

Illness, Society and Women: Narratives of Illness in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract: *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's classic novel, not only shows the social landscape of 19th century Victorian England, but also explores the interweaving of characters' fate, illness and social reality. This paper analyses the illness narrative in the novel and explores its expression, characteristics and metaphorical significance under the influence of specific social backgrounds and concepts. This paper shows that, through the illness narratives, *Jane Eyre* not only exposes the health crisis and social injustice in the British society at that time, but also shows the individual's struggle in social and gender roles through illness metaphors and narrative strategies. Charlotte Brontë's critical perspective not only addresses the social conditions of the time, but also reflects on the position of women in society. However, despite the forward-looking nature of Brontë's feminist thinking, her views were inevitably influenced by the imperialist and colonialist concepts of the time, which are also reflected in her works.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*, Illness Narrative, Illness and Society, Illness Metaphor.

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre is a distinguished work of 19th-century British literature, authored by Charlotte Brontë in 1847. This semi-autobiographical novel is renowned for its profound social critique and celebration of female independence. The story follows the life of its protagonist, Jane Eyre, an orphaned girl who endures numerous trials and tribulations within the rigid social norms of the Victorian era, ultimately seeking self-fulfillment and true love. Through this work, Brontë not only demonstrates her deep insight into social injustices and gender discrimination but also articulates her staunch support for women's self-identity and emancipation.

Brontë's work transcends her time; with her unique literary talent and profound understanding of human nature, she crafts a strong, independent, and compassionate heroine. *Jane Eyre* is not only a great literary work but also a pioneer in feminist literature, exerting a lasting influence on subsequent generations. In this novel, Brontë skillfully employs the narrative of illness as a tool to reveal and criticize social issues, showcasing her keen observation and deep reflection on social realities.

1.2. Narrative of Illness

Disease is often portrayed as more than just a medical condition in literature. It plays a key role in shaping the plot, developing characters, and exploring deeper themes. A disease narrative doesn't just describe the physical symptoms of illness; it also uses disease as a symbol to examine a person's mental state and the social issues they face. This approach helps authors reflect on human experiences, societal problems, and the connection between health and the environment.

In *Jane Eyre*, the disease narrative is carefully integrated into the story, serving multiple purposes. It highlights the serious health problems and poor public health conditions in Victorian England, while also criticizing the widespread

inequalities faced by women and the poor in an increasingly industrialized society. By combining illness with social injustice, Brontë provides readers with a detailed look at the challenges of 19th-century life, showing how disease can both reveal and worsen the struggles of marginalized people. This use of disease in the story emphasizes its significance as a tool for understanding the larger social issues of the time.

1.3. Literature Review

Research on *Jane Eyre* has covered a broad spectrum of themes, including feminism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and illness narratives, reflecting the novel's complexity and its enduring relevance in literary studies.

A lot of scholars focused on *Jane Eyre*'s engagement with colonial and feminist ideologies. Wang and Shi [1], for instance, delve into the allegorical elements of Irish Orientalism, exploring how Brontë subtly critiques colonialism through Jane's refusal to participate in imperial missionary work, thus revealing the co-existence of colonial and anti-colonial impulses within the text. Chishti [2] extends this postcolonial analysis by examining the portrayal of colonial power dynamics, particularly through the character of Bertha Mason, who embodies the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized. These analyses are crucial in understanding how Brontë navigates the complex interplay between gender, race, and power in a colonial context.

In the realm of feminist criticism, both domestic and foreign scholars have scrutinized how *Jane Eyre* articulates feminist concerns. Zou and Wang [3] analyze the feminist ideology embedded in the character of *Jane Eyre*, who symbolizes resistance against patriarchal oppression and the pursuit of independence. This perspective is echoed in Herzig's examination of the aesthetic of white femininity in the novel, where the association of whiteness with purity and the idealization of a fairy-like, childlike femininity underscores the novel's entanglement with racist and misogynistic ideologies. Herzig [4] suggests that *Jane Eyre* simultaneously upholds and critiques these ideals, reflecting the novel's ambivalence towards the gender and racial norms

of its time.

Psychoanalytic readings of *Jane Eyre* provide further layers of interpretation. Strovas [5] links Bertha Mason's madness to mid-19th-century moral and cultural degeneration, interpreting her nocturnal behaviors and insanity as a reflection of inherited moral corruption. These psychoanalytic perspectives enrich our understanding of the characters' internal struggles and the broader societal anxieties about morality and mental health.

