

# The new feminist heroine born from typical genre conventions

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## Introduction

I laughed at him as he said this. ‘I am not an angel,’ I asserted; ‘and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me – for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate.’ (Brontë, 2019, p. 291).

Although women historically have been forced to align themselves with the ideals created by men, Jane Eyre refuses to waiver and give up her morals and agency. She states that she will not live up to this angel-like ideal clearly to Mr. Rochester when the pair is discussing marriage. The ideal woman in the 1800s was supposed to marry and move on from adhering to a father, to a husband. She is obedient, caring, and dependent. Claudi (2013) describes this ideal as an angellike figure, someone pure, innocent, and submissive (Claudi, 2013, p. 172). Jane Eyre, however, refuses to lose her agency and her individuality. This short quote contrasts the idea of the perfect Victorian woman, which leads us to consider that Jane might be a feminist.

Charlotte Brontë published the novel under a gender-neutral pseudonym in 1847. Its reception was positive, and the novel influenced the society of its time (Gao, 2013, p. 926). According to Gao (2013), “*Jane Eyre* is the first, also the most powerful and popular novel to represent the modern view of women’s position in society” (Gao, 2013, p. 926). This illustrates the impact the novel had with its descriptions of a young girl growing up, but also the popularity the novel had and has kept. It is possible *Jane Eyre* has remained as popular because one can

analyze it from different perspectives, which in this paper is a feminist perspective. The novel is seemingly narrated by Jane Eyre herself and is written like a biography, where Jane's thoughts and perceptions regarding past events are somewhat included. *Jane Eyre* is a "bildungsroman", making it natural to analyze. The relevant characters will be Mrs. Reed, Helen Burns, Bertha Mason, and Jane Eyre herself. Although these characters might be different from other women in literature at that time, one can discuss that they still adhere to some stereotypes. This paper will argue that the typical constructions of women, the evil stepmother, the martyr and the madwoman, help create the new complex feminist heroine that is Jane Eyre.

## Rewriting stereotypes to invoke familiarity and further change

### Mrs. Reed – summoning the evil stepmother

A genre in literature that has been around for a long while and is familiar to most, is the fairy tale. Jack Zipes (2012) state that fairy tales start with some type of conflict (Zipes, 2012, p. 2), just like what Mrs. Reed creates in *Jane Eyre*. Mrs. Reed is not a well-liked character, as she appears cold, unfair, and jealous. In the novel, she seems to dislike Jane because her husband took her in. She prioritizes her own children ahead of Jane, and her son ahead of her daughters. Already in the first chapter, it is established that Jane is inferior to the other children. A conflict spurs between Jane and John Reed, where John throws a book at her causing her to bleed (Brontë, 2019, p. 13). Although Jane is the one is the victim of this conflict, like many before – "Accustomed to John Reed's abuse..." (Brontë, 2019, p. 13), she is the one Mrs. Reed chooses to punish by sending her to the red room. This clearly paints Mrs. Reed as an unjust character, and as a reader you dislike her early on. Unlike Jane, Mrs. Reed upholds patriarchal ideals, as she ignores her son's malicious and violent behavior; "Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject; she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did now and then in her very presence; more frequently, however, behind her back" (Brontë, 2019, p. 12). This is not unheard of in fairy tales either, such as in *Cinderella* where the stepmother spoils her own children rotten. One might argue that Mrs. Reed dislikes Jane because she is different, in behavior and morals as well as blood. Although Jane thinks of Mrs. Reed as despicable and cruel, she strives to please her (Brontë, 2019, p. 38). Mrs. Reed never considers her good enough, holding Jane to a higher standard than anyone else in her life. Most likely because of this inherent dislike she has towards her, like the stepmothers in fairytales. Jane also feels somewhat betrayed by Mrs. Reed, as one can tell when Mr. Brocklehurst comes to visit. Mrs. Reed discloses that she has written a letter to

the academy stating that Jane's worst fault is deceit (Brontë, 2019, p. 38), because she does not have the behavior Mrs. Reed wishes she would. It spurs an argument between the two where Jane accuses Mrs. Reed of being deceitful and states that she is no relative of hers (Brontë, 2019, p. 42). Mrs. Reed's treatment of Jane has impacted her greatly and it pushes her over the edge, and although she is infuriated and upset, the argument leaves a bitter taste in her mouth, and she considers apologizing.

