

Gothic Imperial Romance in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

This paper examines how the imperial gothic shapes *Jane Eyre* (1847). I argue that the colonial world is brought back to Victorian England in *Jane Eyre* as a retelling of the Bluebeard story, a chilling fairy tale that emphasizes Jane's imperial gothic identity, which poses a challenge to her essential Englishness throughout the novel. Outside threats from England's colonies represented through the imperial gothic quest put Jane's life at risk and endanger her Englishness and the very nature of pastoralism and innocence. I support this argument by discussing the various elements of the imperial gothic within *Jane Eyre*. Firstly, I discuss the connections with the fairy tale and how the Bluebird story foreshadows some of the potential outcomes in the novel. Secondly, I look at the relationships Jane makes in the novel – most importantly, those with Rochester and Bertha. Lastly, I discuss the way in which Jane herself poses a threat to her own Englishness with her active participation and choices of engaging in the imperial gothic world. Looking at *Jane Eyre* through the lens of the imperial gothic allows a more sophisticated understanding of the novel and points toward what the everyday Briton may have experienced during the Victorian era. *Jane Eyre* is best read with the gothic in mind, and this paper serves to illuminate the connections therein.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*, Gothic, Imperial, Supernatural, Empire and Natural Resources

If “human identity is determined by the politics of imperialism” (Spivak 250), then romance between two individuals is as well. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jane and Rochester are both products of the Victorian era; thus both capitalize on imperial means of wealth. Rochester gains his wealth in the colonial

world, and this is also where he finds his Creole wife, Bertha. Jane's affinity to mahogany decorations symbolizes and internalizes the violent history of colonial exploitation (Freedgood 35). The imperial gothic exploits what we today call the developing world (in *Jane Eyre*, Madeira and Jamaica) and twists the narrative to emphasize the risk it puts on the motherland's mind, body and soul (Daly). *Jane Eyre*, who dismisses St. John's accumulation of wealth, is manipulated and charmed by Rochester who earned his money in the same fashion. Bertha represents the colonial or foreign world as coming home to Britain and terrorizing the protagonist, which strains Jane's relationship with Rochester; though Bertha dies and this permits Jane to feel comfortable in marriage with Rochester, Bertha represents the so-called savage intruder who puts the English girl's life at risk. Throughout the entire bildungsroman story, it is clear that *Jane Eyre* is an imperial text, reminding the reader that the book was written in a time of British socializing missions central to processes of colonization. This "other" or foreign world is brought back to England in *Jane Eyre* as a retelling of Bluebeard, a chilling fairy tale that emphasizes Jane's imperial gothic human identity, which is what poses a challenge to her essential Englishness throughout the novel in relation to other characters.

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). 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). *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. 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 in her opening hours at this manor home, as she immediately feels threatened by her surroundings in the dark, mysterious environment. 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.

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. 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.” Perhaps this popularity can also be accredited to Charles Perrault, a French folklorist and fairy-tale writer in the late 1600s; Perrault gripped Europe and Britain with gruesome fairy tales embedded with lessons for social behaviour (Abler). Brontë alludes to Perrault’s most gruesome tale, *Bluebeard*, as Jane tours Thornfield for the first time (and perhaps also through the naming of Jane’s French instructor, Madame Pierrot):

“Mrs. Fairfax stayed behind a moment to fasten the trap-door. I, by dint of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase. I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating the front and back rooms of the third story – narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle” (Brontë 125).

Bluebeard was a hideously ugly man who persuaded his neighbour’s youngest daughter to marry him; she settled in his remote fortress with the help of an elderly maid (i.e. Mrs. Fairfax (Lovell-Smith)). He left for business one day and gave his new wife the keys to all of the doors and windows in his secretive castle; this gift

came with a warning not to open one particular door lest she will receive his wrath. Curiosity consumes the young woman and she opens the door to find the bodies of Bluebeard's ex-wives hanging around the room, drenched in blood. Bluebeard comes home just before she escapes; however, the wife's brothers rescue her by killing Bluebeard upon his arrival. This tale parallels Jane's relationship with Rochester in a multitude of ways. Both Bluebeard's ex-wives and Bertha in *Jane Eyre* are locked away from society, emphasizing the Victorian ideals of a woman's obedience to the man; neither Bertha nor Bluebeard's wife listen to their orders; both rebel and find themselves punished for breaking patriarchal standards. Immediately after the unnerving opening tour of Thornfield, Jane hears an eerie laugh, snapping the reader back into her reality. This encounter leaves Jane curious and inquisitive about Rochester himself, leading her down the path of a gothic, shadowy romance she herself cannot decipher.

