

# Analysis of the Tragic Fate of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* from the Perspective of Foucault's Theory of Madness

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**Abstract:** Charlotte Brontë's seminal work, *Jane Eyre*, played a pivotal role in shaping women's literature throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by delving into the myriad challenges confronted by women within a patriarchal society. This paper employs Michel Foucault's theory of madness to scrutinize Bertha Mason's portrayal and the underlying causes of her tragic destiny in *Jane Eyre*. From the outset of her brief existence, Bertha's life spirals into an abyss as she transitions from a position of privilege to that of a maddened spouse, ultimately becoming an imprisoned renegade. It becomes evident that Bertha's tragic fate stems from the confluence of patriarchal and marital oppression, which reduces her from a lady of means to a crazed wife and then an imprisoned rebel. Deprived of autonomy in marriage and ostracized due to illness, Bertha's vehement defiance, though extreme, underscores the stringent limitations and indomitable spirit of Victorian women. Her depiction not only enriches the narrative fabric of the novel but also offers profound insights into the plight of women and the progressive awakening towards women's liberation.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, Madness.

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## 1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë emerged as a writer during a period when feminist discourse was gaining momentum in England. Her contributions solidified her status as a cornerstone author in the realm of 19<sup>th</sup>-century women's literature, which centered on advocating for women's autonomy and striving for societal parity with men. Her magnum opus, *Jane Eyre*, laid a robust groundwork for the progression of women's literature into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, delving deeper into the challenges encountered by women once they had achieved personal independence.

*Jane Eyre* follows the life of the titular character, Jane, an orphaned girl who faces many hardships and struggles for independence and love. The novel begins with Jane's unhappy childhood at Gateshead Hall under the cruel care of her aunt, Mrs. Reed. She is then sent to Lowood School, where she endures harsh conditions but eventually becomes a teacher. After leaving Lowood School, Jane takes a position as a governess at Thornfield Hall, where she falls in love with the enigmatic and brooding Mr. Rochester. As their relationship deepens, Jane discovers that Thornfield is haunted by a mysterious laughter and that Mr. Rochester has a hidden wife named Bertha Mason. Bertha, a woman from the West Indies, is kept secretly in the attic by Rochester due to her violent tendencies and mental instability, which were likely exacerbated by the unequal marriage forced upon her. When Jane learns the truth about Bertha on her wedding ceremony, she feels betrayed and resolutely leaves Thornfield. However, after a series of events, including the destruction of Thornfield and of the bequeath of a large fortune, Jane chooses to go back to Rochester who is then a heart-broken and blind widower. They reconcile and marry, leading a happy life thereafter.

As a far-reaching literary work, *Jane Eyre* has been extensively explored by scholars both at home and abroad. Previous analyses of *Jane Eyre* have mainly focused on the heroine Jane Eyre, with little attention to the mad woman Bertha Mason. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the period bracketing Brontë's writing, madness was increasingly viewed as a pathological condition requiring confinement and

medical intervention, which had profound implications for how the mentally ill were perceived and treated. What's more, women living in the Victorian age were still under the oppression of a patriarchal society at that time, and their voices and aspirations were often ignored or marginalized. Thus, to explore the tragic fate of Bertha Mason could provide a better understanding of the harsh living condition and various oppression imposed on the vulnerable groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, which is of great significance for the progress of women's cause. In this paper, the author shall employ Michel Foucault's madness theory to explore Bertha Mason's image and the causes of her tragic fate.

## 2. Michel Foucault's Theory of Madness

In his seminal work *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault presents a profound historical and philosophical investigation into the concept of madness, charting its metamorphosis from being viewed as a mystical or divine affliction to a medically defined condition. Foucault (1972) posits that madness is not an innate characteristic but rather a social construct, molded by the dominant beliefs and institutions of each epoch. He mainly delves into the institutions tasked with managing madness, particularly asylums, and uncovers the subtle forms of resistance embedded within experiences of madness.

### 2.1. Asylum

Foucault meticulously examined the asylums established by Tuke and Pinel, shedding light on their distinct approaches. Tuke's asylum fostered a moral and religious milieu intended to segregate and shield its inhabitants from evil influences, akin to the Quaker community's ethos. "The retreat would function as a mechanism for segregation: a moral and religious separation aimed at enveloping madness within an environment reminiscent of the Quaker Community" (Foucault, p.243). Consequently, this institution underscored the notion of a "family," wherein the madman was cast in the role of a child subject to parental authority. Conversely, Pinel

contended that religious fervor and its attendant madness lay at the heart of delirium, hallucinations, despair, and melancholy. He envisioned, "The asylum exists as a religious sphere devoid of religion, embodying pure morality and ethical consistency" (Foucault, p.257).

Spanning the late 18th to early 19th centuries, perspectives shifted, acknowledging madness not as a sin but as a psychological or mental ailment intertwined with moral failing. In such an environment, the insane are often seen as deviants by society and suffer rejection and isolation. Foucault pointed out that confinement is a right of the family to try to avoid shame and that "defend confinement as a right of families seeking to escape dishonor." (Foucault, p.67) Therefore, *homo medicus* need to use strong means to suppress the insane. Foucault highlighted, "In the asylum, *homo medicus* wields authority not as a scientist but as a sage... If medical expertise is necessitated, it serves as a judicial and moral assurance, not in the guise of scientific knowledge." (Foucault, p.270). Here, paternalistic authority reigned supreme, with absolute dominion over the insane. Asylum practices amounted to a potent form of patient oppression, designed to uphold societal rationality.

