A LIVELIER VEIN OF CONVERSATION: Reading the Influence of Gothic Conventions on Feminist Criticism Through Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 novel, follows the protagonist, for whom the title is named, in a rags-to-riches bildungsroman told as an autobiography. Jane’s new, distinctively personalized voice gave rise to the novel’s place as one the most widely studied nineteenth-century texts and feminist critics, in particular, have found the novel a generative one (Kaplan 16; Lodge). Within the feminist critical body of literature, Brontë’s appropriation of the Gothic genre in *Jane Eyre* has not gone unnoticed. The relationship between the two plays a role in informing Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s landmark text *The Madwoman in the Attic*, as well as many other critical works that expand upon and push against Gilbert and Gubar’s. Gilbert and Gubar propose that Jane’s anger within the novel is a product of the frustration and anxiety associated with both the enforcement of gender norms and the suppression of her inner passion. Gilbert and Gubar then show how a Gothic trope, the double, works within the novel, proposing that Bertha Mason, Edward Fairfax Rochester’s unstable wife, serves as Jane’s angry double and, to some degree, Brontë’s. Their primary concern, however, is not the role of the Gothic genre, though their framework brings forth the link, also seen in later readings, between critical feminist interpretations and Gothic conventions. I will argue that the relationship Gothic conventions have to feminist readings may be better understood specifically through Jane’s focus in relaying her time at Mr. Rochester’s estate, where her compelling interactions with Mr. Rochester are at the forefront of her experience.

GOTHIC CONVENTIONS

In order to understand how the connection between feminist criticism and Gothic conventions operates within *Jane Eyre*, it is first necessary to establish a working
knowledge of what constitutes as Gothic conventions and how Victorian era authors employed them. The characteristics that denote the Gothic, however, are difficult to define and it has been argued that the Gothic’s evasion to the limits of form result in its haunting inability to possess a single identity (Smith and Hughes 1-2). Despite the difficulty in developing a single definition for the Gothic genre, the term generally has come to be understood as novels whose basic framework includes “a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror” that resembles a nightmarish state where uncanny and/or melodramatically violent events take place, often between an innocent heroine and a cruel, lustful villain (Abrams 117). The uncanny, as explained by Smith and Hughes, is key to understanding the Gothic that Victorian writers, such as Brontë, appropriated: “The point of the domestic Gothic is that it represents a particular manifestation of the uncanny in which the ‘home’ now becomes, in Freud’s terms, the site of troubled sexual secrets, so that far from guaranteeing safety, the domestic becomes the space through which trauma is generated” (4).

Ann Radcliffe, one of authors who developed the Gothic genre, contributed to its basic framework, as noted in our definition. However, Brontë does not fully imitate this framework, selectively employing devices as she recognized both the limits of the Radcliffian Gothic, creating neither a fantasyland nor a puppet heroine, and its values. Brontë identified that what is truly the underlying preoccupation of the Gothic genre is the dilemma of female sexuality and she explores this concern in Jane Eyre, moving it into the plausible limitations of real world constraints (Wolff 106).

Despite differences in Brontë’s approach to the Gothic genre, she includes many of its original trappings. These include ominous castles with “dungeons, subterranean
passages, and sliding panels,” as well as “ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences” (Abrams 117). However, Wolff notes that though Thornfield Hall, Mr. Rochester’s estate, possesses the characteristics of a traditional Gothic castle, the way in which Jane navigates the home stands in opposition to the traditional Gothic heroine. This reveals Jane’s task in navigating an acceptable medium between the complete denial of sexuality and the unchecked expression of desire (Wolff 108). Within Gothic texts bodily morphing characters, such as vampires, doubles, ghosts, and monsters are placed as signifiers of the other and indicate “[...] how cultures need to invent or imagine others in order to maintain limits” (Botting 10). In fact, the Victorian period, known for its focus on refined sensibilities, also became known as a heyday for ghost stories. Within stories the tropes came to carry implications, for example, references to vampires are associated with magic, primitive violence, and sexual corruption and references to ghosts hint at dubious class origins or family secrets, and the mention of a haunting signals division and multiplication of meanings (Botting 10, 13, 17). Brontë’s use of such visual metaphors, critic Susan Wolstenholme explains, intends to impose rage within the narrative, a rage that is linked to gendered relations (59).

Brontë’s Gothic, like the Gothic that came before it, allows for the discovery and release of a new pattern of feelings, but in a more complex way that relies on the literary (Ellis 258). Traces of the excess noted in the framework of older Gothic novels, such as the temptation to break codes of law or knowledge or to indulge immoral desires and appetites, is still seen in Brontë’s work. Gothic theorist Fred Botting argues that such excess displays transgression and brings norms and limits more sharply into focus, with
the crossing of boundaries demonstrating the protection that they offer (9). Emotional intensity is often seen as the locus of excess within Gothic novels:

Reason is overwhelmed by feeling and passion, and signalled as a horrified, paralysing encounter with something unspeakable, an obscure presence too great to comprehend evoking an excess of feeling or registering an experience too intense for words. Negative aesthetics, in these terms, is double: deficiency, the absence, exclusion or negation of knowledge, facts or things; and excess, an overflow of words, feelings, ideas, imagining. (Botting 6-7)

Negative aesthetics, Botting explains, are the characteristics of the darkness, negativity, and transformations that inform gothic texts (Botting 1-12). Negative aesthetics work to map a narrative that more closely resembles how emotional interiority simultaneously exists along one’s present experience. However, it is excess that reveals the power of the Victorian Gothic to move toward a new kind of passionate engagement (Ellis 258). Had Brontë remained within the primitive excess of the Gothic genre that, for example, Radcliffe worked within, the potential realized in her text would have been impossible to achieve. This move towards a more passionate engagement is, however, dependent upon the inclusion of unstable psychological conditions found in traditional Gothic models (Abrams 118). To this, critic Carol M. Davison notes Heilman’s reading of Brontë, which sees Jane Eyre as conferring the mechanisms of fear known to the earlier Gothic novels in order to better flesh out the protagonist’s psychology (128). Psychology’s relevance to the Gothic will be explored further by in both the review of feminist critical literature and our investigation of the text.