The passage above is drenched with gothic imagery; Jane gropes around the dark, descending into the depths of an eerie passage mimicking the descent into hell or purgatory. The doors are all shut, leaving Jane closed off from her host's secrets. In this passage, Jane sheds her innocence and foreshadows Rochester's first wife, Bertha, when she comments on Perrault's Bluebeard tale. Bluebeard and *Jane Eyre* have a remarkable number of similarities, such as the benevolent older woman, and imagery of secretive passages in a mysterious mansion, persuading the reader to believe that Brontë was familiar with the gothic, fairy-tale genre that was taking England by storm and used these tropes to shape her protagonist's relationships with other characters, as well as Jane herself.

England's social mission and cultural reputation was based on ideas of English imperialism (Spivak 243). This goal of the British Empire in turn created an "othering" of England's colonies, which posed threats to the English way of life as this "other" seeped back into the United Kingdom. Bertha, as outlined with the help of Perrault's Bluebeard tale, was the other in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester essentially locked her up in a closet much like Bluebeard killed off his ex-wives, and these hidden secrets in the closet posed a threat to Jane's relationship with Rochester. Gayatri Spivak argues that human identity is shaped and determined by politics of imperialism (Spivak 250); thus Jane is exalted as a pristine English woman who is threatened by Bertha's Creole ancestry. As many scholars point out, Bertha acts as Jane's double in the novel; this opposition then puts Jane on a higher pedestal than

her colonial counterpart, and we see the plot unfold such that Jane's actions separate her from stereotypes of colonial savageness. The imperial conquest, as described by Spivak (247), is represented in the novel as a version of hell, which furthers the point of Bertha's otherness and danger to Jane's English character. As mentioned previously, the groping around the dark into the long, narrow staircase mimics the descent into hell. What Jane finds with persistence is Bertha – a dark secret that was supposed to remain a mystery to Jane. The representation of Bertha found in dark, narrow passageways underscores the link of Bertha and hell (or the other, foreign, etc.) as it endangers Jane. Hell of course opposes a pure and rewarding heaven; therefore, if Bertha is associated with hell in Jane's relationship with her, then hell and Bertha are Jane's primary sources of conflict and discontent throughout the novel.

The threat Bertha poses to Jane's English way of life, as Brontë seems to suggest, is a real problem that also perhaps afflicts the British Empire. An imperial gothic such as *Jane Eyre* underscores the stark contrast between the "west" and the "other" (represented in characters like Jane and Bertha respectively) marking the vulnerability of the heroine in a social time of transition (perhaps democracy, end to elitist rule, woman's voice, etc.) (Daly). Bertha's character represents the historical impact of a centuries-long tradition of beliefs about colonial barbarism and savageness, which emphasizes the risk on the "mind, body and soul" of the British. Therefore, in the eyes of Victorian Britons and Brontë herself, there is a fundamental trench found separating the west and the "other", which is irreconcilable due to the inexpressible risk it could cause for English life; for Jane, this risk materializes when she is confronted with Bertha, and must navigate through relationships of gothic nature, including Rochester as well, and when she adopts gothic furniture to stylise her own dwellings. This manipulation of space in Victorian Britain highlights the consequences with which Britons had to cope in order to reap the rewards of their conquered land. If relationships between the imperial west and its colonies go awry (like Rochester and Bertha) then it challenges the sanctity of English life which is embodied by Jane, who feels the consequences of such strained and exploited relationships.

Jane Eyre's imperial gothic identity is shaped fundamentally by her relationships with Bertha and Rochester; however, this identity also comes from her own upbringing, and choices of engagement with the imperial world. In Jane's

youth, she is a prisoner in the home of the Reed family. She is consistently punished for speaking out and “misbehaving.” Often, she is sent to the Red Room: plausibly her first experience with the gothic world. Here, there is a palpable atmosphere of mystery, gothic and the supernatural, as Jane is surrounded by the rich, bold colour of blood and hears the ghost of her uncle who had previously died within the room. This early childhood experience shaped Jane’s interest in the gothic, which would, with exposure to the colonial world through relationships at Thornfield, turn into a quest for the imperial gothic. Her early experiences with the gothic and supernatural make Jane keen on pursuing the mystic, whether subconsciously or not, throughout her life. The gothic from Jane’s childhood reflects the “barbaric” treatment she endured; this did not directly threaten her state as an English woman; however, being a prisoner in the Reed house endangered her future, and connects her on a simplistic level to the savage treatment from the colonizers towards the colonized, as she feels repression similar to the colonized people.

