

# *Jane Eyre*: A Panorama of Victorian Women's Lives and Social Status

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## Introduction

Before *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, Charlotte Brontë almost lived in a female world. She spent most of her time with her sisters and aunt at home, girl friends in Roe Head School, and female schoolmates in Brussels. She rarely had any chance to deal with men except her father, brother and Mr. Heger for whom she once had secret passion as a language student in Brussels. Some critics thought Charlotte Brontë's portrayals of male characters were weak probably due to her lack experience of meeting men.

However, Charlotte Brontë's representations of female characters in *Jane Eyre* were profound. People are familiar with the eponymous heroine of *Jane Eyre*, with a story of how she progressed against a male-dominated society and culture. Jane was portrayed as an indomitable woman figure that set a good example for the world's women who are experiencing difficulties. Jane was just like a brilliant star in the literature and had the significant meaning in the critical history.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë covered a broad range of women of different classes. *Jane Eyre* has been the critical text of feminism not only because of the extraordinary life progress of its heroine but also of the representations of the rest of the female characters. This paper will focus on examining these female characters. Like Jane, each female character had a significant meaning by representing women of different classes or particular female groups in patriarchal society, and exposed the typical Victorian social problems. A panorama of Victorian women's lives and social

status unrolled before our eyes by understanding these female characters in *Jane Eyre*. These figures include: women acting as agents for men, women as “the angel in the house”, women choosing spiritual self-renunciation, women as the inhabitants of Vanity Fair, the madwoman, and the governess.

## **1. Women Acting as Agents for Men**

– Mrs. Reed and Grace Poole

To maintain the order of the patriarchal society, Victorian men also needed a credible woman to speak for them. If the patriarchal terror did not directly come from men, it could come from women – women acting as agents for men to execute men's order. The best representatives of this type of women in *Jane Eyre* were Mrs. Reed at Gateshead and Grace Poole at Thornfield.

Mrs. Reed shut Jane in the red room to punish her rebellion against John Reed, the substitute patriarch. Mrs. Reed spoke for men and punished those who were discords in male-dominated society. The red room symbolized the oppression for Jane. It was Mrs. Reed who implemented this oppression to maintain the order of patriarchal society. And there, in the red room, imprisoned and frightened, the narrator Jane implied that the terror from Mrs. Reed was no less horrible than that from the dead Mr. Reed. “...a certain secret drawer in the wardrobe, where were stored divers parchments, her jewel-casket, and a miniature of her deceased husband”. (*JE*, p.7) The narrator consciously put Mrs. Reed's jewel-casket and a miniature of dead Mr. Reed together to imply the special role that Mrs. Reed played and the equal patriarchal terror from her.

At Thornfield, Grace Poole was always an enigma for Jane. And the disclosure of this enigma was concomitant with Bertha Mason's identity opening to the public. Grace Poole was hired by Rochester as the keeper of Bertha Mason. By receiving a high salary, on the one hand, Grace Poole kept the secret from others, which almost

led to the illegal marriage between Jane and Mr. Rochester; on the other hand, the imprisonment of Bertha Mason ordered by Mr. Rochester and executed by Grace Poole increased Bertha's insanity and inhuman behavior more.

Jane lived in a world where women actually acted as the agents for men to police each other and to maintain the patriarchal order according to the demands and requirements of the patriarchal society.

## 2. Women as “The Angels in the House”

– Miss Temple

Miss Temple was very influential to Jane. As a superintendent of Lowood School, Miss Temple imparted what was thought to be ideal in Victorian society to Jane. She herself was like a Victorian ideal, “the woman-as-angel-in the house”, showing her “ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy – and repression” as Sandra Gilbert pointed out.<sup>1</sup> Miss Temple's virtues were just like what Virginia Woolf summarized about an ideal Victorian woman in domestic family:

“She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short...she never had a mind or wish of her own...”<sup>2</sup>

Miss Temple always set an example and was kind and generous to others. For example, she encouraged the freezing Lowood School girls to march forward valiantly

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra M Gilbert & Susan Gubar, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress” *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, Second Edition. Yale University, 2000. p.344, 345

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, quoted in Beth Newman, ed., *Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. Bedford Books of St. Martain's Press, 1996. p.9.

on their way out of far located church while other teachers were dispirited and did not attempt to cheer the pupils up due to the freezing weather; when Jane accidentally dropped her slate and was asked by Mr. Brocklehurst to stand before all the teachers and pupils, Miss Temple comforted Jane gently and asked her not to be afraid; when one day the breakfast was ill-prepared, Miss Temple asked the kitchen to prepare cheese and bread for the starving pupils and even claimed that she would be responsible for this matter. Miss Temple also generously entertained Jane and Helen with her own seedcake. Jane expressed her satisfaction that “we feasted” “as on nectar and ambrosia”. (*JE*, p.65)

