

International Baccalaureate

English B

EXTENDED ESSAY

Gothic Elements in Jane Eyre

Research Question

How does Charlotte Bronte incorporate elements from Gothic Literature into the novel Jane Eyre?

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Introduction

From the late 18th century to the early 19th century in Britain, Gothic fiction marked by the use of isolated locales and mystery emerged. Gothic literature is characterized as a kind of literature that features dark and charming settings, macabre and melodramatic storytelling approaches, and an overall sense of mystery, horror, eccentricity, and trepidation. Despite the somber theme's fame, writers have included mystical elements, love stories, historical figures, and gallantry themes in their works that appeal to readers.¹ Also, Gothic writers employ melodrama often to convey ideas, and most of the characters' dread and anxiety are expressed through exaggerated, and emotive language. Furthermore, nightmares are a particularly powerful omen because they have long been linked with foretelling: they have been used to amplify the eerie properties of a book's plot. As a result, writers are able to utilize *dark dreams* to depict the characters' feelings.

In the novel "Jane Eyre", Charlotte Bronte, whose life was gothic in many ways from having to deal with the loss of her mother to being raised by a cruel aunt, heightens the reader's interest with the use of Gothic elements. The novel was also exposed to Gothic aspects in a variety of ways because it existed in the Victorian age. Indeed, the outcome of Gothic fiction -ruined castles, evil villains, women in distress, supernatural events, complicated emotions, melodrama- had a big impact on Charlotte Bronte's writing style and how she constructed the characters, plot, theme, and setting.

The Gothic tradition exploits otherworldly encounters, secluded settings, intricate family backgrounds, medieval buildings, gloomy mysteries, and riddles to achieve a medium that embodies suspense and horror, and Jane Eyre's plot covers the majority of these features. Thornfield Hall, like Gateshead Hall, is a historic building. Furthermore, Lowood, the house of

¹ Kennedy, Patrick. "Gothic Literature." ThoughtCo, Feb. 16, 2021, [thoughtco.com/gothic-literature-2207825](https://www.thoughtco.com/gothic-literature-2207825).

the Moors, and Thornfield Hall are all far apart. In the novel, Jane is mysterious every time she is being introduced to a different setting, and the loneliness that surrounds Jane aims to foreshadow and emphasize the most important events throughout the narrative. Both Mr. Rochester and Jane have intricate family histories. For instance, Bertha –Mr. Rochester's concealed wife- operates as the book's fundamental enigma. Moreover, Bertha's revelation is a major incident in the novel, and her dark secret is the novel's principal origin of ambiguity.

It is true that Charlotte Bronte uses Gothic imagery that piques curiosity and helps with the sensitive and intellectual stress in the work. On the other hand, the majority of the allegedly supernatural happenings are clarified as the plots progress. Moreover, many of the Gothic elements appear to serve as foreshadowing, emphasizing the importance of the story's finale. In this essay, I will explore the Gothic themes in the novel *Jane Eyre* in relation to Jane's feelings, characteristics, and relationship with the characters surrounding her based on the research question "*How does Charlotte Bronte incorporate elements from Gothic Literature into the novel Jane Eyre?*"

Development

Feminist Language

Gothic fiction is a blend of horror and romance that generally follows a youthful female protagonist on a journey of self-discovery and personal maturity.² Charlotte Bronte utilizes gothic themes that have deeper meanings in her novel *Jane Eyre* to create a new, but most importantly, a feminist language:

“Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, to absolute a stagnation, precisely as

² Howells, Coral Ann. *Love, mystery and misery: Feeling in gothic fiction*. A&C Black, 2014.

men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags.” (Bronte, 167)

In the quote given above, we can see the hints of a female gothic language. The word “supposed” has a very important place in the quotation as it implies the things that are expected from women in society. Moreover, in the quote, it is indicated that men and women are very similar in nature with the words “*women feel just as men feel*”. What really creates a feminist language is the portrayal of opinions to change the gender norms and a lot of criticism for “privileged-fellow-creatures”. By distressing the need for equality between men and women, Charlotte Bronte makes feminist claims. However, the real reason why it is detrimental for the novel is that it establishes the mood to create a feminist character, Jane, to fulfill what the women of the 19th century could not have done. In the novel, which is full of gothic elements, a lot of space was given to explain women’s problems and the gothic elements being intertwined with the women’s problem and women’s empowerment within the Gothic spaces qualifies “Jane Eyre” as a female gothic novel.

