious and regressive in women as a sex. (167)

This perspective of displacement as described by Kaplan is an important factor when attempting to understand the ideological function of the characters. Without it, Gilbert and Gubar’s argument about bad role models seems rather toothless to me and their analysis seems to be lacking an intersectional perspective. While it is interesting to consider that the characters are created in order to warn Jane of what will happen if she steps away from the righteous path, it is even more important, I argue, to examine what it is that makes us perceive Céline and Blanche as bad characters. I argue that the ideological function of the characters is created in connection to their contextualized role within the Victorian society and the stereotypes that they are created to embody. Therefore, to understand how Céline and Blanche function in order to emphasize emancipated and moral characteristics in Jane, I argue that it is important first to examine the categorization of women and how it influenced the depictions of these characters.

3.2 Contextualizing Céline Varens

The character Céline Varens is introduced through Mr. Rochester’s story of how he as a younger man fell in love with a French dancer. When contextualizing Céline, Rochester’s description of her as a woman without any “consecrating virtue” (Brontë 167) is a good starting point. Politi writes that “[i]t is on the Continent that Mr. Rochester falls into the nets of Duessa – a French woman in whose person are concentrated whoredom, deception, wile and immorality of the stage” (84). Céline fills Rochester with “*the grande passion*” (Brontë 167), disregards Victorian norms that say that a “woman must preserve her virtue until marriage” (Welter 158) and uses her inhibited sexuality to con men into supporting her sinful Parisian life. Thereby, while Jane remains pure and virtuous throughout the novel, Céline is depicted as a morally depraved and sexual aggressive woman. She has loose morals, immense vanity and no hesitation about seducing good men into ruin. The scene which cements this perception of Céline is when Rochester finds out that she was being unfaithful to him with another man. When catching her with the “brainless and vicious youth” (Brontë 167), his love turns to hate as “a woman who could betray me for such a rival was not worth contending for;

she deserved only scorn” (167). By seeking out another lover, Céline rejects the Victorian norm of female asexuality (Pykett 16) which was built on the 19th century notion that while the male sex drive was perceived as impossible to control, women’s nature was seen as more or less without sexual desire (Mitchell xi). This led to the paradoxical view that while a man could visit a brothel before marrying without being judged, a woman who did the same would never be accepted back into society (Mitchell x). Therefore, in the eyes of both Jane and Rochester, Céline is the only person who seems immoral. Rochester, in line with Victorian norms, believes that he was the victim of Céline’s sexual aggression and that only she is to blame for their immoral affair. The only part that is demeaning for him is that he had to spend time with such a second-rate person. He tells Jane that,

Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading.
(Brontë 375)

He seems to believe that it is not the prostitutes (or the slaves) who suffer from selling their bodies for money but rather the men who are forced to spend time with them. This ties into the previously described sexual morality of the 19th century where “[a] Victorian young man did not lose his virtue when he tumbled in the hay with a cottage girl or visited a brothel [...]” while “[a] woman who falls from her purity can never return to ordinary society” (Mitchell x). In line with this view, Céline is believed to have no desires of her own and therefore no excuses for living a promiscuous life. She seduces Rochester not because she wants him but because of his money and ability to provide her with diamonds and dresses.

Another prominent example of Céline’s moral depravity and selfishness is the abandonment of her daughter Adèle. When leaving her child to run off with an Italian singer or dancer (Brontë 172), Céline refuses to abide by the Victorian norm of the “asexual state of married motherhood” (Pykett 63) and instead seeks self-realization elsewhere. In doing so, she completely rejects the norm that the Victorian woman’s place is “unquestionably by her own fireside – as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother” (Welter 162). From a Victorian point of view, it thereby does not matter if Céline is living a self-fulfilling life on the continent on her own terms. Without the “four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152), it does not matter if there was “fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes” (152). Therefore, even if you could argue that Céline lives an independent life on the continent, the Victorian counterargument would be that it is the wrong kind of independent which deems it worthless.

In summary, Céline is presented as a deceptive, promiscuous and bad mother. If we contextualize her character within the Victorian dichotomy of good and bad women, it becomes clear that Céline belongs within the morally depraved group as the novel's fallen woman. The fallen woman was a popular female stereotype used by Victorian authors in order to rivet "the growing middle-classes" and underpin "their fears of women's unrepressed sexuality" (Kubiesa 2). Therefore, these kinds of stories work "largely as a didactic tool to warn women of the dangers of marital indiscretion and ultimately transgression" (2). The course of these narratives seem to follow the same structure: once the woman has sinned, there is no redemption possible and her life therefore continues its downward spiral until she had reached the lowest possible place in society (2). Céline's role as the fallen woman explains why she as a character is given no redeeming qualities and thus, functions perfectly in the novel as a bad woman.

