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TIELE PATRICIA MACHADO

CATHERINE EARNSHAW, JANE EYRE, AND BERTHA MASON:
Women's Subjectivity in Victorian Literature

PORTO ALEGRE

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Licenciada em Letras – Língua Portuguesa e Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa, Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa –, pelo curso de Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Orientadora: Prof.ª Dr.ª Rosalia Neumann Garcia

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to analyze three female characters from Victorian England novels: Catherine Earnshaw, from *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë, and Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason, from *Jane Eyre,* by Charlotte Brontë. The object of analysis is their subjectivity, i.e., their minds, consciousnesses, and beliefs, related to being a woman in Victorian society. Firstly, we define what Gothic is and how Gothic elements are related to these novels. Then, we comment on Victorian society and ideals for women using the concept of "The Angel in the House," and the life of the Brontë sisters. Finally, we comment on the novels and each of the three characters: Catherine – a wild-natured girl, and her transgressions to the feminine social ideal; Jane – an orphan girl and her search for love and identity, whose views on gender and marriage are far-ahead from her time; and Bertha Mason – the madwoman in the attic and her relation to Jane's subjectivity.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar três personagens femininas de romances da Inglaterra Vitoriana: Catherine Earnshaw, de *Wuthering Heights*, escrito pela Emily Brontë, e Jane Eyre e Bertha Mason, de *Jane Eyre,* escrito pela Charlotte Brontë. O objeto de análise é a subjetividade dessas personagens, i.e., suas mentes, consciências e crenças, relacionadas à vida como mulher na sociedade Vitoriana. Em primeiro lugar, definimos o que é o gótico e como elementos góticos relacionam-se a esses romances. Então, comentamos sobre a sociedade Vitoriana e os seus ideais femininos através do conceito do "Anjo do Lar" (*The Angel in the House*), e sobre a vida das irmãs Brontë. Por último, comentamos sobre os romances e cada uma das personagens: Catherine – uma menina de natureza selvagem e suas transgressões ao ideal feminino social; Jane – uma menina órfã e sua busca por amor e identidade, cujas opiniões a respeito de gênero e casamento estão bem à frente de seu tempo; e Bertha Mason – a louca no sótão (*the madwoman in the attic*), e sua relação com a subjetividade da Jane.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Brontë sisters' writings were greatly significant in Victorian era literature, and are still continually read, studied, and researched in many languages. Along with Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, they are the most recognized English novelists among women writers. This remarkable success did not happen out of nowhere: the family life and education of the sisters were very favorable for the development of writing skills, especially because both their father and mother were involved in the literary world.

The main objective of this paper is to discuss how female subjectivity appears in the novels of two of the Brontës, by analyzing three important female characters – Catherine Earnshaw, from *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë, and Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason, from *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë. Firstly, it is necessary to explain what we understand by female subjectivity.

Since *subjectivity* is a very broad term, it may be understood in different ways, depending on one's perspective. For the aims of this paper, the term encompasses more than simply the opposite of objectivity (i.e. the quality of being objective[1]), relating also to the *subject* (individual, person). *The Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* states that:

> [Subjectivity is] related to an individual's mind and consciousness. It could be said the humanities are concerned with subjective truth: i.e. the opinions, beliefs and personal knowledge that people live their lives by […]. Subjectivity expresses itself through feelings, emotions and inner thoughts […]. (AUGER, 2010, p. 297)

In this case, when analyzing female subjectivity in Victorian female literature, it is necessary to take into account features that are related to the condition of being a woman in Victorian society, taking into consideration such aspects as marriage, work, and life expectations, as well as the condition of being a female writer at the time. Both novels that are being discussed are written by women, and have very strong female characters. From Catherine's free spirit, divided between love and social ambition, to Jane's moral strength, divided between passion and responsibility, women's lives are filled with somewhat similar, complicated problems. Situations involving love, religion, society, and marriage are

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[1] According to Oxford dictionary (see at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/objectivity).

constantly present in their minds. On another note, there is Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, a somewhat threatening, uneasy appearance in the novel *Jane Eyre*, who does not exactly go through the same struggles as Jane and Catherine, but who is also a significant female character.

1.1 Women: A Literature of Their Own

Elaine Showalter, in her book *A Literature of Their Own*, shows an interesting and comprehensive perspective on what women's literature is. By reviewing different theoretical points of view on the subject, Showalter tries to characterize women's literary tradition as a subculture (i.e., a cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger culture[2]), which translates their own voices and history into their words, apart from dominant male literary tradition.

