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Beyond the Attic in *Jane Eyre*: Jane and Bertha as Feminist Archetypes

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Abstract

This article discusses two models of women in the Victorian era by analyzing Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* from a feminist perspective. The researcher used two contrasting characters, Jane and Bertha, to criticize the patriarchal system and the tragic female submission. The novel presented Jane as a model of a rebellious woman who defied traditional gender roles. As for Bertha, she was used to show the beginning and tragic end of submission and loss of identity under patriarchal control. The researcher relied on some feminist theories to explain some concepts such as the concept of women's autonomy, the idea of women's marginalization, and the concept of oppressive structures. Through the contrast between the two characters, the article revealed the importance of women's independence and warned against their submission to patriarchal oppression.

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Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* critiques Victorian patriarchy (Raharjani, 2013) ^[14] by presenting two contrasting models of women (Rahman & Al Marof, 2024) ^[13]: Jane, the rebellious and independent heroine, and Bertha, the submissive 'madwoman in the attic.' Through Jane's journey toward self-realization (Zhang, 2022) ^[18] and resistance to societal expectations (Iqbal, 2018), Brontë creates a heroine who challenges traditional gender roles (Yao & Wang, 2020) ^[17] and emphasizes the importance of independence and equality in relationships (Abaker, 2019). Bertha, by contrast, serves as a tragic example (Belkhir & Bakhled, 2022) ^[3] of what happens when a woman is rendered powerless and stripped of her identity by patriarchal forces (Anees *et al.*, 2021) ^[2]. These two characters convey Brontë's message about the importance of self-knowledge and the need to resist patriarchy (White, 2013) ^[15].

Drawing on key feminist theories, such as Virginia Woolf's concept of female autonomy, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women's marginalization as 'other,' and Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics, this article examines how Brontë uses Jane and Bertha as contrasting symbols to emphasize the need for self-determination and challenge patriarchal norms. By depicting rebellion and submission (Mansour, 2024) ^[11], *Jane Eyre* powerfully advocates for female independence and critiques a culture that often dehumanizes women through control and confinement.

Methodology

This study employs a feminist literary analysis approach to examine Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, focusing on how the novel critiques Victorian patriarchy through its portrayal of contrasting female characters. The study then conducts a comparative character analysis of *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Mason to highlight Brontë's use of these characters as symbols of rebellion and submission within a patriarchal system.

Feminist Frameworks in *Jane Eyre*

Feminist theories provide a good framework for understanding *Jane Eyre*, helping to reveal Brontë's critique of patriarchal

norms that seek to restrict and confine women. By consulting feminist theories, readers can delve deeper into understanding gender roles, autonomy, and societal power structures, particularly Jane and Bertha, as symbols of identity and oppression.

These feminist perspectives highlight two extremes: Jane's struggle for equality and self-fulfillment, and the tragic fate of Bertha, whose imprisonment underscores the consequences of a life deprived of autonomy and agency.

Virginia Woolf's concept of *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is particularly relevant, underscoring the need for financial independence and personal space as foundational to women's identity and self-expression. Woolf affirms that "A woman must have money and a room of her own". The room Woolf is indicating is a metaphoric room that is needed to find the real self and identity; as women's dependency on men influences their own identity and writing, and, as a result, obliges them to abide by men's roles rather than their own roles; which is "the effect of tradition". In explaining the importance of financial independence, Woolf indicates that in the past women didn't have any legal property rights and that was the reason for being submissive.

Additionally, de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) proposes that women are in this condition because of the social constructs "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". She illustrates that the constructs of the patriarchal society have made women subordinate. She illustrates that the basis of this cultural construct is women's sexual difference: "she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her". She also explains that "the term 'female' is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex".

Furthermore, Cixous clarifies that women's real identity and value were overshadowed because of the historical taboo of recognizing and identifying their body, sexuality, and desires (Cixous, 1976, p. 891) ^[5]. In that sense, and because the Old woman is not more than man's shadow, Cixous emphasizes on the pressing need "to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her-by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old in order to be more than her self;" (Cixous, 1976, p. 878) ^[5] – That is a woman must be aware of her own identity in order to "write her self" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875) ^[5].