## 2.2. Resistance

Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Foucault introduces the concept of the "Narrenschiff," a term rooted in ancient Greek mythology, denoting a vessel manned by "imaginary heroes, ethical models, and social types" (Foucault, p.8). This crew embarks on a symbolic odyssey not necessarily for fortune but to confront their destiny or uncover truth. The *Narrenschiff* thus embodies rebellion against established norms, encapsulating the aspirations of the marginalized-the "madmen"-and their tactical defiance.

Resistance, as Foucault views it, is an ongoing dance with uncertainty at its core: "At the center of the power relation, and constantly provoking it, is precisely the disobedience of the will and the intransigence of freedom" (Foucault, p.342). His focus lies with micro-level resistances, particularly among society's fringes, advocating for change through subtle acts and decisions that collectively erode oppressive structures. This approach shuns violence and revolution in favor of incremental challenges to power dynamics.

Central to his philosophy is the notion that effective resistance necessitates a dual perspective-both broad and nuanced understanding-of the opposition. There exists no universal strategy capable of addressing every scenario; hence, resisters must intimately know their adversaries. To counteract modern society's homogenizing forces and strive for personal freedom, one must first grasp the intentions driving those in authority before strategizing resistance. In essence, Foucault underscores a form of resistance from the margins, seeking liberation and celebrating diversity amidst hegemonic pressures.

## 3. The Image of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*

### 3.1. A Privileged Lady

Before marrying Rochester, Bertha was a beautiful and wealthy lady, as evidenced by Mr. Rochester's recollection of his pursuit of her:

"Mr. Mason, he found, had a son and daughter; and he learned from him that he could and would give the latter a fortune of thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed. When I left

college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me. My father said nothing about her money; but he told me Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram: tall, dark, and majestic. ... She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments. All the men in her circle seemed to admire her and envy me." (Charlotte Brontë, p.429)

Bertha Mason's father was a prosperous West Indian planter and merchant with extensive holdings. He was willing to provide his daughter with a dowry of thirty thousand pounds. Therefore, before her marriage, Bertha Mason was a privileged young woman endowed with beauty, youth, and wealth.

### 3.2. A Crazy Wife

Rochester and Bertha Mason lived together for four years as husband and wife, despite Rochester being deceived into the marriage. He quickly realized that his marriage was an unbearable hell:

"I lived with that woman upstairs four years, and before that time she had tried me indeed: her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank: they were so strong, only cruelty could check them, and I would not use cruelty. What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me! (Charlotte Brontë, p.431).

However, their marriage did not improve over time; instead, Bertha Mason became even more vulgar. Rochester recounts:

"I was physically influenced by the atmosphere and scene, and my ears were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out; wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language! - no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary than she: though two rooms off, I heard every word - the thin partitions of the West India house opposing but slight obstruction to her wolfish cries." (Charlotte Brontë, p.433)

This unhappy marriage lasted for four torturous years for both. Eventually, Bertha was driven mad:

"a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw, was associated with mine, and called by the law and by society a part of me. And I could not rid myself of it by any legal proceedings: for the doctors now discovered that MY WIFE was mad - her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity." (Charlotte Brontë, p.431)

Faced with such a situation, Mr. Rochester ultimately decided to confine her to the attic of Thornfield.

### 3.3. An Imprisoned Rebel

Foucault argued that confinement is a right of the family aimed at avoiding shame. In the case of Rochester and Bertha Mason, Rochester justifies his actions in confining Bertha by emphasizing his desire to remain clean in his own eyes despite the world's perception of dishonor: "In the eyes of the world, I was doubtless covered with grimy dishonor; but I resolved to be clean in my own sight - and to the last I repudiated the contamination of her crimes, and wrenched myself from connection with her mental defects. (Charlotte Brontë, p.432) Both the Rochester and Mason families sought to conceal Bertha from society due to the fear of shame she brought upon them. As Charlotte Brontë describes, "and very soon the infamous conduct of the wife my father had selected for me was such as to make him blush to own her as his daughter-in-law. Far from desiring to publish the connection, he became

as anxious to conceal it as myself.” (Charlotte Brontë, pp.434-435)

Thus, upon Bertha Mason being diagnosed as a maniac, Mr. Rochester’s initial response was to consider abandonment and confinement: “Let her identity, her connection with yourself, be buried in oblivion: you are bound to impart them to no living being. Place her in safety and comfort: shelter her degradation with secrecy, and leave her.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.434) Even while confined, Bertha was acutely aware of her tormentors and seized every chance to seek revenge. Bertha’s rebellion is fully revealed in the following excerpt:

