

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
Edmond, Oklahoma
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

**Mirrors and Windows:
Recognizing the Experience of a Woman of Color in
*Jane Eyre***

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE

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Edmond, Oklahoma

2021

**Mirrors and Windows:
Recognizing the Experience of a Woman of Color in Jane Eyre**

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

20 July 2021

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Abstract of Thesis

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TITLE: Mirrors and Windows: Recognizing the Experience of a Woman of Color in *Jane Eyre*

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PAGES: 68

This thesis aims to present the character of Bertha in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as a representation of feminism and Jane's transformation into an independent player in her relationship with Rochester by examining the similarities in struggle, circumstance, and oppression between the two women. A focus on feminist theory and critical race theory will inform this thesis. By viewing Bertha as a mirror and a window for Jane, both for Jane to realize her potential independence and to witness the oppression Bertha faces as a woman of color in Victorian England, it becomes clearer that Bertha should be read and recognized as an individual rather than vaguely characterized as a madwoman and a simple plot device for Jane's development.

Most of the current scholarship on Bertha centers around speculation about her mental health, appealing to the common characterization of her as a madwoman. There is much less research on Bertha's racial background and how it affects the ways the other characters and society treat her. To understand the oppression she endures and to highlight her experience as a woman of color in Victorian England, I refer to the works of Toni Morrison. This examination of Bertha becomes inevitably linked to feminist theory as well, considering the patriarchal oppression both she and Jane experience. Though they experience oppression in different ways and to vastly different degrees, they share similarities so that Jane is able to see herself in Bertha, eventually leading her to feel confident enough to claim her autonomy. Despite the lack of characterization and time Brontë spends on Bertha, especially compared to Jane, this thesis argues that considering Bertha as a main character is critical to recognizing her value not only to the growth of Jane's character but also as an individual. Critical race theory, in combination with feminist theory, reads Bertha as a woman experiencing the worst of patriarchal and racial oppression, giving the title character a figure to model her independence after, no matter how subtle. Bertha's unapologetically wild and uncontrollable nature allows Jane space to develop her own identity and autonomy at her own pace, thus creating a path for Jane to finally maintain a degree of independence in her relationship with Rochester. This thesis ultimately advocates for the inclusion of critical race theory when analyzing the character of Bertha in order to adequately understand the prejudice and trauma she is subject to and the significance of her resulting influence on Jane.

Introduction

Current scholarship on Charlotte Brontë's most popular novel focuses most commonly on feminist, supernatural, and religious elements that affect what most consider the main character of the novel. Jane Eyre, the title character of Brontë's most notable novel, is overwhelmingly considered the heroine of the novel, despite the fact that readers get a more tangible and varied look at the abuse that Bertha, Rochester's first wife, endures. That is not to minimize any oppression that Jane herself experiences; rather, I wish to point out the treatment Bertha receives in light of her racial background, which is often overlooked as valuable an experience as Jane's.

In analyzing and legitimizing Bertha's value in a misogynistic, xenophobic atmosphere, I utilize a combination of ethnic studies and feminist theory to inform most of my argument, with the addition of some ideas related to critical race theory and postcolonial theory. I consulted some of Toni Morrison's work to better grasp and communicate how Bertha's identity in a white-dominated setting contributes to our understanding and interpretation of her importance. Throughout this paper, I regularly refer to Bertha as a "woman of color" in order to highlight the importance of her identity in an era and setting that tend to ignore it or use it as reason to discriminate against her. She is described in the novel as being of Creole descent (Brontë 289). In considering her a woman of color, I want to defend her experience as it remains no less legitimate than if she appeared more "obviously" like a woman of color. In other words, given that her oppression arises, at least in part, from racial prejudice, her racial identity maintains its validity because it contributes to her personal experiences as an independent character in the novel. Aside from xenophobic tendencies, the Victorian era did not typically allow for women to maintain or enact any degree of autonomy, especially in their relationships with men. Thus,

intersectionality becomes a significant element in the study of Bertha's treatment, function, and relevance in the novel, especially compared to analyses of Jane.

Bertha's importance as a character, or the ways she may be viewed as a positive influence on the title character, inevitably leads to a consideration of her significance independent of her perceived "roles" in the novel; if we afford her the attentiveness she deserves as both a character and a woman of color, or even the same degree of consideration typically given to Jane, we discover that her identity is much more complex than is often acknowledged. In developing this overarching argument for the significance of Bertha as a main character in light of the racial and misogynistic oppression she experiences, I first develop the importance of her influence on Jane and on Jane's personal exploration of her autonomy.

Chapter One, then, addresses Jane and the various forms of patriarchal oppression she encounters to set up the similarities between the two women; this recounting of Jane's hardships throughout the novel prepares us for a comparative analysis when documenting and interpreting the injustices Bertha faces. In this chapter, I frequently allude to the concept of "blindness." I want to recognize, here, that while equating ignorance to "blindness" can have deeply ableist implications, it is intended here to draw on the notable symbolic function of blindness in the novel, as expressed, for instance, in the work of Maren Linett. Chapter Two draws upon Bertha's treatment to parallel, in a way, Jane's; this reveals to us the value in recognizing Bertha as being as central a character as Jane, given the comparison between the types of oppression they each experience. Additionally, I evaluate here the common reading of Bertha as a "madwoman" and the problem with defining her as such when she is the only prominent character who is nonwhite. Finally, Chapter Three reveals that each character is critical to the reading of the other. It is also here where I definitively situate Bertha as a mirror and a window for Jane--a mirror to provide

Jane with an image of who she could be with the acknowledgment and practice of her autonomy, and a window to reveal to Jane Bertha's experience not just as a woman but as a woman of color.

Through this comparison and eventual advocacy for increased deference to Bertha's experience and her identity, I propose the reading of Bertha as a main character in Brontë's novel. Recognizing her experience as a woman of color and thus considering her a main character, especially given that she is present in various ways throughout the novel, is critical to understanding the ramifications of simply existing as a woman of color in the Victorian era. It is for this reason that I chose to incorporate elements of critical race theory in my analysis. Critical race theory is generally understood to apply primarily to more modern issues in the United States, but it still provides helpful context and perspectives for analyzing the treatment of Bertha and the ways in which her treatment is affected by her racial background. Similarly, I consulted ideas typically related to postcolonial theory, seeing as how Rochester attempts to conquer both Jane and Bertha, making this action even more significant when considering that Bertha is a woman of color. The characterization of Bertha as a "madwoman" is problematic for many reasons; not only is it potentially damaging to the progression of disability studies, but it also paints people of color and cultures different from Victorian England's as somehow "less-than."

Ultimately, my goal for this thesis is to reveal the value in reading *Jane Eyre's* only prominent nonwhite character as a main character, thus prioritizing her experience as a woman of color while also extending the issue to other fictional works that tend to either overlook or vilify those who come from unfamiliar places. In my argument, I do not impart any value to Bertha's character; rather, I wish to point out that value is inherent, and I intend to convey that through my thesis. Whether Brontë meant for Bertha to be read exclusively as a foreign villain or as a supporting pillar to Jane's development is superfluous; we have nonetheless been given a

complex character who invites us to consider her as someone more significant than a part of a supporting storyline.

Chapter 1: Evaluating the Character of Jane Eyre as a Convolved Representation of both Resistance and Growth

Numerous parallels exist between Jane and Bertha, from their circumstances to their desires to the way they are perceived by the world in which they live. Throughout the majority of the novel, Jane relies heavily on others for her physical survival: at Gateshead, where she depends on Mrs. Reed for food and dwelling; at Lowood, where she depends on the school for the same; and at Thornfield, where she depends on Rochester for means to survive. If Jane can be seen as a projection of Bertha--independence, strong will, and all--has Brontë still created an easily manipulated main character? Jane's malleability as an individual primes her for influences of all kinds, from maintaining a complacency toward societal expectations to eventually performing her autonomy. Jane seems confined to many traditional gender roles, but she also conveys a sense of personal fulfillment from the labels she either receives or selects to represent herself. While she may not exhibit the same unapologetic passion for self-government as Bertha, Jane nevertheless symbolizes a kind of voluntary blindness and/or resistance to seeing opportunity and oppression, instead demonstrating mostly a complacency that keeps her from envisaging truth.

Research on Jane is overwhelmingly characterized by a sense of sympathy and admiration, and it would certainly prove problematic to overlook the oppression she did face. What remains significant, however, is analyzing the ways in which Jane represents a willful ignorance or silence in regard to the oppression experienced by others who are lower on the "hierarchy" of oppressed peoples. The amount of scholarship on Jane's suffering compared to Bertha's is surprising for this reason--the novel revolves around the title character's life, so we see the more nuanced ways her privilege as a white woman is enacted. This is not to discount

any of her suffering but rather to highlight the lack of similar tones in relation to Bertha and the abuse she experiences, especially considering how her intersectionality as a woman of color affects the way both the characters and Brontë treat her. As Maria Lamonaca and Emily Griesinger point out, Jane's participation in the church and religion complicates her personal endeavor to claim her autonomy and form her identity, and it may have an impact also on her resistance to Bertha's influence (258, 56). Nevertheless, the similarities between Jane and Bertha reveal that though Jane understands Bertha's harrowing oppression to an extent and yet chooses to chiefly ignore them, she still channels Bertha's unapologetic nature to eventually perform her independence in her relationship with Rochester.

A main element that characterizes much of Jane's life is that of metaphorical isolation. Living as a woman in the Victorian era would have been isolating all on its own, and Jane's situation only added to that feeling of exile from the world around her. The novel begins with her isolation from family--not just from the absence of her mother and father, but from the traditionally positive familial bonds she never received from Mrs. Reed and her children. At this point so early on, Jane has close physical access to her family, though this situation excludes her from any sense of belonging and comfort that family is typically thought to convey. Perhaps it is here, at the beginning, where Jane learns to resist the image in front of her in order to reconcile her experience with how she believes reality should appear.

It should also be noted that, throughout the novel, the main antagonists Jane encounters are primarily males. For instance, John Reed is the root cause of most of Jane's misery at Gateshead. Mrs. Reed may be quick to dole out punishment on Jane, but the driving force behind that punishment is Mrs. Reed's desire to satisfy her son's need for control of Jane. This is only the first of many times in the novel that we witness the ways in which Jane experiences

oppression at the hands of patriarchal ideals. Most work on Brontë's novel appeals to feminist readings of Jane, including Griesinger's, which reads Christianity, in many ways a symbol of colonization and subjugation, as a mode of empowerment for the title character. The inclusion of religion may be read in a number of ways with respect to its influence on Jane, but considering Christianity's history of being weaponized by colonists, as well as Bertha's categorization as a woman of color, Jane increasingly becomes an image of submission and an agent of oppression (even as she herself is subject to oppression).

At Lowood Jane experiences more of the same. The authority figures in her life are largely condemning and distant, while her closest friend, Helen Burns, is lost to consumption. Jane expresses a feeling of hope before she arrives at Lowood, believing it impossible for her to end up somewhere worse than Gateshead. Once this feeling is disputed by the entrance of Mr. Brocklehurst, a male presence who insists on maintaining control of all the young girls at Lowood, the isolation intensifies. Mr. Brocklehurst explicitly instructs the other students to ignore Jane--to "avoid her...exclude her...and shut her out" (Brontë 69). This humiliation, at the hands of the patriarchal figure at the school, finds Jane retreating more and more into herself as she navigates adolescence. But the isolation does not stop there as Jane discovers some sort of comfort within herself. The oppression of this patriarchal force capitalizes on her age in the hopes of fostering the growth of a young woman who finds comfort instead in remaining complacent in the face of misogyny and suffering.