Firstly, there is no question whether women can write, and write very well, as we can see by the works of the writers cited above. But to what extent are the books they write not only books written by women, but also part of a "female literature", that is, a literature that is not just an imitation of the accepted models of the male literary tradition? Also, is it possible to identify similarities between women's writings that justify the concept of "female writing"? Showalter argues that the critics who have asked these questions before, and answered them inaccurately or only partially, have not analyzed the whole picture. Traditionally, women's literary history has been reduced to the "great" writers – i.e., once more, Brontës, Woolf, Austen, and Eliot –, and the link between these generations of great authors has been lost with minor female novelists. Therefore "we had not had a very clear understanding of the continuities in women's writings, nor any reliable information about the relationships between the writers' lives and the changes in the legal, economic, and social status of women" (SHOWALTER, 1997, p. 7). As the works of the "minor" writers were uncovered, it became clear that women have had a literature all this time.

Furthermore, if we admit that men and women have had different lives, for social, cultural, and historical reasons, there must be a difference in their *subjectivity*. Thus, it is possible to recognize that there is a difference between male and female writing, not

[2] According to Oxford dictionary (see at: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/subculture).

necessarily in qualitative terms, but at least in subjective ones. Accordingly, "when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation" (SHOWALTER, 1997, p. 11).

This is the assumption upon which this paper is built. How are women of the time represented in those novels? How are social motifs translated into the story? How do social factors contribute to their decisions in life? With that in mind, we have to place both novels in a literary perspective, that is, firstly, what is Gothic and why these novels purportedly fit in this genre. Then, we go on to place Victorian women in Victorian society: What was it like to be a woman in England during the 19th century? Then, we comment on each of the three characters mentioned above.

2 VICTORIAN SOCIETY: LITERATURE AND LIFE AS A WOMAN

2.1 Gothic and "The Angel in the House"

The first use of the word "gothic" documented in literature was found in the subtitle "A Gothic Story" of the novel *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole, published in 1764. Walpole intended the word to mean "barbarous," "derived from the Middle Ages," but it was eventually associated to several elements of his novel, such as the supernatural, mystery and frightening old buildings (Mullan, 2016). The theme of the supernatural became popular with other authors, like Ann Radcliffe, as well as with the public; a publishing company, Minerva Press, worked only to provide the readers with this kind of fiction. Gothic novels continued to come into scene, dealing with elements such as the supernatural, fear, terror, frightening castles, dungeons, extreme psychological states, heroes who are actually villains, dreams and visions, and their influence, both in Victorian years and nowadays, is remarkable. Several Gothic novels are tremendously famous until today; *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, for example, have been adapted to different texts, films, TV series, comic books, and are very present in our imaginary. Despite the popularity of the genre, Gothic was not well accepted by a number of critics because it represented a rupture with traditions.

> The Gothic genre – or modern romance as it was often called – was regularly attacked: its subject matter, its form, themes, modes of representation and its perceived effects on readers, were seen as a 'flood', a 'deluge', an ever-encroaching sea eroding the rocks of good taste and decorum and leaving only a pernicious and depraved appetite for adventures, thrills and sensations in its wake. Hostile critical tones denounce the threat of fiction as endangering not only aesthetic values, but moral and social values as well: painting vice in attractive colours, romances encouraged readers to eschew the virtues of order and decency, of respect for social mores and familial duties, of chaste habits and disciplined, rational reflection. (BOTTING & TOWNSHEND, 2004, p. 1)

At the time of the publication of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, Gothic had become very influential, and, as a result, both novels contained Gothic elements. They are considered Gothic novels, though belonging to a different category, as explained below.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the elements of nature are important for the events of fear and suspense that compose the story, with the presence of storms, snow, wind and wild landscapes. The supernatural is also presented early on in the novel, when Mr. Lockwood's dreams and reality are not distinguishable and he sees the ghost of Catherine Linton; at the end of the novel, there are reports of Heathcliff's and Catherine's ghosts roaming the moors on rainy nights. Heathcliff is a hero/villain; despite his harsh, rude personality, the reader sympathizes with him because of his poor origins, Catherine's rejection and his love for her.

In *Jane Eyre*, supernatural elements are also present, as well as fear; one example is the Red Room scene, when Jane is locked up in a room of this color that used to belong to her dead uncle, and she believes his ghost is in there. One possible interpretation is that the Gothic elements in *Jane Eyre* are used as a way to create a new "female" language (SRIVASTAVA, 2014), constructed by Jane's gothic imagination. Charlotte's Gothic differs from traditional Gothic because though her narration presents the feeling of Gothic novels, the method of the narration is different: Gothic events are not guided through marvelous circumstances. Jane is rational, and so is her narration; this new use of Gothic is what Robert Heilman (2003) defines as 'New' Gothic. Charlotte's new use of Gothic serves as a way to protest against Victorian ideals; the Gothic scenes about the red room and the madwoman in the attic, for example, may be interpreted as an allegory for the imprisonment of women in Victorian society. Brontë, therefore, uses the Gothic to suggest rebellion from feminine ideals.