“The lunatic is both cunning and malignant; she has never failed to take advantage of her guardian’s temporary lapses; once to secrete the knife with which she stabbed her brother, and twice to possess herself of the key of her cell, and issue therefrom in the night time. On the first of these occasions, she perpetrated the attempt to burn me in my bed; on the second, she paid that ghastly visit to you. I thank Providence, who watched over you, that she then spent her fury on your wedding apparel, which perhaps brought back vague reminiscences of her own bridal days: but on what might have happened, I cannot endure to reflect. When I think of the thing which flew at my throat this morning, hanging its black and scarlet visage over the nest of my dove, my blood curdles.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.435)

## 4. Factors Leading to Bertha Mason’s Tragic Fate

### 4.1. Patriarchy

The 19<sup>th</sup> century marked a period of profound oppression for women under the weight of patriarchal domination, yet it also signified the inception of female self-awareness. In Britain, gender identity was rigidly acknowledged and demarcated, with male superiority firmly entrenched as a societal norm. This prevailing gender ideology underscored inherent disparities between men and women, perpetuating an unequal gender structure and identities within society. In this formidable patriarchal framework, men, leveraging their physical prowess, robust economic foundations, and claimed “rational supremacy,” marginalized women as “others.” Constrained by patriarchal discourse, women were confined, neglected, and denied even the right to articulate themselves, often being dismissed as “insane.” Consequently, women’s perceived ‘madness’ is not an inherent condition but rather a construct engineered by patriarchal narratives.

Throughout the novel, it is evident that the author exclusively employs a third-person point of view to depict Bertha Mason’s character. Bertha’s own voice and direct expressions are conspicuously absent from the narrative. As a woman of means, her marriage was orchestrated by her father, as noted in the observation that ‘Her family wished her to secure me because I was of a good race; and so did she.’” (Charlotte Brontë, p.429) Her union was merely a means to advance familial interests.

After marriage, Bertha was unable to fulfill the traditional roles of homemaker and mother due to her illness, leading her husband to lament, “when I perceived that I should never have a quiet or settled household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders.” (Brontë, p.430). Diagnosed as a maniac, Bertha Mason was subsequently isolated from society, a decision tacitly approved by both the Rochester and Mason families.

### 4.2. Imprisonment

At Thornfield Hall, Rochester was the unquestioned master. He was like what Foucault called a “homo medicus”, a representative of rational science and a symbol of order and normality. Not only did he have absolute power over his patients, but he also used paternal authority to oppress them. As mentioned in the previous section, inside the asylum, the labor of the insane was secondary but the imposed moral control was the main purpose. Therefore, Bertha, as a ‘madwoman’, had to obey the medicus, that meant her husband, Rochester, unconditionally.

Years of imprisonment took a severe toll on Bertha, both physically and mentally. The once beautiful young woman was transformed into a brutal beast trapped in a den. Bertha’s living state is clearly described in the work:

“He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. In a room without a window, there burnt a fire guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain. Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something in a saucepan. 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.” (Charlotte Brontë, p.412)

This imprisonment was not only a physical restraint, but also a destruction of her mind. She is deprived of her freedom, dignity and voice and is imprisoned in an airtight cage. Her image epitomizes the fate of women in a patriarchal society.

### 4.3. Resistance

Despite her imprisonment, Bertha did not entirely surrender her will to revolt. Her manifestations of madness, or vengeful acts, can be interpreted as a form of rebellion against societal oppression. As previously discussed, her resistance embodied “precisely the disobedience of the will and the intransigence of freedom” (Foucault, 1997, p.342). She was acutely aware that her tragic destiny stemmed from the patriarchal and matrimonial forces that oppressed her. Thus, she meticulously crafted a threefold revenge strategy.

Whether it was her initial attempt to assassinate Rochester in his sleep by setting his bed ablaze, stabbing her brother with a knife, or finally igniting Thornfield Hall, we can discern her strategic planning through the narratives of other characters. If the first two acts of vengeance are viewed as provocations against patriarchal authority and her husband’s dominance, then the final conflagration at Thornfield Hall represented her grand “war of self-defense”. Although she ultimately perished in the flames, her actions not only obliterated her dark confinement but also dismantled Rochester as a symbol of male power, arrogance, unchecked masculinity, and the economic foundations that upheld the patriarchal discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper employs Michel Foucault’s theory of madness to re-examine the portrayal of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Her tragic fate is depicted not merely as the result of her illness, but as a product of combined oppressive forces. These forces reduced her from a privileged lady to a crazy wife and imprisoned rebel. Firstly, patriarchal power oppressed her by

denying her the right to choose her own marital fate; her marriage was merely a bargaining tool for familial benefit. Secondly, her husband's power further subdued her; due to her illness, he abandoned her and confined her to the attic. This oppression not only neglected her emotional needs but also suppressed her subjectivity as a human being. However, despite these circumstances, she resisted with her own strength. Compared to Jane Eyre, Bertha chose a more extreme form of rebellion, ultimately finding liberation in the blazing flames. Through her portrayal, we witness not only the oppression and bondage of women in Victorian British society but also the awakening of women's consciousness and resistance. The character of Bertha Mason not only enriches the novel's connotations and meanings but also provides a new perspective and insight into understanding women's

destiny and social change.

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