And it seems to work. After her period of chagrin incited by Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane laments, "so overwhelming was the grief that seized me...nothing sustained me; left to myself I abandoned myself" (Brontë 71). Of course, we are meant to understand that Jane metaphorically leaves herself in the sense that she disconnects from her surroundings to fully feel and immerse

herself in the depth of her overwhelming emotions; she certainly communicates a suffocating feeling of melancholy. Another interpretation, however, might suggest that the truculence she has experienced thus far has created in her a desire to “abandon herself” in a different way--to sacrifice the weight of her autonomy, individuality, and identity in order to escape the wrath of the patriarchal forces she seems more and more frequently to come into contact with. Though this scene occurs very early on in the novel, it is arguably representative of the ultimate form of isolation, when one no longer feels comfortable even in one’s own company. Griesinger views such circumstances as useful to Jane’s development of her identity, arguing that her intellectual clash with St. John allows her to find comfort and courage in religion, resulting in her ability to recognize and perform her autonomy (51-52). Her childhood, however, is certainly not characterized by an abundance of courage to do so.

Jane’s relationship with Helen Burns also mimics her transition from Gateshead to Lowood. She allows herself to become close with another person, only to be isolated once Helen dies. Jane’s powerful desire to connect with another person is illustrated in the scene where she documents Helen’s passing. Jane learns that she was found with “[her] face against Helen Burns’s shoulder, [her] arms around her neck. [Jane] was asleep, and Helen was -- dead” (Brontë 85). The physical closeness represented here indicates a desire for intimacy and companionship, but Jane’s final position in this chapter next to a body empty of life symbolizes the extent of the seclusion Jane has experienced in her life so far and will continue to experience in her future. Brontë’s distinction here between Jane’s and Helen’s states in this scene--one asleep, the other dead--could be read as a metaphor for the relationship between Jane and Bertha later in the novel. Jane, for most of the novel, is asleep, or voluntarily ignorant, to the suffering of other women in the novel, while both Helen and Bertha are ultimately free from, or dead to, the

misogyny that plagued the Victorian era. Only through their deaths are we able to understand this. Nilay Erdem Ayyildiz agrees that while Helen personifies “what true Christian love is,” her intensely submissive nature evokes criticism from Jane (149). Both characters’ deaths lead to the increasing solidification of Jane’s developing identity. Once again, our title character is left on her own to ponder her seclusion in the face of the loss of her best and only friend. This picture of an isolated Jane contributes to the understanding of her characterization later in the novel as desiring to be ignorant of truth.

Ayyildiz recounts the instances where Jane expresses anger to argue that “it is evident that Jane has a rebellious nature against injustices in life” (149). Certainly, there are moments when she indicates a desire to rectify some wrong that she has witnessed. But this “rebellious nature” doesn’t often present itself externally, as Jane tends to stay quiet and passive, particularly compared to Bertha. Thus, her nature seems less rebellious than restless. Jane conveys a sense of discontent at certain injustices, but her lack of desire for justice for Bertha suggests that her motivations are less aggressively riotous than vaguely troubled. Jane’s childhood does not allow for much room or acceptance to express defiance; knowledge of Bertha and her experience are Jane’s final catalyst to actively challenge the oppression she herself has been experiencing.

In a significant period of time at Thornfield, Jane once more becomes reliant on a male in order to maintain the social standing and reputation she has acquired over the last several years. Rochester, acting as a type of metaphor for patriarchy, challenges Jane and further attempts to isolate her mentally and emotionally. Even in her observation of his relationship with Miss Ingram, Jane notes that Rochester simply stops noticing her (Brontë 184). We can gather that this affects Jane greatly because of her revelation that “the nature of the pain [she] suffered could not be explained by that word [jealous]” (Brontë 184). Jane seems unable to articulate the depth of

her feelings as a result of Rochester's coldness towards her, but she relays a sense of loneliness and seclusion in her forwardness in discussing it with the reader. Though she communicates complicated feelings for Rochester, Jane makes it clear that she holds him in high regard; this, however, does not keep Rochester from either taking advantage of that regard or using it as reason to keep from toying with her. In one of their conversations, Rochester puts on an air of theater, prompting Jane to insist that she would "give [her] life to serve [him]" (Brontë 202). A sacrifice such as this, even if only hypothetical or hyperbolic, reveals Jane's intensely overpowering desire to break out of her isolation, even if it means forfeiting her own desires for the sake of someone else's mere contentment. Ayyildiz mentions a "gender power" John Reed is privileged with that, through the boundaries set by the patriarchal societal standards, permits him to abuse the women around him (148). This may be read as the precedent through which Jane comes to understand social differences as defined by Victorian culture, shaping her into an individual with a quiet hatred for oppression who is nonetheless submissive enough to pass as a "respectable" Victorian woman.

Yet another illustration of the extent to which isolation has affected and characterized Jane comes soon after she discovers the existence of Bertha and Rochester's keeping that knowledge from her. She responds to him with silence as he rambles excitedly and calls her out, saying, "You shut yourself up and grieve alone!" (Brontë 295). This observation on Rochester's part suggests not just that Jane is attempting to process the information she discovered but also that it has become part of her coping mechanism to retreat into herself in moments of stress and intense feelings of isolation. Of course, this only intensifies those feelings, as can be seen in the moments following when she demonstrates hesitance in engaging in conversation. That is not to say that Rochester himself does not contribute to her feelings of loneliness; instead, his outburst

directed at her after such a disturbing experience only pushes Jane farther into a state of seclusion due to his lack of understanding.

Perhaps it is here where Jane finally begins to understand the destructive nature of oppression upon seeing its effects on someone else. She defends Bertha to Rochester, pointing out that Bertha is not at fault for the state of mind she is in and faulting Rochester for treating and speaking of her so poorly (Brontë 297). That this defense comes so soon after Jane's period of silence speaks to the influence the situation has on her, suggesting Bertha's presence is effective in inciting something within Jane. Witnessing Bertha's condition and treatment causes Jane to question the systems of oppression that surround her, suggesting, as Lamonaca argues, that the overpowering influence of religion contributes to her complicated and arguably muddled understanding of oppression:

For these women, however, God was no rhetorical abstraction, but a very real and genuine Other. Throughout the margins of *Jane Eyre's* final speeches lurks an anxiety that Jane may be confusing her own desires for God's will. And by invoking God's will to support these desires, she may be distorting that Other--a misrepresentation tantamount to idolatry. It should come as no surprise, then, that by novel's end Jane's theology is every bit as conflicted as her new identity as Mrs. Rochester. These ambiguities reflect the tensions real Victorian women of faith experienced in trying to meet multiple, often conflicting demands in their lives. (260)

Lamonaca suggests a complexity to the ending that is rare to find in other works. Indeed, Jane's devotion to religion complicates her ability to act wholly in her best interest, but we should refrain from discounting the growth, however slight, she exhibits by the end of the novel.

Such a passionate response from a character usually so submissive and reserved is critical to the reader's understanding of Bertha's impact on Jane. Ashley Bennett argues that for Bertha to exist as a successful representation of feminist rebellion, the reader must be able to identify with her anger (320). If this line of reasoning is extrapolated to Jane as an effective symbol of isolation and a victim of oppression, readers must also be able to identify with her melancholic emotions. These instances work in tandem to create a complex and dynamic relationship between Jane and Bertha--one that sees Bertha ignite a feeling of anger, however subtle, in Jane that makes Bertha critical to our reading of Jane as well as to Jane's own development as a character.

Kimberly Cox similarly points out the importance of the reader's ability to feel Jane's emotions, particularly through the characters Jane physically touches (199). Through this physical contact, we might find reason for Jane's decision to return to Rochester by the end of the novel. Despite any reservations she has about him, she "experiences new sensations that originate in the sensory receptors of the hand that Edward holds... [and] we know from her history that she has never before experienced such an embrace, such physical closeness with another person" (Cox 203). She stays dependent until the end of the novel, and this enduring dependence, while suggesting a degree of intimacy, may actually work to prevent it. This discussion of the character's physical aspect ties back to the argument that Jane's metaphorical blindness warrants the presence of Bertha. Because of this symbolic blindness, Jane's life is unquestionably affected--it has an impact on where and how she takes up space in the novel.

Perhaps one of the most telling of Jane's thoughts regarding her personal sense of fulfillment can be found earlier in the novel while she is still at Lowood. Upon losing yet another significant figure in her life, Miss Temple, Jane recounts a period of melancholy, recalling, "I believed I was content" (Brontë 87). This sentiment seems subtly omnipresent in the rest of

Jane's narrative. Her need to clarify that this is the state she believed herself to be in suggests that she was not, in fact, content. The choice of word here, "content," is interesting on its own as well; it does not imply that she experiences happiness to a great degree regularly, but rather that she has discovered a way to be satisfied experiencing life apart from constant and extreme disappointment and anguish. Jane's seeming comfort in isolation is shown by her belief that she is content when reality strongly suggests otherwise. In Victorian novels, emotions functioned "as a central epistemological tool throughout the era--a way of defining not just male and female, public and private, but also subject and object, human and nonhuman, determined and free" (Ablow 375). Jane's expression of emotion, then, represents a boundary between what is "acceptable" to feel and the expression of feeling. Anne DeLong touches on the misogynistic tendency to negate the value of emotions, characterizing feminist Gothic novels as "privileging companionship, empathy, and spirituality over the patriarchal values of respectability, wealth, and skepticism" (16). In her appearing to be content in isolation, Jane theoretically has more time to ruminate on the expectations of her performance of emotion, a luxury Bertha's circumstance does not allow. Certainly, it is not until much later in her discovery of Bertha that Jane recognizes the influence of hardship brought on by both literal and metaphorical confinement.

The ability of present emotions to "[reify] patriarchal values" and simultaneously "undermine" those same values mirrors the convolution of religious faith that both provides and warps one's confidence (DeLong 17). In a piece in which she compares Brocklehurst to an image of a judgmental God, Griesinger argues that Brontë's creation of Jane draws on her own experiences, pointing out that both Brontë and Jane Eyre spend more time dwelling on their "sins, and hardly any time enjoying God's forgiveness, love, and grace" (42). This observation of Jane's crushing guilt over church-defined wrongs speaks to the ability of the church to subjugate

individuals under the guise of empowering them. The expectation of a “good,” “successful” Victorian woman is muddled beneath the contradicting pressures demanded by the patriarchal society; even Rochester’s physical contact with Jane “changes their relationship precisely because it employs conduct to explore, rather than to temper, desire” (Cox 204). Surely, in many circumstances, Jane grapples with these exhausting, unstable expectations by appearing passive to her surroundings, but only after she has fully invested herself mentally in the negative energy around her. This seems to cause her exhaustion afterward, driving her flexibility of identity and increasing her ability to be influenced by Bertha, in light of Jane’s own suffering.

