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Jordin Billings

Jane Eyre: Insanity Juxtaposed Rationale

In the Victorian era insanity was believed to be a disease, one that took multiple forms. In the 1838 edition of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, Dr. Woodward remarked on moral insanity saying, “Insanity. . .the operation of the feelings and passions depends upon the physical system no less than the understanding. . .The senses often become false guides, the perceptions are mistaken, and the judgment becomes false and impaired. It is not well known that the passions and propensities are even more affected by disease than the mental powers? Is it unphilosophical or irrational to suppose, that these faculties can be subject to such impairment, as to be beyond the control of the reasoning powers and the judgment?” (“Moral Insanity” 1838). What Dr. Woodward is outlining the notion that there is a form of insanity, moral insanity, that is rooted in passions, morals, and judgment. This form of insanity is not to be confused with biological insanity, insanity that is passed from parent to child throughout generations. Charlotte Brontë highlights these two different forms in *Jane Eyre*. Throughout the novel Bertha is classified as the “madwoman in the attic” while Jane is classified as plain and ordinary. Based on the science of psychology at the time, I argue that Jane can be classified as insane too.

Jane is classified by other characters in the book and eventually herself, as insane. The novel draws on psychological disorders to distinguish between Jane’s moral insanity and Bertha’s biologically insanity. Psychology emerged during the Victorian era, specifically in the belief of differing forms of insanity. Rick Rylance describes the different factions within Victorian psychology as, “Four strands of psychological argument can be identified . . . the discourse of the soul, the discourse of philosophy, the discourse of physiology in general biology,

and the discourse of medicine” (Rylance 2002). As women were believed to be prone to hysteria Brontë exemplifies this in Jane as moral insanity and in Bertha as biological insanity. Critics have argued that Jane and Bertha are the personification of each other, that Bertha is Jane’s insanity. In reality Jane is used to exemplify moral insanity while Bertha is used to exemplify biological insanity. Bertha is Mr Rochester’s wife. Before Bertha is unveiled, she lies in the shadows. Before she is introduced, she is only seen in glimpses. Flashes of her mental state take place in the dead of night in the forms of “eccentric murmurs,” scratching at doors, “snarling, snatching . . . almost like a dog” (Brontë 115, 223). While the servants disguise these strange occurrences as it being the act of one of the servants, Grace Poole, it is actually Rochester’s wife, whom he keeps locked in an attic at Thornfield. This is done to “shelter her degradation” of mental illness “with secrecy” (Brontë 333).

The first actual occurrence of Bertha’s mental state is the string that unravels the truth, Bertha’s insanity is biological. The night before Jane’s marriage to Mr Rochester's wedding Jane’s dress and veil are laid out in her room. As she comes back into her room, she finds that the veil had been torn and shredded. Once again, the reader is led to believe that it was the result of Grace Poole. Bertha’s identity, and mental state, are not revealed until the failed marriage attempt. Jane is led by these false pretenses until her ceremony where Bertha’s brother interrupts the priest. After he informs Jane that Rochester is actually married the truth comes to light. Rochester’s hand is forced, and he tells Jane of his marriage to Bertha. “What this lawyer and his client say is true: I have been married; and the woman with whom I was married lives! You say you never heard of Mrs. Rochester at the house up yonder, Wood: but I daresay you have many a time inclined your ear to gossip about the mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward. .

.I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago,—Bertha Mason by name” (Brontë 1847). While Bertha’s insanity is spoken of, Jane is not able to understand it until she sees it.

Immediately following the broken ceremony Rochester takes Jane to meet his wife. It is there that Bertha’s mental state is fully uncovered, she is biologically insane. “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came from a mad family: –idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard!” (Brontë 1847). Millingen paints a vivid picture of biological insanity, “The bane grows near the antidote, and poisonous weeds often choke the growth. . .Apparent destruction and reproduction is a law of Nature” (Millingen 1848). Bertha’s biological insanity lends itself in the form of the physical. As Jane gets a view of her, Bertha lunges for her, “Mr. Rochester flung me behind him; the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. . .At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair” (Brontë 1847). Bertha’s biological insanity lends itself outward through the physical harm of others, a prone to pyromaniac, and even the demise of herself.

It can be suggested that Jane’s moral insanity was created as a result of her abusive childhood. Jane’s mother and father passed away when she was young, as a result Jane was sent to live with her uncle, although he passed away before she could even remember him. Before his untimely death he begged his wife to promise to take care of Jane. As a result, Mrs. Reed allowed Jane to remain at their home, Gateshead Hall. Mrs. Reed was unable to fulfill the most

vital part of Mr. Reed's desired promise, to treat Jane like one of their own children. Instead, Mrs. Reed and her children created an abusive environment.

The first sign of this is seen in the very first paragraph of the novel. Jane's cousins Eliza, Georgiana, and John (Jack) were all playing in the drawing room. In order to stay out of their way Jane hides behind a curtain to read a book. She was told to go over there by Mrs. Reed who said, "Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak with pleasantness, remain silent." Right from the beginning it can be seen that Mrs. Reed is attempting to keep Jane separated from herself and children. Alongside that, it also appears that she is attempting to teach Jane how to be an acceptable woman within their society. Instead of giving constructive parenting, this form of teaching is given through abuse. While Jane is reading she hears her cousins searching for her. John asks her to reveal herself, "And I came out immediately; for I trembled at the idea of being dragged forth by the said Jack" (Bronte, 1847, p. 13). This passage reveals that this is most likely not the first time that John has abused Jane. There is something that has happened in the past to create a fearful mindset within her. Jane goes on to reveal, "He bullied and punished me--not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually: every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrunk when he came near" (Bronte, 1847, p. 14).