While these studies have significantly contributed to the understanding of *Jane Eyre*, they often overlook the intersection of physical illness with these broader themes. Mou's work is among the few that addresses the illness narratives in *Jane Eyre*, with a particular focus on Victorian psychiatry and the social construction of mental illness. Mou [6] explores how the characters' mental health reflects Victorian anxieties about irrationality and the importance of self-control in middle-class culture ("Psychiatry" and "Healthy Body"). However, Mou's analysis is primarily centered on mental illness, leaving the portrayal of physical illness relatively unexplored. Jin [7] touches upon illness narratives in the broader context of 19th-century British women's fiction, linking them to ethical choices and the concept of "self-help". Yet, Jin's work does not provide a detailed, systematic analysis of how illness functions within the narrative structure of *Jane Eyre*.

This gap in the literature points to the need for a more comprehensive exploration of how both physical and mental illnesses are depicted in *Jane Eyre* and what these depictions reveal about the intersection of health, society, and gender in Victorian England. By focusing on the illness narratives, this study aims to uncover how Charlotte Brontë uses disease as a narrative device to critique the societal and gender norms of her time, thus providing a new perspective on the novel's engagement with the social issues of the 19th century.

Therefore, this paper intends to explore how Charlotte Brontë uses the metaphor of illness to expose the health crisis and social injustice in nineteenth-century England through the narrative of illness in *Jane Eyre*, while reflecting on the individual's struggle with social and gender roles. The study will further analyse Brontë's feminist ideology and how it was inevitably influenced by notions of imperialism and colonialism.

2. Typhus in *Jane Eyre* and Its Social Context

2.1. The Industrial Revolution and the Degradation of the Social Environment

Jane Eyre is not only a classic literary work but also a profound reflection of the social realities of the Victorian era. The novel vividly portrays the harsh environmental and social consequences of the Industrial Revolution, particularly through its depiction of disease, with typhus playing a central symbolic role. The early 19th century marked a period of rapid industrialization in Britain, transforming the nation from an agrarian society into an industrialized urban society. This transformation, while fostering economic growth, also led to significant environmental degradation and public health crises.

The widespread use of steam power and the rise of factory systems dramatically increased productivity and caused a significant population influx into cities. However, this rapid development was accompanied by severe environmental

pollution and the deterioration of public health. As cities expanded and populations grew denser, air quality sharply declined, and pollutants such as industrial waste, sewage, and garbage were inadequately managed, leading to the widespread transmission of diseases like typhus. The urban poor, who lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, were particularly vulnerable to such diseases [8].

In the novel, Brontë uses the Lowood School as a microcosm of the broader societal issues stemming from the Industrial Revolution. The school, where *Jane Eyre* is sent as a child, is depicted as a bleak and oppressive environment, with poor living conditions that contribute to the spread of typhus. "The unsanitary conditions of the place itself; the quality and quantity of the children's food; the brackish and foul water used for cooking; the students' coarse clothing and equipment; all of this was discovered" [9]. The outbreak of the disease at Lowood is not merely an isolated incident but a reflection of the widespread public health issues in industrial Britain. The students at Lowood, like the workers in the industrial cities, are subjected to harsh conditions, with inadequate food, poor sanitation, and a lack of proper medical care. These conditions mirror the real-life experiences of many people during the Victorian era, particularly the working class, who were often forced to live and work in environments that were detrimental to their health.

Brontë's portrayal of the environmental degradation and public health crises brought about by the Industrial Revolution is a powerful critique of the societal flaws of her time. By highlighting the connection between industrialization and the spread of disease, Brontë underscores the negative impact of rapid economic development on public health and the environment. This critique is particularly relevant in the context of the Victorian era, when the social and environmental consequences of industrialization were becoming increasingly apparent.

2.2. The Symbolic Meaning of Typhus

In *Jane Eyre*, typhus is not merely a literal disease but also a symbol with profound implications. The disease serves as a metaphor for the broader social issues of the time, particularly the suffering caused by industrialization and the neglect of the poor. Several characters in the novel, including Jane's parents and her close friend Helen Burns, succumb to typhus, underscoring the pervasive impact of the disease. These depictions not only heighten the novel's tragic tone but also make typhus a powerful symbol of the widespread suffering in an industrialized society.

The presence of typhus in the novel reflects the social problems of the time and serves as a critique of the Victorian public health system. In an era when public health infrastructure was inadequate and living conditions for the working class were deplorable, diseases like typhus were rampant, particularly among the poor. Brontë uses typhus to highlight the stark inequalities in Victorian society, where the wealthy could afford to live in relatively clean and healthy environments, while the poor were forced to endure conditions that were conducive to the spread of disease.