Unlike Bertha, Jane does not initiate a demand for acknowledgment of her right to independence as an individual. In a conversation with Rochester in which he bluntly asks her opinion of his implied dominance over her, she responds, “I don’t think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience” (Brontë 136). It could be argued that this instance proves Jane’s inherent desire to exert her autonomy; I, however, would suggest that her response to Rochester only further reveals her predisposition to be persuaded. After all, Rochester must prompt Jane for her response--she does not offer it up, though her response itself may be seen as an indication of a slight inclination toward or perhaps desire for feminist ideals and freedom from patriarchal oppression. At any rate, everything discussed prepares Jane to be open and influenced in the presence of Bertha.

Another aspect of Jane’s life to consider in the analysis of her metaphorical blindness is her status as a governess, which may be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, this position allows Jane to impart knowledge to a young, impressionable mind, and it emphasizes

the fact that Jane herself has an abundance of knowledge worth passing on to the future generation. On the other hand, even the term itself--"governess"--indicates that the position is somehow meant for women. Choosing a women-dominated profession may symbolize feminist pride, but it could also be argued that she is actively perpetuating gender roles and stereotypes by not breaking out of that career path. Still, Jane values the role for what it potentially promises to provide her--even before she has formally accepted and adopted it. There appears an inkling of desire to break from her current, stagnant position as she "longed to go where there was life and movement" (Brontë 91). The verbal statement of desire contradicts the complacent state Jane regularly exhibits, though she does not explicitly express an opposition to the suffocating misogyny she experiences. Her outlook may be described as a kind of tunnel vision, making her blind to the pressing issues of misogyny and mistreatment at Lowood and focusing her attention on a general dream to run off and escape any and all things that bring her displeasure.

The role and reputation of governesses in literature is indeed notably variegated. Duc Dau characterizes the Victorian governess as "at once a domestic and an exotic figure. She was a woman of contradiction, a mystery--or so it seemed. The suspicion she provoked was often a result of her ambiguous, indefinable social position" (287). Perhaps a degree of empowerment may be obtained through this objectification, one that grants Jane an unspoken permission to explore her identity independent of her subscription to the church and to societal norms. The governess, while a figure of knowledge and caretaking, is also characterized as a threat because of their influence on families. Esther Godfrey details the foundation of the fear of governesses and their progressive influence:

For Victorians, the threat to gender stability presented by governesses stemmed not only from the middle-class fear that they would teach ambiguous notions of gender and class

to their children but also from the more explicit sexual threat governesses wielded to the middle-class men they encountered. Because they contrasted and complicated middle-class notions of femininity, governesses commanded desire through their polymorphous characteristics. They were feminine and yet they were not feminine; they were sexual objects and gender subjects; they occupied a place simultaneously within and outside middle-class society. (859)

Though Jane's decision to become a governess is commonly read as her only choice as she outgrows her post at Lowood, we might instead interpret it as one of the first signs of her desire to become more independent.

The job advertisement for the governess position at Thornfield indicates that Jane is expected to teach "English...French, Drawing, and Music" (Brontë 89). The latter subjects are most certainly creative ones, and languages and literature have been historically viewed as superfluous and unproductive. Jane's seeming lack of pride in her role as a governess indicates a blindness to the value of such an education. That is not to say that she deems these subjects meaningless but rather that she prefers to handle them on a more distant and passive level. Either way, her failure to express a sense of meaning in her work of fostering of young Adèle's mind is characteristic of an inability to see the value in the knowledge she acquired at Lowood and in her own work. The basis for this attitude towards her own work may be affected by the general melancholy she experiences due to the isolation previously discussed, as well as Victorian expectations that education for women be limited to knowledge that molds them into angels of the house.

Nora Gilbert goes so far as to characterize the role of the governess as isolating all on its own, between living under the eye of watchful employers wary of what intimate family secrets

their governesses were writing about to being perceived as a threat in their status as potential authors (479). Jane's seemingly permanent position in solitude indeed is not remedied by her mode of employment at Thornfield. Gilbert views the role of governess as empowering to women in its isolation of them, but I would propose that, whether it be so or not, the role of governess certainly puts Jane in a position to be more impacted by Bertha's demonstration of abandon. It seems more likely that, because Jane does not completely experience empowerment until Bertha is fully introduced, her job as a governess serves more as another catalyst to her eventual acceptance of her independence as a woman. As Gilbert points out, the job of a governess is an isolating one, which extends Jane's period of isolation and mirrors Bertha's, though Jane's is arguably less dramatic. That is not to discount the potential empowerment of isolation for some women, but rather to point to the individual way that it negatively affects Jane herself and her identity formation.

Jane, to exist as the main character of the novel, is very malleable in relation to her surroundings and the circumstances in which she finds herself. In contrast to Bertha, Jane fully absorbs the energy around her, though she still manages to ignore its full repercussions--for example, she suspects something is awry when the strange goings-on in Thornfield are casually blamed on Grace Poole, though she refrains from either pushing for more information or seeking more cogent answers. Does this suggest that Jane is easily manipulated? I would like to point to the difference between Jane being malleable and being manipulated: it is not necessarily that our main character is hopelessly ignorant of her own oppression or of the oppression around her, but that she rather chooses to be ignorant to those issues. This would explain her suspicion about the fire as well as her hesitation to probe more than she does. Ignorance such as this also underscores the need for Jane to see more than she is allowing herself to see--in other words, her resistance to

see truth warrants the presence of Bertha to help Jane metaphorically open her eyes to the issues and oppression around her.

The last element of the text and of Jane's characterization that relates to her status as figuratively blind is her tendency to address the reader throughout the entirety of the novel. In a sense, her relationship with the reader is both the longest and closest one she has in the novel. After all, the reader is there through the beginning of her life at Gateshead all the way to her future with Rochester. Furthermore, the reader has access to what no other character in the novel does--Jane's intimate thoughts and emotions, as well as every experience she speaks of. If we consider Jane as the primary storyteller, as opposed to Brontë herself, there is a sense that Jane prefers this voluntary blindness. She never physically sees the reader, though the reader alone is given access to every intimate part of her life. This provides more evidence that Jane is comfortable in being unaware of the depth or of the potential resolution of the issues that plague not just herself, but all Victorian women.

While I argue that Bertha is a reflection of Jane, Jane does not fully form and own her identity until she learns of Bertha and leaves Rochester only to return to him later on. Maren Linett, British literature and disabilities scholar, analyzes blindness in twentieth-century literature as a vehicle for intimacy between characters (28). Linett's piece suggests that physical blindness results in a type of vulnerability that allows characters to develop close relationships with each other. This intimacy between characters does not characterize Jane or her relationship with other characters for much of the novel, but I would argue that her metaphorical blindness to reality breeds that vulnerability and amenability within her that contributes to her pliability of identity; this is why, following her discovery of Bertha, we see such a dramatically visible transformation of Jane from reliant, obedient submissive to unorthodoxly autonomous woman as

she decides to leave Rochester. Certainly, blindness is not synonymous with “blissful ignorance” but instead allows characters to more easily see “the inner life” (Linett 39). While Jane arguably shows preference for intentional naivete, her metaphorical blindness nevertheless gives her space to imitate Bertha and adapt Bertha’s independence to the extent that Jane is comfortable exerting her autonomy. Ultimately, the combination of her blindness and the shock of discovering Bertha reveal Jane to be receptive to viewing herself as an extension of Bertha.

Jane’s tendency to address the reader suggests she never quite reaches the same level of self-reliance as Bertha, as her dependence upon the reader’s presence continues to the end of the novel. The endurance of Jane’s dependence on another individual despite her growth speaks to the gravity of the urgency for Bertha’s interference. Despite Jane’s perpetual reliance on another, however, a slight evolution in her conversation with the reader parallels her increasing comfort with her newfound autonomy. Even right after Bertha’s existence is revealed to Jane, she insists, “Reader, I forgave him at the moment and on the spot” (Brontë 295). Though she eventually leaves him temporarily, this particular line suggests that she feels, to some extent, the need to explain herself and her lack of immediate outward condemnation of Rochester. In this case, Jane not only chooses to prioritize Rochester above her own complex emotions about Bertha, but she also illustrates the weight of oppression that causes her to feel as though she must justify her decisions. By the end of the novel, she subtly reveals the impact Bertha’s presence had on her, saying, “Reader, I married him” (Brontë 440). The significance of this phrase may be found in what it doesn’t say--that he married her. Instead, Brontë’s wording of this narration emphasizes Jane’s active hand in the matter. The significance of this can be found in the implied intention in the two examples discussed; Jane’s narration has evolved from a focus on others to a focus on herself.

Still, we can understand the need for Bertha within the novel and as an essential part of Jane's evolution as an individual based on the common thread among all of Jane's conversations directed at those outside the novel: her use of the title "Reader." Such a generalization distances Jane from readers, so while it indicates a desire for a relationship, it also represents a lingering need to remain detached from others. The address remains constant throughout the entirety of the novel, implying a certain comfort it brings our main character; Corinna Norrick suggests this technique indicates a desire on behalf of the narrator to form a bond with the audience by urging them to feel the emotions the narrator feels (69). If, however, we consider all the instances of the evolution of Jane's character after discovering the truth about Bertha, this impersonal use of "Reader" might be read as representative of her diminishing need to remain dependent on others. In that case, the distancing can be seen as a marker of the metaphorical power she witnessed in Bertha's uncontrollable nature, as a result of which Jane herself begins to acknowledge and experience.

Jane takes part in the ultimate form of independence in the later part of the novel when she returns to Rochester to find him blind and becomes his literal and figurative caretaker in marriage. In the face of patriarchal oppression, she is exercising a fundamental form of feminism; not only is she managing to refrain from depending on Rochester, but he now depends on her guidance to move forward. The traditional Victorian era gender roles have been flipped, symbolizing and mirroring Jane's personal transformation from oppressed submissive to self-sufficient actor. She has gained independence by the end of the novel, but it is critical to point out that this only happens after Jane finds out about Bertha. Jane allows herself to be changed by Bertha's portrayal of metaphorical but uninhibited freedom. Circling back to Jane's use of "Reader" and its lasting connotation of desired isolation, we might look to Bertha to

explain this seemingly unchanged part of Jane's character. Brontë does not refer to isolation as an exclusively negative element in the novel, as can be seen from the way Bertha escapes the confines of patriarchal oppression. She lives much of her life in forced isolation, while Jane lives her life in both forced and arguably voluntary isolation, but both characters emerge by the end as less under the control of societal and cultural expectations than they were previously. Ultimately, we might read the isolating nature of Jane's continued use of "Reader" as a parallel to the isolation Bertha endures, eventually leading both women to experience independence apart from the restraints of Rochester and of Victorian society in general.

Without Bertha acting as a window to show Jane the potentially devastating effects of oppression and as a mirror to reveal to Jane what she could be, apart from her complacency in social restraints, Jane would not have emerged by the end as independent as she does. Linnet challenges the ableist idea that blindness inevitably equates to blissful ignorance, but this is actually the state Jane actively chooses. Jane's inability, or, rather, her unwillingness to acknowledge and challenge the various modes of oppression around her necessitates Bertha's raucous presence. Indeed, Jane's defense of Bertha to Rochester suggests a sense of association, indicating Jane identifies with Bertha and the injustice she has experienced at the hands of the man who maintains such a tight grip on both women's independence. Outside forces influence Jane in various, nuanced ways, creating an intricate path to freedom for her. This understanding of union further opens Jane up to become increasingly influenced by the frenzied show of wildness Bertha exhibits, not quite causing Jane to mirror it exactly but undoubtedly prompting her to embrace its essence.