These feminine ideals in Victorian middle class society are generally described by the expression "the angel in the house." This expression originates from a poem written by Coventry Patmore, an English poet from the 19th century; inspired by his wife, the poem describes a perfect lady, mother, and housewife. The angel in the house is "contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own Realm of the Home" (SHOWALTER, p. 11). M. Jeanne Peterson (1984, p. 677) says the term suggests "domesticity, unworldliness, asexuality, innocence, even helplessness in matters outside the domestic sphere." When young and unmarried, a woman should be discrete and follow her duties as a daughter, while preparing to be a house-wife. The education of a young woman would include sewing, embroidery, piano and sometimes French lessons. When married, she should love, worship, and obey her husband; she should help him when needed, and supervise the servants. Motherhood is also important: the ideal Victorian woman would have children, and divide her days between taking care of them, and watching over her husband and her house. She would never show any sensuality or sexual desire. This ideal woman was "an

acquiescent, passive, unintellectual creature, whose life revolved entirely around social engagements, domestic management, and religion" (PETERSON, 1984, p. 678).

Were Victorian women really "angels in the house"? Peterson (1984) defends that it was not quite the case, based on an analysis of three generations of the Paget family – a stereotypical Victorian upper-middle class family. Although the Paget women seemed to fit the feminine ideal, they were more educated than expected, had more vigorous – and sensual – physical lives, more control of money and estates than expected, and their personalities did not always agree with the "pious, gentle, submissive woman" ideal. Also, it is necessary to consider that women belonging to lower classes would not be able to live as housewives; they usually worked and took care of their husbands, children, and homes in the time they had left.

Considering that "the angel in the house" was an ideal, a utopia, and not the reality, it is not that surprising that the Brontës' writings would present signs of rebellion against it. Showalter (1997) points out as one of the reasons for the difficulty critics felt in considering women's literature theoretically is that they extended their culture-related stereotypes of femininity to women writings. Consequently, Victorians expected women writers to reflect feminine values defended by Victorian society in their work, disregarding the fact that they are surpassing their role as women only by being writers:

> "Come at will," Charlotte Brontë wrote to Lewes, "I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on these terms, or with such ideas, that I ever took a pen in hand." (SHOWALTER, 1997, p. 7)

Because of this, both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were published under male pseudonyms – Currer and Ellis Bell. After Emily's death, Charlotte wrote a preface to *Wuthering Heights* explaining their choice. Charlotte says that

> We did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting our mode of writing and thinking is not what is called 'feminine' – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice (BELL, 1850, p. ix).

And Charlotte was correct: many critics thought they were men. A review[3] published in 1847 in *The Era* states that: "although ladies have written history, and travels, and warlike novels, to say nothing of books upon the different arts and sciences, no woman *could have* penned the Autobiography of Jane Eyre."

2.2 The Brontë Sisters

Bentley (1954) comments that in order to fully understand the work of a writer, readers need to be familiar with the essential nature of the work, besides the place it occupies in literature. The Brontës' place in literature is already established, for the remarkable extent and continuity of their writings. The essential nature of their work, however, depends on many different variables; one of the most important is the life of the writers. The Brontë sisters were a very literature-driven family. The context in which they were raised influenced directly the outcome of their work. Charlotte, for example, translated many aspects of her own life into *Jane Eyre*. We present here a summary of the main aspects that characterized the life of the Brontës.

The father of the Brontë sisters, Patrick Brontë, was a clergyman, graduated from the University of Cambridge. He married Miss Branwell in 1812, and they had six children; she died nine years later, and her sister started taking care of the children. Both had literary ambitions, were very religious and eloquent people, and "a strong religious feeling, coupled with the belief in self-improvement by reading and study" (BENTLEY, 1965, p. 9) characterized the Brontë house. Later, Mr. Brontë sent his eldest four children to boarding school; he also encouraged them to read newspapers, magazines, and books. The children would create fantasy worlds and kingdoms, and write about them until they were young adults. At the age of eighteen, Charlotte wrote a list of authors as a recommendation for a friend, containing works by Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Milton, and many others. The sisters tried to live by teaching for a space of ten years, working mainly as governesses for private families; in 1842, Charlotte and Emily went to live in Brussels to study French and German. In 1846, the sisters published a book of poems, but it was not well received. They decided, then, to publish novels. Anne's and Emily's novels – *Agnes Grey* and

[3] Unknown reviewer. The complete review can be found at: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/review-of-jane-eyre-from-the-era.

Wuthering Heights, respectively – were published, but Charlotte's (*The Professor*) was denied; at this point, she started writing *Jane Eyre*, which not only was published, but also turned out to be the most successful of the sisters' novels.

