

Jane Eyre
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Lecture 27
Gothic Plot and Imperial Gothic

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Week 6: Jane Eyre

Lecture 6B: Gothic Plot and Imperial Gothic

Image source: <https://lucchiagray.com/2016/06/19/2-days-to-launch-midsummer-at-eyre-hall-my-genre-what-is-a-victorian-gothic-romance/>

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Hello, and welcome to week six lectures on Jane Eyre. In today's session, I am going to continue the plot of the novel and also discuss the concept of imperial gothic in relation to Jane Eyre.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot



- “Jane is taken in by people she later discovers are her cousins. One of them is St. John, a principled clergyman. He gives her a job and soon proposes marriage, suggesting that she join him as a missionary in India. Jane initially agrees to leave with him but not as his wife.”

- Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Brontë>



“Jane is taken in by people she later discovers are her cousins. One of them is St. John, a principled clergyman. He gives her a job and soon proposes marriage, suggesting that she join him as a missionary in India. Jane initially agrees to leave with him, but not as his wife.”

So, I am continuing from the plot that we left off in the previous session. If you remember, we saw how Jane leaves Thornfield hall, because she realizes that Rochester is already married to Bertha Mason and when he encourages her to elope with him to France, she refuses and quits Thornfield hall and she wanders around almost destitute and her status is not much different from that of a beggar at that point in the novel and she is taken in by her relatives and she gets a job with them and one of them who is called St. John is a clergyman and he offers marriage and travel to India to carry out missionary work in the colony. Jane agrees to leave for India, but not as his wife.

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Jane Eyre: The Plot



- “However, St. John pressures her to reconsider his proposal, and a wavering Jane finally appeals to Heaven to show her what to do. Just then, she hears a mesmeric call from Rochester. Jane returns to Thornfield to find the estate burned, set on fire by Rochester’s wife, who then jumped to her death. Rochester, in an attempt to save her, was blinded. Reunited, Jane and Rochester marry. Rochester later regains some of his sight, and the couple have a son.”

• <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>

• Image source: <https://lithub.com/charlotte-bronte-may-have-started-the-fire-but-jean-rhys-burned-down-the-house/>



“However, St. John pressures her to reconsider his proposal, and a wavering Jane finally appeals to heaven to show her what to do. Just then, she hears a mesmeric call from Rochester. Jane returns to Thornfield to find the estate burned, set on fire by Rochester's wife, who then jumped to her death. Rochester in an attempt to save her was blinded. Reunited, Jane and Rochester marry. Rochester later regains some of his sight and the couple have a son.”

When St. John is giving her further encouragement to reconsider his marriage proposal, Jane is at a loss as to what is the right thing to do. She appeals to heaven and in a kind of telepathic communication, she hears from Rochester who begs her to return, placing a lot of faith in that call, in that mesmeric telepathic call, Jane returns to Thornfield to find it burned down.

She is told that it was set on fire by Bertha Mason, who also jumped to her death. She sort of flings herself from the top of the mansion and Rochester was injured while he was attempting to save her. In fact, Rochester loses his sight in that accident and soon after Jane and Rochester reconcile, they get married and they live in Ferndean, which is a

much smaller house close to Thornfield hall. We also are told that Rochester later regain some of his eyesight and that the couple have a son.

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Jane Eyre: Reception



- “The book was originally published in three volumes as *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, with Currer Bell listed as the editor. (The Lowood section of the novel was widely believed to be inspired by Charlotte Brontë’s own life.)... the work was an immediate success.”

• Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/jane-eyre-novel-by-bronte>

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“The book was originally published in three volumes as *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* with Currer Bell listed as the editor. The Lowood section of the novel was widely believed to be inspired by Charlotte Bronte's own life and the work was an immediate success.”

Three interesting things with regards to the reception of this novel. Firstly, it was published as an autobiography. It was claimed to be a fact rather than fiction. Secondly, as we have discussed in the previous lecture, we know that the Lowood section of the novel was inspired, was drawn on the experiences that Charlotte Bronte had in the clergyman’s daughter school and the work was a best seller. It immediately appealed to the reading public.

