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Dr. Faubion

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Mental Illness and Human Dignity in *Jane Eyre*

In Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, Jane interacts with Bertha Mason, the mentally ill wife of Mr. Rochester. Deeper analysis demonstrates that mental issues in the novel are not limited to Bertha, but also extend to additional characters in subtle ways. Jane Eyre's actions towards those struggling with mental illness demonstrate that Brontë believed such individuals were deserving of more dignity than they were granted during the time period. By using commonly accepted beliefs of the era to establish credibility with her audience, Brontë is able to use her personal experiences to advocate for the humanization of the mentally ill in a time where they were viewed otherwise.

Through her inclusion of socially accepted ideas, Brontë establishes a relationship with readers that enables her to gain their trust. Brontë primarily builds this relationship through intentional characterization and development of her novel's plot. For example, on one occasion Jane is called to the deathbed of her Aunt Reed, whose mental capacities were failing as a result of physical illness. Although Aunt Reed's decreased mental abilities are not identical to mental illness, the aunt's condition demonstrates many similarities to Brontë's overall approach to mental issues. Upon arriving at the house, Jane writes of her aunt: "The well-known face was there: stern, relentless as ever--there was that peculiar eye which nothing could melt; and the somewhat raised, imperious, despotic eyebrow" (Brontë 224). Although the description Jane provides is seemingly limited to the physical attributes of her abusive aunt, it rather demonstrates

Brontë's intentional incorporation of physiognomy and phrenology into her work in order to establish credibility with her audience. According to Beth Tressler, "The decipherability of the inner self through outward physical properties constituted a large part of the appeal of phrenology" (3); Tressler later states, "[B]asically anyone able enough to read could become a competent interpreter of the brain and moral condition of anyone else" (3). Elizabeth Donaldson, another scholar, writes, "Reading the body is a central practice in *Jane Eyre*: madness gets its meaning from the novel's underlying logic of physiognomy" (102). Brontë's purposeful inclusion of her aunt's physical appearance, and vocabulary which references her personality, demonstrates Brontë's awareness of societal beliefs, specifically as they pertained to phrenology. Through appealing to readers by including accessible ideas, Brontë not only provides her audience with relatable imagery, but also establishes herself as a trustworthy author. The reliability that Brontë earns by including the aforementioned elements allows readers the opportunity to thoughtfully consider her arguments.

Although Brontë connects with readers via the inclusion of certain elements, she also advocates that the mentally ill be treated with more dignity than they were often given. Aunt Reed's cognitive impairment at the end of her life can be used to demonstrate Brontë's beliefs regarding the topic of mental issues overall. In Jane's final interactions with her aunt, Mrs. Reed attempts to provide a form of reconciliation, confessing, "Well, I have twice done you a wrong which I regret now," and later resolving, "Well: I must get it over. Eternity is before me. . . ." (Brontë 232). In attaching qualities to Mrs. Reed which confirm her humanity and capacity for doing good (although not overwhelming), Brontë argues that those struggling with mental issues should nonetheless be viewed as people. After discussing Mrs. Reed's efforts to bring misfortune upon her, Jane writes, "'Love me, then, or hate me, as you will,' I said at last, 'you

have my full and free forgiveness: ask now for God's; and be at peace” (Brontë 233). Even though Mrs. Reed does not provide Jane with warm affection (Brontë 233), Jane's statement articulates Brontë's belief that mentally fragile individuals should be treated as people, regardless of their mental capacity. Similar to Anne Rügemeier, who writes, “Both Jane and Bertha function as Brontë's avatars,” I would like to argue that Jane's actions in the novel serve to demonstrate Brontë's beliefs (74). When Jane grants her aunt the ability to “[l]ove [her]” or “hate [her]” (Brontë 233), she affirms her aunt's capacity for making decisions regarding her emotions, and therefore her ability to conduct herself as a human being. Jane does not only credit her aunt with autonomy over her decisions, but she also treats her with respect and kindness, demonstrating that she believes her aunt is worthy of humane treatment, even as her mental abilities fail. Jane's treatment of her aunt (in respecting both her autonomy and her personhood) expresses Brontë's opinion regarding the type of treatment mentally fragile individuals deserve.

In comparison to widely accepted social beliefs and practices of her time, Brontë's approach to the worth of those struggling with mental illness is radically atypical. According to scholar Paul Marchbanks, “The early Victorian period witnessed a marked increase in the public's willingness to deposit family members diagnosed with mental illness, cognitive disability, or drug addiction inside Britain's growing number of government- and charity-run asylums” (55). Not only does the action of sending a person to an asylum strip them of their dignity, but it also significantly decreases the amount of respect given to their personal will and desires¹. Marchbanks's use of the word “deposit” also highly suggests that mentally ill

¹ Similarly, see “A Costly Morality: Dependency Care and Mental Difference in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters,” in which it is argued that “the object of the prejudicial gaze is transformed ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’ (Goffman qtd. in Marchbanks 60).