3.3 Céline and Jane

Now that we have contextualized Céline within the Victorian discourse as the fallen woman, we can conduct our resistant reading of the novel to examine the ideological function of her character. As previously mentioned, Gilbert and Gubar describe Céline's function as a negative role model for Jane who "suggest[s] problems that she must overcome before she can reach the independent maturity which is the goal of her pilgrimage" (350). In their opinion, the fallen woman in *Jane Eyre* is used not only to warn the female readers but also to show the character Jane what will happen if she succumbs to a transgressional lifestyle. Céline's dissolute choices thereby warn Jane of what will happen if she gives in to Rochester's seduction. Thus, it is Rochester's description of Céline that teaches Jane that she ought to deny the offer to live with him and "transgress a mere human law" (Brontë 380) if they cannot be married. It is Céline's function as a bad role model which makes sure that Jane stays in the moral path.

While I agree with Gilbert and Gubar that this is part of Céline's function, I argue that this view does not question the way that Céline is sacrificed in order to keep Jane moral. As I stated in the method section, this essay hopes to expose mythologies concerning different kinds of women and show how stereotypical depictions are used for specific reasons in literature. When reading the novel as a resistant reader, I argue that it becomes apparent that Céline is created not only to be Jane's negative role model but also to emphasize how much of a good role model Jane is. It seems as if Jane and Céline are created to be each other's opposites with Jane possessing all desirable characteristics and Céline the undesirable ones. It

is this function that coincides with Kaplan description of how the 19th century middle-class women displaced “all that was deemed vicious and regressive in women as a sex” (Kaplan 167) onto less upstanding women. When reading the novel from this perspective, I argue that it is evident that immoral and promiscuous traits are attributed by Brontë onto Céline in order to make Jane seem like a pure and morally upstanding woman in comparison. This act by Brontë thereby upholds in the moral hierarchy between women with the good and pure woman at the top and the fallen woman at the bottom.

The most evident difference between the characters that establishes Jane as a good role model in contrast to Céline is their sexual morality I argue that Céline’s promiscuity does not only warn Jane of female transgression but does also function in order to emphasize Jane’s virtue. As Mitchell explains about the fallen woman in Victorian literature,

[t]he sexual outcast is often glimpsed only in passing [...], her gloomy tones supplying a ground against which to shine the pale-silver aura of the pure English maiden. (45)

In the novel, the gloomy tones of Céline function as a contrast to Jane’s pale silver aura. By keeping herself pure, Jane shows proof not only of self-constraint but also of good moral character. She loves Rochester but when she finds out that he is already married, she leaves him and thereby also makes sure that he continues his life on the right path. Her selfless refusal to live with him outside marriage thereby functions as the opposite of Céline’s selfish plight to drag him into moral ruin for her own pleasures.

Nationality is another factor that functions in order to highlight how morally degraded Céline is in comparison to Jane. Jane is a “pure *English* maiden” (Mitchell x, emphasis added) while Céline is Rochester’s “French dancer” (Brontë 173). During Victorian times when nationalistic views were dominant, the French were viewed as the opposite of the morally upstanding English citizens. Showalter writes that “[t]o Charlotte Brontë, as to most of her countrymen in the mid-nineteenth century, France represented passion, immorality, and idolatry while England stood for reason, decency, and piety” (227). Therefore, it is no coincidence that the uninhibited and egotistic Céline is French. In fact, on the contrary, making her a French dancer heightens the perception of her moral degradation in the eyes of Brontë’s contemporary readers. Thus, similarly to how Jamaican creole Bertha is *othered* to show how Europe is the epitome of rationalization and humanity, Céline as a French woman is portrayed as “illicit, self-indulgent, and dangerous” (Showalter 228) to demonstrate immorality of the continent in contrast to the moral England. By establishing the difference

between the pure English maiden and the French dancer, Brontë shows that “[i]n the world of *Jane Eyre* ‘improper’ discourse has no place. Revolution, sexuality, insanity, belong ‘abroad’” (Politi 91) and not as a part of Jane’s personality.