3 *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Published in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* is one of the most famous English novels of the 19th century and perhaps of all times. Initially, however, it was not well received. Both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* received some bad reviews, mainly because of their depictions of cruelty, suffering, and gloomy scenes – Gothic aspects, which were used as tools to oppose Victorian society; also, Gothic novels were considered an attack against traditional aesthetics, as mentioned above. A review[4] published in *Athenaeum*, a British magazine from the 19th century, stated that:

> In spite of much power and cleverness; in spite of its truth to life in the remote nooks and corners of England, 'Wuthering Heights' is a disagreeable story. The Bells seem to affect painful and exceptional subjects: – the misdeeds and oppressions of tyranny – the eccentricities of "woman's fantasy". They do not turn away from dwelling upon those physical acts of cruelty which we know to have their warrant in the real annals of crime and suffering, – but the contemplation of which true taste rejects.

"The Bells" refers to Currer and Ellis Bell, Charlotte's and Emily's pseudonyms. The reviewer, despite recognizing the quality of their work, finds the book "disagreeable" because of the subjects it deals with. Of course, the book is shocking and unconventional, but this is one of its main qualities. A reviewer for the *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*[5]actually recommended the book for its originality:

> We strongly recommend all our readers who love novelty to get this story, for we can promise them that they never have read anything like it before. It is very puzzling and very interesting, and if we had space we would willingly devote a little more time to the analysis of this remarkable story, but we must leave it to our readers to decide what sort of book it is.

The plot of the book revolves around Heathcliff, a poor orphan boy who is adopted by Mr. Earnshaw, Catherine's father. Heathcliff becomes good friends with Catherine when they are children, but Hindley – Catherine's brother – detests him. After a while, Mr. Earnshaw grows to like Heathcliff better than his own son, who he sends away to study. Three years

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[4] Review by H. F. Chorley. Other reviews, including this one, can be found at: http://www.wuthering-heights.co.uk/reviews.php.

[5]Anonymous review. Other reviews, including this one, can be found at: http://www.wuthering-heights.co.uk/reviews.php.

later, Mr. Earnshaw dies and Hindley comes back with a wife, who dies after giving birth to his son, Hareton. He still detests Heathcliff and forces him to live like a laborer. One day Heathcliff and Catherine walk to Thrushcross Grange, where Isabella and Edgar Linton – two rich, spoiled young people – lived. Catherine is bitten by a dog and must stay there for five weeks; she comes back a changed girl. Catherine and Heathcliff end up developing loving feelings for one another. Despite that, Catherine accepts Edgar Linton's marriage proposal, because of his social status. Heathcliff runs away from Wuthering Heights and is gone for three years; when he returns, mysteriously wealthy, Catherine and Edgar have just gotten married, and Heathcliff decides to seek revenge. He lends money to Hindley, who is already deeply in debt and has become a drunkard. Hindley ends up increasing his debt and dies a short time later, leaving Wuthering Heights and his son Hareton in the hands of Heathcliff. Hoping to inherit Thrushcross Grange, Heathcliff marries Isabella Linton, whom he treats her very badly. Eventually, she moves to London to give birth to their son, named Linton after her family. Meanwhile, Catherine gives birth to a daughter, Catherine Linton, and dies. Heathcliff, who still loves her, begs her spirit to remain on Earth and not leave him alone. Many years later, Isabella dies and Linton comes to live in Wuthering Heights. Catherine, who was raised by Edgar, meets Heathcliff during a walk, and he takes her to see Linton. Linton and Catherine begin a secret romance through letters. When Linton becomes sick, Heathcliff sees the perfect opportunity to win Thrushcross Grange. He lures Catherine to Wuthering Heights and forces her to marry Linton. Thus, when both Linton and Edgar die, he becomes the owner of both properties. Heathcliff never stopped loving Catherine; until his death, he wishes her spirit to accompany him, and has visions of her. When he finally dies, he is buried next to Catherine. At the end, Catherine Linton and Hareton inherit Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights, and have plans to get married.

It is important to comment that *Wuthering Heights* is narrated through flashbacks from the perspective of Nelly Dean, a servant who grew up with Catherine and Heathcliff and lived through the whole story. She tells her story to Lockwood, a man who rents Thrushcross Grange in the final years of Heathcliff's life. The entire narration is built through their words, which may cause the reader to be suspicious about the "truth" of the narration, mainly because Nelly lived through the story and has personal opinions and sentiments about the characters.

3.1 Catherine Earnshaw

The first appearance of Catherine's character occurs in Chapter 3, when Lockwood sees and talks to her ghost, who is trying to force entrance to the house. Catherine asks him to let her in; when he denies her, she mentions she has been around for twenty years. Lockwood concludes that it is "a just punishment for her moral transgressions" for she must have been a "wicked little soul" (BRONTË, 1992, p. 18). Lockwood is at least partially correct. Catherine is not a model for moral strength, at least in Victorian terms. Through Nelly's narration, it becomes clear that since childhood Catherine is seen as a wild, disobedient, arrogant girl:

> [Catherine] put all of us past our patience fifty times and oftener in a day: from the hour she came down-stairs till the hour she went to bed, we had not a minute's security that she wouldn't be in mischief. Her spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going—singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same. A wild, wicked slip she was […] In play, she liked exceedingly to act the little mistress; using her hands freely, and commanding her companions: she did so to me, but I would not bear slapping and ordering; and so I let her know. (BRONTË, 1992, p. 29.)