Moreover, typhus in *Jane Eyre* symbolizes the destructive impact of industrialization on both the physical and moral health of society. The disease is associated with the squalid conditions of Lowood School, which reflect the broader environmental degradation of the industrial era. By portraying typhus as a consequence of these conditions, Brontë critiques the moral failings of a society that prioritizes economic

progress over the well-being of its most vulnerable members.

2.3. Narrative Perspective and the Depiction of Disease

Brontë employs a limited narrative perspective in *Jane Eyre*, using Jane's subjective viewpoint to present the impact of disease on individuals and society. This narrative strategy allows readers to experience the emotional and psychological effects of disease firsthand, making the depiction of typhus more impactful. For instance, when Helen Burns contracts pneumonia, which is linked to the poor conditions at Lowood, the narrative is filtered through Jane's perspective, allowing readers to feel her sorrow and helplessness. This emotional resonance is enhanced by the limited perspective, which draws readers into Jane's inner world and makes the depiction of disease more personal and immediate.

The use of limited perspective also transforms disease from a mere objective event into something closely tied to the characters' psychological experiences. Through this narrative strategy, Brontë elevates the depiction of disease into a tool for reflecting social issues, allowing readers to understand how the social environment contributes to the spread of disease while also considering the personal toll it takes on the characters.

2.4. The Author's Personal Experience and its Influence on the Novel

Charlotte Brontë's personal experiences had a profound impact on the creation of *Jane Eyre*, particularly in her depiction of disease. Brontë's mother and two sisters died of tuberculosis, a painful experience that deeply influenced her understanding and portrayal of illness. In *Jane Eyre*, the depiction of Helen's consumption (tuberculosis) is infused with delicate emotion, showcasing Brontë's deep personal experience and understanding of illness. This personal experience not only adds authenticity to the portrayal of disease in the novel but also makes illness a key to understanding the novel's themes and the inner worlds of its characters.

Brontë's personal losses are reflected in the novel's somber tone and its focus on themes of suffering and resilience. The depiction of disease in *Jane Eyre* is not just a narrative device, but a means of exploring the emotional and psychological impact of illness on individuals. Brontë uses her personal experiences to imbue the novel with a sense of realism and emotional depth, making the characters' struggles with illness all the more poignant.

The influence of Brontë's personal experiences is also evident in her portrayal of the social implications of disease. By integrating her painful memories into the narrative, Brontë imbues the depiction of disease with deeper symbolic meaning, making *Jane Eyre* not just a work of literature, but also a significant text for reflecting and critiquing the social issues of the Victorian era. The novel's exploration of disease serves as a critique of the societal conditions that contribute to the spread of illness, as well as a commentary on the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

In conclusion, typhus in *Jane Eyre* serves as a multifaceted symbol that reflects the complex intersections of industrialization, social inequality, and public health in Victorian society. Through her depiction of disease, Charlotte Brontë critiques the societal flaws of her time and explores the profound impact of the social environment on individuals' physical and emotional well-being. The novel's portrayal of

typhus challenges readers to consider the broader social and environmental factors that contribute to the spread of disease, while also highlighting the personal toll that illness takes on those who are most vulnerable.

3. Mental Illness in *Jane Eyre* and Its Social Context

3.1. The Victorian Context of Mental Illness

Mental illness in the Victorian era was a complex and multifaceted issue, deeply intertwined with the era's prevailing social, cultural, and gender norms. The period was marked by a growing interest in psychiatry, but this interest was often colored by patriarchal biases and misconceptions about women's mental health. Women were disproportionately diagnosed with conditions like hysteria, melancholia, and madness, conditions that were often attributed to their reproductive systems or emotional nature. Victorian society viewed women as inherently more fragile and emotionally unstable than men, which made them more susceptible to mental illness.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë reflects this societal perspective through her depiction of female characters who struggle with emotional and mental turmoil. The era's psychiatric theories, which often linked mental illness to moral weakness or sexual deviance, provided a framework within which these characters were judged. The societal tendency to pathologize women's behavior, particularly when it deviated from the norms of femininity, is evident in the treatment of characters like Bertha Mason, who is described as mad and ultimately confined to an attic, a fate that symbolizes the ultimate control over a woman's mind and body.