In his book, Zipes (2012) refers to the tale *The Baba Yaga* where the evil figure is the stepmother who also abuses the stepdaughter. Her kindness and cleverness are what saves her, and the stepmother dies in the end. One can compare this to *Jane Eyre*, where Jane grows to be both kind and clever. Other than Mrs. Reed, there are some other characters that might remind one of fairy tale characters. For instance, Mr. Brocklehurst and his beastly nature. When Jane meets Mr. Brocklehurst for the first time, introduced by Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst asks Jane to come closer as he wants to have a good look at her. "I stepped across the rug; he placed me square and straight before him. What a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! what a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!" (Brontë, 2019, p. 37), is what Jane thinks when she gets a closer look at Mr. Brocklehurst. This is very similar to the Little Red Riding Hood. This might illustrate Jane's impression of the wolfish Mr. Brocklehurst. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) also refer to Miss Temple, the compassionate teacher at Lowood, as "closer to a fairy godmother than anyone else Jane has met, closer even to a true mother". She tries to protect the girls from Mr. Brocklehurst's sadistic ideals, like eating burnt porridge, and treats the girls with kindness. Both Helen Burns and Jane appreciate and admire her. "And dispossessed Jane, who is not only poor, plain, and little, but also fiery and ferocious, correctly guesses that she can no more become such a woman than Cinderella can become her own fairy godmother" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 345), illustrates that Miss Temple is this ideal Jane might wish to be like but cannot achieve it. Maybe one can consider her the fairy tale ideal, like an angel but albeit not quite the same. This also contrasts the other mother figure Jane has had in her life, namely Mrs. Reed. They become representations of good and bad.

### Helen Burns – pity the martyr

*Jane Eyre* got a mixed reception, as people were not entirely on board with the anger Jane harbors and its somewhat 'anti-Christian' sentiments (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 339). When the reader first meets Helen Burns, she is reading a book and answers questions Jane might have

about the teachers and the Lowood Institution. The second, she is being criticized by Miss Scatcherd (Brontë, 2019, p. 60). Both Jane and the reader feels sympathy for the poor girl from right when you meet her. Jane questions why Helen never stands up for herself, “Burns made no answer: I wondered at her silence. ‘Why,’ thought I, ‘does she not explain that she could neither clean her nails nor wash her face, as the water was frozen?’” (Brontë, 2019, p. 61), as she finds Helen’s treatment unjust. After witnessing this treatment, Jane asks her if she would like to leave Lowood (Brontë, 2019, p. 63). Helen refuses and seems almost appalled by this question, as she thinks this is what she deserves. This makes one consider Helen might be a martyr figure, as she tends to turn the other cheek. This is also a common Christian value. Jane answers that she could never bear to be flogged in front of everyone, which spurs a reaction in Helen who replies: “‘Yet it would be your duty to bear it, if you could not avoid it: it is weak and silly to say you *cannot bear* what it is your fate to be required to bear.’” (Brontë, 2019, p. 64). This illustrates how strong Helen’s sense of duty is, especially since Jane does not see it this way in the slightest. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) argue that Helen does not do anything more than *bear* her fate, as she does not put in any effort to be Lowood’s definition of good (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 346). “‘I make no effort, I follow as inclination guides me. There is no merit in such goodness.’” (Brontë, 2019, p. 65), she said when Jane asks. Helen is considered lazy and naughty, as she does not do everything she is expected to, like keep her drawers tidy or wash her nails (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 346). This can indicate that Helen is aware of how to be considered good but chooses not to care. This alludes to the martyr figure, as she chooses to then get punished for disobedience.