This leads to the first glimpse of moral insanity within Jane. After physically defending herself from her abusive cousin and being misunderstood by her cruel aunt Jane is locked up in the red room. "I resisted all the way: a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me... I was conscious that a moment's mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved in my desperation to go all lengths" (Brontë 1847). As Jane

struggles in the ladies hold, they view this behavior as insanity, "...then she and Miss Abbot stood with folded arms, looking darkly and doubtfully on my face, as incredulous of my sanity" (Brontë 1847). Jane being hurt, terrified, and full of passion instantly leads the other characters to identify her as insane. The other characters in the novel automatically come to this conclusion because of Jane's gender, age, and emotional state. Instead of having empathy and understanding for her situation, they classify her with a disease.

The label of moral insanity follows Jane as she matures and progresses when she encounters situations that bring bouts of passion. When she was little it was in the form of being locked in a room, as she got older it took the form of her being in a foreign place. After accepting a position as a governess at Thornfield Hall to a little French girl named Adèle. During her first night there Jane hears a "demoniac laugh—low, suppressed, and deep" (Brontë 1847). As her emotions of anxiousness, fear, and curiosity rise Jane attempts to look for the laugh but does not see anyone. The next day Jane brings up her feelings after the encounter with Mrs. Fairfax. While Mrs. Fairfax is attempting to bring forward a logical solution, she places the blame on Grace, a housekeeper. Jane begins to wonder why Mr Rochester, the owner of Thornfield Hall, would keep around an insane servant thinking, "He had almost as much as declared his conviction of her criminality last night" (Brontë 1847). Brontë is comparing insanity to criminality. Not criminality in the sense of committing an act against the law, but in the sense of being mentally unstable, of having the disease of insanity. As a result, Jane begins to compare herself to Grace and wonder if she herself suffered from insanity. This situation revealed the reality that Jane was beginning to believe the labels, that she herself could be insane.

Jane's belief of having moral insanity reaches its peak at the culmination of her relationship with Mr Rochester. Up until this point Jane had been made aware of her social difference between herself and Rochester. She had suppressed and tormented herself as a result. In Jane's mind she was a poor, plain, and unworthy girl in love with a handsome, wealthy, and brilliant man. Due to the company Mr Rochester kept Jane was constantly kept in check of her station. After she had been burying her emotions for months, Mr Rochester confesses his feelings for her. This is when Jane begins to let her feelings out. This only comes crashing down after it is revealed that he is already married. This is the peak of Jane's belief in her insanity. Her feelings went from suppressed, to being let out, to having to be suppressed again. This caused her passions to boil over. In the middle of her moral crisis she tells Mr. Rochester, "I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. . . They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs" (Brontë 1847). Jane grew from having bouts of insanity to experiencing the brunt of it. It is at this point in the novel that Brontë reveals Jane to be insane, and aware of it as well.

Jane Eyre exemplifies Victorian psychology through the representation that insanity can take the form of differing manifestations. Brontë uses Bertha and Jane as the juxtaposition of Victorian insanity, not as the personification of each other's psyches. Jane's insanity lies in morality. It is through her inner feelings, passions, and suppressed emotions that Jane's insanity manifests. It all culminates inward, Jane restrains her feelings herself. As Jane matures throughout life a label of insanity is placed upon her, and eventually she believes it. This creates

a space for readers to be sympathetic. Due to the science at the time, Jane can be classified as insane. Jane may not be insane in the manner one expects, or even to the degree they expect, but the characters place the label on her for a reason.

I argue that Jane's label of moral insanity is actually her greatest strength. The different characters throughout her life are so quick to label her as insane because she is passionate and outspoken. This is the exact opposite of who women were expected to be, as seen by Mrs. Reed's constant attempts to teach Jane to be silent, quiet, useful, and humble. After one of the countless times as a child that Jane is berated by Mrs. Reed, she finally speaks back. Jane unloads everything off her chest saying, "Ere I had finished this reply my 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 unhopod-for liberty" (Brontë 1847). When Jane is being interviewed for a potential spot at a school she is told, "But you are passionate, Jane: that you must allow" (Brontë 1847). Jane was always passionate, she just began to express it in ways that other women did not, in ways that were not acceptable to society. This only grew as she got older.

Jane struggles with the idea that Rochester loves her for her--passion and all. Yet, she is at her fullest with him. Before greeting him Jane is getting ready. For the very first time she allows her passions to be her asset. "I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain; there was hope in its aspect and life in its color" (Brontë 1847). In this moment Jane doesn't see herself as plain, or ordinary. She doesn't see herself as the attributes that had been told of her, she sees herself rationally. As she is attempting to talk Mr. Rochester out of his love for her, he describes her in her likeness saying, "I never met your likeness, Jane; you please me,

and you master me--you seem to submit” (Brontë 1847). It takes her love for Mr. Rochester, for his view of her, for her to fully realize her insanity is not that at all.

In *Jane Eyre* insanity is posed as an unwanted disease. Jane is labeled as quiet, plain, and ordinary. I argue that Jane isn’t insane, she may be impassioned, I suggest that, although she exhibits all the traits of moral insanity, these characteristics are actually what makes her a realistic protagonist. Despite being passionate Jane always maintains a clear head and holds a strong rationale. She is living in a society that doesn’t see, or deem, that behavior acceptable. Through her impassioned outbursts, Jane is able to transgress the societal expectations. Jane is insanity juxtaposed rationale.

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