Catherine's behavior is not the ideal for a girl from 19th century England, even for a child. Her wild nature, associated with the early loss of her parents and the lack of control from her brother, makes it easy for her spirit to develop without any restraint. Another important contributing factor for her character is Heathcliff – also wild in nature –, who becomes her inseparable company. Their relationship grows closer and tighter as Catherine helps him study, as they run through the moors and ignore any instructions and promises of punishment from the servants. It is only after her five-week stay at the Linton's house that Nelly describes an improvement in Catherine's behavior:

> [Catherine's] manners [were] much improved. The mistress visited her often in the interval, and commenced her plan of reform by trying to raise her self-respect with fine clothes and flattery, which she took readily; so that, instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there 'lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in. Hindley lifted her from her horse, exclaiming delightedly, 'Why, Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you: you look like a lady now. Isabella Linton is not to be compared with her, is

> she, Frances?' 'Isabella has not her natural advantages,' replied his wife: 'but she must mind and not grow wild again here. Ellen, help Miss Catherine off with her things—Stay, dear, you will disarrange your curls—let me untie your hat.' (BRONTË, 1992, p. 36.)

From this point on, the difference in Catherine's behavior and appearance is remarkable. Her beauty and lady-like manners are accentuated, as well as Hindley's, Frances', and Nelly's approval of the change. However, her encounter with Heathcliff is not very pleasant. When Catherine starts looking for him, she finds a dirty, demeaned boy; she embraces him and laughs because of his strange appearance. Heathcliff's pride and shame takes over, and he runs away, for Catherine is now more similar to Isabella and Edgar Linton, the children who they used to make fun of, than to himself. Despite this, she had not changed completely: with Heathcliff, she acts as always, though in front of the Linton's, she acts like a lady. The Linton's had awakened in Catherine the desire for wealth, culture and social power; in order to fit into that world, now her wild nature is caged. Nevertheless, she cannot abdicate who she is; a fact that is clear to the reader when she pinches and slaps Nelly in front of Edgar because Nelly would not leave the room and leave them by themselves.

Heathcliff's and Catherine's relationship grows weaker as she strengthens her bonds with the Linton's. This fact leads to Catherine's main dilemma in the novel: Heathcliff or Linton? She loves both in different ways. Marriage is a natural path for a girl her age, but to marry someone like Heathcliff, poor, an orphan of unknown origins, and – because of Hindley's arrangements – a servant – is not. This dilemma originates one of the most famous passages of the book, when Catherine tells Nelly she has accepted Linton's marriage proposal and explains why she could not be with Heathcliff:

> I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton's is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire. […] Every Linton on the face of the earth might melt into nothing before I could consent to forsake Heathcliff. Oh, that's not what I intend—that's not what I mean! I shouldn't be Mrs. Linton were such a price demanded! He'll be as much to me as he has been all his lifetime. Edgar must shake off his antipathy, and tolerate him, at least. He will, when he learns my true feelings towards him. Nelly, I see now you think me a selfish wretch; but did it never strike you that if Heathcliff and I

> married, we should be beggars? whereas, if I marry Linton I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power. (BRONTË, 1992, p. 57-58.)

Catherine's reasons to marry Edgar Linton are logical, but her feelings point to the opposite direction. Trying to balance love and reason, she hopes to maintain a relationship with Heathcliff and, at the same time, to be wealthy, respectable Mrs. Linton. Whichever path she chose would be the wrong one for some reason or other. However, in some ways, Heathcliff represents more than Linton, for he is part of her identity. Catherine believes part of her lives in Heathcliff: "if all else perished, and *he* remained, *I* should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it [,,,] Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff!" (BRONTË, 1992, p. 59). By marrying Linton, Catherine loses her identity. She cannot make her wishes come true; Edgar and Heathcliff belong to opposite worlds, and the struggle between these worlds ultimately leads to her death.

It is not hard to understand why Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* received bad reviews when it was published. Her depiction of passion and unstoppable love, Catherine's feelings of love for two different men, Heathcliff's cruelty and vengeful persecution, are all contrary to what was believed to be moral and acceptable in Victorian terms. The Earnshaw family, also, was no picture of morality and values, and this is strongly associated to who Catherine is: as a person (*subject*), she is the result of her experiences. And Catherine is no angel in the house: despite being a girl from the 19th century, she does not fit into Victorian standards. Catherine's subjectivity is, essentially, "unfeminine." Her nature is directly connected to Heathcliff's nature: wild, free, unpredictable; she is not concerned with maternity and household life, but rather with herself – none of these features are traditionally associated to femininity.