Similarly, Millett argues that women for a long time have been subjected to male dominance, subordinated and mistreated, based on artificially constructed beliefs and ideas. In this notion, she insists that women were stereotyped and granted certain qualities such as "passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue,' and inefficiency". And thus, male ruled female by birthright priority. In this sense, in *Theory of Sexual Politics* (1969), Millett argues that although "Politics" is supposed to work for arranging the life of people, it is used here in the sense that one sex is dominating the other. In this respect, she adds that the sexual relationship between men and women is no longer a relationship between two individuals; it is moved to the broader scope of society. In short, she explains that family, like any other institution, is a patriarchal institution established and based on hegemonic basis: "This is so because our society, like all historical civilizations, is a patriarchy [...] in short, every avenue of power within the society [...] is entirely in male hands".

Jane and Bertha as Feminist Archetypes

In the novel, Jane and Bertha showcase the different responses of women under patriarchal oppression. Jane is portrayed as a woman who defies traditional gender roles and seeks independence, aspiring to an equal and respectful relationship based on self-knowledge and mutual love. In contrast, Bertha, who is restricted and silenced, represents the tragic consequences of a life dominated by patriarchal oppression.

Jane Eyre's decisions all over the novel indicate that she does not aim to be a stereotypical woman. She aims to be a respected person that is equal to her partner. She does not desire to enter into a relationship where one sex is dominating the other (Millett 24), she feels unhappy because of belonging to a different class that is lower to Rochester's. Therefore, Rochester's promised jewelries do not wet Jane's appetite: "In a day or two I hope to pour them into your lap" (Brontë, 2011, p. 173) ^[4]. Additionally, she proves to be stronger than herself, when she refuses to be with Rochester without marriage, and decides to sacrifice her love for the sake of saving her dignity and identity.

Similarly, she refused to be a stereotypical wife for St. John, as she does not aim to be a mere womb that satisfies St. John: "to satisfy St. John [...] He will never love me" (Brontë, 2011, p. 267) ^[4]. She wants a relationship that is built on mutual respect and love, not sexual lust that considers her a womb. Therefore, when she feels that she is financially even to Rochester, she goes back ready to enter a relationship with him. But she realizes that she is in a better position than he is, due to the loss of his sight and one of his hands.

In contrast, Bertha Mason embodies the devastating consequences of patriarchal control and submission. Bertha is confined to the attic, silent, and treated as an object, stripped of her autonomy and humanity. This portrayal is in line with Kate Millett's *Theory of Sexual Politics*, where women are often subject to patriarchal oppression and control, resulting in their psychological and physical subjugation. Rochester's treatment of Bertha, keeping her locked away and hidden, serves as a reminder of the nature of patriarchy that devalues and dehumanizes women. By contrasting Bertha's tragic situation with Jane's journey towards self-realization, Brontë offers a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression and the submissive woman. Bertha serves as a cautionary character, emphasizing the need for women to rebel against the oppressive authority that dehumanizes them.

To analyze Bertha's character, we must address three axes: first, Bertha's character herself, second, Bertha's madness, and third, the attic. Bertha embodies the image of the marginalized woman, and her end comes as a tragic symbol for women who lack the ability to confront patriarchal restrictions. Bertha's madness, on the other hand, represents feminist ideas seeking liberation from patriarchal domination, as a woman seeking independence is viewed by patriarchal society as crazy. For this reason, she is imprisoned and isolated from society, where she is treated as a patient with an infectious disease. The novel highlights the desire of patriarchal society to imprison women physically and metaphorically. The attic is not only a physical place, but also represents a moral prison that women suffer from as a result of the nature of the relationship between men and women in

this society. Hence, the attic becomes a symbol of the oppression that women are subjected to under patriarchal control. It is a dark, isolated, and hidden place, just like the lives of women who suffer under the burden of this oppression. Through this metaphor, Brontë criticizes the social system that confines women to silence and obedience, highlighting the psychological and physical effects of this oppression.

The contrasting fates of Bertha Mason and Jane in *Jane Eyre* illustrate Brontë's message about the crucial importance of independence and self-respect for women. Bertha's tragic end, she perished in the fire that engulfed Thornfield Hall, symbolizes the devastating consequences of a life completely controlled by others. Bertha, confined, her freedom confiscated, and her identity taken away, becomes the victim of a patriarchal system that does not recognize women's independence or humanity.

Conclusion

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë presents two contrasting characters in an attempt to critique patriarchy and Victorian feminist subordination. Jane represents the archetypal woman who strives for independence and equality, challenges traditional roles, and seeks self-discovery. By rejecting the unequal relationship with Rochester, Jane provides a clear path for women seeking self-assertion and identity. In contrast, Bertha Mason represents the destructive effects of women's subordination to patriarchal domination and their silence and acceptance of oppression.

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