3.2. Bertha Mason: Madness as a Symbol of Social Oppression

Bertha Mason's portrayal in *Jane Eyre* is one of the most significant and complex representations of madness in Victorian literature. Her madness is not just a personal affliction but a symbol of the broader social and gendered oppression faced by women in the 19th century. Bertha, who is often described using animalistic and monstrous imagery, represents the "otherness" that Victorian society feared and sought to contain. Rochester refers to her as a "clothed hyena" and describes her as having a "discoloured face" and "red eyes," imagery that dehumanizes her and reinforces her status as a deviant figure [9].

Bertha's confinement to the attic of Thornfield Hall can be seen as a metaphor for the social and psychological confinement of women in Victorian society. As Gilbert and Gubar [10] argue, Bertha's madness is a direct result of her resistance to the oppressive structures that seek to control her. Her violent outbursts and ultimate destruction of Thornfield can be interpreted as acts of rebellion against the patriarchal system that has imprisoned her, both physically and mentally. Bertha's fate also serves as a stark warning of the consequences for women who transgress societal norms and challenge the prescribed roles of wife and mother.

This depiction of Bertha as a "madwoman in the attic" has been widely interpreted as a reflection of the Victorian fear of female sexuality and autonomy. The monstrous imagery associated with her character underscores the perception of strong, independent women as threatening and uncontrollable. Brontë uses Bertha to critique the ways in which society

pathologizes and punishes women who do not conform to its expectations, highlighting the deep-seated anxieties about gender and power that permeated the Victorian era.

The novel also challenges the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house," a concept that prescribed a narrow and restrictive role for women as passive, obedient, and self-sacrificing. Characters like Bertha Mason and even *Jane Eyre* herself resist these roles in different ways, and their mental and emotional struggles can be seen as a response to the suffocating constraints of Victorian society. Bertha's madness, in particular, serves as a powerful symbol of resistance against the oppressive structures that seek to control and silence women. Her violent actions and ultimate destruction of Thornfield Hall can be interpreted as a cathartic release of the pent-up frustration and rage that many women of the time likely felt but were unable to express. In this way, Brontë uses the character of Bertha to explore the darker aspects of the human psyche and the destructive potential of repressed emotions.

3.3. The Intersection of Mental Illness, Gender, and Social Class

In *Jane Eyre*, mental illness is also closely linked to issues of gender and social class. Victorian society was highly stratified, and the experiences of mental illness were often shaped by one's position within this hierarchy. Women of the upper and middle classes were subject to different expectations and pressures than those of the lower classes, and this is reflected in their treatment and portrayal in literature.

The character of *Jane Eyre* herself experiences significant emotional and psychological distress throughout the novel, much of which stems from her precarious social position as an orphan and a governess. Jane's status as a governess places her in a liminal position between the upper and lower classes, making her particularly vulnerable to the social and economic pressures of Victorian society. Her struggles with identity, autonomy, and belonging are central to the novel, and Brontë uses Jane's internal conflict to explore the broader societal forces that shape women's lives.

The mental and emotional struggles faced by women like Jane were often dismissed or misunderstood by the society around them. Victorian culture placed a high value on female propriety and self-control, and women who exhibited signs of emotional distress were often labeled as "hysterical" or "mad." This pathologization of women's emotions served to reinforce their subordinate position within the social order, as it justified the need for male control and supervision over their lives.

In contrast, the portrayal of Bertha Mason's madness is steeped in the racial and colonial anxieties of the time. As a Creole woman, Bertha is depicted as the racial other, her madness intertwined with her exotic and foreign origins. Her character embodies the fears of racial degeneration and the perceived dangers of miscegenation, reflecting the broader imperial anxieties of the Victorian era. Brontë's depiction of Bertha, therefore, not only comments on the gender dynamics of the time but also on the intersections of race, class, and colonialism that shaped Victorian attitudes towards mental illness.

In conclusion, mental illness in *Jane Eyre* serves as a multifaceted symbol that reflects the complex intersections of gender, class, race, and power in Victorian society. Through the characters of Bertha Mason and *Jane Eyre*, Brontë

critiques the social norms that constrain women and explores the psychological impact of these constraints. The novel's portrayal of mental illness challenges the reader to consider the ways in which society pathologizes difference and dissent, and to question the structures of power that maintain these oppressive dynamics.

4. Metaphors of Disease in *Jane Eyre*

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the character of Bertha Mason is a pivotal figure, representing complex layers of metaphor, particularly through her madness. This chapter explores the dual metaphorical significance of Bertha's madness. On one hand, it symbolizes the oppressive conditions faced by women under patriarchal domination; on the other, it reflects Brontë's imperialist ideology.