Chapter 2: Analyzing Bertha's Experience and Her Similarities to the Title Character

With Jane Eyre acting as both main and title character of Brontë's novel, it would seem logical that she also serves as the subject or agent of the narrative--in other words, the character by whom all other characters are defined. Still, considering the extent to which Jane is a diluted reflection of Bertha, there are many ways in which Bertha fills the role of the subject or agent, making Jane something closer to the object of the novel. The two characters share similarities, but at different levels of intensity. In these similarities, it is Bertha who represents the more potent version, giving Jane a starting point for her imitation. To say, without any context, that Bertha represents freedom and/or feminism would be seen in the context of the novel's other characters as a massive understatement at the very least. But this is only because of the inevitable comparison of her to Jane, who represents a much more complacent and socially and culturally acceptable idea of a woman and a wife.

Bertha's status as a supposed "madwoman" is a nod to how she is perceived--as nothing short of an outcast by the other characters, but further analysis suggests that she offers a vision of metaphorical unrestraint that parallels Jane's desire to obtain and exercise more independence. Isolation, an experience they share, affects both characters, Bertha more visibly so. And as with Jane, Bertha's status--though as a "madwoman" rather than a governess--creates the context in which she is able to show how uncontrollable she truly is, not only by Rochester himself but also by the oppressive patriarchal society. Finally, Bertha enacts the ultimate form of resistance, rebellion, and escape by sacrificing her life to be free from various forms of oppression. In a culture so restrictive, particularly when it came to women and to policing their lives and autonomy, Victorian culture compels Bertha to be as wild and untamable as Brontë writes her so that Jane can feel comfortable coming into and owning her autonomy on her own terms in an

atmosphere that practically condemns it. Additionally, analyzing the intensity and influence of Bertha's character will allow us to recognize her as a main character, as more than a plot device, and as nothing short of critical to the understanding of Victorian treatment of women of color.

Isolation is arguably the most obvious hardship Bertha experiences, and she shares that hardship with Jane. Bertha's presence might be read as a simple underscoring of Jane's eventual growth, as we are understood to take Jane as the fixed main character. Rather than a passive emphasis, however, I would argue that Bertha's character is, at the very least, a dynamic catalyst for Jane's emergence as a more autonomous individual, leading to an invaluable reading of her (Bertha) as a main character in the novel. Alexandra Nygren argues for a focus on Bertha's apparent mental illness to validate her significance as a character independent from her supposed role as a "plot device" (117). Whether or not Bertha is assumed to have had dealt with mental illness, her time spent locked up at Thornfield unquestionably does not prove favorable to her mental health in general, particularly since her "characterization by both Rochester and Jane as mentally ill stems from [Bertha's] position as the female colonial Other" (Nygren 118-119). I am not especially concerned with the discussion regarding whether Bertha is truly exhibiting signs of a mental illness; rather, I would like to focus on both the physical and metaphorical isolation she experiences as a result of being othered and the ways in which this gives credence to the claim that Bertha is nothing short of crucial to Jane's personal evolution of independence. While Toni Morrison speaks to the use of black characters by white American authors, key elements of her argument are just as applicable to British literature:

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less,

but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (52)

As Morrison points out, othering is a technique that is ultimately used to form one's identity. Bertha might be read as a model against which Jane compares herself, but exposing the often-overlooked influence of Bertha on Jane makes her a more tangible and central character than she is often considered to be.

The othering Bertha endures from both culture and other characters accentuates her influence on Jane by providing Jane with a personification of liberation. Bertha's suffering from isolation is a consequence of oppression with which Jane can identify. Perhaps it is even with a degree of assumed superiority that Jane is able to use Bertha's action to model her break from dependence, particularly when considering that Jane views Bertha as the inverse dark to her own "pale, Anglican countenance" (Nygren 117). Ross Chambers aptly describes the societal result of the differing treatment of the identities of white people and people of color:

By contrast with [people of color] whose identity is thus defined by their classificatory status as members of a given group, whites are perceived, however, as individual historical agents whose unclassifiable difference (one from the other) is their most prominent trait. Whiteness itself is thus atomized into invisibility through the individualization of white subjects. Where non-whites are perceived first and foremost as a function of their group-belongingness--as Black or Hispanic or Asian (and then, with luck, as individuals)--whites are perceived first as individual people...Their essential identity is thus their individual self-identity, to which whiteness as such is therefore a secondary, and so negligible, factor. (145)

Jane's own tendency to other Bertha exacerbates the isolation they both experience—Jane's because it is an extension of the oppression resulting from her relationship with Rochester, and Bertha because she receives no kinship from Jane despite the fact that they both live their individual lives as oppressed women. I would suggest, though, that Bertha is influential to Jane because she is a reflection of Jane's experience and feelings of suffocation. In considering Bertha's value as an active character in the novel, especially where her relationship to Jane is concerned, speculation about the classification of her struggles with mental health are less critical than the treatment she sustains from external forces. That is not to undermine the ways in which that treatment affects her mental health; rather, this perspective allows for us to focus on the need for Bertha's presence in the novel apart from understanding her as a simple antagonist or supernumerary.

Even before Jane learns of Bertha, her language when recalling her encounters with Rochester's secret wife works to actively isolate and other Bertha. As she describes her worrisome experience, Jane refers to Bertha as a woman before dehumanizing her with a demeaning pronoun: "It drew aside the window-curtain and looked out; perhaps it saw dawn approaching, for, taking the candle, it retreated to the door. Just at my bedside, the figure stopped: the fiery eyes glared upon me--she thrust up her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes" (Brontë 280). This selection is bookended by Jane's acknowledgement of Bertha as an individual--she calls her a woman preceding the passage and uses female pronouns to refer to her. But in between those identifying pronouns, Jane switches to the use of "it." Perhaps this is simply to maintain parallelism in advance of saying "the figure." Nevertheless, "it," when referring to an individual, indicates a sense of inherent contempt, illustrating Jane's contribution to the othering and consequent isolation of Bertha, whether

intentional or not. Because “it” is also impersonal for a pronoun, the language attempts to distance Jane from Bertha. This technique, however, may not be as effective as Jane suspects because it further highlights her projection of the oppression she herself experiences, intensifying the reflection on both sides as she attempts to darken Bertha’s side and, consequently, darkens her own as well. In this instance, it seems Jane is either unable or unwilling to identify with Bertha although their similar experiences as oppressed women are indisputable.

Another telling moment is when Jane first sees Bertha, finally knowing who she is and her relationship to Rochester. She describes the encounter, saying, “What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing” (Brontë 290). This characterization provided by Jane extends far beyond the illustration of an eccentric and reduces Bertha to the level of a “savage.” Ignoring in the moment the possible effects of isolation and oppression Bertha must have experienced up to this point, Jane equates her appearance and behavior to an animal’s; for a while, she continues to use the pronoun “it,” which further dehumanizes Bertha. But it is significant that Jane refers to Bertha as a wild animal--not a “lesser” individual person or even a domesticated animal. While this characterization alludes to the extent to which Bertha acts according to her own will, it nonetheless renders her dignity nonexistent in the eyes of the other characters. Comparing people of color to animals is not an uncommon trope, so Brontë, whether intentionally or unintentionally, calls attention to the tired and highly problematic racism against people of color. Aligning with the persistent control of Bertha, Jane’s observations attempt to portray her as less than human, only further deepening Bertha’s already-perceived image as an outcast. Perhaps Jane’s need to participate in the collective antipathy towards Bertha is rooted in cultural and societal expectations and attitudes

regarding insuppressible individuals, or those who consistently resist efforts to control them--especially women. This may point to her need for some degree of power as she slowly and subtly begins to mirror the abandon that Bertha so freely expresses.

The power dynamics in the novel are complex and intricate, due largely to the presence of patriarchal oppression. An article from 2015 on viewing intimate partner violence in light of feminist, queer, and gender studies points to the historically overwhelming influence of heteronormativity in cultures. By adhering to the traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity, "hegemonic masculinity maintains its privileged status" (Cannon et al. 676). And it is this privilege that allows Rochester to isolate Bertha for so long with several people aware of the situation. The inherent intimidation of Victorian women arises from their knowing that their voices would be ignored, if not utterly scorned (Saeed et al. 57). Still, Bertha's performance as contradictory to her expected/assigned gender role--as a submissive and tame woman--should not be underestimated. Rochester's, Jane's, and the culture's inability to accept Bertha's independence and individuality illustrates the degree to which patriarchal ideals permeate Victorian society.

Indeed, perhaps the tendency to reduce Bertha to an animalistic "savage" is succinctly explained by the logic by which we are traditionally conditioned to operate: "How we understand...acts of aggression and power differ because of the ways society is gendered and sexuality is organized" (Cannon et al. 673). These power dynamics fuel the resistance to isolation that we witness in Bertha and propel her to engage in rebellion to such a dramatic extent, compared to Jane, that she becomes a type of martyr to feminist resistance, arguably earning her classification as a main character on the level of Jane herself.

It is difficult to talk about Bertha's role in Jane's growth and its connection to power dynamics without a discussion of female sexual agency. In fact, there is an abundance of scholarship that addresses female sexual agency in Victorian literature and even in *Jane Eyre*. Every attempt to govern Bertha is met with resistance, as she clearly refuses to relinquish control of her mind and her body. In a discussion on what she calls the "erotics of power" in the novel, Mary Ann Davis explains that Jane's own "erotic agency" is "produced" by an "interdependent relationship between erotic power dynamics, female agency, and xenophobic and colonial rhetorics" (121). This could easily be applied to Bertha as well; the defiance with which she approaches traditional gender roles plays on the idea of power dynamics, as she pays no mind to the expectations placed upon her; even while oppressed, physically and mentally, she fights for ways to enact autonomy; and her identity as a woman of color in Victorian England results in a susceptibility to oppression and prejudice. Because we don't have nearly as much context for Bertha as we do for Jane, we cannot be certain whether these various intersections necessarily produce Bertha's erotic agency, but I would argue that this parallel between the two characters is yet another illustration of Bertha's role as a mirror for Jane to model her growth as an individual.

Many analyses of Bertha attribute her unorthodox behavior to the isolation she endures at the hands of Rochester. I, however, propose that this isolation produces at least one positive consequence by giving Jane something to identify with. The trouble with this "advantage," however, is that it remains an advantage only for Jane. In other words, though the character of Bertha allows for some growth on Jane's part, Bertha herself is stripped of an individual identity and her worth in the novel is therefore reduced to what she can do for Jane. Jane's isolation may be more metaphorical while Bertha's is both metaphorical and literal, but this disparity allows Jane space to reinvent herself so that she feels increasingly comfortable owning her autonomy.

Ultimately, Bertha's isolation represents, as a whole, the tendency of Victorian society to attempt to stifle the independence, free thought, and sexual liberation of women. As it may be argued that Jane experiences those forms of oppression as well, it becomes increasingly clearer how Bertha acts as a sort of mirror for Jane to quietly reinvent herself. Isolation also gives way to the rebellion Bertha acts out, interpreted by others as a display of "madness."