The autobiography is an interesting way to describe this novel. We are also reminded of the fact that much of the gothic fiction are also offered as real life experiences which are written down by an editor or by a person who was recording that particular life and offering it to the public as a cautionary tale.

So in that fashion we have Jane Eyre offer to the British reading public as the collection of the life experiences of a woman called Jane Eyre and Currer Bell being referred to as the editor is very interesting, because that kind of editorial work is also performed in relation to gothic fiction, where the editor collects all these narratives and packages it in an appropriate format and offers it to the world to be read and to be cautioned. So that is the case with gothic fiction usually.

In this case, Jane Eyre, Currer Bell becomes an editor who chooses the experiences of Jane Eyre and gives it to the reading public, so that they can learn from that life. So it is an interesting concept. There seems to be a contradiction in the title in relation to the absent author figure. If Jane Eyre is an autobiography then the author of that autobiography should be Jane Eyre. However, that reference to the author is suppressed. Instead we have an editor called Currer Bell.

So, the editor is not necessarily the author, of course, Currer Bell could be the pseudonym of Jane Eyre, but that reference to the author is shielded here for cultural reasons. We know that writing was not a respectable position for middle class women and Charlotte Bronte along with her sisters use pseudonyms when they publish their work. Wuthering Heights was written by Ellis Bell whom we know to be Emily Bronte. And Anne Bronte wrote under the new pseudonym Acton Bell.

So, there is a lacuna or a deliberate attempt at confusion with regard to the reference to the author. So that is an interesting aspect and it connects with the previous novel that we have read for this course, which is Frankenstein, where once again, we do not have the name of the author mentioned on the title page.

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Jane Eyre: Reception



- *“Jane Eyre’s appeal was partly due to the fact that it was written in the first person and often addressed the reader, creating great immediacy. In addition, Jane is an unconventional heroine, an independent and self-reliant woman who overcomes both adversity and societal norms.”* (my emphasis)

• Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jane-Eyre-novel-by-Bronte>

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“Jane Eyre’s appeal was partly due to the fact that it was written in the first person and often addressed the reader, creating great immediacy. In addition, Jane is an unconventional heroine, an independent self-reliant woman who overcomes both adversity and societal norms.”

One of the reasons that Jane Eyre was a big hit with the readers is due to the fact that it was written in the first person narrative, and the narrator addresses the reader several times over the course of the novel, thus creating a bond with the reader. There is also a great sense of immediacy. The reader is invited to look closely into the life of Jane Eyre.

Further, Jane Eyre was a success with the reading public also because she was an extraordinary heroine in the sense that she was from the ordinary walks of life, she was from the middle class, she was a plain heroine, she was not a great beauty, she was very small and very plain. In fact, plainness was emphasized to a great extent in the novel. And she was independent and very proud of her context. She was also resourceful. She relied on her personal courage and resilience to overcome very difficult circumstances and the regulations of society that usually bound women to their place.

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Jane Eyre: Genres



- “The novel also notably blended [diverse genres](#).

Jane’s choice between sexual need and [ethical](#) duty belongs very firmly to the mode of [moral](#) realism.

However, her close escape from a bigamous marriage and the fiery death of Bertha are part of the [Gothic](#) tradition.”

• Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/jane-eyre-novel-by-bronte>

• Image source: <https://ncrflkapers@sh.weebly.com/literary-characteristics-of-the-romantic-and-gothic-genres.html>

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“The novel also notably blended diverse genres. Jane’s choice between sexual need and ethical duty belongs very firmly to the mode of moral realism. However, her close escape from a bigamous marriage and the fiery death of Berta are part of the Gothic tradition.”

Jane Eyre falls within several subcategories of the novel. One can argue that this novel belongs to moral realism, because Jane is given that difficult choice of whether to follow her sexual need, the desire to be with Rochester or to do the right thing, to do her duty, be ethical by refusing to “live in sin” by running away with Rochester and leading a life in France as man and wife.