Jane Eyre purposely does, however, not distance itself from everything French. Céline’s daughter Adèle is Jane’s pupil and Jane must therefore speak French to her. In contrast to her mother, Adèle as an innocent child can be saved from her French ways and it becomes Jane’s mission to raise the little girl “in the wholesome soil of an English country garden” (Brontë 172). At first it seems as if it will be difficult to wash “the slime and mud of Paris” (172) out of the “miniature Céline” (165). As Gilbert and Gubar note, Adèle “longs for fashionable gowns rather than freedom” (350). In the end, however, Jane notes that “a sound English education corrected in great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion – docile, good-tempered, and well-principled” (Brontë 546). It is Jane’s pure English influence that tames Adèle and keeps her from becoming a new morally depraved Céline. By featuring Céline’s daughter in the narrative and by showing how she in the end resembles Jane more than Céline, the novel emphasizes just how morally upstanding and pure Jane is. Politi notes that

Jane Eyre constructs a new female stereotype: the highly principled, unattractive woman, the anti-woman of the French coquette. Her role is to protect the English male from falling into “French” ways, and thus, indirectly, she becomes the pillar of the nation. (89)

Jane saves both Adèle and Rochester from continuing the immoral path that Céline laid out for them and is thereby established as the very opposite of her. In contrast to the debauched Frenchwoman who leaves Adèle and who leads Rochester into degradation, Jane makes it possible for them to find domestic bliss within the home in an ideal Victorian fashion.

Moreover, in the quote above, Jane is described as an unattractive woman. While this seems minor in comparison to the other aspects of the character, I claim that it is not. It is one of the pivotal factors which separate Jane from the vain Céline. During Victorian times, dress was “inversely related to the moral code, with plain dress usually signifying more virtue and showy dress more vice” (Valverde 179). While Jane describes herself as Rochester’s “plain, Quakerish Governess” (Brontë 310), Céline’s motive for staying with Rochester seems to be so that he can shower her in “cashmeres, diamonds, dentelles” (167). Therefore, Jane who only owns three dresses which she wears because their plainness “stresses the Puritan aspect” (Berglund 326) of her character clearly belongs within the virtuous category in contrast to Céline. She refuses to be “dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester” (Brontë 321) and explicitly

tells him that “I will not be your English Céline Varens” (323). By using Céline as a contrasting character, Jane emphasizes her own rationality in contrast to Céline’s vanity and immoral choice to sacrifice her virtue for vanities.

In conclusion, I argue that all these characteristics that separate Jane and Céline are used to emphasize Jane’s reputation as a good female role model and a moral character. It seems almost as if Brontë created them to be complete opposites. If Jane is to be selfless, Céline is depicted as a selfish and self-asserting. If Brontë wanted Jane to be morally upstanding, a good mother and a rational person, Céline is portrayed as immoral, a bad mother and a vain character. If there was no fallen woman in *Jane Eyre*, I believe that the general opinion of Jane as a “the feminist individualist heroine of British Fiction” (Spivak 251) would not be as established. Therefore, Brontë’s action of “projecting and displacing on to women of lower social standing [...] all that was deemed vicious and regressive in women as a sex” (Kaplan 167) successfully heightens the notion that the female protagonist Jane is a good female role model.

3.4 Contextualizing Blanche Ingram

Blanche Ingram is the daughter of the Dowager of Ingram Park and the one who is rumored to become Rochester’s wife. She, in contrast to Jane, is beautiful, accomplished (Brontë 189) and of the right rank (221). Since “neither she nor her sisters have very large fortunes” (Brontë 188), Blanche has to make sure to find a wealthy man to marry if she wants to keep her position within the aristocracy. She does therefore not have the luxury of looking for someone that she loves, like Jane does, but rather settles on Rochester because of his wealth and position in society. However, unlike Jane, Blanche is not spiritually connected to Rochester and therefore has to find another way of convincing him to marry her. To do so, she uses the only trait that benefits her as a woman in the Victorian patriarchal society, her beauty. As Valverde concludes, upper class women like Blanche “must dress well in order to marry well” (172). Blanche dresses up and flirts with Rochester to such a degree that Jane sullenly thinks that she is “showy” (Brontë 221) and “remarkably self-conscious” (204). Berglund writes that Blanche belongs to the group of

[...] handsome as well as exquisitely dressed women, who deliberately use their beauty and their knowledge of how to dress to advantage in order to dazzle the men around them. (324)

This deliberate decision of using her beauty to find a husband and thereby discarding love for a mercenary plight, clashes with the Victorian norm which stated that “[w]oman should marry but not for money. She should choose only the high road of true love and not truckle to the

values of a materialistic society” (Welter 171). Welter explains that the true Victorian women “were passive, submissive responders” while it was the man’s job to be “the movers, the doers, the actors” (159). In this situation, Blanche rejects all these Victorian norms and becomes the aggressor in her courtship with Rochester.