Throughout the novel, Charlotte Bronte intelligently develops a female language by giving her young female protagonist a “gothic creative power”. But more than that, Jane Eyre explains how this *Gothic creative power* inspired her as a youngster. As a young kid, Jane desires that the book she is reading be covered in pictures. The imaginative power that Jane has, unlike that of “cheerful small children,” and with a fledgling, “not fully understanding,” creates her own interpretations of the pictures she sees. Moreover, the Gothic imagination Charlotte Bronte absorbed from male-authored books is expressed in the words she utilizes to recount the narrative. Charlotte Bronte’s gothic language is a tool that Charlotte Bronte and Jane Eyre communicate their authentic feminine narrative in a feminist language that would otherwise be inappropriate to the readers of the Victorian Era.

She constructs a girl hero whose attitude against writing is employed to track down a narrative of the female uprising which will assist in the hunt for a brand new personality with the help of this female Gothic language. The Gothic theme, in general, is employed to express this harsh truth from the Eurocentric perspective of a woman living in the 1800s in England. Consequently, this investigation of Gothic elements in *Jane Eyre* is based not solely on their presence in the work, but also on their subtlety and reasonable padding.

Aside from Charlotte Brontë's feminist language, the name "Jane Eyre" reveals several associations about the portrayal of women in the Victorian Era and the name's link to gothic. Jane's initial name, which has a conventional link with simplicity, contradicts the names of the book's noblewomen such as Blanche, Georgiana Eliza, and Rosamond which further underlines Jane Eyre's lack of rank while simultaneously highlighting her deficiency of pretense. Jane Eyre's surname can be interpreted in a variety of ways, none of which eliminates the others. Jane is related to the "spiritual" throughout the book as she floats from one place to the next which originates from "Eyre" being an antique spelling for air.

The Portrayal of Women and Their Issues

Jane chooses a feminist gothic tale which reveals that she is dissatisfied, and moreover: people of the Victorian Era are not prepared for a feminist portrayal. Her highly feminist goals are apparent, since she expresses with no doubt that men and women share the same exact feelings, and thus they require power to release restrained emotions. With his disabled power and damaged eyesight, Rochester is not capable of doing anything compared to a tree that has been struck by lightning. Jane's capacity to teach Adele is impeded even more by her marriage. This isn't a defect in Jane's feminist goal, which contains wonderful imaginations of life; rather, it's a very accurate depiction of the Victorian woman's marriage limits and thus, the restrictions that come with it. Charlotte Brontë displays a writer's –especially a woman- desire to find her own story by empowering her through the feminine gothic, which she utilizes as the dialect of

her female enthusiasm. Bertha Mason, the “outsider” is used to portray what Jane is not, and Charlotte Bronte never intended to do so for Bertha. Bertha is forced to die after performing the function of displaying Jane's handled desire and having no other place in the Victorian Era. Charlotte Bronte uses a specific gothic language which in turn explains the brilliant imaginations for which she expects to be labeled disgruntled, Charlotte Bronte establishes a refreshing, feminist realm. She not only creates this new space but she also accomplishes in doing it while also portraying the status of women living in Victorian times truthfully.