individuals were viewed as objects rather than people. Marchbanks later writes, “Within the course of Charlotte’s own life, however, [the] removal of society’s cumbersome denizens . . . would become a socially acceptable, often professionally encouraged option in Britain” (57). The prevalence at which people were being objectified and removed from the normal social sphere further demonstrates the significance of Brontë’s deviance in her beliefs. Although Mrs. Reed’s mental issues were not prolonged, Jane’s willingness to travel from Thornfield, as well as her kind words towards her aunt (Brontë 233), demonstrate a significant divergence from the societal norms. Rather than viewing her aunt as no longer worthy of affection (as many would have), Jane makes an effort to submit to her aunt’s wishes. The fact that Jane obeyed her aunt’s desire to see her demonstrates that Jane respected her aunt’s will. Jane’s interactions with her ailing aunt demonstrate Brontë’s personal conviction regarding the humanization of the mentally ill, something that stands in stark contrast to the cultural tendency towards sending people to asylums. Because of Brontë’s credibility with her audience, she is also able to use her novel to advocate for a belief that was not widely held.

Brontë’s utilization of social norms in her writing is further demonstrated by the character Bertha. According to Anne Rügemeier, “[C]ontemporary medical discourses suggested that monstrosity in the form of monstrous madness lies asleep in every woman and is always in danger of breaking out if one does not carefully guard one’s behaviour, conduct or, as Victorian physicians would add, the necessary balance of energy” (75). The commonly accepted notion that women were more likely to become mentally ill is mirrored in Brontë’s characterization of Bertha. Although mental illness, cognitive disability, and self-destructive behaviors are seen in multiple characters throughout the novel (and are viewed as related for the purposes of my discussion), the fact that Brontë assigned the most extreme case of mental illness

to a woman demonstrates her understanding of associated societal beliefs. Although it would be logical for Brontë to assign the most obvious example of mental illness onto a male character based on her personal experiences (to be discussed momentarily), Brontë instead selects a female character in order to demonstrate her understanding of common beliefs to her audience and further strengthen her credibility. Prior to the day on which Jane Eyre was supposed to marry Mr. Rochester, Jane describes Bertha's presence in her bedroom: "[P]resently she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror" (275)². Although Bertha's entrance into Jane's room is undoubtedly disturbing, Bertha's interaction with Jane's wedding veil demonstrates her womanhood. Although the veil is later destroyed, the brief scene in which Bertha dons the garment allows Brontë to demonstrate her understanding of the association between women and mental illness. When Rochester introduces Bertha to Jane, she writes, "it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal" (Brontë 285)³. Bertha's motions and noises indicate that she is suffering from mental illness, which persists until her death. By placing a mentally ill character and a veil (symbolic of Bertha's womanhood) within the same frame, Brontë proves to readers that she understands the widely accepted notion that the two were related. Brontë's incorporation of this commonly believed connection demonstrates her intentional inclusion of information in order to appeal to her readers.

In addition to the many examples of Brontë's utilization of social beliefs to connect with readers, her personal and family experiences also heavily influence her work. Arguably the most significant inspiration for mentally ill characters in the novel is Brontë's brother, Branwell. Paul

² Also see Strovas 390 and Rügemeier 82 for a different use of this scene.

³ For an additional use of this quote and a discussion of the significance of Bertha's animal-like character, see Rügemeier's article.

Marchbanks describes “a passionate affair” Branwell had, later writing, “From this point until his death in 1848, the broken-hearted Branwell spent what money he could get on stimulants, borrowing on his family’s credit when his own funds ran dry, and forcing his father and sisters to deal with his incessant ‘drinking bouts, unstable temper, and deteriorating health’” (Smith qtd. in Marchbanks 59). For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to consider Branwell’s self-destructive behavior and “unstable temper” as related to mental illness. Although Branwell’s actions are not necessarily equivalent to Bertha’s behavior, the connecting factor between the two is demonstrated in the way Brontë approaches each. After learning that Rochester was married to Bertha, Jane resolves to leave Thornfield: “Sir, your wife is living: that is a fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical--is false” (296). Jane’s reaction to Rochester’s marriage demonstrates the worth she perceives Bertha to hold as his wife. Jane’s evaluation of Rochester’s marriage is not dependent upon Bertha’s mental capacity; Jane acknowledges Rochester’s marriage, and despite her persistent attraction to Rochester, stands firm by her conviction and eventually leaves Thornfield. Jane’s actions demonstrate Brontë’s beliefs regarding the worth and value of Bertha. If Jane did not view Bertha as also human, her actions may have differed significantly. Through ascribing human value to a woman suffering from mental illness, Brontë demonstrates that her personal beliefs deviated from societal norms of the period.