In addition to her questionable motive for love, Blanche has other debatable aspects to her personality. Jane spends much time in the novel listing just how vile Blanche is. She states that

[Blanche] was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor; her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. She was not good, not original: she used to repeat phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her. (221)

Jane’s lengthy description of Blanche’s personality makes it clear that, just like Céline, Blanche does not have any redeeming qualities. In contrast to Céline, however, who we only encounter through Rochester’s tale, we as readers ourselves are able to read scenes where Blanche mocks “gentle Mrs. Dent’s” (204) lack of knowledge about the “discourse of botany” and where she steals the spotlight in the evening to discuss at length all the horrible things that she in her youth did to her governesses (210). In these scenes, Blanche is especially demeaning and classist towards Jane, calling her “that creeping creature” (Brontë 266) and referring to her as “that person” (266) rather than by name. She does not allow Jane to join the game of charades in the evening since “she looks too stupid for any game of the sort” (Brontë 217). Further, Blanche is also cruel towards Jane protégé Adèle. Jane describes how Blanche had a “spiteful antipathy” against the child, “pushing her away with some contumelious epithet if she happened to approach her; sometimes ordering her to her room, and always treating her with coldness and acrimony” (Brontë 221). In a time where the maternal traits were highly honored and cherished in a woman (Welter 162), this clearly signals not only that Blanche would be a bad stepmother to Adèle but also she is essentially a bad and spiteful woman.

In conclusion, in this chapter, we can see that Blanche is depicted as a cruel character with a mercenary plight to marry Rochester for his money. She calculatingly plays to her strengths, her appearance, as she “feigns an attachment to Rochester while really only coveting his wealth and social status” (Berglund 323). When acknowledging this scheming aspect of Blanche and at the same time considering her class position at a time when the readership of novels was dominated by the middle class (Norton Anthology, 1959), I argue

that the character Blanche is portrayed as part of the “traditionally corrupt’ aristocracy” (Kaplan 167), an additional category that middle class women during the 19th century projected their unwanted characteristics onto (167). The corrupt aristocrat is established by and in contrast to the honorable middle class. Beajout explains that,

[p]eople of the middle class shared certain values that were often predicated on the difference between themselves and other classes. They thought of themselves as the moral center of society – group separate from the drunken, lazy, uncouth working class, and the debauched, womanizing aristocracy. (5)

The depiction of Blanche as a classist and deceiving lady, who calls Jane names and refuses to consider her intellect, places her within the category of bad women which marks the difference between her and the novel’s good protagonist.

3.5 Blanche and Jane

Now that we have contextualized Blanche’s position in the novel and in the Victorian society, we can begin to examine her character from a resistant point of view. Instead of siding with Jane and deeming Blanche simply as her cruel competitor, I argue that Blanche has a deeper purpose to the novel. Similarly to their arguments about Céline, Gilbert and Gubar state that Blanche, by showing Jane that it is impossible for calculating women to win “the game of the marriage ‘market’” (350), functions as a warning example for novel’s protagonist which makes sure that Jane does not attempt to scheme Rochester into marrying her. Blanche is - thereby used to warn Jane of what will happen if she disregards the norm of female passivity and attempts to control her destiny by tricking Rochester.

While this is a valid starting point for analysis, I argue that by reading the novel from a “new critical direction” (Rich 18) and with Kaplan’s explanation of middle-class displacement in mind, it is evident that Blanche is also made into a bad Victorian woman in order to establish Jane as a good female role model in comparison. However, in contrast to Céline who possesses every immoral and promiscuous trait in order highlight Jane’s virtue, Blanche’s negative attributes function more or less to be the opposite of every good trait that Jane has, no matter the implication. Therefore, while Céline is depicted solely as a sexually aggressive woman, Blanche is deemed both as too aggressive and too stagnant. In the following sections, I will describe this projection further and show how it functions in order to establish the perfect Victorian character Jane.