The novel can also very firmly be anchored in the gothic tradition, because we have the potential bigamous plot in terms of Rochester. Rochester is already married to Bertha Mason, but he is also about to marry Jane Eyre to whom he suppresses his previous marriage. We also have the very violent death of Bertha, who is killed during that fire accident that she causes in Thornfield hall. So these elements anchor this novel very, very strongly within the Gothic tradition.

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Imperial Gothic



- “Imperial gothic elements include wild, remote and often desolate landscapes, a vulnerable heroine victimized by fear and manipulation, often by illegitimate or marginal family members, and an array of the supernatural, interspersing the plot with ghosts, dreams, and eerie voices; there is also a perceivable threat of the “other” as in stark opposition to the “West” (Daly).”

• (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)

• <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>

• Image source: <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>



Now, let us discuss the idea of imperial gothic. “Imperial gothic elements include wild, remote, and often desolate landscapes, a vulnerable heroine victimized by fear and manipulation, often by illegitimate or marginal family members and an array of the supernatural, interspersing the plot with ghosts, dreams and eerie voices, there is also a perceivable threat of the other as in stark opposition to the West.”

So, these information pertains to the attributes of the imperial gothic. One can very clearly see that the attributes belong to the generally understood notion of the gothic mode as well. Both the imperial gothic and the gothic include wild, remote, desolate settings, a persecuted heroine, reference to the supernatural.

But in the imperial gothic, very specifically, there is a threat of the other. There is a threat from the foreign. There is a threat to the home, to the West, to Britain from the exotic, strange, unknown foreign other. So that element of the other, which comes in relation to usually British colonies, creates this category of the imperial gothic.

We do have the other from the colony in Jane Eyre in relation to Bertha Mason. And we also have eerie sounds. Again in the context of Bertha Mason, the sounds which persecute, which threatened Jane Eyre when she is staying in the mansion.

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Imperial Gothic and *Jane Eyre*



- “In *Jane Eyre*, dark, mahogany furniture and crimson decorations take precedent (Freedgood 31), adding another layer to the haunting qualities of the story as it echoes the colonial death and destruction that made this furniture possible (Freedgood 32).”

- (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)
- <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>
- Image source: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-imperial-gothic>



“In *Jane Eyre*, dark, mahogany furniture and crimson decorations take precedent, adding another layer to the haunting qualities of the story as it echoes the colonial death and destruction that made this furniture possible.” There is the suggestion that Bertha Mason stands in for the destroyed colony, the rich furniture that litters, that decorates Thornfield Hall comes from the plunder of a colony and that kind of context gives evocation to the notion of imperial gothic.

The dark furniture and the crimson furnishings, decorations emphasize the haunting element of the story. It also simultaneously reinforces very subtly the nature of destruction suffered by a colony at the hands of colonial masters. So one can see how *Jane Eyre* is connected to this particular thematic of imperial gothic when one studies the character of Bertha Mason and the source of wealth that furnishes the interiors of Thornfield Hall.

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Gothic Moments



- “Jane Eyre’s romance with Mr. Rochester begins on a gloomy English night, when she glances upon his dark, stern face for the first time; Rochester seems unreachable and distant, despite his initial intimacy with Jane.”
- (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)
- <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca//index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>
- Image source: <https://mypages.unh.edu/tda/scene-3>

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“Jane Eyre’s romance with Mr. Rochester begins on a gloomy English night. When she glances upon his dark, stern face for the first time, Rochester seems unreachable and distant despite his initial intimacy with Jane.” So, what I am trying to do in this section of this lecture is to pick up on the gothic moments, the gothic moments which underlying this novel as well as the gothic moments which connected to the notion of the imperial gothic.

Jane meets Mr. Rochester on a very dark cold night and when Rochester sees her, he first thinks of her for as a spirit, as a supernatural being. Fortunately for Rochester, she comes to his aid when his horse falls and slips. And that moment is a dark threatening moment in the novel. And later on, Jane realizes that Rochester is the master of Thornfield Hall, a place where she is going to work as a governess.