Early on, it becomes clear that Helen is a devoted Christian and has clear Christian values which is most likely what makes her understanding and kind, which again is proved in how she accepts her punishment without any complains. At this point in her life Jane does not feel that in touch with her religious side, but Helen is certainly a person in her life that advocates for Christianity. When Jane cannot understand Helen’s way of thinking, Helen encourages her to read the New Testament (Brontë, 2019, p. 66). Jane states that you need not be good to anyone who treats you ill, but Helen disagrees: “‘It is not violence that best overcomes hate – nor vengeance that most certainly heals injury.’ ‘What then?’ ‘Read the New Testament, and observe what Christ says, and how He acts: make His word your rule, and His conduct your example.’” (Brontë, 2019, p. 66). Jane does not seem appalled by this recommendation, but rather confused and curious. She inquires what Christ says and the reply sounds: “‘Love your enemies; bless

them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you.’ ‘Then I should love Mrs. Reed, which I cannot do; I should bless her son John, which is impossible.’” (Brontë, 2019 p. 66). This is what causes Jane to open up about her experiences and what happened to her, and Helen listens patiently without interrupting (Brontë, 2019, p. 67). The act of forgiveness is central in Christianity, as it is the way of release from hurt and disappointment. This appears to be Helen’s point of view as well. Forgiving Mrs. Reed is not for Mrs. Reed’s sake, but Jane’s. According to Matthew 6:14, forgiving others is necessary for God to forgive you. Helen meets an unfortunate end, as she is very ill. Even though her fever is contagious, Jane goes to her room. Jane is worried and upset, but Helen is happy – “I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve” (Brontë, 2019, p. 92). Helen clearly states that she is going to God, and is happy to be doing so. Her martyr-like qualities are just as apparent on her deathbed if not more, as she says “By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings. I had not qualities or talents to make my way very well in the world: I should have been continually at fault” (Brontë, 2019, p. 92). Helen appears to feel pity for herself and thinks it is right and the best option for her to die.

### Bertha Mason – the wrath of the madwoman

When the reader and Jane first crosses paths with Bertha Mason, neither party knows it is her. The cruel laughter echoing through Thornfield Hall, previously thought to be Grace Poole, is revealed to be the wife of Jane’s romantic interest Edward Rochester, Bertha Mason. This character is introduced quite late and is not present for most of the novel, but she is quite impactful. According to Mr. Rochester, “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations? Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard! – as I found out after I had wed the daughter; for they were silent on family secrets before.” (Brontë, 2019, p. 327). He claims she is mad, blaming her Creole background and justifies his search for a new wife with her alleged madness. As Bertha is Rochester’s “dirty little secret”, he hides her away in the attic with Grace Poole as her guardian. Mr. Rochester does not have a nice word to spare for his wife and calls her maniac or lunatic at every given opportunity (Brontë, 2019, p. 336). Therefore, Jane’s perception of Bertha is entirely colored by Rochester. She does not have any access to Bertha that is not through Rochester, meaning he is permitted to present her in any way he desires. He has to convince Jane that there was no love between the two (Small, 1996, p. 166), to remain on the morally good side. Throughout the

novel, Bertha is reduced to a beast. After meeting her, Jane considers her appearance grotesque. “I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments” (Brontë, 2019, p. 317) is how she describes her encounter to Rochester before the wedding. When Rochester shows her to Jane, it is narrated “The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face – those bloated features” (Brontë, 2019, p. 328). She is in other words no longer the beautiful woman from before her marriage. The pronoun *it* is used to describe Bertha, “What it was, whether beast or human being [...]” (Brontë, 2019, p. 328). Small (1996) writes that Bertha’s laugh can remind one of the hyena (Small, 1996, p. 159). The hyena used to be tied to female revenge, which is clearly a topic in the novel. These descriptions of Bertha as more beast than woman, would promote an idea of her as a villain.