One of the most important Gothic stereotypes, which Bertha Mason perfectly embodies as a raging mad-woman in spite of her wealthy origins, is that of aristocratic downfall and lunacy. As a result, the portrayal of the enslaved female body raises the topic of female sexuality suppression. In the novel, Bertha Mason is the Gothic icon for feminine sexuality and desire. In fact, Bertha Mason is depicted as "a clothed hyena" who has a masculine spirit, animal-like behavior and stands nearly as tall as her husband:

“The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr. Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest—more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was.” (Bronte, 447)

By making such a depiction in the quote given above, Charlotte Bronte wants to demonstrate that if a woman would not act the way it is expected of her from society, her faith would be in the hands of other people who most likely would lock her in a mansion, far away from human interaction. Moreover, Bertha Mason's attacks have a regular pattern, which further suggests a link to the cycle of her menstruation. It actually is an evaluation of a community set on regulating female sexuality, which was also classified and known as "lunacy" when it was expressed by Victorian Women. Physicians in the 1800s were concerned by the belief that

menstruation may cause short-term madness, which in turn, would result in women attacking people and destroying furniture (eg. Bertha Mason biting her brother and acting very aggressive).

Ultimately, there's Jane herself, who embodies the Gothic trope of a young unmarried girl -who usually is a virgin- to some extent. Jane definitely has most of the qualities for this cliché with her young age, politeness, innocence, and virtuosity. However, she lacks a specific vulnerability as the Gothic girl is known for her fragile senses and her proclivity for fainting. On the other hand, Jane is of a tougher breed, having waited hours with the injured Mr. Mason, mostly unmoved by the glimpse of blood. It can be understood from this interaction that when stressful situations arise, such as her extinguishing of Mr. Rochester's bed in fire, she not only swiftly gathers herself but also behaves accordingly.

In the novel, there are some connections drawn between the characteristics of Bertha and Jane. They are compared to imply that in the condition of Jane wanting justice, romance, and an identity for herself, she must suppress her ambitious nature. Charlotte Bronte points out a few similarities between the characters. For instance, while Jane was acting insane (this term is associated with Jane's introduction into womanhood and the initiation of her menstrual cycle) in the Red Room, Bertha is compared to an animal -"crawling on all fours"- when she was trying to escape her captivity. To identify her older self, a much older Jane purposefully paints a much younger version of herself as the insane and lunatic Bertha and characterizes Bertha as someone who is a stranger.

The feminine Gothic Literature is defined by finding and creating an identity with the help of discovering an absent mother. These mother figures are Diana and Mary in Jane's case. In the novel, "the moon" and thus "moonlight" is symbolized as maternal assisting spirits which indicates the importance of coming across such strong figures in a male-dominated culture.

Moon, with "her" half-obscured blood-reddish, preside over the rift between the broken chestnut tree, casting a "bewildered, gloomy glance" at Jane and departing swiftly.

The establishment of religion is a regular Gothic component that showcases Victorian women didn't have the luxury to express themselves when it came to religion. Jane Eyre's actions and feelings are told in the first person, therefore, the story is shaped by Jane's views on religion. Even though her childhood aggressors utilize religion to justify their actions, Jane remains a Christian. In fact, Helen Burns –Jane's close friend from her Lowood days- is the first person to demonstrate how religion may be used effectively to produce a beneficial outcome. Jane grows to believe in God's mercy and the equality of all souls, just as Helen does. Moreover, Helen, using the Gospels, advises Jane to forgive those who have wronged her:

"Make His word your rule, and His conduct your example... love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you." (Bronte, 69)

In this way, Jane is able to have religious freedom, and as she is the female lead of the novel and someone who had been through a lot of painful experiences, she engages in a gothic quest. Through this gothic pursuit -one in which she battles vigorously for the realization of her beliefs- the reader can understand that Jane actually displays the characteristics of the Gothic tradition.

Setting and the Atmosphere

As Jane locates herself in various places and locations, the places that she is present in also change dramatically. Bronte takes advantage of this necessity by meticulously organizing the surroundings to correspond to many situations Jane finds herself in. Gateshead -where the Reeds live- is where Jane Eyre's narrative initiates.