Davis refers primarily to Jane herself, in her article, but she notes generally that there exist "women who have been shaped by Western liberal notions of agency and freedom and yet whose erotic desires play with, in, and upon oppressive ideological structures" (120). Bertha is brought in by Rochester from outside the Western world of which Davis speaks, but the idea of the seductive nature of that which is wild and, in some cases, almost inconceivable is still useful when analyzing Bertha's role in the novel. Bertha's more wild nature as she presents in the novel must, to some extent, be alluring to Jane, since it is only after meeting Bertha that she begins to adopt a more independent persona. In this case, the Western ideal of the time would have demanded complacency in submission; nevertheless, Jane, knowing the expectations placed upon her by the culture, concedes to the temptation of autonomy that she witnesses present itself so dramatically in Bertha.

A fair comparison cannot truly be made between the Bertha of *Jane Eyre* and the Bertha/Antoinette of Jean Rhys's postcolonial response to Brontë's classic, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Still, Jennifer Gilchrist's contribution to the discussion of the eroticization of power in Rhys's novel provides potential explanations for Bertha's dynamic with Rochester:

[Bertha] requires Rochester to be the sadist to her masochist in order for him to help her transform a reenactment of historical slavery into physical pleasure. She initiates him into

an erotics of violence that allows them both, however briefly, to achieve a Nietzschean self-overcoming, a transcendence or surpassing of social consciousness. (476)

In Gilchrist's argument, I would like to point out the observation that Bertha's actions are centered on the potential for her own pleasure. Though, as I stated previously, the Bertha of *Jane Eyre* and the Bertha of *Wide Sargasso Sea* cannot be considered one and the same, we can see this same attitude reflected in Brontë's novel. Rhys identifies and reiterates themes of misogynistic and xenophobic ambush and metaphorical suffocation, necessitating a more exhaustive analysis of Bertha's treatment and worth in *Jane Eyre*. What characterization we get of Bertha from Brontë reveals that she tends to follow her urges as opposed to choosing courses of action that would please those around her. At no point in the novel is there any indication that she values the desires of others over her own; instead, she actively chooses what pleases her in the moment, priming her to model feminism to other oppressed women who might use her as the mirror she provides for Jane. This inclination supports a prioritization of self, something Victorian society restricts women from doing--something with which Jane herself is relatively unfamiliar. Bertha's unbothered approach to the concerns of others about her status as an outcast madwoman has feminist tones to it, but this is debated. Gilchrist views Bertha's "eroticization of her own powerlessness" in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as "a particular, antifeminist vision of femininity as complementary masochism to powerful male sadism" (477).

Pitting this against the image of a wildly unrestrained Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, however, I argue that this fantasy of powerlessness contributes to an intense desire for real freedom by the time we are formally introduced to Bertha by Brontë. This would mean that her desires as specifically outlined in Rhys's novel are not necessarily antifeminist; rather, they might be viewed as feminist because she has actively chosen to pursue something that pleases her. Indeed,

Gilchrist concedes that Bertha “looks like an English rose, but that exterior...hides deep, mad, primitive, violent sexuality” (478). The common understanding of this characterization as deviant clouds the driving force behind it, which is Bertha’s autonomy. More critical to the conversation than her sexual fantasies are her ability and, furthermore, her desire to act upon her own will and maintain control over her mind, body, choices, and circumstance. A discussion of Rhys’s Bertha sparks conversations about the significance of Bertha as an independent player in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys’s work effectively humanizes Bertha, making it easier to envision her as a main character in Brontë’s novel; independent of Rhys’s post-Brontë background for Bertha, though, we should endeavor to understand the significance of Brontë’s Bertha as an individual and a main character. The conversation remains important in analyzing the history of the treatment of Bertha in all kinds of literature.

Jane and Bertha are perceived by those around them in very different ways--Jane typically as a governess and Bertha as a frightening “savage.” In fact, there are many instances, particularly once Jane hears the truth about Bertha and Rochester, in which Bertha is characterized by others as barbaric, animalistic, and generally uncivilized. This characterization revisits the racially-charged tendency to compare people of color to animals and finds its foundation and justification in Bertha’s strong deviations from Victorian expectations of a woman of color, and it affords the other characters unspoken (and, truly, unfounded) license to mistreat and discriminate against her. The seeming emptiness resulting from Bertha’s uncontrollable behavior and nature translates to what Morrison calls a “blank darkness” that “conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies” (38). Bertha’s unrelenting refusal to be silenced, however, proves notable given that she suffers through more tangible abuse and prejudice than any of the other characters, including Jane. This disagreeable perception of her

that, although her perceived social identity differs greatly from Jane's, contributes to her desire for freedom and separates her from the other characters, emphasizing her role as a critical central character.

The characterization of Bertha as a "madwoman" speaks to the suffocating effects of Victorian patriarchal culture. In her doctoral dissertation on madwomen in literature, English scholar Shahd Alshammari points out the diversity of perceived madness among women:

The Victorian madwoman who is locked up, then, is not altogether different from the Postcolonial and/or Bedouin madwoman, who are confined not in the attic or a Victorian bourgeois home, but rather, a tent, a room, an asylum, and most significantly, a space of confinement that is the result of both colonialism and patriarchy. The confinement is not limited to the attic or any other physical space, but rather, it is limitless. The confinement is culturally and imperially constructed; it is an enslavement that women struggle to break free from. (2)

The intersection of isolation and madness Alshammari refers to is evident in Bertha's struggle with the way in which both individual characters and society in general perceive her. The treatment she endures from not only Rochester but the other characters as well highlights the external condemnation that only continues to feed her appetite for liberation. This particular analysis of the madwoman effectively legitimizes the experience of Jane as an oppressed woman, but it simultaneously underscores the treatment Bertha endures. The "limitless" nature of such oppression speaks to the animalistic abuse faced by Rochester's wife, linking her experience to that of Jane's and mirroring feelings of injustice, as she experiences a cruelty that is different from but no less legitimate and real than that which Bertha experiences.

There is a difference in labels that should be noted here. Alshammari's conversation focuses on the idea of the "madwoman" in particular, and Bertha is unquestionably meant to be representative of that trope. She is locked up and contained, deemed "crazy" by those around her, and exhibits grotesque behavior that excites both trepidation and animosity in the other characters. Common stereotypes of "madwomen" are typically grounded in misunderstandings and misdiagnoses of mental health conditions. Indeed, the others view Bertha as wild and far beyond the point of rehabilitation by the time Jane formally meets her--if rehabilitation was ever even something they, and Rochester in particular, considered. Circling back to Jane's dialogue about Bertha, however, we can see how Bertha is often referred to in arguably even more derogatory terms. Equating her to an animal on the grounds that her appearance and performance deviate from what Victorian culture deems acceptable reveals the extent to which Bertha is scorned--even by Jane herself. If "it is the madwomen protagonists who are able to embody agency" (Alshammari 5), what is Bertha to represent as an image inferior even to the madwoman?

The *OED* defines agency as the "ability or capacity to act or exert power." Following this line of rationale, then, if the breadth of autonomy increases as the individual's perceived status declines, Bertha's lowly reputation may in fact grant her a degree of sovereignty. Again we find her at the extreme ends of circumstance, further proving this exaggerated structure is necessary for Jane to feel comfortable enough to enact her own agency. In other words, the subtlety of Jane's acknowledgment of her independence suggests that anything less than the magnified characterization of Bertha (and her behavioral "flaws," according to a sexist, xenophobic, ableist Victorian culture) may not have provided enough flagrancy to overshadow Jane's experimentation with her agency. Bertha's status as defined by society and the other

characters, while incredibly demeaning and blatantly misinformed, still propels her forward, rewarding her with more and more tastes of freedom.

The isolation discussed previously can be read as a contributing factor to the worsening of Bertha's mental health; it may also be understood as some sort of justification for her discriminatory characterization as a "crazy," "wild" woman. Oftentimes, the idea of the "madwoman" or an individual experiencing "madness" is coupled with the concept of isolation. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, "all characters that were considered deviant or dangerous were significantly marked as other; and the other was almost always racially inferior" (Alshammari 28). The elements that characterize Bertha's experience in the novel feed into each other, and whether Rochester truly considers her dangerous or manipulates that idea to legitimize his treatment of her is unknown. What is known, however, is that she is clearly othered by everyone, and not playing to her advantage is the fact that she is from Jamaica. Alshammari's observation of *Wuthering Heights* can be easily extrapolated to Bertha's treatment here, and it stands to reason that Bertha as a character, including both her identity and her reputation, are used to categorize her as an outcast whose existence is deemed inconvenient. Here we begin to understand how Bertha functions as a window for Jane to acknowledge the oppression she (Bertha) endures as a woman of color.

On perhaps what might be considered a superficial level, Bertha's behavior can be attributed to the treatment that she receives and that fuels her anger and her hunger for liberation. The wildness which she demonstrates seems also to come from deeper within her; more ingrained than affecting simply her outward performance, there is a sense it expresses itself through her mindset as well. Indeed, this idea is much more blatantly supported in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Gilchrist observes that in Rhys's novel, Bertha sees fire "not as the manifestation

of collective anger...[but] the awesome power of natural destruction, before which people do not matter” (470). While the Bertha in *Jane Eyre* cannot be fairly judged against the Bertha/Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Gilchrist’s analysis serves as a valuable starting point for a discussion of Bertha’s motives apart from what she experiences in England.

The possibility that a particular mentality drives *all* of Bertha’s decisions and actions suggests a complexity of reason not previously applied to the Bertha of *Jane Eyre*. To begin, it is important to recognize in Gilchrist’s comment the pull away from Bertha’s commonly assumed animosity resulting from her situation at Thornfield. Furthermore, the insinuation that Bertha sees value in nature’s superiority over humans suggests that her respect for the natural world transcends misfortune and experiences of prejudice. Essentially, this mindset that finds less value in other people may explain her ability to maintain her defiance against and resistance to Rochester’s attempts to control her. Releasing the weight of the speculation of others is yet another behavior that Bertha arguably demonstrates and that Jane comes to eventually imitate, allowing her to move past the fear of potential denunciation from society.

There is perhaps a bleak irony in the fact that the very action that can be considered Bertha’s ultimate form of escape and resistance is also the ultimate sacrifice. The rebellion Bertha clings to leads her directly into a need for the finality of death, as it is her only vehicle for escaping the oppression that has come to consume her life. The sacrifice characterized by her death is twofold: it not only serves as the price she pays for an end to the oppression but also makes way for Jane to develop by the end of the novel. Gilbert and Gubar analyze the numerous ways in which Bertha appears the actor of Jane’s motives:

Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days

at Gateshead...Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester's mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys herself in the process as if she were an agent of Jane's desire as well as her own. And finally, Jane's disguised hostility to Rochester...comes strangely true through the intervention of Bertha, whose melodramatic death causes Rochester to lose both eye and hand. (360)

The vision of the madwoman then becomes, in Brontë's novel, not just an alter ego to the common nineteenth-century Victorian woman but also a starting point and vehicle for the assertion of her autonomy. Without Bertha, and without her same characteristics that society uses to brand her a "madwoman," Jane would have been unable to witness the enticingly powerful impact of female dominance. Many analyses consider the characters of Jane and Bertha as being one and the same, with the latter serving as a simple metaphor for the hidden anger within the former. But I believe that this perspective grossly undermines the significant individuality of Bertha's character. Perhaps she may be seen as both: a personification of Jane's hunger for independence and emotional freedom, and a martyr for the title character to emulate in her pursuit of autonomy. Indeed, she may well be considered a martyr when analyzing the path by which she finally gains independence from both Rochester and the oppressive nature of Victorian England society. And it is her death, her sacrifice, that ultimately clears the way for Jane to emerge as an autonomous woman in a culture that forbids just that. In any case, both views of Bertha are critical to understanding the weight of her influence on Jane's development and the novel's general commentary on Victorian England's treatment of women. Bertha is more than a supporting or side character in the novel, and to disregard her contribution to Jane's growth as an individual is to undermine the value of her refusal to be controlled.