The idea of “the madwoman” has long been a part of literature, even before *Jane Eyre* (Small, 1996, p. 139-140). Although we have a broader understanding of mental illness nowadays. Still women are being accused of being mad, usually accusations based on misogyny. “Jane Eyre, too, uses the insights of mid-nineteenth-century medical writing to support its recasting of Romantic ideas about insurrection and insanity” (Small, 1996, p. 156). Read from a feminist point of view, Bertha’s dying laugh can be a symbol of rebellion against the patriarchy (Small, 1996, p. 160). Brontë’s way of writing the madwoman differs from other romantic writers as well, as she avoids romanticizing insanity and rebellion. According to Small (1996), this concludes a hostility towards romantic models. One could say Brontë is taking advantage of the ideas the contemporary reader would have of female insanity and wants to change this (Small, 1996, p. 161). The madness Bertha exhibits is different from other madwomen at the time, such as Ulrica from *Ivanhoe*. One could argue that ‘moral insanity’, “a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclination, temper, habits and moral dispositions, without any notable lesion of the intellect or knowing and reasoning faculties and particularly without any manical hallucination” (Small, 1996, p. 163-164), is what plagues Bertha. Women were generally thought to be more vulnerable to insanity and this category was easy to apply to any given situation (Small, 1996, p. 164). When Rochester describes her situation to Jane, he essentially applies any symptom mentioned in moral insanity. Some scholars argue that there is a connection between Jane and Bertha, and argue Bertha is Jane’s dark double. Small (1996) argue that there are more similarities between Bertha and Rochester, as they both shut out the world

instead of disciplining and educating themselves like Jane (Small, 1996, p. 174). Brontë uses this familiar madwoman as a catalyst for the action and she spurs discourse between Jane and Rochester. Jane cannot allow herself to be with an already married man, which is then solved by Bertha plunging to her own death from the roof of Thornfield Hall. Her alleged madness caused her set fire to the manor and jump to her own death, as her only way out of this life. Before this she is able to blind Rochester, as her final revenge. After all, “There is nothing like a mad woman” (Dressner & Swift, 2020, track 12). In any case, this madwoman is different from the ones we know mad from love.

## A new heroine - Jane Eyre

Based on these characters, how is Jane able to become such a strong feminist character? The first part of the novel can remind one of a fairy tale, with the vile Mrs. Reed abusing the heroine. Mrs. Reed is the antagonist of Jane’s childhood and as a child, she is never able to “beat” the antagonist. She does not know how to overcome this villain. In her house, Jane had to deal with abuse because of her status. Because of this, Jane is not able to forgive the woman and her son. Mrs. Reed also introduces Jane to one of the situations where she experiences feeling mad, namely the red room. After spending little to no time in the room, Jane cannot take it anymore. She could not stand being caged. Zipes (2012) states that “Fairy tales are informed by a human disposition to action – to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world” (Zipes, 2012, p. 2). This can closely be tied to *Jane Eyre* as well, because throughout her life Jane has been striving to change the world and the people around her. She criticizes the world for treating her differently, be it because of her sex or her social status. In addition, Jane’s growth is personal and she herself changes as she grows. As she meets new people, especially Helen Burns and Mrs. Temple, she is able to integrate some of their best values in herself. Because of Helen’s help regarding forgiveness, Jane forgives Mrs. Reed. When Jane visits her on her deathbed, she shows how she has changed and matured by forgiving the sick woman. Mrs. Reed remains hateful until the end, illustrating her passiveness. This act of forgiveness can also be a symbol of Jane surpassing these patriarchal ideas that Mrs. Reed have been upholding for so long. She understands them, but will not accept them. Jane’s impression of the other characters, like Mr. Brocklehursts being compared to the big bad wolf, can be in place to illustrate young Jane’s naivety. She sees this unlikable character, Mr. Brocklehurst, and associates him with another unlikable character, the wolf. These