Though much more could be said about the Gothic, our work here will be useful in understanding the Gothic genre’s impact on feminist criticism through the textual evidence located in Jane and Mr. Rochester’s interactions. In discussing the Gothic genre
in the Victorian era, we established a working definition of Gothic novel’s basic framework, particularly emphasizing the uncanny. I then explained Brontë’s evolution of the traditional Radcliffian Gothic model, followed by a detailing of the features specific to the Gothic genre, which is important knowledge to have when critically approaching the text. Lastly, I briefly illuminated the concept of negative aesthetics and psychology’s role in portraying emotional interiority and the new pattern of feelings found in the Victorian Gothic. With this accomplished, the body of feminist critical literature must then be reviewed before utilizing textual interactions between Jane and Mr. Rochester to consider how the relationship between the claims in many feminist critical texts are directly related to the presence of Gothic conventions.

PROMINENT CRITICISM

Two years before Gilbert and Gubar, Elaine Showalter in “Feminist Heroines: Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot” explored the evolution of the female literary tradition of the English novel, which she argues can be divided into three stages: the Feminine (1840s-1880s), the Feminist (1880-1920), and the Female (1920 onwards, with a new self-awareness emerging around 1960) (Lodge 73). Brontë, a pioneering Feminine novelist, seeks to create a complete female identity, conveying Jane’s consciousness through a variety of narrative devices, ultimately revealing what is at the forefront of a Victorian woman’s experience of self: the division of the psyche into body and mind (Showalter 100). Showalter argues that the external archetypal representation of this division is the devilish Bertha Mason and the angelic Helen Burns, each of who must perish for Jane to reach an integrated self (113). Having achieved this, Showalter views Jane’s marriage to Mr. Rochester as a union of equals, but—as the product of feminine
fiction— one that is permitted only after resigning to their mutual limitation, which is far from a potential for mutual growth (122).

To touch again briefly on Gilbert and Gubar, they begin their chapter specifically on *Jane Eyre* by first quickly highlighting the reactions and concerns with which Victorian critics received Brontë’s novel. They dub the initial readers of the text as “no doubt instinctively perceiving the subliminal intensity of Brontë’s passion” (337). Like Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar agree that Bertha represents one side of the Victorian female psyche, which, fractured by social demands and taboos, externalizes a ‘double self.’ They claim that Bertha, rather than the carnal figure that Showalter perceives, is, as the image of female anger and rebellion, a political figure, allowing the repressed nineteenth-century woman writer to subtly reveal her rage against patriarchal oppression (Lodge 75). Gilbert and Gubar trace this rage, mentioning early in the essay that even Brontë’s choice of Jane’s surname hints at the anger seen throughout the novel: “[...] Jane Eyre— her name is of course suggestive— is invisible as air, the heir to nothing, secretly choking with ire” (Gilbert and Gubar 342). To this, it is easy to see how Gilbert and Gubar’s reading became known as the “[...] shorthand for female repression under systems of patriarchal power” (Lodge 3).

Critic Nancy Armstrong writes in response to the approaches of Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar in “The Rise of Female Authority in the Novel.” She explores the domain of domestic fiction, explaining that the novels of Austen and Brontë intended to rewrite political history as personal history. To do this at its best meant that they had to assert that their novels were products of the truth, more than the mere fiction that came before them; after all, *Jane Eyre* is an autobiography (38). Armstrong also explains that
women writers had control over a specific realm of knowledge, that of emotions, which
lent them a certain authority, as did the sexual contract (43). The sexual contract meant
that males and females during the middle of the nineteenth century were competing
forces where a contractual exchange empowered the female at the expense of the male
(55).

Critic Robyn Warhol in “Double Gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and
*Villette*” takes a narratological approach to examining the dual genres of *Jane Eyre*, that
of the Realist novel and that of the Gothic novel (858). However, Warhol accounts for
this double genre through the narrator’s divide in the experiencing self and the narrating
self (860). Ultimately her case contends that the refusal to fully occupy the position of a
character or a narrator, in conjunction with the novel’s refusal to conform to a single
genre, is connected to an underlying subversive impulse to work against the Victorian
constructs of gender (861). These splits in genre and in the protagonist’s self grow out of
an unwillingness to wholly conform to a Victorian resolve insisting that in writing and in
life one must possess a well-defined sex role, namely that one must be either masculine
or feminine and male-identified or female-identified (871).