She then travels to Lowood which is a place of eerie darkness and a spiritual abyss. Jane struggles her way through the prickle of various sentimental and mental spikes at Thornfield. In the House of the Moors, Jane has full freedom of development for the very first time in her life in the broad areas encompassing the residence. Additionally, in the manor-house of Ferndean, the fondness she has for everything -including Mr. Rochester- surrounding herself can flourish. Moreover, the flourishing of love between Jane and Rochester can be seen in their dialogue:

Rochester tells to Jane, *“I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard. . . . And what right would that ruin have to bid a budding woodbine cover its decay with freshness? In which Jane replies with: “You are no ruin, sir—no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop.”* (Bronte, 678)

As mentioned in the paragraph above, Jane Eyre's setting is tinged with Gothic overtones from the inception. For instance, on a "leafless" and "somber" wet day, we are introduced to Jane's environment and lifestyle from the very first paragraph. The lonely setting creates a dismal and eerie atmosphere, which is a typical characteristic of the Gothic genre. Jane's first few months at Lowood are likewise emblematic of this, in terms of the school and the dreary weather.

Readers will notice Charlotte Bronte's dramatic weather descriptions in Jane Eyre, with each scene's environment, fitted to the intended mood, which helps them forecast and connect to the work. Even before introducing characters or dialogue, many scenes begin with detailed descriptions of the weather and these portrayals do not only set the atmosphere; they also have

symbolic meanings. Charlotte Brontë intentionally employs weather in *Jane Eyre* to set the tone, to establish parallelism with Jane Eyre's feelings, and create foreshadowing.

Throughout the narrative, it can be found that the weather is more of a mirror of Jane's personal situation than an agent for emphasizing Gothic darkness and melancholy.

“I was not surprised, when I ran down into the hall, to see that a brilliant June morning had succeeded to the tempest of the night; and to feel, through the open glass door, the breathing of fresh and fragrant breeze. Nature must be gladsome when I was so happy.”

(Brontë, 392)

From the quote given above, it can be understood that weather is a symbol that represents mood and circumstance, and also, Jane's pleasure at finding that she is to marry Mr. Rochester offers an unexpected bright spot. Pleasant weather denotes that Jane's life is going pretty well and that she has eventually understood the true meaning of bliss. Even she becomes conscious of the connection between herself and the weather.

In the novel, there are many constrictions emphasized on the “female body”. With the help of Gothic Literature, these constrictions and thus, the fright of female confinement within domestic spaces through the depictions of enclosed places of the house are explored by Charlotte Brontë. Also, by using the word “enclosure” she explains the female restraint in detail. Jane was occasionally locked in the “red chamber” as a child in Gateshead as a retribution for her perceived impertinence. Mr. Reed died nine years ago in this room, which was considered an “unused room” from that time on. Jane is petrified and subsequently claims she was locked down in a room for hours that was in the presence of a ghost. In addition, she is said to merely imagine the ghostly existence in the room and is skilled at not allowing herself to be completely suppressed by horror. The trapping of women living in the Victorian Era in the boundaries of the house's patriarchal space is one of the metaphorical interpretations of the red room event.

When Jane is constricted to the “battlements” of Thornfield Hall, she laments about the discomfort that agitated her to deathly suffering.