As a typical representative of Victorian “Angel in the House”, Miss Temple was good at – or it can be said that she was required by the patriarchal society to be good at – the “repression” of her feelings. Jane stated that Miss Temple always had “something of serenity in her air, of state in her mien, of refined propriety in her language, which precluded deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager”. (*JE*, p.65) For instance, when Miss Temple listened to Mr. Brocklehurst’s sermonizing about satisfying the body but starving the immortal souls, Jane observed that:

“especially her (Miss Temple’s) mouth, closed as if it would have required a sculptor’s chisel to open it, and her brow sealed gradually into petrified severity.” (*JE*, p.56)

Miss Temple was in total control of her emotions. Although she was also angry at Mr. Brocklehurst’s hypocrisy, she repressed her madness and anger very well, and she had let the fire of anger burning inside extinguished<sup>3</sup> as Victorian men expected. What Jane learnt from Miss Temple was the quality of self-control that she did not own before as Jane stated:

“more harmonious thoughts; what seemed better regulated feel-

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Z. Thaden, “*Jane Eyre* (1847)”, *Student Companion to Charlotte & Emily Brontë*. Greenwood Press, 2001. p.57.



ings had become the inmates of my mind. I had given in allegiance to duty and order; I was quiet; I believed I was content; to the eyes of others, usually even to my own, I appeared a disciplined and subdued character.” (*JE*, p.76)

Jane said Miss Temple’s “friendship and society had been my continual solace; she had stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and latterly, companion.” (*JE*, p.76) Miss Temple acted as “mother” for Jane as the critic Adrienne Rich pointed out.<sup>4</sup> And she was a good mother figure. Good mother figures in patriarchal society encouraged repression and submission since mothers themselves were powerless and dependent on men.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Women Choosing Spiritual Self-Renunciation

– Helen Burns

In the patriarchal society women had very few outlets and opportunities to show their talents, abilities and desires. Women were easy to renounce the world and deny themselves completely. The representative of this type of women in *Jane Eyre* was Helen Burns, who was also a poor girl at Lowood School.

Like Miss Temple, Helen could also control her passion well and on this point, she also greatly influenced Jane. Helen was another “impossible ideal” to Jane: “the ideal... of self-renunciation” as Sandra Gilbert pointed out.<sup>6</sup> Being often humiliated and abused by the teacher, Miss Scatcherd, Helen never tried to find an excuse for

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<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Rich, “*Jane Eyre*: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman” *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. p.95.

<sup>5</sup> Adrienne Rich, “*Jane Eyre*: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman”, quoted in Barbara Z. Thaden, “*Jane Eyre* (1847)”, *Student Companion to Charlotte & Emily Bronte*. Greenwood Press, 2001. p.62, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra M Gilbert & Susan Gubar, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress” *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, Second Edition. Yale University, 2000. p.345, 346.

herself or to oppose injustice. Helen had the belief that her true home was in heaven. For this belief, she could love her enemies and bear the injustice which would be forever impossible for Jane to make. Helen told Jane:

“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.” (*JE*, p.49)

Helen looked for eternal release via death from a miserable life of injustice instead of rebelling in this life.<sup>7</sup> “By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings.” (*JE*, p.74) Helen did not live very long. When typhus killed many Lowood girls, Helen also left for her liberty. She died of consumption, a more dignified death. The novel did not say how Helen's self-renunciation was formed. But at least we could infer that Helen's longing for her home in Northumberland, her uncertainty for her earthly future and her powerlessness to change anything somehow led her attitude to life.

#### **4. Women as the Inhabitants of Vanity Fair**

– Georgiana Reed, Blanche Ingram and Adèle

The conventional and accepted way for a woman to achieve social status in Victorian Britain was a good marriage. This convention can be very well embodied in three female characters in *Jane Eyre*: Mrs. Reed's daughter – Georgiana Reed, Blanche Ingram whom Mr. Rochester pretended to marry, and Mr. Rochester's ward – a little French girl, Adèle. Although these three female characters were different from each other, they all shared the same identity, the inhabitants of Vanity Fair.

Georgiana Reed and Blanche Ingram were both beautiful with good family background and they both tried to lure a wealthy husband from the upper class to

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Z. Thaden, “*Jane Eyre* (1847)”, *Student Companion to Charlotte & Emily Brontë*. Greenwood Press, 2001. p.57.

financially secure them. Georgiana Reed always dreamed to have a life of Vanity Fair. Her mind seemed completely taken up with the recollections of her past happy time spent in the social circles of London's upper class, and longing for a dissipated life. She never cared about her mother – Mrs. Reed's illness, or her brother's death, or the decline of the family. Georgiana Reed eventually married a wealthy but worn-out man.