4.1. Bertha Mason as a Metaphor for Patriarchal Oppression

Bertha Mason's madness is not merely a personal affliction but a manifestation of the broader social constraints placed on women in the 19th century. Her character can be seen as embodying the "madwoman in the attic" trope, a figure that has been extensively analyzed in feminist literature. Gilbert and Gubar [10], in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argue that Bertha represents the repressed rage of women who have been subjugated and silenced by patriarchal authority. This is evident in how Bertha is physically confined within Thornfield Hall, hidden away from society, much like how women's voices were often suppressed.

Bertha's condition can be read as a critique of the domestic ideology that was prevalent during the Victorian era. This ideology posited that women were naturally suited for the private sphere, tasked with maintaining the home and upholding moral values. However, as Bertha's madness demonstrates, this confinement often led to psychological distress. The fact that Rochester keeps her locked away in the attic symbolizes how women's autonomy and individuality were similarly restricted under patriarchal norms.

Moreover, Bertha's foreign origins—she is of Creole descent—add another layer to her metaphorical significance. Spivak's postcolonial critique highlights how Bertha's racial and cultural otherness exacerbates her marginalization, both as a woman and as a colonial subject [11]. In this sense, Bertha's madness can also be seen as a reaction to the intersectional oppression she faces, making her a powerful symbol of the destructive effects of both patriarchy and colonialism.

4.2. Bertha Mason and Brontë's Imperialist Ideology

While Bertha Mason can be interpreted as a victim of patriarchal oppression, her portrayal also reflects the imperialist attitudes of the time. Brontë's depiction of Bertha as a "wild animal" and her constant references to Bertha's "savage" nature reinforce colonial stereotypes about the inherent inferiority of non-European races. This portrayal is problematic because it suggests that Bertha's madness is not only a result of personal and social factors but also an inherent trait of her racial background.

Brontë's imperialist views are further evident in the way Bertha is juxtaposed with *Jane Eyre*, the novel's English heroine. Jane's calm, rational demeanor contrasts sharply with Bertha's irrational and violent behavior, reinforcing the

idea of English superiority over colonial subjects. Bertha's ultimate fate—her death in the fire that consumes Thornfield Hall—can be seen as a symbolic cleansing of the colonial "other," paving the way for Jane to marry Rochester and restore order to his household.

This imperialist reading is supported by Spivak, who argues that Bertha's role in the novel is to serve as a foil to Jane, highlighting the latter's moral and racial superiority. In this context, Bertha's madness is not just a metaphor for female oppression but also a tool used by Brontë to reinforce contemporary notions of racial hierarchy.

4.3. The Dual Metaphor of Madness

The dual metaphor of Bertha's madness—as a symbol of both patriarchal oppression and imperialist ideology—underscores the complexity of Brontë's critique in *Jane Eyre*. On one level, Brontë is sympathetic to the plight of women like Bertha, who are driven to madness by the oppressive structures of society. However, her depiction of Bertha also reveals an inherent bias, as Brontë falls into the trap of using Bertha's racial otherness to justify her marginalization.

This tension between feminist and imperialist readings of Bertha Mason has been a point of contention among scholars. While feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar [10] emphasize the gendered aspects of Bertha's madness, postcolonial critics like Spivak focus on the racial implications of her portrayal. Both perspectives are essential for understanding the full metaphorical significance of Bertha's character.

In conclusion, Bertha Mason's madness in *Jane Eyre* serves as a powerful metaphor for both the plight of women under patriarchal domination and the imperialist attitudes of the time. Her character embodies the intersection of gender and racial oppression, making her one of the most complex and significant figures in the novel. Through Bertha, Brontë critiques the social structures that confine women and perpetuate colonial hierarchies, while also revealing the limitations of her own perspective.

5. Conclusion

Illness narratives in *Jane Eyre* offers a profound literary dissection of the multifaceted society of 19th-century England. Illness here serves not only as a depiction of individual experiences but also as a metaphor for social injustice and health crises. The spread of typhus highlights the environmental degradation and the frail public health system brought about by industrialization. Bertha Mason's madness stands as a powerful symbol of the struggle and resistance of women under patriarchal oppression.

Through the narratives of illness, the novel exposes the dark

realities of Brontë's time, reflecting deeply on the status of women. Her writing touches on gender discrimination, social class, and racial prejudice, showing how these factors interweave to shape individual destinies. Additionally, her personal experiences with illness infuse the novel with emotional depth and a foundation in reality.

Although Brontë's feminist ideas were visionary, her work also inevitably incorporated the imperialist and colonialist notions of her era. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Bertha Mason, whose madness reflects not only the oppression of women but also the stereotypes of race and cultural otherness.

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