Firstly, I will start with the trait which is the easiest to understand and to perceive when reading the novel. While Jane is kind to the other servants and to little Adèle, Blanche has no time for pleasantries and no motivation for being kind to those beneath her. In short, she does

not have the personality to be a good mother figure for little Adèle or a selfless wife for Rochester, two roles that the Victorian woman ought to play with great success if she wanted to be valued as a good woman (Welter 162). Instead, Blanche seems consumed with her own needs and desires. Rochester states that “[Blanche’s] feelings are concentrated in one – pride; and that needs humbling” (Brontë 314). Her pride is apparent when she tells Rochester that “I am resolved my husband shall not be my rival, but a foil to me. I will suffer no competitor near the throne” (213). In addition, while Jane seems to seek true love at all costs, Blanche decides on a man for purely economic purposes. She coins her smiles (Brontë 222) and flirts with Rochester, hoping that he will fall in love with her. Her carefully concocted plan seems to be working up to the point where Rochester exposes her scheme by spreading the rumor that his “fortune was not a third of what was supposed” (305) which makes her leave Thornfield for good. It is by comparing Jane to this mocking and prideful character that Jane’s own maternal attributes and potential for becoming a good wife are highlighted. Where Blanche is cold, mocking and calculating, Jane is warm, kind and very much in love with Rochester. Thereby, of course it is Jane who in the end marries him, not because she tricked him, but because she would never do such a thing.

Secondly, while I have in the previous action described how Blanche is deemed as bad for not abiding by the norms of the true Victorian woman, I will in this section exemplify that Blanche is also punished for being too traditional and regressive. In contrast to the rational Jane, Blanche is depicted as vain and obsessed with her exterior. Her fashion is described before she even herself enters the story as in Jane’s portrait, she is dressed in “aerial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose” (Brontë 190). While Jane is dressed for middle-class female labor, which at least includes looking after a child, Blanche’s clothes instead limit her ability to work. Roberts explains how clothes that Blanche would wear, “high heels, tightly laced corsets, elaborate hair dress, fragile fabrics, delicate colors: all these clearly announce that the wearer cannot possibly do physical labor and needs servants to dress her and maintain her wardrobe” (566). While you might say it was Blanche’s job to be beautiful, as Roberts explains “[i]n an age when alternatives to marriage for women were grim and good husbands scarce, the pressures to conform to the submissive ideal that men demanded were enormous” (564), she in comparison to Jane seems to be a lazy and entrapped female character. As Berglund phrases it “fashionable women are never depicted in a positive light in the Brontë novels. They are invariably vain, shallow and frivolous” (323). Thus, in contrast, Jane’s three plain dresses signal a sort of refusal to conform to the passive ideal for women and thereby emphasize her emancipatory plight in contrast to Blanche’s beautiful but

stagnant persona. The difference in dress establishes Jane as an unattractive but rational and emancipatory seeking woman. She refuses to be valued only for her appearance and she sees through the old structures as she tells Rochester that if she would have been as beautiful as Blanche, he would have chosen Jane instead of the corrupt aristocrat (Brontë 303). In the end, of course, Rochester does choose Jane, not because she is beautiful, but because she is a much better person than Blanche. However, in the process of refusing to be judged only for her looks, Jane does not only chastise the men who expect her to be beautiful but also the women who are abiding by this patriarchal tradition. Blanche is deemed as regressive and entrapped within an old tradition which establishes Jane as not only a good role model but also an independent character. However, on the other hand, the fact that when Jane has married Rochester, she suddenly dresses herself in colorful dresses and golden jewelry (Brontë 547) is a good example of how Jane's character is created to be the exact middle ground between refusal and acceptance of Victorian norms. While both Céline and Blanche are penalized from dressing in fancy clothes in order to seduce a man, Jane can wear pale blue dresses and a gold watch chain (Brontë 547) "without compromising [her] purity" (Berglund 327) if she does it for her lawfully wedded husband. Blanche is neither traditional nor progressive enough, in contrast to Jane who seems to be balancing on the line that allows her to embody the true womanhood of the 19th century and at the same time rejecting female norms.

