Meet the Madwoman: Who is Bertha Mason?

Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) tells the life story of Jane, a young woman who goes to work as a governess. Jane falls in love and intends to marry the owner of the manor house, Mr. Rochester. However, a man steps forward on their wedding day to reveal the existence of Mr. Rochester’s wife: a madwoman named Bertha Mason, barricaded in a separate room within the manor. Bertha’s madness haunts the story of Jane Eyre. My research explores the connection between Bertha and Victorian ideas of psychosis.

Listed below are Bertha’s four key scenes in the novel (as represented in textual quotations):

1. Jane’s recollection of a dream of Bertha’s actual appearance and wearing of the veil. As Jane tells Mr. Rochester, “It removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts... Taking the candle, it streamed from the door. Just as at bedside the figure stopped... she thrust up the candle to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. Jane compares Bertha to “The foul German spectre—the Vampire” (370).
2. Bertha stabbing Mr. Rochester’s friend (not represented directly).
3. Mr. Rochester exposes Bertha to Jane and the wedding attendees: “A figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human, one could not, at first sight, tell...it snatched and growled like some strange animal: but it was covered with clothing” (38).
4. The inn proprietor’s recollection of the fire at Thornfield Manor (Bertha’s death): “Bertha was on the roof...we could see it [her hair] streaming against the flames as she stood... Mr. Rochester ascended through the skylight on to the roof: we heard him call “Bertha!” We saw him approach her; and then ma’m she yelled, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement” (39).

Michael Foucault establishes that, toward the beginning of the 19th century, madness took on a moral quality which necessitated punishment as means for treatment (18). During this time, asylums became increasingly common in Victorian society. Later in the 19th century, tough new laws emerged directed at “medicine of the mind” and away from individual confinement (Foucault 274).

Despite the novel being written in 1847, Bertha is not in an asylum, although her character remains isolated. Furthermore, the cause of her insanity reflects racial stereotyping of the time (madness due to biological heritage) rather than a medicalised disease of the mind.

Responses to Bertha: Victorian vs. Modern

Victorian Reviews: The “Maniac Wife”

“There is a phase of insanity which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind, and a fiend nature replaces it.” — Charlotte Brontë

“She [Jane] was told by the landlord that the havoce was the work of Mr. Rochester’s maniacal wife...” — The Morning Post, 1847

“Rochester had been married to her against his will, when quite a young man, and had been gently all the mad [rational] fire she was of West Indian Origin (that drove her into real insanity)” — The Manchester Times and Gazette, 1847.

“...the shape of another wife of the bridegroom's, who, although mad, is alive...Mr. Rochester's mad wife flings her ball at night, and perishes in the catastrophe.” — The Bradfield E-Wakefield Observer, and Halifax, Halifax, Halifax and Keighley Reporter, 1847

Modern (19th Century) A Progressive Disorder

“This depiction of a progressive familial disorder with behavioural and cognitive decline with violent movements is similar to Huntington’s original essay describing Huntington disease.” Elizabeth Coom & Arbha Hassan, “Did the ‘Woman in the Attic’ Source for Bertha?”, 2018

Chaos & Violence in Life, Beauty in Death (19th Century Illustration)

Emotion Emerges in the 20th Century

The images above are taken from separate editions of Jane Eyre, 1847 (left) and 1943 (right). The 1943 edition includes lithographs by Barnett Freedman (born in London, 1908-1960) wood engraving. Almost a century after the publication of Jane Eyre, 1847, both illustrators chose older imaging techniques to accompany the newer editions of Brontë’s novel. Both images emphasize her humanity: facial emotion (and thus cognition) over animalistic portrayal of violence. On the right, Bertha looks over Jane, ominous yet not as beastly as in the left image illustrated by Edmund Garrett in 1929. Note that both illustrations partially hide Bertha’s face, by either veil (left) or darkness (right) suggesting her madness as a barrier to our full comprehension. In both cases, Bertha holds a candle to her face, providing the only source of light in each figure. The candle is also present in Garrett’s illustration (1891). In both images, Bertha’s body no longer assumes importance: her emotion appears dominant.