Sally Shuttleworth in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* argues,
displacing the traditional views that hold Brontë as an intuitive genius, that *Jane Eyre* is
greatly involved in the Victorian debate on psychology, with it even possessing the
psychological discourse of Brontë’s day (148). In her introduction Shuttleworth briefly
acknowledges Gilbert and Gubar’s incorporation of Freudian theory in their work, but
maintains that their argument is “[…] resolutely ahistorical, failing to take into account
the ways in which Victorian psychiatric discussions of female sexuality had defined the
framework of both normality and rebellion” (2). Though technically bringing New
Historicism to bear on Jane Eyre, Shuttleworth still contributes a relevant reading to the
interconnected discourses on feminism and psychoanalysis within the novel.
Shuttleworth notes that phrenology and psychiatry were disciplines intending to decode
the external signs of the body to reach the hidden inner play of the forces driving
individual subjectivit. It is this framework that Brontë draws from, making the use of
phrenology as a politicized act. This act reveals the new mode of conceptualizing
selfhood that cuts across Victorian discourses on the economic, political, and medical,
especially those concerning the need to strike a balance between the social body’s healthy
release of innate energies and one’s need for control and regulation (Shuttleworth 3).
These disciplines, and the individualistic discourses they simultaneously undertook, had
their contradictions, which Jane’s internal contradictions come to mirror (Shuttleworth 2).

In conversation with Shuttleworth, but more so with Warhol, is Heather Glen in
her work Charlotte Brontë: the Imagination in History. Glen argues that the novel exists
as two concurrent and opposing stories. The narrator-self is magically omnipotent, while
the character-self is insubstantial, consistently at the mercy of forces out of her control.
Despite the conclusion presented in Chapter 38, the opposing empowerment and
disempowerment of Jane is left unresolved at the story’s close because the resolution
offered, even when the novel in its entirety is considered as the account of this resolution,
still fails to reconcile the two (64).

Cora Kaplan’s reading of Jane Eyre in Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism
critiques earlier feminist authors for failing to account for the way in which issues of
gender are inextricably tied up with those of class (Lodge 86-87). Kaplan notes how
many critics have come to *Jane Eyre* with highly charged emotions and she sets out to explore why the novel has generated such responses (16). Drawing from Freud and Laura Mulvey, she proposes that *Jane Eyre* is a type of mnemonic symbol, "[…] a Western cultural monument which had moved generations of its mainly women readers to tears of desire and rage, as well as loss" (Kaplan 15). Kaplan suggests that the emotive history of the novel's criticism can be understood by specifying cultural sites, such as nationality, class, and gender. Kaplan explains that critical literature has long since highlighted Jane's new, distinctive personalized voice, which has been attributed as placing a particular cultural value on subjective experience (16). Kaplan ultimately highlights *Jane Eyre*'s ability in different contexts to produce readings in strong opposition to one another, showing that the differing views, each valid to some degree in their own right, problematize the reader's approach to *Jane Eyre* (34).

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

With the explanation of the Gothic genre and conventions, as well as the review of the critical feminist literature, now provided, we may turn to the interactions between Jane and Mr. Rochester within text to examine how the two inform one another. Jane's first meeting with Mr. Rochester is unplanned and, though it does not occur within the Gothic estate of Thornfield Hall, Brontë still employs Gothic conventions in setting the stage for their first encounter. On her way to post a letter in town Jane rests for a moment on the side of the road (Brontë 122). Upon hearing a horse approach, Jane recalls a story once told by her childhood nursemaid, Bessie, but is pulled back to reality with the arrival of the traveler: "The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash: it was always alone; and goblins, to my notions, though they might
tenant the dumb carcasses of beasts, could scarce covet shelter in the commonplace human form" (Brontë 124). Jane’s imagination here is tied to references of Gothic conventions. As the spell broke, she discounts the possibility of the Gytrash, a legendary black dog known said to haunt lonely roads as it awaited travelers, and goblins. Despite the fact that she dismisses them, by introducing the possibility of spells and fantastical creatures into the scene Jane fashions a setting informed by Gothic conventions. To this, Gilbert and Gubar note how later Mr. Rochester admits that he viewed their first meeting as a mythic one, thinking that Jane may have bewitched his horse, in a comment that “[...] acknowledges her powers just as much as (if not more than) her vision of the Gytrash acknowledges his” (352).

In the course of her first encounter with Mr. Rochester, Jane thinks, “[...] had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked. I had hardly ever seen a handsome youth; never in my life spoken to one” (Brontë 125). By setting Jane’s insecurities and inexperience with men alongside Gothic conventions during Jane’s first conversation with Mr. Rochester, Brontë not only alludes to the innocent Gothic heroine, standing in contrast to the fallen man swearing under his horse, but she also establishes a relationship that will be repeatedly seen in Jane’s interactions with Mr. Rochester. Mr. Rochester does not give rise to such insecurities in Jane during this interaction, but Jane is still unaware at this point in the story that the man before her is her employer. After this knowledge comes to light, coupled with the development of her feelings for Mr. Rochester as she gets better acquainted with him, it will be clear that Jane’s inexperience with men continues to be a source of anxiety for her.
Chapter 14 brings the reader to another important exchange between Jane and Mr. Rochester. Interestingly, U.C. Knoepflmacher explains that this conversation is based upon the first conversation between Beauty and the Beast in Beaumont’s telling of the story (22). Prior to the conversation, at the end of the preceding chapter, Jane discusses Mr. Rochester’s peculiar personality with Mrs. Fairfax. Mrs. Fairfax explains that Mr. Rochester seldom stays at Thornfield for more than a fortnight. When Jane wonders why, Mrs. Fairfax mysteriously says, “‘perhaps he thinks it gloomy’” (Brontë 141).