Blanche Ingram, the daughter of a rich and powerful family, was beautiful but proud, snobbish and simple-minded. As was common practice in Victorian Britain, neither Blanche Ingram nor her sister could inherit money from their father. The eldest son of the family would inherit the whole fortune. Therefore, Blanche Ingram could find no means of sustaining her luxurious life other than desperately catching a good husband. And Mr. Rochester was her prey. Blanche Ingram could sing, play the piano and speak French just like many other Victorian girls with trained accomplishments to find a good husband. Blanche Ingram and Mr. Rochester did not marry in the end. On the one hand, Mr. Rochester could see the weakness of Blanche Ingram. He just pretended to marry in order to make Jane jealous; on the other hand, when Blanche Ingram heard a rumor actually created by Mr. Rochester that he did not have much fortune as people guessed, she became cold to him immediately.

Another example is Adèle, who was the daughter of Celine, a French opera-dancer and one of Mr. Rochester's mistresses. Although Adèle was just a little girl, she already showed her aspiration for a Vanity Fair life by her speaking and behavior. The way Adele danced and sang was just like her mother, Celine. Like her mother, Adèle longed for fashionable gowns rather than freedom.<sup>8</sup> She was very submissive and loved to cling to Mr. Rochester, the patriarch of Thornfield.

As the products of the patriarchal society, this type of women witnessed the

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<sup>8</sup> Sandra M Gilbert & Susan Gubar, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress" *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, Second Edition. Yale University, 2000. p.349.

subordinate social status of women in patriarchal society.

## 5. The Madwoman

– Bertha Mason

The madwoman was not just a simple fictional character in some literary works of the nineteenth century. More significantly, it reflected a typical social problem that existed in Victorian Britain. The specific law system and social convention in Victorian times explained the existence of the madwoman in a large number, for instance, the property problem of Victorian married women. No sooner had the women married, than they lost their legal rights and their property, which had been transferred to their husbands. Women's financial dependence on men determined their submission to men and the possibility of men's arbitrary abuse of women, which was likely to lead to women's mental disorders. Married women could not own property to support themselves without depending on their husbands until Britain passed *The Married Women's Property Act* in 1870. The influence of social convention on domestic life was another typical cause of the problem of madwomen. Women were required to stay at home. Except for playing the piano, reading novels, dancing, knitting, supervising the servants and so on, they could do nothing because they were never educated to do other jobs than those mentioned above. Women were confined to a narrow domestic sphere, lacking meaningful work, aimless and hopeless. Women's imprisonment and repression led to a large number of madwomen in Victorian society.

The mad woman figure in *Jane Eyre* was Bertha Mason. Since *Jane Eyre's* publication, for a long time there was little attention paid to Bertha Mason. Bertha was just regarded as a tool to highlight and elevate Jane as an extraordinary person, and as an approach adopted by Charlotte Brontë to create a Gothic atmosphere for the novel. Bertha never appeared before people as a human. Her strange, mysterious mummers and ghostly laughs, and Mr. Rochester's personal despising accounts of her

were the only source for us to know Bertha. This madwoman, who was deprived of freedom and even the right of speaking to defend herself, was actually the true victim under the oppression of patriarchal society. The arranged marriage between Mr. Rochester and Bertha suddenly exchanged their financial status. Mr. Rochester, as the second son, who could inherit nothing from his father, became rich suddenly by obtaining his wife's dowry of thirty thousand pounds; while Bertha, who was once the daughter of a rich planter became penniless and dependant on her husband.

After obtaining Bertha's body and property, Mr. Rochester found he had married a woman whom he "never loved", "never esteemed" and "did not even know". (*JE*, p.292) As Bertha's eccentricity was more and more exposed and also when Mr. Rochester discovered that Bertha was actually from a family with a history of madness, he was filled with resentment, aversion and contempt for Bertha. And Mr. Rochester never showed his sympathy or offered any proper care to Bertha. After Mr. Rochester took Bertha back to England, he imprisoned her on the dark third story of Thornfield for ten years under the surveillance of Grace Poole, who was a cold and more eccentric woman. Far away from her hometown in West India, her families, and lacking the tender care of family members, Bertha could not get better other than deeper insanity. Here, do not forget one incident that happened in the evening before the eve of Jane and Mr. Rochester's marriage. Sneaking off from the third story, Bertha went into Jane's room and tore Jane's wedding veil into half. This wedding veil reminded Bertha of her marriage with Mr. Rochester. But now she was just a discarded woman by her husband. How could a madwoman so purposely aim at destroying a wedding veil? The incident implied Bertha's anger and despair at her miserable identity as the true victim of patriarchal society. Bertha at last set fire to Thornfield – the centre of male domination. She herself also ended her life by jumping off Thornfield. Death seemed the only outlet for this victim.