different fairy tales can be invoked to make the reader understand the characters right away and familiarize us with them. Jane has been given a very anonymous name, because she is not special. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) claim that a girl like Jane will never be Cinderella (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 342). Even though Jane is the heroine of the story, she is not a fairy tale princess. It is likely that Jane is also aware of this, she is plain and her life is no fairy tale, regardless of evil stepmothers and fairy tale meetings with “princes” like Rochester. Helen Burns, along with St. John, left a significant imprint on Jane. She was able to introduce Jane to a new outlook on life and a new understanding of forgiveness, which is the only way forward in life. Even though Jane does not agree entirely with the Christian ideals and values she is presented with, she is able to pick what she likes and sees value in and include these in her life. For instance, Jane refuses to be a martyr. She will not succumb to being a victim to life and she will not marry Rochester after knowing he already had a wife. Jane will not allow herself to be used. However, Helen being a martyr and dying might have been the push Jane needed to forgive Mrs. Reed. The impact of Helen forgiving everyone in her life and being willing to die, might have forced Jane to see value in forgiveness, both for her own sake and for Helen’s. In other words, Jane was able to include religion in her life in her own way, by thinking critically of what she *wants* in her life. However, it is possible she is confusing her own desires with God’s as well (Lamonca, 2002, p. 260). Since she does not have an entirely clear understanding of her own religion, she remains confused. Like other women of her time, she must juggle different roles, a wife and a Christian (Lamonca, 2002, p. 260). It does not seem to be resolved either, as the novel ends before we are able to explore this further. The ending of the book leaves the reader with some uneasiness, as it describes the other religious person, St. John, and not Jane.

As previously mentioned, Bertha is a catalyst, and another obstacle Jane must surpass. Bertha must be removed from the equation for Jane to marry Rochester. Still, it is hard to dislike Bertha as a modern reader. She is a woman that went mad from being caged, which is understandable. Early in the Red Room, something similar happened to Jane. Women are not meant to be caged. Madness is something Jane generally seems to fear, and her love for Rochester can become akin to madness (Small, 1996, p. 168-169). She is scared that her love for Rochester will destroy her and her mind. Seeing Bertha probably did not soothe this fear, neither did Rochester’s claim regarding unwavering love and him begging her to stay after Bertha’s revelation. Jane refuses, as she thinks Rochester would hate her mad (Brontë, 2019, p. 337) and

wants to keep her current values and principles (Brontë, 2019, p. 355). Although Brontë's writing has kept the anxiety of the mid-Victorian period (Small, 1996, p. 178), it is likely applied to show how it can be used to manipulate history. Bertha is just an instrument and a descendant of the love-mad woman. To a modern reader, it appears more like it is hatred that has made her mad. Even though Jane marries Rochester after Bertha's death, it seems like this illustration of madness and lack of control impacted Jane and her understanding of good and bad. The idea of good and bad is also something that seems to change throughout the novel. Previously, Jane saw the world in black and white. Mrs. Reed is bad, Helen good and Bertha bad, but these characters are more complex than that. They all help Jane further develop her agency and strong values regarding status and gender roles. Her desire is to be Rochester's equal and in the end, it is somewhat equal. Jane has her own fortune and is therefore financially independent. In the end she was able to find this equal relationship that she longed for all along, without losing herself. Her strong ambition and constant search for both education and independence, marks her place as a feminist. "Her story, providing a pattern for countless others, is – far more obviously and dramatically than *The Professor* – 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, 2000, p. 339). In the end, Jane did this. The people she met on the road, helped her become a strong and independent woman who does not waiver on her morals.

## Conclusion

*Jane Eyre* is a complex novel with complex characters. The different characters become easier to follow as they allude to familiar characters we know from other genres or types of literature. Jane's life with Mrs. Reed made her incredibly strong and outspoken, regardless of her traumatic time spent in the Red Room. Mrs. Reed is the evil stepmother in Jane's life and she does not make it easy on her. Still, Jane is able to overcome this character and forgives her in the end. Helen Burns, the martyr, helps Jane on her road towards understanding and embracing religion, although only to the degree Jane herself feels like. She picks what she likes, such as the idea of forgiveness, and integrate it into her life. Helen was a great companion, comfort and

teacher for young Jane. Bertha Mason was an obstacle Jane had to overcome. She was the madwoman hidden away in the attic, ensuring Jane could not marry Rochester. However, her death freed Jane to do what she wished. The journey Jane has been on has helped her become a strong woman, and in the end she finds what she has longed for – equality. Through her writing and including of typical characters in literature, Brontë has been able to create a new feminist heroine who does not waiver to any and will overcome obstacles life throws at her. This heroine is no Cinderella, martyr, madwoman or angel, she is just a woman.

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