Traditionally, estates in Gothic literature were the essence of gloominess and Brontë intentionally has the housekeeper who is very well acquainted with the residence describe it as such, furthering the brooding atmosphere typical of the Gothic novel. The Gothic setting is reinforced at the end of the chapter and it is connected to the conversation between Mr. Rochester and Jane that occurs in Chapter 15, which is laden with moments that reveal the influence of gender constructs.

During their conversation Mr. Rochester is characterized as the domineering master that is demanded of a Gothic novel, saying to Jane, “‘I ought to be at liberty to attend to my own pleasure. Miss Eyre, draw your chair still a little farther forward: you are yet too far back: I cannot see you without disturbing my position in this comfortable chair, which I have no mind to do’” (Brontë 144). Though Mr. Rochester is Jane’s employer and has the authority to command her to his presence, he is very controlling of her relation to him in this space. In being so particularly exacting in his role as her superior, he perpetuates polarized gender roles where the male is the dominant figure in the relationship and the female is submissive to him. Amber Jamilla Musser explains that enacting dominance is part of a process of othering, which serves “[…] to show what is at
stake when power is formulated as a binary: that is to say, when it is seen as something that one possesses and the other lacks” (27). Jane responds to Mr. Rochester by doing as she was bid because, as she remarks, “[...] Mr. Rochester had such a direct way of giving orders, it seemed a matter of course to obey him promptly” (Brontë 145). Later, however, Mr. Rochester attempts to justify his demands and Jane intelligently refutes his reasoning. Though Jane does assert herself and in doing so reclaims a level of mutual respect, her initial response was, nevertheless, to simply obey Mr. Rochester’s orders.

Jane resists the social structures that expect her to be demure, but as an adult the performative aspects of gender, in this instance the characteristics of passivity and compliance, are a necessary habit for Jane.

Given that power is often perceived as a binary, it may come to weigh on other binaries at play within the novel, most prominently the dual genres of the novel and the position of Jane and Mr. Rochester as a gendered couple. Most obviously it validates Jane’s frustrations and anxieties associated with the confines of her gender, which come to light through her relationship and conversations with Mr. Rochester, because they are coming from a place of dearth. Jane is very aware that she is lacking in what she can bring to a marriage; she has no name, no money, and no experience. While this is what attracts Mr. Rochester to her— that she possesses none of these, yet is his equal in mind and spirit— this inequality, of course, is a source of discomfort for Jane. By dissecting the progression of uncertainty that the structure of power causes, the path that Jane’s relationship with Mr. Rochester takes becomes much easier to understand. To this, Musser’s discussion on pain-consciousness has resonances: “[...] pain is a sensation that
forces one to think through the body as a space of being-for-others and being-for-itself’ (126).

Returning to Jane and Mr. Rochester’s conversation, once Jane is firmly in his presence, Mr. Rochester, daydreaming, stares at the fire and as he does Jane unconsciously finds she is staring at him (Brontë 144). Mr. Rochester unabashedly addresses Jane’s direct gaze: “‘You examine me, Miss Eyre,’ said he: do you think me handsome?’” (Brontë 145). Caught off guard, Jane somewhat rudely replies, “[…] ‘No, sir’” (Brontë 145). So explicitly gazing at a man, a direct inversion of the male gaze, is not acceptable of a properly reared young woman. Mr. Rochester’s question of Jane immediately reinforces what is deemed inappropriate for her gender, making her feel uncomfortable for examining Rochester’s physiognomy and prompting Jane’s quick attempt to recover her blunder. Despite these efforts, Mr. Rochester still says of Jane, “‘you fear in the presence of a man and a brother—or father, or master, or what you will—to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly’” (Brontë 153). With little real experience from which to draw, Jane navigates this stressful interaction with Mr. Rochester by struggling to act in what she conceives of as a suitable manner, but Mr. Rochester’s commanding nature makes this difficult for her.

In the following chapter there is also a conversation between the two, during which they walk along a beech avenue and Mr. Rochester finally undertakes the task of explaining to Jane how Adèle came to be in his care (Brontë 155). Gilbert and Gubar point out that many Victorian readers considered this conversation between “a dissipated older man to a virginal young governess” completely unacceptable (352). Yet, Mr. Rochester’s comfort in confiding in Jane actually demonstrates a sense of equality
between the two. In the midst of their conversation Mr. Rochester pauses and has a silent conversation with the figure of his destiny that he describes as “a hag like one who appeared to Macbeth on the heath of Forres” (Brontë 157). The figure is Gothic in its uncalled for appearance that resembles a haunting and in its comparison to the ominous hag in Macbeth. How the Gothic convention emerges here is unique in that Mr. Rochester brings it forward, but I believe it to be representative of Jane’s insecurities with herself. As Gilbert and Gubar contend, in a world of women like Adèle’s mother, Céline, and later Blanche, who continuously market themselves to men, Jane is reminded during the course of this conversation of the expectations of femininity that she is not fulfilling and that her independence stands in contrast to other women (353).

Later in the chapter a Gothic presence continues to dwell within Thornfield Hall when Jane is awakened after hearing at first a vague murmur and then, while trying to fall back to sleep, a demonic laugh and other strange sounds. Driven by fear to seek solace from Mrs. Fairfax, Jane leaves her room and on her way comes upon Mr. Rochester’s, which has smoke rushing out of it (Brontë 162-64). When Mr. Rochester awakens it is only after Jane has quenched the fire and he is disoriented: “In the name of all the elves in Christendom, is that Jane Eyre?” he demanded. “What have you done with me, witch, sorceress? Who is in the room beside you? Have you plotted to drown me?” (Brontë 164). Despite having just saved his life, Jane is made to feel at fault when Mr. Rochester equates her with a witch or a sorceress in a demeaning and gendered act.