Jane’s choices in the realm of British imperialism greatly shape her imperial gothic identity. *Jane Eyre* is a text of empire, and echoes the development of the colonial world in her own life. The text takes place in England, Madeira, and Jamaica; Jane Eyre’s connection with these places comes from her affinity to mahogany as Elaine Freedgood argues. Jane’s desire to decorate interiors throughout the novel reveals her (sub?)conscious participation in the imperial world. It is when the symbols of empire and the imperial gothic, such as mahogany, intrude upon Jane’s life that her relationships with others and her own self-identity come in question. At the end of the novel, Jane returns happily to Rochester and the woods at Ferndean in a sort of paradise found in nature, completely casting away her relationship with mahogany and imperialism; it is in this ending that Jane finds happiness – when threats of empire no longer encroach upon her life. However, before this happy ending occurs, we see Jane’s placement of mahogany furniture that symbolizes, normalizes, and internalizes the violent histories of deforestation, cash crops, and a wide array of other exploitative imperial goals within the colonies (Freedgood 35). This creates symbolic compressions of violence, as argued by Freedgood, that surround her well-being at moments when she is timid or confused. The mahogany empowers Jane and makes her confident and fierce, which reveals her desire to shape her own destiny

with dark symbols of the Empire so as she can indirectly confront these symbols of Empire. She brings the Empire home inadvertently, causing the history of violence and repression to come with it. During the time in the novel when mahogany furniture is everywhere in the interior of Thornfield, her relationship with Rochester, Bertha and other illegitimate “family” members such as Adele, are threatened and put through many tests and obstacles. Her “haven” only comes when Ferndean is transformed from the hunting lodge, and she restores nature, naturalizing England through wealth extracted from the colonial environment in its wild and raw form (Freedgood 52).

Perhaps Jane’s desire to shape her world with imperial gothic elements suggests that she carries a sort of sadistic nature within herself (Freedgood 32). It is possible that Jane wants to fill some sort of gothic need within herself – a presence since she was a young child with the Reed family. In the Reed home, she never had a say; however, as she moved on with life, she gained control of her surroundings and was able to, for example, decorate her houses however she pleased. This sadistic tendency in Jane backfires ultimately, as it only serves to further her quest of the imperial gothic. The novel ends in an unfurnished and uninhabited place; therefore, the mahogany furniture for which Jane had quite the affinity is rendered less meaningful than the way she was shaped by other elements of the imperial gothic genre, such as Bertha. Mahogany furniture does not seem to place a real threat on Jane personally; however, the general process of bringing the Empire home threatens English way of life for the entire island. There was no sugar before colonial cash crops, nor was there a perceivable danger from abroad – imperialism and the imperial gothic of the Victorian British era perpetuated this “danger” and violence in itself.

Jane Eyre’s sadistic tendencies are also reflected in her relationships with other people. “Madness remains one of [Jane’s] central contradictions” (Beattie 493), as she is not only victimized by the madness of colonial elements around her, but she seeks out this insanity, too, as we see by her choices in relationships. St. John, who makes his money the same way Rochester had (in the Empire), is not quite right for Jane, although perfect on paper. Instead, she opts for the dark and mysterious Rochester who treats her poorly for the majority of the novel. She also has a fondness of the supernatural, as we see throughout the novel that Jane is listening to the voices of “ghosts.” Not only that, but Jane also goes to see the

gypsy which leaves her at the beginning completely entranced; though the gypsy turns out to be Rochester in disguise, her entrancement by a perceived mystic being reveals her affinity to the “other” and unknown. The majority of Jane’s relationships revolve around elements of gothic imperialism, and the stronger that connection, the larger we perceive the threat to her Englishness.

To conclude, I argue that what is so compelling about *Jane Eyre* is that Jane begins her bildungsroman narrative timid and lonely in a repressive gothic prison; Jane grows into a mature young woman, who sheds the gothic desolation and wildness from her youth and enters a new married life with Rochester in pastoral freedom and experience. Though this echoes a rather happy-ending without much depth to her imperial participation, Brontë’s use of flashback reminds the reader of Jane’s acceptance of the imperial gothic and her removal from it when she marries Rochester and begins a familial, domestic life. Throughout the novel, Jane Eyre is subjected to harsh treatment from Bertha, a palpable threat to her relationship and well-being as an English woman, and the tests Jane endures in her relationship with Rochester stem from the problems of empire. Lastly, her own identity is threatened with her affinity to symbols of violence and repression. She manages to break free from her “prison” and sheds the constraints of the dark, imperial gothic. Her innocence was shadowed by the depths of the imperial gothic; however, she breaks free from this and at the end finds her own paradise in the natural world (Freedgood 52), restoring balance and order back to English life once it has been rid of so-called savage intruders who bring in their irrationality and degeneracy.



Furcifer Pardalis, “Castle” (January 14, 2012) *Flickr*, Web, Accessed 2 May 2017.



Gabor Kiss, “Forrest” (December 21, 2003), *Flickr*, Web, Accessed 2 May 2017.

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