Since 1979 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar co-authored the book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, more and more attention has been paid to Bertha. An

interesting and influential perception was raised by them from psychoanalytical perspective that Bertha was the “dark double” of Jane.<sup>9</sup> Bertha acted as an agent of Jane's rebellion, anger and desire. “What Bertha now does, ...is what Jane wants to do” as Sandra Gilbert pointed out.<sup>10</sup> For instance, facing Mr. Rochester's patriarchal power and their unbalanced wealth and social position, Jane wanted to put off the wedding and tear up the veil – Bertha did it for her. Jane desired to triumph over the patriarchal power from Thornfield, which had been experienced in her dream of the ruined Thornfield, Bertha again did it for her by burning down Thornfield eventually.

Bertha Mason is no longer a neglected character in *Jane Eyre*. Instead, she represented a special group of victimized women in patriarchal society and has become an important medium to understand the innermost of Jane and re-read Mr. Rochester more objectively.

## 6. The Governess

– Diana and Mary River

The governess was a figure that often appeared in nineteenth-century literature. Jane Eyre herself was a governess who married her master in the end. The popularity of the governess theme in the literature was due to its existence as a very typical Victorian social problem. The 1851 Census stated there were 25,000 governesses on the market. As the only “genteel” and accepted profession for middle-class women was governess, governess became an overcrowded profession. The competition was one of the direct causes that led to the plight of the governess with low pay and low social status.

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<sup>9</sup> Sandra M Gilbert & Susan Gubar, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress” *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, Second Edition. Yale University, 2000. p.360.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.359.

The most congenial women whom Jane did not meet until the end of her journey were Diana River and Mary River. On the one hand, these two women, who were later accidentally proved to be Jane's cousins, provided Jane with the experience of a true family that she always craved and never experienced before at the Reeds; on the other hand, as Sandra Gilbert pointed out, Diana and Mary, "through their independent, learned, benevolent personalities" suggested "the ideal of female strength" that Jane had always been searching for.<sup>11</sup> Being unable to inherit anything from the declined family, Diana and Mary had to support themselves by working as the governesses. And at this point the orphaned Jane bore the same identity with them. The status of a governess was very ambiguous. The governess was neither a member of a family, nor a servant.<sup>12</sup> The governess was the "anathematized race" (*JE*, p.166) just as Jane was despised and cursed at Thornfield's party. The children teased their governess because they knew she was just someone who received a wage from their parents and had no real power over them.<sup>13</sup> At Marsh End, Jane also sympathized with Diana and Mary's miserable status as governesses to "wealthy and haughty" families, who regarded them only as "humble dependants", "and who neither knew nor sought one of their innate excellences, and appreciated only their acquired accomplishments as they appreciated the skill of their cook or the taste of their, waiting-woman". (*JE*, p.338)

However, in real life, unlike Jane, Victorian governesses seldom could marry into their employer's family. As Kathryn Hughes pointed out the reality of a governess's life was "more prosaic and more complex than anything experienced by her fictional

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.365.

<sup>12</sup> M. Jeanne Peterson, "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society", quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress" *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, Second Edition. Yale University, 2000, p.349.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Z. Thaden, "Jane Eyre (1847)", *Student Companion to Charlotte & Emily Brontë*. Greenwood Press, 2001. p.66.

counterpart”.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses how *Jane Eyre*, as a critical feminist text, displayed a panorama of Victorian women's lives and social status by examining in detail the important female characters: Mrs. Reed, Grace Poole, Miss Temple, Helen Burns, Georgiana Reed, Blanche Ingram, Adèle, Bertha Mason, Diana and Mary River. These figures represented women of different classes or particular female groups. This paper also demonstrates that the representations of these female characters reflected the typical Victorian social phenomenon and exposed the social problems. For instance, under the Victorian criterion of an ideal woman, a woman must be like “an angel in the house”, namely a perfect lady in her proper sphere; women were trained for a good marriage, but not for a profession as no proper profession could suit them; and due to the particular Victorian restriction on women's professions and domestic life, a large number of governesses came onto the market and a large number of madwomen appeared in lunatic asylums in the Victorian age. These female characters were all affected and restricted by a male-dominated culture. However, their responses to the patriarchal culture were totally different with that of Jane. What we can see from these women were submission, repression, sacrifice and victimization. These women were all inevitable products of the patriarchal society.

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<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Hughes, “Reader, I Married Him”, in *The Victorian Governess*. The Hambledon Press, 2001. p.9.



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