It is common knowledge that throughout history accusations of witchery have been a channel through which to persecute and often kill threatening women within a society. Mr. Rochester’s first instinct is not to believe that Jane may have rescued him,
but that she through some devious means caused the threatening fire. After Mr. Rochester recovers from the incident he thanks and praises Jane, with Jane describing, “strange energy was in his voice, strange fire in his look," and he begs her presence until Jane reminds him that she is drenched in water and that “I am cold, sir,” at which point she is released (Brontë 167). During this traumatic event, unexplained forces endanger Mr. Rochester’s life and, though Jane ultimately delivers Mr. Rochester from these forces, her gender causes her to be mistaken as among these brooding forces at first. The passage continually employs adjectives that relay Gothic conventions, such as demonic, pale, gloomy, strange and cold, and it foreshadows the melancholy fates that will meet Mr. Rochester and Bertha Mason.

In Chapter 19 Jane enters the library to have her fortune read, but little does she know it is Mr. Rochester who is disguised as the gypsy. Here Mr. Rochester’s peculiarity comes forward when he takes on an entirely different persona. Upon meeting the gypsy fortune-teller Jane ponders, “one unexpected sentence came from her lips after another, till I got involved in a web of mystification; and wondered what unseen spirit had been sitting for weeks by my heart watching its workings and taking record of every pulse” (Brontë 221). Jane describes the Gypsy woman in a subtly Gothic way: her sentences are unexpected, they created a web of mystification for Jane, and an unseen spirit had been watching her. On an apparent level the language used creates a Gothic texture to the experience for Jane, but on a more technical and submerged level—beyond how the experience is captured—Mr. Rochester’s act in itself has Gothic undertones. Doppelgangers are a Gothic convention and though the gypsy is not Mr. Rochester’s doppelganger, a sort of doubling of character does occur. Mr. Rochester spends a great
deal of effort in cultivating his character as the gypsy woman and he maintains that it is all in good fun, merely for the amusement of the houseguests and himself, but there are many implications in his act.

Warhol contends, “doubleness is figured as both feminine and feminist, a strategy for negotiating differences between and within male and female, center and margin, inside and outside, public and private, realism and romance” (857). Mr. Rochester’s role as the gypsy woman reveals the confines of sex and the fluidity of gender: a part of Jane seems completely inaccessible to him and the only way he may interpret a side of Jane that is unattainable as Mr. Rochester is by taking up the garb of a woman. Though much of my argument focuses on Jane’s inability to navigate her gender and its confines, and despite Mr. Rochester being of the more empowered gender, societal expectations and norms, nevertheless, results in his own anxieties and frustrations over gender constructs as well. As Gilbert and Gubar notice, “[…] though his puzzling transvestism, his attempt to impersonate a female gypsy, may be seen as a semi-conscious effort to reduce this sexual advantage his masculinity gives him (by putting on a woman’s clothes he puts on a woman’s weakness), both he and Jane obviously recognize the hollowness of such a ruse” (355). Jane’s encounter with the gypsy fortune-teller serves to show how inexpressible feelings, even for Mr. Rochester, find relief through Gothic conventions.

Critic Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* explains, “that the transvestite makes culture possible, that there can be no culture without the transvestite because the transvestite marks the entrance into the Symbolic” and that desire “is another definition of the transvestite” (34, 75). By pretending to be a gypsy fortune-teller, Mr. Rochester simultaneously subverts and hints at the cruel and
lustful villain archetype seen in the Gothic genre. He is somewhat cruel in that he uses his power to manipulate not only the houseguests, but also Jane, whom he genuinely cares about. Mr. Rochester deceptively forces them into an intimate setting with someone they think is a stranger of a much lower class, but is actually their host and master, respectively. But, at the same time, Mr. Rochester’s performance as the gypsy woman is not all too different from the way others in daily life perform gender and class. It is in subtly highlighting this fact that Jane is made to feel uncomfortable. It does not take Jane all too long to figure that the figure before her is actually Mr. Rochester, but when she does she is upset because, though in jest, she perceives a breach of trust: “‘In short, I believe you have been trying to draw me out—or in; you have been talking nonsense to make me talk nonsense. It is scarcely fair’” (Brontë 224). When asked if she forgives his transgression, Jane replies, “‘I cannot tell till I have thought it all over. If, on reflection, I find I have fallen into no great absurdity, I shall try to forgive you; but it was not right’” (Brontë 224). In regards to lustfulness, it is not blatant in this passage, but desire is certainly Mr. Rochester’s motivating force in playing the gypsy woman during this chapter, as is revealed when the two are engaged.

Chapter 20 begins when the staff and guests are awoken by a scream (Brontë 228). They are assured that everything is fine and sent back to bed. Jane retreats to her room but without the intention of sleeping, knowing that Mr. Rochester lied to pacify his guests (Brontë 229-30). Sure enough, Mr. Rochester comes to Jane asking for her help and as he leads her to the source of the scream, Jane remarks, “I saw a room […] it was hung with tapestry; but the tapestry was now looped up in one part, and there was a door apparent, which had then been concealed. This door was open; a light shone out of the
room within: I heard thence a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling” (Brontë 231). As Thornfield Hall embodies its Gothic setting with the presence of tapestries and a hidden door, it continues to reveal a horror there within. It is revealed that the commotion emanated from Mr. Mason who is badly injured and bleeding. Mr. Rochester asks Jane to tend to Mr. Mason’s wounds while he fetches the surgeon and before he leaves Mr. Rochester forbids either to speak to one another in his absence (Brontë 232). After Mr. Rochester’s return, while the he is being tended to, Mr. Mason remarks, “‘She sucked my blood: she said she’d drain my heart’” (Brontë 236). Evoking Gothic imagery, the cause of Mr. Mason’s injuries is made to sound as if they came from a vampire.