4 *JANE EYRE*

Jane Eyre was Charlotte's first published novel, and remains to this day one of the most famous books in English literature. Just like *Wuthering Heights*, the novel received both good and bad reviews. Many traditional Christian Victorians thought the book to be too immoral for the time. Jane Eyre had unconventional views of romance, religion and marriage, which was not traditionally accepted for a woman. A review[6] published in *The Quarterly Review* in 1848 criticized the immorality of the romance in *Jane Eyre*:

> Mr. Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws both of God and man, and yet we will be bound half our lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honor. We would have thought that such a hero had had no chance, in the purer taste of the present day ; but the popularity of Jane Eyre is a proof how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature."

Charlotte wrote a preface to the second edition of the book, criticizing these people for their close-minded opinions, for believing *Jane Eyre* was an "insult to piety" (BRONTË, 2011, p. viii). Charlotte wrote that: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last" (BRONTË, 2011, p. viii), which exemplifies her confrontation with the values of the time. As with the previous edition, she signed the preface as Currer Bell.

The plot of *Jane Eyre* follows the structure of a Bildungsroman, i.e., "a novel that depicts the main character's development into adulthood" (AUGER, 2010, p. 34). The story begins when Jane is an orphan child and lives with her wealthy aunt and cousins in Gateshead; she is unwanted and badly treated by her aunt, who eventually decides to send Jane away for school. At Lowood, a charity school for girls, Jane's life doesn't get much better at first. The headmaster of the school, Mr. Bocklehurst, is a cruel man who defends a life of poverty and deprivation for the girls. Jane leaves Lowood at the age of eighteen, after spending the last two years as a teacher there, and goes to Thornfield, where she is hired as a governess by Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper. Mr. Rochester, the owner of Thornfield, and Jane fall in love with each other and decide to get married. However, there is a mysterious presence in the house. Jane wakes up to bizarre laughs, Rochester's bed is set on fire, and

[6] Review by Elizabeth Rigby. The complete review can be found at: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/review-of-jane-eyre-by-elizabeth-rigby.

Jane's wedding veil is cut in pieces. Rochester claims that the person responsible for this act is a drunken servant named Grace Poole. On their wedding day, Jane finds out that the person responsible for these mysterious events is, in fact, Bertha Mason, a woman who Rochester married when he was young and now keeps locked on the third story of Thornfield because she has gone mad. Jane cannot accept living with a married man, as his mistress, and leaves Thornfield. Without any money or a place to go, Jane ends up on the streets, begging for food. Eventually, three siblings, Mary, Diana and St. John Rivers, take her in. One day, St. John confesses to Jane that they are actually cousins, and that their uncle, John Eyre, has died and left her a fortune of 20,000 pounds. Jane goes back to Thornfield, after denying a marriage proposal from St. John, and finds out the property has been destroyed by a fire caused by Bertha Mason, who died in the incident. Jane then goes to Ferndean, where she meets Rochester, who lost his sight and one of his hands, as well as a significant part of his fortune. At the end of the novel, Rochester and Jane have been happily married for 10 years, and Rochester has recovered the sight in one eye in time to see the birth of their first child.

The novel contains many similarities with Charlotte's life, and was initially subtitled "An autobiography." Lowood, for example, is inspired in the school she used to frequent, Cowan Bridge, as well as Mr. Bocklehurst personality is strongly similar to the Evangelical minister who used to run Cowan Bridge. Helen Burns, Jane's friend at school, died from tuberculosis, just like Charlotte's sisters, Maria and Elizabeth. Also, just like Charlotte, Jane works as a teacher and a governess.

4.1 Jane Eyre

As a child, Jane was mostly unhappy living at Gateshead. Her aunt, Mrs. Reed, did not like Jane, and would only take care of her because she promised her dying husband to do so, and she was not a friend of her cousins as well. Bessie, a servant, was the closest to a friend Jane had at that house. Therefore, Jane did not have any love or affection. After the red room incident, when her aunt leaves her locked in her dead uncle's old room of, and Jane is leaving for school, her aunt accuses her of being a liar. In response, Jane expresses her feelings towards her aunt:

> I am glad you are no relation of mine. I will never call you aunt again as

> long as I live. I will never come to visit you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty […] You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity. I shall remember how you thrust me back […] into the red-room. . . . And that punishment you made me suffer because your wicked boy struck me—knocked me down for nothing. I will tell anybody who asks me questions this exact tale. 'Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhoped-for liberty (BRONTË, 2011, p. 44-45)

Her contempt towards Mrs. Reed is clear. Jane does not consider her benevolent for taking care of an orphan girl, because Mrs. Reed has treated her with cruelty, nor does she consider herself ungrateful, because she has nothing to be thankful for. On the contrary, what brings her triumph is to finally be able to express herself, to say truly and completely what her opinions towards what happened in that house were, because she is free, at last: "an invisible bond had burst." From the beginning, Charlotte establishes Jane's personality as good, honest, but confrontational. She judges whether or not the Reeds were fair to her, and she knows she shouldn't be grateful for it. From this moment on, Jane starts to assert her non-submissive condition, her questioning mind. In one of the most famous passages of the book, Jane questions the roles of women and the differences between men and women:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (BRONTË, 2011, p. 155)

For a Victorian woman to have these kinds of ideas about equality between genders was not common, nor accepted, or encouraged in any way. This is why *Jane Eyre* is considered by many to be feminist – because Jane's ideas about gender equality are far-ahead from the common sense 19th century England dictated.