The “rebellious feminism” in the novel, defined by Gilbert and Gubar as “‘anti-Christian’ refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society” speaks to the existence of a prejudiced, misogynistic culture that necessitates a change to curb the mistreatment of women and people of color. The ways in which Bertha rebels against those attempting to control her are obvious, and her eventual death may be seen as the ultimate form of resistance and escape. The link between religion--or, rather, disregard for religion--and rebellion reveals a deep-rooted misogyny that goes beyond surface hatred to a foundation of age-old religious bias. Thus, it is theoretically logical that it would take an equally powerful element to act effectively against that system. Indeed, Davis claims Gilbert and Gubar’s concept of rebellious feminism actually “emphasizes the building of an equal relationship between Rochester and Jane Eyre” (117). That rebellious feminism, which Bertha herself personifies, is the tool Jane thus uses to differentiate herself from oppressed women. As Bertha epitomizes rebellious feminism, and arguably the clearest example of it in the novel, her character is necessary to Jane’s development. If Jane’s much more subtle employment of rebellious feminism can be considered a constitutive element of an equal partnership, then perhaps Bertha’s more aggressive application indicates a power imbalance where she holds more metaphorical authority over Rochester than he does over her.

However gruesome and tragic its manner, Bertha’s death results in her escape from the oppression of Rochester and Victorian English culture. This aspect of the plot supports labeling her a martyr, particularly for Jane. Most martyrs or saints are considered models--an example to which others may aspire, but not necessarily imitate to so intense a degree. But it is precisely Bertha’s severity and passion of mind and body that set the precedent for Jane’s eventual transformation, however slight that transformation may seem in comparison. The phrase “rebellious feminism” and Bertha’s representation and enactment of it further sets her apart from

the other characters by emphasizing her refusal to adhere to any and all standards placed upon her by the culture.

When traditional definitions of femininity that value submissiveness and complacency are maintained, “hegemonic masculinity maintains its privileged status, which is sustained through the establishment of the cultural ideal and institutional power and influence” (Cannon et al. 676). While this system may have led to the loss of her life, Bertha’s performance of rebellious feminism and unorthodox femininity works to question and protest the privilege of masculinity in Victorian England; the dramatic quality of her behavior is necessary to challenge the systems of power that nourish misogyny. Bertha, in other words, is the figure who spearheads the revolt against sexist, patriarchal ideals in a time and world that require great sacrifice to do so.

Ultimately, Bertha is no less central a figure to the novel than Jane Eyre herself. Considering the nature and extent of the abuse Bertha suffers at the hands of Rochester, her experience is just as critical to our understanding of both the characters’ and Brontë’s commentary on feminism and the treatment of women--and women of color. We don’t get nearly as much information about Bertha as we do Jane, and we are not formally introduced to her until near the end of the novel. Nevertheless, the information Brontë does give us about Bertha’s character reveals many similarities to Jane’s experience and many instances that foreshadow Jane’s eventual transformation into a more autonomous and self-reliant individual. From the time we learn of Bertha, and even before when we analyze her actions as she hid in the darkness, up to the end of her life, she remains the same. In other words, wild and uncontrollable as she is, Bertha is consistent and blatant in her refusal to be made into a puppet by society or by Rochester. This is a striking contrast to Jane who, while not always totally submissive, remains

largely complacent and quiet until she is exposed to Rochester's secret. It is undoubtedly a positive transformation, but it reveals the instability of Jane's character.

Indeed, Bertha's humble superiority as a character is compounded by her history with Rochester, as his "ultimate secret, the secret that is revealed together with the existence of Bertha...[which] is another and perhaps most surprising secret of inequality" (Gilbert and Gubar 355). It is here in the novel that Brontë reveals that Rochester married Bertha to bolster his own status; Bertha's current, untameable nature rationalizes Rochester's desire for control over the women in his life. His inability to tame her or, rather, her refusal to be tamed, supports the argument that she functions effectively as a character as central as Jane herself. This again brings into question the imbalance of power between man and woman in a rigidly patriarchal society, and it further paints Bertha as an independent force in her own right. Her establishment as such also makes her a more consistent character than Jane in the sense that Bertha, from what we as readers are shown of her, never strays from her characterization; while there is no growth that we witness of her as we do Jane, Bertha's wholly unapologetic essence and stubbornness make her a distinct figure of female empowerment.

The concept of Bertha acting as Jane's true, suppressed self is modeled often even in the novel. Bertha seems to take action in all the ways we assume Jane wishes she herself could, leading Jane to "first clearly [perceive] her terrible double when Bertha puts on the wedding veil intended for the second Mrs. Rochester, and [she] turns to the mirror" (Gilbert and Gubar 362). That description of "terrible" should be read in light of the prejudice by which such individuals as Bertha would have been perceived in a sexist and exclusionary society. In other words, Jane views Bertha's behavior and presence as outrageous because they blatantly contradict the societal and cultural standards that have been normalized. Yet she sees herself in Bertha, not simply

because she is wearing the clothes meant for Jane. This speaks to Bertha's influence on the title character and further supports Bertha's position as a compellingly independent character herself.

Essentially, though Bertha may indeed seem to serve no other purpose than as a plot device for Jane to use to develop her autonomy, her relentlessly defiant nature earns her as much recognition as any central character in the novel--even matching that of Jane's. Her experiences and influence on the title character make her an essential part of Brontë's commentary on feminism. While it remains difficult to argue for the ousting of Jane as the main character of the novel, I would like to point to Bertha's characterization as further proof of her status as the stable subject or agent of the novel around which Jane, as the less stable object, revolves as she explores the extent of her independence. Most scholarship on Bertha focuses on her role as Jane's "evil" or "suppressed" self, and the research that analyzes her independent of that role doesn't quite touch on her value as a central character. Recognizing Bertha's worth as a character as fundamental as--or perhaps even more so than--Jane's allows us to uncover the significance of her contribution to the novel's feminist commentary. It would not be unreasonable even to suggest that Jane's development as an individual is due largely, if not entirely, to the example set by Rochester's first wife.

Cementing Bertha's position as a stable, central character is critical to understanding Jane's growth and how we might interpret that process in light of the similarities between the two characters. Considering their different but equally valid experiences of oppression, the labels by which they either identify and/or are assigned by the culture, and their final acts of independence in the novel, it becomes clearer that Bertha is the model and the foundation by which Jane develops her identity; this, in turn, legitimizes her often-underestimated significance in both Jane's growth and the novel as a whole. Gilbert and Gubar discuss Bertha's influence on Jane as

she leaves Thornfield, that “unjustly imprisoned now, as she was then, in one of the traps a patriarchal society provides for outcast Cinderellas, Jane realizes that this time she must escape through deliberation rather than through madness” (363). This initially appears to be a reference to Bertha, and perhaps it is simply a suggestion of Bertha’s unintentionally demonstrating to Jane how not to escape the confines of oppression. I argue, however, that Bertha acts with both deliberation and “madness,” as we have analyzed her unapologetic nature through her behavior. This analysis, then, leads to an understanding that Jane’s decisions are inspired by Bertha’s free and purposeful style of action.

Chapter 3: Why Bertha's Individual Experience and Influence on Jane Warrants More Discussion

Bertha plays numerous roles in Brontë's novel, despite her lack of "screen time" compared to Jane. Obviously, we do not get nearly so detailed a characterization of Bertha, but her significance becomes clear in the ways she influences Jane to assume independence in a time and place that do not allow this to happen so freely. As stated previously, much of the scholarship that exists on Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, and Bertha specifically tends to view Rochester's first wife as an extension of Jane--a representation of her most suppressed desires.

While this is a common, and certainly valid, perspective, I believe it has the ability to undermine Bertha as an individual character. Even more important, it has the ability to undermine her experience as a woman of color in Victorian England. Thus, it remains critical to integrate a discussion on race to fully understand the ramifications of oppression on Bertha, given her background and the treatment she receives in the novel.

By proposing a reading of Bertha as a character equally as central as Jane, I hope to reveal her as a window to and mirror of oppression to Jane. Bertha may be seen as a mirror to show Jane who she (Jane) is and who she could be--in other words, the common view of Bertha as a complement to the title character. But she could also be read as a window for Jane who allows her to understand the unfairness Bertha experiences in society and culture, not just as a woman but as a woman from a "lesser" place. Indeed, Bertha as window and mirror and Jane as sight work in tandem to illustrate the complexity of identity formation, particularly in this misogynistic, xenophobic era. Jane's slowness to catch on to Bertha's motives may also be read as general resistance; when considering Bertha as the transparent window in this situation, both characters again work synchronously to explore the tendency of white women to overlook the

struggles of women of color, even when they experience similar oppression (albeit to often vastly different degrees). Ultimately, Bertha loses her life so that Jane can gain both independence and an understanding of the nuances and depths of oppression.

Firstly, I would like to clarify that, though the most accepted readings of Bertha often do not adequately address her individuality and identity, there is still value in reading her as a mirror to Jane. But instead of focusing on that impact exclusively on Jane, there is much to be gained from analyzing how Bertha's character contributes to the larger picture of how race plays into oppression and identity. Viewing Bertha as a mirror for Jane characterizes Bertha in a number of diverse ways. Bertha, through her unchanging characterization in the novel, remains the stable reflection Jane needs as the young governess develops and changes throughout the novel.

Indeed, wild and seemingly unpredictable as Bertha seems to be, she is steadfast in her unapologetically untamable nature. As Jane develops in her realization and ownership of her autonomy, she needs the stability Bertha provides in order to experiment with her freedom. In other words, it is only through the presence of Bertha that Jane is able to come into her own, thus highlighting the significance of Bertha's character.

It may well be argued that Bertha's otherness is what keeps her from receiving more character development from Brontë, but this lack may be interpreted as a reflection of the needlessness for further growth. Bertha already represents an extreme feminist independence in the context of the novel, so taking into account the othering she experiences shows that she is already fully developed as an individual by the time we are formally introduced to her. When Jane describes seeing Bertha's reflection in a mirror previous to that, Monika Elbert identifies the scene as "a sign of their merging identities as raging, helpless, or violated women" (806-807). Certainly, both characters experience a significant amount of oppression throughout the novel,

and at times they may indeed feel helpless. But I would like to challenge the idea that they *are* actually helpless. Jane's unawareness of who Bertha/the woman in the mirror is at that moment signifies her wavering understanding of her own as well as of Bertha's circumstances and her general struggle with identity and being. Intangible as she may seem in the reflection, Bertha's presence and her image in the mirror work to further present her as a representation of stability that Jane can use as context for everything else in her life. In other words, Bertha's fixed reflection remains stable in the mirror as Jane grapples with what is going on around her. Considering the ways in which Bertha's display of autonomy affects and is subtly emulated by Jane, it is more difficult to characterize either of them as helpless unless we choose to view their experiences primarily in light of enduring patriarchal ideals and systems.