In an effort to address the evening’s odd and unsettling episode, so teeming with secrecy, Mr. Rochester asks Jane to join him in a walk after Mr. Mason departs (Brontë 239). Mr. Rochester tells Jane a hypothetical story about a man who made a capital error in a foreign land and then chose to lead a life of dissipation to try to obtain relief (Brontë 241-42). During Jane and Mr. Rochester’s discussion, Mr. Rochester’s impending nuptials are brought up once again and Jane manages to keep her feelings in check: “‘Little friend,’ said he, in quite a changed tone—while his face changed too, losing all its softness and gravity, and becoming harsh and sarcastic—‘you have noticed my tender penchant for Miss Ingram: don’t you think if I married her she would regenerate me with a vengeance?’” (Brontë 243). The confines of her gender and of her role as his employee prevent Jane from protecting her own feelings. Convention requires Jane to sit idly by, agreeing to Mr. Rochester’s requests even though they pain her greatly. To this, Mr. Mason’s injury can be seen as the physical manifestation and release of Jane’s inner
torment: Jane is unable to express the pain of seeing her love’s engagement unfolding and this pain has to somehow be realized externally. Mr. Mason serves as the vehicle through which Jane’s own distress may be given a voice. All of the emotions Jane experiences and subsequently suppress while conversing with Mr. Rochester need an outlet and a point of articulation. Therefore, Jane’s composure is only maintained because the Gothic tropes occurring earlier in the chapter provide an avenue through which her trauma may be illustrated.

In Chapter 23 Gothic elements enter after a pivotal conversation between Jane and Mr. Rochester. During midsummer at twilight the two are in the orchard on a stroll and Mr. Rochester gives Jane her orders to march because of his impending marriage (Brontë 278-79). However, this is simply a ruse to get Jane to admit her feelings for him and she does so, forsaking gender and societal norms:

‘Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!— I have as much soul as you,— and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;— it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,— as we are!’ (Brontë 281)

Jane is clearly putting herself in a potentially compromising situation: not only does she declare her love to a man she believes is engaged, she does so to her master, a man high above her social rank whom she works for and the man she will have to continue working for until he is married and she secures another position. How terribly shocking, even almost by today’s standards, let alone those of Victorian times. Mr. Rochester knows Jane has a passionate nature that she has suppressed in an effort to be proper, likeable and ladylike, but Mr. Rochester intentionally gives Jane no choice but to act on this nature.
Despite Jane throwing caution to the wind in this moment, her word choice shows that she is entirely aware of this fact and that she feels the pressures to remain within the confines of her gender and societal position even while stepping outside them.

Jane is rewarded for her spirit when Mr. Rochester, in turn, asks Jane to be his bride (Brontë 283). However, the pressure that Jane experiences during her proclamation of love for Mr. Rochester, even though firmly spoken, still has a Gothic release elsewhere. The chestnut tree in the orchard that Jane and Mr. Rochester sit beneath during the course of this decisive conversation serves as the physical point through which the Gothic can be traced. This is hinted at in the passage when Jane notes, “but what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were on shadow: I could scarcely see my master’s face near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? it writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us” (Brontë 284). Jane and Mr. Rochester’s engagement is an emotionally charged scene, yet it is when she agrees to marry Mr. Rochester, implicitly relinquishing her independence and binding herself to him, that the weather shifts and the gloom of the Gothic begins to encroach on the happy couple. Jane sees “a livid, vivid spark” descend from a cloud and the two are drenched before they make it back inside (Brontë 285). The next morning Jane rises and Adèle informs her “[…] that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard had been stuck by lightning in the night, and half of it split away” (Brontë 285). It is no coincidence that such an overtly ominous turn comes after such an important discussion between Jane and Mr. Rochester, one that causes Jane to poignantly sense the limits imposed by her gender and society’s construction of its expectations.
Chapter 25 relays the discussion between Jane and Mr. Rochester’s on the eve of their wedding, during which Jane tells her fiancé of a bizarre experience she had the previous night. Jane’s story is heavily Gothic in its references and it is of no coincidence that such an outwardly Gothic tale transpires between the two the night before their wedding ceremony. Jane had had a disturbing dream, in which a small child cried in her arms as she attempted to reach Mr. Rochester on a long, winding road. Mr. Rochester dismisses the dream as insignificant, but then Jane explains that it was not this dream alone that unsettled her. In a second dream Jane lost her balance and the child fell from her knee. This upsetting image caused Jane to wake and when she did she witnessed a savage-looking woman rustling through her closet, which, after finding the object that she sought, took Jane’s veil and tore it in two (Brontë 313-16). Here a physical materialization of doubling occurs to mirror a psychological one as, oddly enough, even the object within this story, the veil, seems to be seeking a way to split itself.