Jane's social status is strangely contrasting. She is a penniless orphan; however, she acquires the education of a wealthy person, after her years studying and teaching at Lowood. This was the case for governesses: they needed to be educated enough to teach their master's children, but they were still paid employees. As a woman, there was not much Jane could to sustain herself. She was not rich, nor beautiful, so she could not marry a wealthy man, and she wouldn't want to. There were few jobs acceptable for a woman in her condition, if she were not to marry or pursue a life devoted to religion; and Jane would not do something like that. She believes in marrying for love, as was the case with Rochester; and she does not believe in a religious faith that would require her to abstain from the world. The job as a governess suited Jane's capabilities and wishes.

When love is concerned, Jane' life has always been scarce in regards to it; and she never denies she needed it, as she tells Mrs. Reed: "You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so" (BRONTË, 2011, p. 44), and Helen Burns: "to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest" (BRONTË, 2011, p. 94). Jane finds love at last with Rochester; however, she does not feel comfortable with it, because she does not feel as his equal, and therefore she does not have anything to offer him:

> Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. (BRONTË, 2011, p. 364)

Even when she finds out that Rochester actually does want to marry her, she does not feel comfortable. When Rochester calls her Mrs. Rochester, Jane responds that "such a lot befalling me is a fairy-tale – a day-dream" (BRONTË, 2011, p. 373). She rejects the jewels he offers her, saying that "jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange" (BRONTË, 2011, p. 373). Jane then remembers that her uncle, John Eyre, had sent a letter to Mrs. Reed, stating that he wished to adopt her, and decides to send him a letter, hoping his legacy would give her at least some independency.

Jane's search for independence and equality still goes a long way. When she finds out that Rochester is married to Bertha Mason, but is willing to commit bigamy to be with her,

Jane sees no other way but to leave Thornfield. She forgives Rochester and feels sorry for him; but, she cannot risk her integrity by becoming his mistress. She leaves Thornfield, under Rochester's protests, while still wondering if she would ever find a man who truly loved her again, after a life of loneliness. Later, after her marriage to Rochester does not happen and she is living with the Rivers, Jane is faced with a difficult decision once more when St. John proposes to her. If she married St. John, she would go with him to India, as a missionary wife. Jane knows she could do what he was asking her, and that he would respect her as his wife. Furthermore, she could not go back to Rochester, and she does not have any other plans. But, she would never love him and he would never love her. She could not sacrifice love over principle by marrying St. John Rivers, as well as she could not sacrifice principle over love by marrying Rochester. When Jane supernaturally hears Rochester's voice calling for her, she goes to Thornfield and finds out about the fire that has taken Bertha's life. Then, she goes to Ferndean, to meet Rochester, who has lost a hand and his sight. Finally, Rochester and Jane get married.

Jane's journey until she is able to marry Rochester is one of self-knowledge and a search for equality. Once, Jane considered herself to be inferior to Rochester; now, she has a fortune of her own and does not depend only on him for love - because she has a family - but rather, Rochester depends on her due to his physical limitations. Now, she does not have to choose between love and principle, nor agree to a marriage in which she would always be in the shadow of her husband. In the last chapter of the novel, Jane describes her marriage of ten years, and her happiness to be in the relationship she had always desired:

> I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result. (BRONTË, 2011, p. 656)

Jane has a very strong sense of integrity. She lives according to her own principles and opinions. Although she did not have a family, or anyone to support her most of the time, she managed to be what she aspired to be. And thus, the Bildungsroman story of Jane Eyre is complete: "[in this novel] the protagonist comes to terms with the world and gains a sense of identity in the process" (AUGER, 2010, p. 35).

Just like Catherine's, Jane's subjectivity is not of an ideal Victorian, though they are very different people. Catherine's wild nature caused her to value more her feelings, her desires, her wishes. Jane, on the contrary, acted according to her own moral principles. For example: she did not agree with women submissiveness to men, but rather with equal marriages. Gilbert & Gubar, in their book *The madwoman in the Attic,* defend that *Jane Eyre* is a product of Victorian women lives:

> [Jane Eyre is] a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female Bildungsroman in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome: oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield), and coldness (at Marsh End). (GILBERT & GUBAR, 1979, p. 339)

The authors also defend that the central confrontation of the book is that of Jane with Bertha Mason, which represents Jane's "imprisoned hunger, rebellion, and rage" (GILBERT & GUBAR, 1979, p. 339). This issue will be commented below.