An argument present in the scholarly literature surrounding *Jane Eyre* suggests that Bertha’s character demonstrates Brontë’s affirmation of the connection between mental issues and “immorality” (Strovas 384)⁴. Although this may be true, I would like to qualify this

⁴ For further discussion and application of the generalized idea connecting the two, also see Marchbanks 60, Donaldson 106, and Rügge-meier 79-81, 86.

argument by suggesting that Brontë's compassion towards the mentally ill eventually triumphs over other reservations she may have had. Karen Strovas writes, "One crucial aspect of Bertha's insanity is that it carries the implications that it was hereditary but ultimately preventable," later describing the belief that, "[T]he difference between sanity and insanity. . . is self-control" (386)⁵. Although Strovas specifically writes of Bertha, the notion of managing oneself (or the lack thereof) is undeniably present in the lives of Branwell and the fictional character John Reed, Jane's cousin. When Robert Leaven approaches Jane regarding her aunt's fragile state, he says of John: "[H]e ruined his health and his estate amongst the worst men and the worst women. He got into debt and into jail: his mother helped him out twice, but as soon as he was free he returned to his old companions and habits . . . How he died, God knows!--they say he killed himself" (215). John Reed's fate further strengthens the suggestion that Brontë may have affirmed the aforementioned argument regarding "immorality" (Strovas 384, 386), and therefore the connection between one's actions, lack of governing themselves, and mental issues. Similar to Branwell, I believe that John's self-destructive nature is, to an extent, related to the larger topic of mental issues within the novel. John's eventual death amidst dire circumstances demonstrates that Brontë connects poor choices to poor outcomes. Brontë does not attempt to negate the consequences associated with irresponsible decisions. Similarly, Beverley Southgate, who argues that Charlotte's identity was connected to Branwell in a unique way, writes, "In spite of the sense of personal tragedy which Branwell came increasingly to embody as he moved towards self-destruction, Charlotte felt only disgust for his conduct" (230). Brontë's personal experiences demonstrate that she was not unfamiliar with the legitimate repercussions of negative decisions and actions. The reality to which Brontë was subjected is mirrored in her

⁵ For an additional discussion of Brontë's perspective on "moral management," a related topic, see Tressler's article.

writing, and the detrimental and harmful effects of unregulated actions are not absent. Brontë does not attempt to minimize the deleterious impacts that a lack of management had on John Reed, Branwell Brontë, and those around them, but rather acknowledges the genuine struggles that resulted.

Brontë's recognition of a connection between a lack of moderation and self-destructive behaviors is used to further develop her opinion surrounding the treatment of those who engage in such actions. Directly after Jane learns of John's death, she states, "I was silent: the tidings were frightful" (216). Within the greater context of her relationship with John (a boy who abused her as a child), the fact that Jane's immediate reaction is one of surprise and sorrow demonstrates Brontë's belief that those who struggle with mental issues are nonetheless human. Despite Brontë's acknowledgement of the negative events at the end of John's life, Jane's sadness amplifies Brontë's position regarding the humanization of the mentally ill, demonstrating that the death of a character who struggled with self-destruction warranted downheartedness, and was not taken lightly. Similar to John, Branwell's life also ended as a result of his self-destructive behaviors and lack of moderation. Although Brontë's written response to his death is not as overtly compassionate as Jane's response to the death of John, she nonetheless experiences emotion at the loss of her sibling:

In her obituary for Branwell, Charlotte mourned not the personal loss of a brother, but the ruination of artistic promise and potential. Evidence that she was herself troubled by this prioritisation of sorrow at ambition thwarted above a sense of personal bereavement is indicated in her avowed hope to her publisher, William Smith Williams, that 'time will allay these feelings.' (Southgate 225)

Although Branwell's death occurred after *Jane Eyre* was published⁶, Brontë's experiences with Branwell not only demonstrate the extent to which personal experiences informed her writing, but also provide further explanation regarding her generalized feelings towards the mentally ill (or those suffering with mental issues generally). Although Brontë acknowledges the legitimate hardship that results from a lack of moderation and the associated self-destruction in the cases of Branwell and John Reed, her feelings towards the deceased demonstrate the value she associated with them as people. Rather than conforming to the social norms of her time, Brontë opposes the objectification of the mentally ill, and instead acknowledges their worth.

Throughout the course of *Jane Eyre*, multiple characters are affected by mental issues. John Reed and Aunt Reed experience self-destruction and cognitive impairment for brief periods of time when compared to Bertha, whose mental illness is persistent. In her writing, Charlotte Brontë incorporates specific social beliefs in order to establish a credible relationship with her readers. In addition, Brontë's personal experiences with the self-destructive nature of her brother enable her to argue that those struggling with mental issues should be treated as humans, regardless of their conditions or behaviors. Although Brontë does not ignore or minimize the effects mental issues can have on a person and those surrounding them, she nonetheless argues that their lives should be understood to have value, which was contradictory to common practices of the time. By first establishing credibility with her readers, Brontë is able to use her personal experiences to advocate for the humanization of the mentally ill.

⁶ According to Paul Marchbanks, Branwell died in 1848. The edition cited in his article shows that *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847.

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