3.6 Problematizing the Ideological Function

In the previous sections of this essay, I have described how Céline and Blanche function to emphasize morally upstanding, pure and good attributes in Jane. In contrast to them acting like two morally debauched and stereotypical characters, Jane seems not only as a traditionally good female role model but is also interpreted as an independent character. However, I argue that it is important to problematize this act of establishing Jane as an emancipated character by sacrificing two other women. It makes me interpret the novel as not criticizing general entrapment for women, but rather only seeking independence for the middle-class and norm-abiding women who are similar to Jane. By reading the novel from this more intersectional point of view, Jane's speech which criticizes the way women are locked inside their homes "making puddings and knitting stockings, [...] playing on the piano and embroidering bags" (Brontë 129) works as an allegory for the message of the novel. Brontë is indeed criticizing the situation for women, but only from a white, middle class perspective which excludes more women than it includes. Thereby, by reading the novel from this perspective, *Jane Eyre* is "politically conservative, accepting of Victorian values and

attitudes towards class, race, and even gender rather than critical of them” (Newman 452). Similarly to how “Bertha must be killed off, narratively speaking, so that a moral, Protestant femininity, licensed sexuality, and a qualified, socialized feminism may survive” (Kaplan 172), Céline and Blanche function together as immoral, over sexualized and cruel women in order to make readers perceive Jane as “a defiant, fiercely intelligent woman who refuses to accept her appointed place in society” in comparison. I argue that this focus on the good middle-class woman at the expense of the lower class, racialized and norm-defying women makes it problematic to discuss *Jane Eyre* as a novel that seeks intersectional female independence.

4. Conclusion

The thesis of this essay has been that the character Jane Eyre's emancipated reputation is created in comparison to the less successful women around her. In order to show how Blanche Ingram and Céline Varens are created in order to establish Jane as a good role model, I have conducted a resistant reading of *Jane Eyre* from a socialist feminist perspective in order to historicize and contextualize the female characters in the narrative and to understand their function. This combination of method and theory has allowed me to resist the conventional reading of the novel and instead examine the differences between the female characters from an intersectional perspective.

In the analysis section of this essay, I claimed that by creating Céline and Blanche to be perceived as bad women, Jane is, in contrast, perceived as the good one. In contrast to Mr. Rochester's former love interests, who both possess many undesirable characteristics, the goodness of Jane's personality is emphasized. My analysis thereby coincides with Spivak's research about Bertha Mason since I similarly to Spivak argue that the minor characters of the novel are sacrificed in order for Jane's perceived independence and success. In contrast to the morally corrupt Céline, Jane is perceived as a good Victorian woman, a mother figure for Adèle and a doting wife for Rochester. In addition, by portraying Blanche as both too mercenary and too stagnant, Jane successfully balances being both an emancipated woman and an ideal Victorian wife. Without Blanche and Céline functioning as examples of bad women in the novel, I argue that the perception of Jane as a good one would not be as established.

Further, however, I think that it is also important to question the novel's struggle for female independence since it is focused solely on the emancipation for the women who fit within the norm. Bertha is literally stripped of agency as she is locked in the attic by her husband, Céline is the wrong kind of independent woman because of her lifestyle and Blanche is deemed both too traditional and too norm-defying to be interpreted as a good woman. Thus, despite the fact that the novel depicts women of all social classes and of different nationalities, it is only the middle class, white woman who achieves a desired independence and becomes emancipated from the class and gender norms around her. In fact, I argue that Jane's independence is deemed as successful when compared to the failure of the native, lower class- and norm-defying women. Thereby, it becomes problematic to discuss the novel as an important text in the women's movement, especially today, since it excludes so many groups of women from

reaching an emancipatory end. This essay argue that in *Jane Eyre*, the sexually promiscuous, the racialized and the class entrapped women never reach an emancipated end and therefore are never represented as good female characters. I argue that this is problematic since if only white, middle-class female liberation is represented in the literary canon, it seems as if this is only that kind of independence that is valued and therefore, that only white middle-class women are able to reach the right kind of emancipation.

In the future, I believe that *Jane Eyre* can be continued to be read from a resistant angle and thereby the reading can focus on other minor female characters. One of the limitations of my research is that it does not center on any poor or working class women which would complete the intersectional reading. Due to the limited scope of my essay, there was no room to include this perspective which I believe would expose additional class and gender structures that the novel upholds. As Spivak has written about Bertha and I have examined Céline and Blanche, I argue that if future research would focus on for example Mrs. Fairfax's ambiguous social role or the life of servant Bessie, *Jane Eyre's* normative ideology could be fully understood and questioned. By reading the novel through the viewpoints of minor characters, I believe that there is an opportunity to understand how *Jane Eyre* values the independence of different kinds of women unequally and how this affects the readers' interpretation of the novel. I argue that this is important since many groups of women reading *Jane Eyre* today will not be able to identify with the prim, white, middle-class identity of the protagonist Jane and thereby feel excluded from its struggle.

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