Though, Jane experiences friendliness initially with Rochester, she senses a drawing, a strangeness, an estrangement from him very soon. So that point of affections creates the see-saw of emotions that Jane finds very hard to come to terms with. And one is let to believe that he is a man of mystery. There are things hidden in his life. And that temperamental nature of Rochester is also a gothic subtext. It is very hard to trust him.

And at the same time not come within his charm. Rochester is very, very charming. He has an exaggerated way of speaking. He cracks jokes. He tries to be on equal footing. So these are some of the aspects that create an element of indeterminacy and uncertainty that keeps Jane off her balance most of the time at Thornfield hall.

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Gothic Moments



- “Mrs. Fairfax welcomes Jane into Rochester’s mansion, and she is immediately taken aback by the wildness and remoteness of Thornfield; Jane’s innocent character feels out of place ...at this manor home, as she [also] immediately feels threatened by her surroundings in the dark, mysterious environment.”

- Image source: <http://soniagensler.blogspot.com/2017/01/tea-with-jane-eyre.html>
- (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)
- <https://course-journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/eng435/article/download/11/14?inline=1>



“Mrs. Fairfax welcomes Jane into Rochester's mansion, and she is immediately taken aback by the wildness and remoteness of Thornfield. Jane's innocent character feels out of place at this manor home as she also immediately feels threatened by her surroundings in the dark, mysterious environment.” What is emphasized at this point here is that Thornfield hall is very remote, very wild, and it is dark and mysterious. So this setting is a classic gothic setting.

We have seen in the previous lectures on the gothic trope that remoteness is an important element of the gothic. So by being remote, this setting, this domestic hearth, this particular castle like mansion is far away from the civilizational aspects of society. And we are also let to believe that perhaps Jane’s innocence, Jane’s personal safety is a threat within this isolated, much removed hall. And the element of mystery is also a hook for

the reader to keep reading, so the gothic thrill is also encoded at the very beginning of the novel.

The readers are encouraged to read for a resolution, to read for greater clarity into the nature of the master. Rochester is he an evil man, or is he a man who would marry Jane. So that question, that thrilling question is what keeps the reader reading. Further, the setting and the nature of the master takes this novel closer to the gothic mode. We are very unsure whether he is going to be a villain who will harass Jane or one who would rescue her from the clutches of an evil villain.

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Thornfield and Imperial Gothic

- “Jane’s initial entrance into Rochester’s mansion emphasizes the darkness of the imperial gothic, as it instills fear into the female protagonist and puts an ominous and “other” (in reference to the colonial gothic, and the perceived danger of “savages” and anything non-British) danger into her life, which in turn twists her own narrative throughout the novel. Here we find the initial spark of imperial gothic romance, which, with the injection of Rochester’s own dark path, will threaten Jane’s British goodness and purity.”

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“Jane’s initial entrance into Rochester’s mansion emphasizes the darkness of the imperial gothic, as it instills fear into the female protagonist and puts an ominous and other in reference to the colonial gothic and the perceived danger of savages and anything non-British, danger into her life which in turn twists her own narrative throughout the novel. Here, we find the initial spark of imperial gothic romance, which with the injection of Rochester’s own dark path will threaten Jane’s British goodness and purity.”

There are several ways to make sense of this particular critique. There are also different ways to kind of read meanings into the novel in relation to this particular critique. This

novel has an aura of the imperial gothic undoubtedly and that comes through the figure of Bertha Mason. One can also see Thornfield hall itself as another, a strange space into which the homely innocent Jane Eyre enters at her own peril, and from which she is safely and securely removed and everything is resolved ultimately for the benefit of Jane and her beloved and the hall is destroyed. That is one way of looking at the novel.

Further, one can look at the novel as offering a space for Thornfield Hall as a symbolic colony where savages such as Bertha Mason live and when Jane enters that strange, bizarre space, she comes within contact of that savage who is potential, who is potentially going to harm Jane Eyre.