Suspense and Mystery

Tension and mystery play a crucial role in Gothic novels in creating a suspenseful atmosphere for readers. During Jane's time at Thornfield, she is confronted with dark secrets and strange happenings. For instance, it is obligatory for her to deal with the strange and thus, frightening laughter that she hears from the third floor; the attacker who sucked Mr. Mason's (Bertha Mason's brother) blood from his wound; the unknown person who set fire to Mr. Rochester's bed; the foul German specter, also known as the *Vampyre*, who did not only tore up her wedding veil but also stomped on it. As time passes, Jane comes to the conclusion that Bertha Mason – Mr. Rochester's wife- was the face behind all of the unfortunate happenings in Thornfield Hall:

“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.” (Bronte, 446)

The quote given above begins with the words “deep shade” which represents the darkness and the uncertainty, adding mystery to the incident. The first sentence is followed by the words “beast or human being” which expresses Jane's complicated feelings about the mysterious creature in the shadows. With the utilization of a simile, (*“it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal”*) Bertha is compared to a beastly creature. To sum up, with the emergence of the “wild animal”, Charlotte Bronte creates a mysterious atmosphere that is followed by the horror that is naturally created in the reader's eyes. This quotation is a clear example of a Gothic tradition embedded into the novel.

Supernatural

From Jane meeting Mr. Reed's ghost in the red room to Bertha Mason's portrayal as the demon, a lot of supernatural elements are employed in the novel. On the other hand, one of the most striking supernatural and also gothic incidents is Jane receiving "mysterious summons" and making a "clairvoyant connection" with Mr. Rochester at the end of the novel:

"I, too, had received the mysterious summons; those were the very words by which I had replied to it. I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative, but made no disclosure in return. ...If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of my hearer; and that mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural." (Bronte, 683)

The quote above starts with Jane receiving "mysterious summons" which is the first indicator of the supernatural. Jane making "no disclosure" because she prefers to keep the topic under wraps rather than explore it in depth means that she and Mr. Rochester have an odd connection that is based on intuition. To summarize, the fact that Mr. Rochester and Jane have such a strong connection that they feel one other at the same time in spite of their great distance is not only bizarre but also a great example of the utilization of gothic elements.

Moreover, dreams have an important place in the novel as they signify a supernatural event. In the novel, the metaphorical purpose of "moonlight" emphasizes the significance of dreams. The highly feminist aspiration that Jane has, constructs itself a place throughout the book, as these dreams actually voice feminine fear about being stuck as the *saint in the home* through marriage vows. Jane's nervous thrill and remorseful awareness of some barrier between her and Rochester are portrayed in her dreams by the *kid*. This child is an indication of the danger that Jane and Bessie will face in the future. As a matter of fact, this danger has a connection with their non-equal marriage with Mr. Rochester. Jane's prophesied escape from this non-equal

marriage is communicated in many dreams, just like the stress caused by the duration of her engagement. Jane's dream of arriving at Thornfield's dreary ruin on a night that the sky is covered by the light of the moon foreshadows the male-dominated authority's willingness to embrace Jane as even. Moreover, Mr. Rochester becomes blind at the end of the book. This situation creates an opportunity for Jane to get to know herself better and start acting independently as this is the way for equal marriage. As it can be seen, Jane Eyre's dreams can act as foreshadowings of the events that will take place in the future, and in order to make the dreams come true, Charlotte Bronte frequently uses the gothic form of literalizing.

Conclusion

Elements of gothic literature -mostly addressed through supernatural incidents- are evident in the novel Jane Eyre. Even though the main aim of Gothic novels are to evoke mystery, fear, and suspense to the readers, Jane Eyre cannot be considered a gothic novel as it does not employ all of the characteristics of a gothic novel and focuses more on the development of the main character through the implementation of gothic elements. These elements are intertwined with the story's and characters' growth. The crimson room and Jane and Mr. Rochester's spiritual relationship, as I have established in this essay, are gothic characteristics that help the reader understand the main character. They show how Jane recognizes when she is being treated unfairly and becomes skilled at speaking up for herself. While Jane's gothic dreams represent her inner fears and foretell about the events that may take place in the future, the isolated places -such as Gateshead- will help her grow as a person. As the novel unveils, Jane matures as a person, and her gothic qualities help her to become more powerful. The gothic elements in the narrative help the development of the main character. But more than that, these elements of Gothic Literature further reveal Jane's concealed ambitions, aspirations, and desires.

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