4.2 Bertha Mason

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is Rochester's mad wife who lives locked in the third story of Thornfield, being taken care of by a servant named Grace Poole. The reader does not discover much about her; most of the time, she makes herself present by the laughs that frighten Jane, or by mysterious events, like the fire in Rochester's bed, or the destruction of Jane's veil. When she is finally revealed in the novel, Jane's description of her does not even seems like the description of a human being:

> In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. 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, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (BRONTË, 2011, p. 423)

Bertha Mason does not have the status of a woman of the time, even though she is married to a wealthy, respectable, Englishman. She is exotic, compared to an animal, described as a corpulent, virile and athletic – all features undesirable for women at the time. When Rochester tells Jane the story of his marriage, he mentions Bertha was one day "tall, dark, and majestic" (BRONTË, 2011, p. 440), but he could not spend time with her, neither could they have a pleasant conversation without her answering in a "coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile" (BRONTË, 2011, p. 442) manner. He describes her as an alien to his world and heart, a woman with violent and out-of-control temper. Because he could no longer take a life of misery in the West Indies, he decided to come back to England, lock his wife in a room where she would be taken care of, and hide his past from society.

Bertha Mason is seen as representing Jane's rebellion, as part of Bronte's use of the Gothic – the 'female language' cited before. According to Gilbert & Gubar, Bertha Mason is a representation of Jane Eyre:

> 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. (GILBERT & GUBAR, 1979, p. 360).

Bertha's status as a locked woman could represent Jane's imprisonment to Victorian values. Jane rebels against this, and so does Bertha when she attacks Rochester, the main cause of their problems, and destroys Jane's veil, which represents the institution of marriage. Bertha's lonely life reflects on Jane's lonely search for love, family and company. In the same manner that Jane wants to be Rochester equal, Bertha is described as his physical equal, almost his size. Bertha's tendencies to set fires also recalls Jane's descriptions of her own feelings, when she uses fire and heath analogies:

> A ridge of lighted heath, alive, glancing, devouring, would have been a meet emblem of my mind when I accused and menaced Mrs. Reed: the same ridge, black and blasted after the flames are dead, would have represented as meetly my subsequent condition […] (BRONTË, 2011, p. 46).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea,* a novel by Jean Rhys published in 1966, Bertha is a very different person. Rhys was the daughter of a Creole white mother and a Welsh father, and was divided between the two different cultures. At sixteen, she moved to England from Dominica – a Caribbean island. Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, telling the story of Bertha Mason. The book tells the story of how Rochester and Antoinette (her name in the novel) got married, how he found out that "madness" runs in her family, and decided to move back to England and lock her away from society. In *Jane Eyre,* Bertha is just the madwoman in the attic; in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* however, Bertha Mason – Antoinette Cosway – has a story, a past, and a voice.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

If there is one common line between the three characters concerned here, it is that all of them are women who are susceptible to Victorian customs; this does not mean, though, they are traditional angels in the house. In fact, none of them are. As it was mentioned before, the ideal image for women was not the reality: even women belonging to traditional families and living traditional lives would not be pure, chaste, beautiful and submissive their entire lives. Nonetheless, they were encouraged to be. The Brontës and, consequently, the characters they wrote, confronted these customs.

Catherine's subjectivity is a product of both her environment and her nature. Her family was not amiable, caring, or exemplary. Catherine grew up without restraints; this situation, coupled with her natural wildness – and Heathcliff's influence on that matter – led her to be the opposite of what would be expected from a woman in her position. Jane's subjectivity is, essentially, a balance between love and principle. Her search for identity, since childhood, was determined by this balance. Her opinions about gender, religion, and marriage are not a mere reflection on Victorian common sense, but rather her own reasoning. Bertha, on the other hand, is the one that suffers the most the disadvantages of being a woman in Victorian England. While Catherine and Jane pursue a more equal position to men (Catherine's souls being the same as Heathcliff's; Jane's conquer of an equal marriage), Bertha got married to a man who wanted her family fortune, and now lives locked in the house of her husband, while he seeks for other wife. In *Jane Eyre*, she functions as a mirror to Jane's subjectivity. Because we only hear her story through Rochester's narration, reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an interesting experience; even though it is not Charlotte's perspective, it is one possible way of thinking of her as a complex character.

We can never forget that this paper is a contemporary view of a society, writers, and novels belonging to the 19th century England. Nowadays, the novels are not as shocking if we do not put them into perspective. And, even if we do, it is not easy to know what it was like for these women; we can only imagine. Even so, this is one of the most remarkable and interesting things about literature: it allows us to be in the mind of another person, in a different time.

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