So, what is clear to us is that the home space and the other speciality comes in conflict within the hall called Thornfield. Rochester by his association with Bertha Mason gets elements of the savage into his own personality and he endangers Jane's British goodness and purity by trying to seek an alliance with Jane while he is already married to the other.

So, one can very clearly see the different hermeneutics. One can illicit by the various intersecting narratives and the thematic implications. What is very clear to us is that the other becomes threatening, the other becomes ominous and by close association with the other, the figure who belongs to home also gets stained in some fashion and becomes a threat to the home.

Rochester's marriage to Bertha Mason is an instance of the imperial gothic romance gone bad. So, that romance has to be cut off and eliminated before Rochester could be recovered by the home and Jane becomes an instrument of recovery. Her goodness, her purity rescues Rochester from his evil destructive path and brings him back home to offer solace and convert him to the good side.

So, these are some of the implications that one can read into the relationship between Rochester, Bertha and Jane Eyre. It is in this context that it seems appropriate for Thornfield Hall to burn down. Thornfield hall that became enriched with colonial

plunder, Thornfield which had, in a strange way, a colonial woman as its mistress, burns down, destroying both the mistress and the wealth of the hall, seems to be the perfect solution for the novel in order to reject the figure of the colonial woman. With her absence nothing is problematic to bring in Jane Eyre, the home grown, the woman from the middle class to occupy the space, which was emptied by the colonial mad woman Bertha Mason.

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Context: Gothic narratives prior to *Jane Eyre*



- “Two decades before Brontë published *Jane Eyre* in 1847, the tales of William Burke and William Hare ominously crept over Britain. At the same time, the Gothic genre was gaining popularity with an audience that could not get enough of these thrilling, haunting stories.”
- (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)
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Now, “two decades before Bronte published *Jane Eyre* in 1847, the tales of William Burke and William Hare ominously crept over Britain. At the same time, the Gothic genre was gaining popularity with an audience that could not get enough of these thrilling haunting stories.”

So, what I am trying to suggest by this detail is that, there was a market for gothic narratives, both in fiction and from real life. So, who are these characters, William Burke and William Hare and why were they popular?

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Context: Gothic narratives prior to *Jane Eyre*



- “The duo Burke and Hare grave-robbled churches in the United Kingdom for corpses; they dug up bodies and sold them on the black market as cadavers for medical students, which in turn created the demand for iron bars over grave sites (Johnson). During a time in the United Kingdom of chilling murder stories and grave robberies, it is no wonder that novels such as *Jane Eyre* gained popularity as a means to convey gothic imperialism and the lingering “other.””

• (Catherine Boschalk, 2017)

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"The duo Burke and Hare grave-robbled churches in the United Kingdom for corpses, they dug up bodies and sold them on the black market as cadavers for medical students, which in turn created the demand for iron bars over grave sites. During a time in the United Kingdom of chilling murder stories and grape robberies, it is no wonder that novels such as *Jane Eyre* gained popularity as a means to convey gothic imperialism and the lingering other.”

So, these two figures, Burke and Hare were grave robbers. We saw similar references when we read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we noted how graves were robbed and how that connected with the creation of the monster by Frankenstein. What is interesting to us in these contexts is the fact that, while cadavers were useful, black market objects, stories about them was also very, very popular among the readers.

Anything gothic, anything out of the ordinary, anything thrilling, anything threatening, anything dark had a market in the publishing scenario and at that time, *Jane Eyre* was published and it exploited that eagerness for dark material which were consumed by the audience, reading audience. And *Jane Eyre* was not just any simple, bizarre narrative that fed the need for dark stories among the readers, *Jane Eyre* was used to convey the very

important concept of gothic imperialism and it was useful to invest the creation of a set of attributes about the other. It was useful to create in the culture, in the British market, in the British mind, a set of attributes about the other, the foreign, the strange and the bizarre.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.