More significant, I would propose, is the depiction of them as "raging" and "violated." The result of both of these characterizations is both Bertha's and Jane's desire to escape from the grip of oppression, as well as their eventual metaphorical break from it. Perhaps it is through her innately submissive nature that Jane "finally realizes that there is no patriarchal protective power: she is alone, terrified by herself" (Elbert 806). While there is no clearly defined alliance between Jane and Bertha, they are united in their taxing relationships with Rochester and their positions in society. Brontë does not provide a true confidant for Jane with whom she could share her struggles in her relationship with Rochester, but it may be argued she is not truly alone--though she may feel otherwise--when taking into account the way that her life and problems mirror that of Bertha's. In this way, an unspoken bond provides Jane with an ally in Bertha.

Indirectly advocating for the perspective that Bertha is a central figure in the novel, Nicole Diederich proposes that "Brontë constructs Jane as Bertha's alter ego." This reading

acknowledges the significance of Bertha as an individual, though the particular analysis takes each character's union with Rochester as the main focus of this connection. Diederich situates Bertha as the main, acting figure and Jane as her complement:

The doppelganger motif, the doubling of the first wife by the second wife, reverses the typical consideration of Bertha as Jane's repressed psychological alter ego. The comparison between Jane and Bertha makes the second wife the doppelganger of the first...In keeping the first wife alive, the doppelganger element in *Jane Eyre*, in addition to the psychological or mythic resonance it awakens, allows Brontë to subvert discourse on marriage with a discourse of remarriage that exposes the often powerless subjectivity of both the first and the second 'angel in the house.'

This observation highlights the understood connection between Rochester's first and second wife, providing reason for treating the character of Bertha as the essential figure around whom the character of Jane develops and revolves. The inclusion of marriage in this particular discussion points to the weight of marital unions on identity and identity formation, and it reminds us of yet another point of similarity that shows Jane following in Bertha's steps.

The difference in their circumstances is found in Rochester's state while he is with each of them. Prior to Bertha's death, he has yet to sustain any injuries, and he enforces some degree of oppression on each of the women. With Jane, he tends to exert a sense of authority and superiority, but this is exponentially magnified in his treatment of Bertha. He is entirely physically capable and independent while he is with Bertha, which makes it much easier for him to exert force over her; with Jane, after Bertha dies, however, Rochester is less self-reliant, and Brontë creates a circumstance that aligns with Jane's more unassuming path to independence.

The lack of power on Rochester's part, due to his injuries related to the fire, allows Jane to continue growing in an environment conducive to her level of comfort.

As it is ultimately Bertha's actions that cause Rochester's injuries and thus Jane's safe(r) space to exercise independence, "she provides Jane with the opportunity to accept the position of wife and mother, to enter into a remarriage that grants the second wife more agency than the first" (Diederich). If it is understood that Rochester's wounds are necessary for him to truly recognize and treat Jane as an equal, then Bertha may be regarded as a type of liberator to Jane. I would like to suggest, here, that it thus becomes necessary for Bertha to choose violence in her final encounter with Rochester in order to escape the patriarchal oppression with which he has suffocated her. Furthermore, Jane, a white woman, reaps the most benefit from this sacrificial act by Bertha, a woman of color. Olivia Loksing Moy analyzes a similar novel, *Re Jane*, in which one of the characters' "feminist self-righteousness enacts the white savior complex that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identified in Western critics attempting to rescue (yet silence) the 'third world woman' from [some cultural] practices" (416). Just as Diederich proposes to replace Jane with Bertha as alter ego, I suggest that using Loksing Moy's reasoning to establish Bertha as a savior as opposed to Jane sufficiently validates Bertha's value as a character apart from a role as a simple, supporting plot device. As discussed previously, Bertha ends up a martyr figure by the end of the novel, having given up her life and allowing Jane to continue a life with Rochester as she navigates her autonomy.

Bertha's acting as a mirror to Jane reveals the title character's potential, as well as her lack of action and initiation to change. Bertha's independence is loud, so to speak, in that it and she pay no mind to the stifling opinions of those around her; Jane, in comparison, exhibits a far more passive route to owning and claiming her independence. Thus, Bertha as a mirror shows

Jane who she (Jane) could be; her potential is visible through the existence of Bertha. Bertha's unapologetic nature affords her the reputation of a "madwoman," but problematic as this may be considering her history, Loksing Moy offers "the parallel between the madwoman in the attic and the Chinese Lady on the stage, because the trapped box—this metaphorical attic, this cross-cultural freak show—is a space that demands self-critical distancing and reevaluation: it begs to be transformed into an empowering trope" (418). And Bertha proves empowering not only for herself as a character but for Jane as well through the example she sets of feminist resistance. Considering that we have much less context and detail about Bertha than we do about Jane, Bertha's ability to alter the traditional connotation of "madwoman" into something infinitely more progressive sets her apart from the other characters.

Examining the influence of racism and xenophobia in the novel and within the context it was written is critical to recognizing the significance of Bertha's experience. Loksing Moy touches on the concept of the white savior, a ploy utilized in the attempted legitimization of colonization, to initiate a discussion on the tendency of white Victorian characters to view their foreign counterparts in a problematic, discriminatory way. Similarly, Chieko Ichikawa points to the representation of race in *Jane Eyre*, as "Brontë's figurative use of 'blackness' represents the way in which oppressors or dominant people in social and gender hierarchies are delineated as the 'other' in relation to the protagonist" (221). Indeed, "the heroine's search for an independent female subject frequently presupposes her racial superiority, which she expresses by alluding to eastern women's inferior position," as can be gathered from the language Jane herself uses to describe Bertha, despite the pity she feels for her (Ichikawa 222). Bertha is incessantly othered in the novel by the other characters--and by the culture within which she is trapped--making it difficult to argue that her racial and cultural background play no part in the oppression and

discrimination to which she is subject. Her ability to resist oppression is even more evident in light of the way she is characterized by the others as “barbaric” and “savage,” traits commonly used by white colonists to justify their actions. Ichikawa analyzes an understanding of such situations during the Victorian era:

[The] definition of the ‘heathen’ women as degraded, confined, uneducated and sensual serves as a cause for British women’s mission to save those ‘slaves.’ Paradoxically, by assigning women to the task of missionising, domestic ideology, which promoted women’s confinement within the private sphere, was deployed to expand women’s domain outside of their households and even beyond their country to the extent that they could construct themselves as independent British women." (223)

This observation on Ichikawa’s part introduces us to the complexity of that dynamic among white women and women of color in Victorian England. Brontë thus writes Jane as a white woman who, even after finally acknowledging the racially-charged and misogynistic injustices faced by Bertha, nonetheless emerges herself as a successful Victorian woman with a fulfilled life by the end of the novel.

Bertha’s roles as a mirror and as a window appear especially intertwined when viewed through a postcolonial lens that takes into account her experience as a woman of color. The inclusion of Bertha’s character in the novel and, furthermore, the way Brontë writes her, inevitably invites us to consider her position as a woman of color experiencing oppression in Victorian England. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, examines the historical tendency of white authors to write black characters as caring nurse figures gone bad:

It is as if the nurse were quite out of control. The other side of nursing, the opposite of the helping, healing hand, is the figure of destruction--the devouring predator whose inhuman and indifferent impulses pose immediate danger. Never still, always hungry, these characters are nevertheless seductive, elusive, and theatrical in their combination of power and deceit, love and death...The female nurses--as wives and lovers with caretaking as their primary role--give voice to and complete acts of destruction. They are predators, sharks, unnatural women who combine the signs of a nurse with those of the shark...The figure evokes a predatory, devouring eroticism and signals the antithesis to femininity, to nurturing, to nursing, to replenishment. (84-85)

Indeed, such has Bertha been written in order to characterize her as an outcast and as a simple antagonist to Jane. But Morrison's analysis suggests that characters like Bertha are much more complex and nuanced than they initially seem. If we apply this metaphor directly to the characters in Brontë's novel, it becomes obvious that Jane likely represents the nurse and Bertha the shark. According to Morrison's argument, however, Bertha likely would have been written similarly to a nurse prior to her supposed break and her captivity. At no point do we witness Jane express shark-like qualities, at least to the degree that Bertha does, but we can see in this connection between them, once when we understand Jane may relate to the nurse-like character Bertha once was, how Bertha reveals and personalizes the experiences of being oppressed as a woman of color. Thus, she exists as a literary window not only in general but to Jane specifically, bolstering her position as a central and critical character whose experience also plays a significant role in the development of the title character.

Furthermore, the discussion of change and fear, in any capacity, to which Morrison alludes is reminiscent of traditional gothic elements in literature, which have been extensively

studied in relation to *Jane Eyre*. Diederich addresses this aspect of the novel in her proposal that Jane is Bertha's doppelganger, considering that "While Rochester's attempt at bigamy violates Jane, he also perpetuates a symbolic and physical violence against Bertha, whom Jane would replace, or double. The social practice of remarriage locates the gothic terror of the doppelganger into the everyday, into the role of second wife." The entry in the *OED* redirects the term "doppelganger" to its original form, "double-ganger," defined as "the apparition of a living person; a double, a wraith." The supernatural, not-quite-real and not-quite-tangible nature of the doppelganger indeed parallels the essence of the mirror. It visibly doubles the figures present, creating a space where Jane no longer feels quite so alone and is finally able to collect enough fortitude to enact her independence. Rochester himself, as Diederich points out, participates in doubling as well through his attempt at maintaining two wives at once. The significance of this lies in that this action has the potential to undermine Bertha's dignity, but it actually adds to the gothic power dynamics from which Bertha derives her power. In other words, Rochester's first wife finds power in that which frightens all the other characters--she becomes Morrison's nurse-turned-shark, expected to play the part of the submissive outsider but instead dismantling the exhausted stereotypes on which that expectation is based. She reflects a tenacity that provides Jane with encouragement to cultivate her identity but with just enough transparency as a window to expose the magnitude of her experience as a woman of color.

The xenophobic atmosphere within which we see Bertha for the entirety of the novel essentially leaves us in a place that makes it nearly impossible to overlook the consequences of the prejudice she faces. Therefore, reading her character as a window allows us to fully appreciate her lived experience, particularly when it relates to her significance in a white-centric,

Victorian-era novel. Bertha, characterized as a “madwoman” and a “savage,” is not typically recognized for her individuality so much as for what she is commonly interpreted to represent.