When asked to describe the woman, Jane says she reminded her “Of the foul German spectre—the Vampyre” (Brontë 316). Mr. Rochester explains that the woman must have been Grace Poole and that what Jane experienced was really “half dream, half reality” (Brontë 317). Mr. Rochester then promises Jane that he will fully clarify the events that transpired after they have been married for a year and one day. Here Mr. Rochester and Jane mirror the two genres of the novel, with Mr. Rochester representing its realist side because he is conveying the voice of reason, while Jane through her story supports the Gothic genre. In interpreting Jane’s tale, Gilbert and Gubar explain, “What Bertha now does, for instance, is what Jane Eyre secretly wants to do. Disliking the ‘vapoury veil’ of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha
does it for her. Fearing the inexorable ‘bridal day,’ Jane would like to put it off. Bertha does that for her too” (359). On a deeper level, not only is Bertha Mason Jane’s repressed double, but on an external level even Mr. Rochester’s reasoning of the events relies on two concurrent states and these layers reveal the varying emotions that accompany a particularly charged moment of Jane’s life. The evening before almost any woman gets married, to this day, results in a mixture of nerves and excitement. Such a heightened moment is not lost on Brontë and these feelings are alternatively realized in Jane’s story to Mr. Rochester as she tells of two troubling dreams and a disconcerting event in which her possession is destroyed.

On the day of Jane and Mr. Rochester’s wedding the unexplained phantom lurking through Thornfield Hall is accounted for as Bertha Mason. Now provided the true explanation, it may be predicted that the use of Gothic conventions would begin to subside. Despite the logical explanation for many of the mysterious occurrences of the earlier chapters, however, a terror, most of which is psychological, reigns over this following chapter and continues to contribute to the Gothic genre of Jane Eyre. As Shuttleworth explains, Jane and Mr. Rochester’s relationship is often negotiated through phrenological discourse, each often trying to read the other’s tendencies while concealing his or her own. The effort to penetrate another’s self and the effort to protect one’s own is tied to erotic pleasure and its need to be both regulated and released (Lodge 129). By chapter 27, however, Mr. Rochester’s well-crafted veil has disintegrated with the exposure of his wife and the ability in Gothic conventions to capture the fear inhabited in one’s psyche asserts itself more prominently.
When Jane comes to Mr. Rochester after she has collected herself from the day’s earlier shattering revelations, she has already resolved to leave Thornfield, a resolution that she impressively maintains in the face of his intimidation. During their conversation Mr. Rochester takes on the Gothic villain more so than ever before, when, impassioned he warns, “‘Jane! will you hear reason?’ (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear); ‘because, if you won’t, I’ll try violence’” (Brontë 337). As Wolstenholme argues, the power of the novel’s Gothic scenes are located in their ability to be both ordinary and familiar, as well as terrible and strange (58). At this point the reader has encountered many conversations between Mr. Rochester and Jane in which the Gothic seems inextricably tied, but the previous framework is reworked here. Mr. Rochester’s presence is no longer only dominating, but also explicitly threatening as he considers using physical violence against Jane to achieve his will.

As the conversation between the two continues, Rochester once again intimidates Jane with the possible use of violence: “‘Never,’ said he, as he ground his teeth, ‘never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable. A mere reed she feels in my hand!’ (And he shook me with the force of his hold.) ‘I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?’” (Brontë 353). During this moment between Jane and Mr. Rochester, Jane’s physical inferiority is brought forward. Armstrong is recalled here, as she explains that during the middle of the nineteenth century men and women were competing forces where a contractual exchange empowers the female at the expense of the male. As Mr. Rochester perceives he is losing control over his relationship with Jane, he attempts to regain it by asserting his physical superiority, making it clear that “[…] the realm of psychic struggle is clearly
associated in her [Brontë’s] mind with the dynamics of social struggle and insurrection” (Shuttleworth 148).

While Jane is at the physical mercy of the Gothic villain, Mr. Rochester’s articulation of his predicament is a reflection of a struggle within Jane’s psyche too. Mr. Rochester has laid forth two choices for himself, as he may try to dominate Jane by force or he may willingly relinquish his claims over her. Jane is also left with two choices: she may either stay as Mr. Rochester’s mistress or leave him, which may also be framed in that she may either abandon her own morals and society’s subsequent respect in upholding them, keeping her love, or maintain both and lose it. Each within the pair sees only two possible paths onward and each path is gendered, with Jane’s path, the feminine one, hinged to morality and Mr. Rochester’s possible path, the masculine one, linked to physical dominance.

Jane understands that her gender limits her choices forward, just as it always has. Yet, in this moment of crisis Jane’s inability to alter this and its devastating effect for her results in Mr. Rochester’s augmented embodiment of the Gothic villain and, consequently, the frightening psychological nature evoked by the figure. As Shuttleworth explains, “[...] women were biologically defined as creatures of excess, throbbing with reproductive energy which had to be sluiced away each month, and yet could not be dammed up or controlled without real threat to the balance of the psyche” (151). The balance to Jane’s psyche is, understandably, disturbed prior to this conversation, yet it is Mr. Rochester who allows his emotions to overtake him. Though there is a reversal of customary gender roles in this regard, this allows Gothic features to come through; specifically, the use of the genre as a release for the protagonist’s
dissatisfaction with her choices at hand is achieved by intensifying Mr. Rochester’s villainous persona.

