

The Attic at Thornfield Hall

The attic at Thornfield Hall in Jane *Eyre* is a physical room that is used to contain Mr. Rochester's secret wife, Bertha Mason, and her passionate fits. Before Bertha's brother interrupts Jane and Mr. Rochester's wedding ceremony, her existence was a complete secret from both Jane and the reader. However, she and Mr. Rochester had a long history. He married Bertha while in Jamaica and quickly began to find her nature "wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singular incapable of being led to anything higher" (Bronte 287). After being declared mad by doctors there, Mr. Rochester decides he should take Bertha to England where no one knows of her existence, where he can lock her up in Thornfield's attic and travel and live without her. He had her "safely lodged in that third story room, of whose secret inner cabinet she has now for ten years made a wild beast's den—a goblin's cell" (Bronte 290). Bertha's story represents the fear men have of women's passion. Mr. Rochester states he finds her station as his wife "odious" to him (Bronte 288), and his response to her madness is not to help her, but to lock her up in isolation so he can live his life as he pleased. The attic at Thornfield therefore becomes a physical representation of the consequences of female passion and represents the broader implications that female passion is something to be contained and controlled rather than allowed or discussed.

If the attic represents the consequence of passion, then Bertha's character in the novel represents what female passion looks like. Mr. Rochester describes the cause of her madness as "excess" that had "prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (Bronte 287). It was the *excess* of Bertha that made her mad in the end according to the men around Bertha. Mr. Rochester later describes her as a "lunatic" who is "both cunning and malignant" rather than someone to be

helped (Bronte 290). This excess of passion serves as a warning to Jane in the novel of the consequences of unchecked passion—isolation in the attic.

Jane herself experiences physical isolation as a consequence of passion while she is at Gateshead Hall with the Reeds. When Jane yells at John and fights him when he attacks her, she is taken to the red room and locked in as a consequence of her passion. Jane “resisted all the way” and is “*out of herself*” with passion and rage (Bronte 12). Bessie tells Jane that if she continues to be “passionate and rude, Missis will send you away, I am sure” (Bronte 13). Just like Bertha Mason, Jane is locked away and isolated from society when she is overtaken by a fit of passion. Jane is even threatened to be sent away from Gateshead as a consequence of her own passionate outbursts, just like Bertha is sent away from society and locked in the attic. Bessie even likens Jane to a “mad cat” who is fighting against the servants who take her to the red room (Bronte 12) similar to how Mr. Mason says that Bertha “worried me like a tigress” (Bronte 201). When each girl is overtaken by passion, they are described as animals without reason. Parallels between Jane’s passionate fits and Bertha’s help to portray Bertha as a warning for Jane of what happens if she continues to let those passions get the best of her.

Jane is reminded by Bertha of the consequences of passion once again while at Thornfield Hall when she is on the third floor looking out at the world. In the scene, Jane desires to see the world beyond Thornfield and what it might have to offer. She says she has a restlessness in her nature and the sole relief was to look out from the third floor at Thornfield. She says that women aren’t supposed to desire *more*, but they do:

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...precisely as men would suffer...It is thoughtless to

condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Bronte 104)

While what Jane says may be correct to the reader, her case for women is interrupted by “eccentric murmurs, stranger than her laugh” coming from the secret room where Bertha is hidden in the attic. This is a physical reminder of the dangers of unchecked passion—of what could happen if Jane lets her desires go too far. Bertha once again serves as a reminder of the consequences of female passion. When this happens, like with Bertha’s *excess*, women are locked up and declared mad. Female passion and rage begin to be controlled by the society around them and they are punished for it by locking them away as if they don’t exist.

Not only is female passion controlled by society around them, but it is also explained through a patriarchal perspective. The attic also represents the control of men and society over female passion—how women’s passion only matters in terms of how it affects *others* rather than themselves. Bertha’s madness is always described in terms of Mr. Rochester’s losses rather than her own feelings. Mr. Rochester’s life “is hell” (Bronte 288) and once married to Bertha she dragged him “through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste” (Bronte 287). He even had to leave Jamaica because *his* name was associated with the mad woman on the island, and he wanted to be able to live life as he pleased elsewhere. While Bertha represents what “excess” looks like, she also represents a character whose illness is only discussed in a man’s loss and feelings rather than her own. Perhaps she also represents a society where men determine a woman’s madness and when passion goes too far. Bertha’s feelings of being locked away are never considered or asked, and the reader is meant to feel pity for Mr. Rochester, chained to a mad woman, rather than the woman herself.

Bertha, the attic, and the red room represent unchecked women's passion and men and society's response to that passion. It also represents a bigger theme portrayed through Gothic novels—romanticism and passion contradicted by the rational and real. Bertha's excess passion makes her mad just like Victor Frankenstein's unchecked passion leads to the creation of a monster. In each case there is a *consequence* for passion when things are taken too far, whether that be isolation, death, or societal scorn. The female Gothic explores ideas of passion and rationality through the choices characters make and the consequences of those choices. In this case, the attic represents the consequence of passion, particularly in women in society. Mr. Rochester has abundant passion and love for Jane he doesn't hesitate to express, but he is never locked in an attic. However, Jane's fits of excess passion led her to be locked in the red room and Bertha's excess passion and rage has to be physically contained by Mr. Rochester in the attic. Therefore, not only is passion something to be contained, but punished and hidden from society. It is only through small "supernatural" like instances where Bertha's presence is found in the novel: her cutting of Jane's veil, setting the fire in Mr. Rochester's room, and stabbing her brother. However, these are fleeting instances that are later explained on Mr. Rochester's terms and through his perspective. These parts of the novel speak to the bigger idea of female passion and how society, particularly men in society, view and "handle" that excess passion. The attic at Thornfield becomes the response to that unchecked passion: isolation and confinement.

Works Cited

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Dover Publications, 2002.