Certainly, it would be problematic to disregard her symbolism in the novel, but I would suggest it is equally toxic to neglect her significance as an individual character. Put simply, to overlook her individuality and existence apart from her various “roles” in the novel is to discount her identity and the experiences and background which cultivated it. Of course, both Jane and Bertha suffer under the influence of patriarchal society, but the intersectionality that considers Bertha’s oppression compounded by her race accentuates Jane’s privilege, however subtle in the grand scheme of things, as a white woman. In “Black Matters,” Morrison addresses this conscious ignorance:

...in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. (9-10)

So while there is a connection between Bertha and Jane in the misogyny they both experience, Bertha’s functioning as a window and Jane’s resistance to seeing her as one represents the larger tendency of more privileged groups to ignore the oppression of others. Specifically, this becomes a glaring issue when white women choose to overlook the struggles of women of color, despite experiencing some degree of the same or similar injustice. The silence to which Morrison refers is a voluntary one, finding parallels between it and Jane’s deliberate choice to approach Bertha’s

mistreatment in a more passive manner. It is the initial shock of the situation that evokes the most protest from Jane, but she fails to fully acknowledge the extent of the racist oppression to which Bertha is subject, which adds to the weight of Bertha's oppression.

To sufficiently grasp the disparity in privilege between Jane and Bertha, and thus the weight of the latter's influence on the former, it may prove useful to revisit their respective labels. As mentioned earlier, Ichikawa points out how Bertha is othered based on her gender and race; compounding this prejudice is the way she is perceived as a "madwoman" by the other characters. The oppression Bertha endures is incessant and, though Jane may be considered a woman in a metaphorical attic, her position as a governess lends her a degree of privilege that is not accessible to Bertha. Nora Gilbert comments on the advantageous side of governessing, which permits individuals to form their identities:

According to popular perception, of course, this action of moving away from home in search of gainful employment was only ever pursued as a final resort; governessing was something one *had* to do, never something one *wanted* to do. It is my contention, however, that necessity and desire were not quite such mutually exclusive categories. When we look at the language of the way real women talked about their entry into the profession in their letters, journals, and memoirs, we find, in fact, a knotty combination of anxiety and excitement, of trepidation and anticipation, of acquiescence and moxie.

(460)

Becoming a governess, then, is not necessarily an inevitable fate for Jane; she even indicates satisfaction in learning throughout the novel, recalling that at Lowood "I had...a fondness for some of my studies, and a desire to excel in all, together with a great delight in pleasing my teachers, especially such as I loved, urged me on" (Brontë 86). Bertha, on the other hand, is

understood to live with no access to that which pleases her, creating an imbalance of privilege that becomes more obvious as Jane expresses her own ability to pursue things that please her. That is not to discount Jane's experience as a woman oppressed by a misogynistic society but rather to acknowledge the importance of Bertha's intersectional identities, especially considering the unrelenting way she challenges those who attempt to control her. In response to a seemingly general disregard for Black voices and influence, Morrison notes the "ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17). From this observation it becomes clearer that Bertha's race is inherently significant in the novel and to the identities and development of the other characters, warranting a discussion of its use by both author and characters.

Gilbert addresses the surprisingly freeing occupation of governessing, elaborating that though "the work of governessing may have been creatively inspiring to its practitioners because of the access it gave them to the outside world (or, more accurately, to the inside world of families that were not their own), it also inspired them to turn inward and cultivate a stronger sense of self-reflectivity" (467). Both labels--madwoman and governess--allow their subjects to use them for identity formation, but the difference lies in that Bertha's circumstance requires her to overcome a more multifaceted oppression. We experience Jane's growth as it happens, though Bertha's growth may only be implied based on the fact that her character does not change within the novel itself. Her label also indicates a greater degree of othering by society than does Jane's; Bertha is palpably deemed an outsider and treated as such, physically and metaphorically, while Jane's oppression causes her much less external physical restraint and abuse. Neither character's

experience with oppression is necessarily more important than the other's, but the intersectionality that must be addressed with Bertha mustn't be trivialized.

By recognizing the value in Bertha's character and her background apart from potentially reductive interpretations of what she potentially represents, the beginning of novel discussions emerge on the impact of race on identity in Victorian England. Bertha is written to appear as a mindless, uncontrollable figure, but the complexity of her identity formation should not be lost. Loksing Moy reminds us of the way Brontë humanizes Jane, noting that "what Bessie and Dr. Reynolds try to read as physical discomfort [in young Jane] is instead complex emotional pain" (416). Though I argue that Bertha is more than an extension of Jane, there is value in recognizing that Bertha, despite her seeming lack of coherence once Brontë formally introduces her, experiences the same depth of emotion as Jane. In fact, reading Bertha's behavior as the result of "complex emotional pain" allows us to see the value in considering her experiences as an individual and as a woman of color. The tendency to further humanize Jane in other scholarly works as a wholesome, pure character is surprisingly common, considering Brontë already does it for us.

Clara Poteet appeals to the prevailing feeling of sympathy for the title character, concluding that, for Jane, loving Rochester "is not a choice but a need, similar to the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace, where the elect, once they experience God, have no choice but to love him. This lays the groundwork for her idolization of Rochester and portrays it as potentially dangerous" (260). Indeed, we can see the threat posed to Jane if she continues to place all of her hopes in someone she comes to learn has been holding his current wife captive; but little attention is given to the woman he oppressed first. The similarities previously discussed between Jane and Bertha open up the possibility that Bertha experienced this all with Rochester before

Jane did, which is, at least in part, what leads to her being restrained and hidden by her husband. If Bertha fell victim to the same charming trap baited by her love for Rochester, then her experience is no less significant than Jane's--if anything, it is even more so when intersectionality and general privilege are taken into account. Both characters, at one point or another, find themselves unable to leave Rochester; Bertha meets a much more tragic end than does Jane, illustrating the oftentimes deadly consequences of living as a woman of color in a misogynistic, xenophobic society.

Bertha's eventual death in the novel is mentioned and cast aside hastily, arguably leaving the reader more time to grieve over Rochester's injuries from the fire than over his first wife's death. At this point, he is rid of the "issue" that kept him from marrying Jane the first time, and the oppression Bertha experienced is forgotten as quickly as her death. Once again embodying the privilege of white women over women of color, Jane comes into her own after hearing the news and reuniting with Rochester, performing her autonomy only at the cost of Bertha's life. Diederich touches on this idea that Jane's inability to own her independence necessitates Bertha's death:

With Bertha's death and her destruction of Rochester's sight, she provides Jane with the opportunity to accept the position of wife and mother, to enter into a remarriage that grants the second wife more agency than the first. Though he can still call Jane to him, Rochester is now in the position of a dependent. Whereas Bertha acts to destroy his sight, Jane may act to restore it, continuing the discursively comparative construction of remarriage.

Bertha is consistently presented as a villainous force, appearing to bring nothing but destruction to Thornfield. Just as Loksing Moy points out, Jane is thus painted as the white savior as she

comes to Rochester's aid--though he plays the part of the colonizer in his relationship with both characters, especially Bertha. We must, then, consider the possibility that, prior to her revelation at Jane and Rochester's first wedding ceremony, Bertha has experienced at least the same amount of oppression by Rochester as we witness Jane enduring, given Bertha's state. As a white woman, Jane has more freedom of choice in her relationship than does Bertha. Catherine England observes that "as Jane alluringly emphasizes her damaged social status, her charms entice Rochester, a man with a taste for feminine vulnerability, who threatens to further damage her social capital as well as harm her psyche" (110). The kind of psychological abuse experienced by Jane should certainly not be ignored, but the greater issue here lies with the tendency to ascribe such trauma to Jane exclusively, without considering that it happened to Bertha as well.

In order to give Bertha the validation she deserves as a central, critical, and complex character, it is necessary to humanize her as much as we do the other characters. Kirsten Parkinson analyzes a 1996 film adaptation of *Jane Eyre* that does just that:

The moment when Jane confronts Bertha and the scene of the fatal fire at Thornfield Hall reimagine both women's positions vis-à-vis the novel's power relations. In these scenes, viewers see Bertha not as the savage double of Brontë's book; rather, she emerges in Zeffirelli's film as a complicated and more rational character...[his] *Jane Eyre* results in a profound rereading of the novel that questions Jane's reliability and undercuts the dominant representation of her as a heroic, proto-feminist literary figure. (18)

There are indeed multiple ways in which Bertha is vilified in the novel--even the fact that she has no lines strongly dehumanizes her (Parkinson 26-27). The way she is perceived by those around her as an outcast creates a cycle of oppression that finds fuel in her identity as a woman of color.

And this is not to say that she should instead be read as a symbol of all people of color and their “collective” experiences. Rather, Parkinson argues, “when Bertha becomes a person rather than a metaphor, it becomes harder to demonize her. [The] film allows readers and viewers to see Jane’s story afresh and realize how Jane’s ‘narrating self’ manipulates our reading of her as independent and fulfilled and of Bertha as her demonic double” (20). As discussed previously, this is precisely what Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* seeks to accomplish. Acknowledging the potential danger in reading everything Jane relates as truth leads us as readers to question all of the perspectives we are handed by Brontë, allowing a fairer assessment of Bertha’s situation and significance as an individual. The window Bertha becomes for Jane and for the novel as a whole becomes clearer as it reveals the glaring disparity of privilege between the two characters.

As Parkinson proposes, recognizing the value of Bertha’s individual experience is key to dismantling the traditional characterization of her as an angry madwoman, which is arguably not a distinction based on in-depth analyses of her background but a result instead of the ramifications of her identity as a woman of color. Bertha acts as both mirror and window for Jane, representing the way nonwhite characters are often viewed in collective groups with no significance ascribed to their individual identities. Bertha makes Jane and the reader see her, refusing to be controlled or silenced. Brontë certainly writes Bertha in a way that dehumanizes her, but it is critical to take into account the way her experiences form and shape her identity and even the way her race contributes to that process. The underlying complexity of Bertha’s character invites us to read her as more than glass, whether reflective or transparent--while this role helps us to see her relevance in relation to Jane’s development, it more importantly supports her significance as an individual character worthy of being read and considered independent of any of her perceived functions in the novel.

Applying a feminist lens that considers Bertha's race allows us to acknowledge the critical intersectionality of her character, which contributes to the way we read and understand her. She plays roles in relation to Jane and Jane's development, but that should not cloud our ability to recognize the significance of her individuality and how that impacts our reading of her. Is Brontë successful in molding feminist characters? How are we to read the title character in light of Bertha's more tangible oppression, especially when taking intersectionality into account? Jane's growth in the novel parallels both the growth and the failures of feminism's attention to racial injustices--specifically when it comes to women of color. Thus, Bertha's story is one that has the potential to empower women of color who experience various degrees of oppression. Whether we are meant to read Jane or Bertha as the main heroine of the novel, Brontë constructs two characters that each expose the complexity and depth of oppression, identity, and feminism. Reading Bertha as a main character in the novel is a new proposal, although one that nonetheless inevitably necessitates deeper analysis of Bertha's racialization. *Wide Sargasso Sea* helps to humanize Bertha, but independent of that separate postulation of her background, it remains critical to examine and regard her intersectionality as it presents in Brontë's novel.

Critical race theory has grown in popularity in recent years, but its application to novels such as *Jane Eyre* serves as a reminder that these perspectives have always been needed in literary studies. While it is a lens that typically considers more recent issues in the United States, it also provides a valuable perspective on the importance of the voices of people of color. The character of Bertha proves multifaceted and critical not just to Jane's development, but to the development of our own understanding and appreciation of her experience as a woman of color and of the ways that experience informs identity. The combination of feminist theory and ethnic

studies as applied here to *Jane Eyre* initiates a critical conversation on how we are to read women of color in Victorian literature.

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