After Jane departs from Thornfield it is uncertain whether she and Mr. Rochester will ever see each other ever again. When the couple finally does interact again, it is in a strange and unpredictable way. This comes during Chapter 35 with an unusual exchange, for it does not take place in the company of one another or though letters. However, this makes it seem all the more Gothic. Their exchange occurs in the midst of a heated conversation between Jane and her cousin St. John Rivers. St. John wishes Jane to accompany him as a missionary and Jane is willing to comply. St. John insists it would only be suitable for them to go as a married couple, yet Jane cannot bring herself to marry purely out of duty and wants to go as brother and sister (Brontë 467-68). Custom and its reign over gendered roles are significantly at play in this moment for Jane. Once again she is trapped between what society deems as proper and what her internal compass demands, a combination of her morals and her own needs. St. John chooses to see in Jane only what most suits his own ambitions and in doing so implores Jane to join him, but St. John does not love Jane the way she needs to be loved. The only chance Jane has of maintaining her own truth and asserting her own needs is through the love she has for herself. She, however, out of a simultaneous love and obligation towards others, seems unable to fully allow this of herself.

The solution to this rather suffocating moment—to this suffocating dilemma, for that matter—seems a Gothic release, which, of course, does manifest. When Jane, under tremendous pressure, nearly yields to St. John, Mr. Rochester’s voice calls out to her:

"Jane! Jane! Jane!—nothing more" (Brontë 469). Jane, in turn, responds aloud to him:
"'I am coming!' I cried. 'Wait for me! Oh, I will come!' I flew to the door and looked into the passage: it was dark. I ran out into the garden: it was void" (Brontë 469). In addition to not being a conversation in the conventional sense, Mr. Rochester's position in this passage in relation to Jane's understanding of her classed gender has drastically changed. Mr. Rochester is no longer reinforcing the limits of femininity for Jane. Rather, this role has shifted to St. John: Gilbert and Gubar view St. John as "a pillar of patriarchy," believing that if Jane were to wed St. John she would be entering into an even more unequal marriage than the union she nearly made before with Mr. Rochester (366). Mr. Rochester as disembodied form is able to aid in delivering Jane from St. John's control and the box he wishes to place her in. The key word here being aid, as Jane and Mr. Rochester's exchange, on some level a reflection of Jane's love for her own self, works together to free Jane: "I broke from St. John, who had followed, and would have detained me. It was my time to assume ascendency. My powers were in play and in force" (Brontë 469-70). This bursting forth of the Gothic and Mr. Rochester's liberation from the figure of the cruel, lustful villain finally allows Jane and Mr. Rochester to arrive at a type of equality previously unattained, one that is required of their relationship if it is to reach the level of sophistication that they both desire and need for it to succeed.

Having achieved ascendency, one may think that the presence of Gothic conventions would begin to wane: this is far from the case, however. In reuniting Jane to Mr. Rochester Brontë not only continues her framework, but also seems to emphasize it. Upon reaching Thornfield Hall Jane declares to Mr. Rochester that he will not be left desolate again as long as she lives. Though she asserts her desire to rekindle their engagement, Jane instantly questions what she said: "Perhaps I had too rashly over-
leaped conventionalities; and he, like St. John, saw impropriety in my inconsiderateness" (Brontë 488). Jane has come so far: she is no longer the child bullied by her cousin John Reed, the governess at the whims of her master, or in need of St. John’s help, yet she still, nevertheless, feels the confines of femininity before the man who not only loves her, but is also her equal. Though Mr. Rochester placates Jane’s worries and Jane remarks, “[...] I felt quite relieved from my previous embarrassment. I resumed a livelier vein of conversation,” it is clear Jane’s feelings of anxiety in upholding her femininity are never fully resolved (Brontë 489).

With the resolution of these feelings of anxiety still unrealized, the final chapter too ends by incorporating Gothic conventions. Mr. Rochester explains how he had been at his gloomiest, ready to give up hope, in the days before Jane’s arrival (Brontë 500-501). In his desperation he had called out to her one night and he thought he even heard her reply, prompting Jane to think, “reader, it was on Monday night— near midnight—that I too had received the mysterious summons: those were the very words by which I replied to it. I listened to Mr. Rochester’s narrative, but made no disclosure in return. The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed” (Brontë 501-502). In this moment, the uncanny is so strongly felt that Jane cannot bring herself to articulate the seemingly impossible that transpired to bring the couple back together. To this, it is no wonder that feminist critics have viewed the novel’s ending with Jane’s marriage to Mr. Rochester as retreating into gender normative ideals.

CONCLUSION

Weaving through the dialogue between Jane and Mr. Rochester reveals that critical feminist interpretations are not unfounded in bringing Gothic elements to
significantly bear on their readings. From Jane and Mr. Rochester's first meeting, through their time at Thornfield Hall, to the mystical force that prompts their return to one another, Gothic elements continually surround and are mentioned in their dialogue. As I have proposed in my own readings, I, similarly to Gilbert and Gubar, believe these Gothic conventions are linked to the anxieties and frustrations Jane experiences in navigating the expectations and confines of her gender. The stress and difficulty in doing so requires another form, which is provided for through the use of Gothic conventions, to articulate Jane's struggles.

Though not the focus of this paper, and only mentioned in brief, the novel's genre of Realism is also necessary to account for. As an autobiography, *Jane Eyre* wishes to convey the setting, events, and people as they actually are and dialogue is a tool through which to accomplish this. Though dialogue categorically falls more so within the genre of Realism, by using it to reveal the significant relationship between feminist criticism and Gothic conventions not only do I subtly show how the two genres work together, but I also reach a more unique argument— the focus of which is this paper— and I create a space where my own ideas may be contended. By positing conversation as the lens through which the connection between feminist critical readings and Gothic conventions can be understood, we are able to directly access "the subliminal intensity of Brontë's passion," which, as seen through the textual evidence, inspired both the novel's genre and its critics (Gilbert and Gubar 337).
Works Cited


