

Filming the First Mrs Rochester:
Depictions of Bertha Mason in Movies and Mini-Series

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1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë in her work *Jane Eyre* (1847) created a timeless phenomenon. The struggles of the governess, “Plain Jane’s Progress” (Gilbert 1996) gained a symbolic status during the decades. Many books, film adaptations and theoretical writings used Charlotte Brontë’s work as a foundation, however most of these like to show Jane as “the angel in the house”, her characterisation is constant, it is always the same in the film adaptations. The Bildungsroman of *Jane Eyre* would be another Cinderella story (Williams 7) without a widely ignored character who, in spite of her small part in the book, has an important role in Jane’s progress. She is the “monster” of the story, the shameful secret, “the madwoman in the attic” (Gilbert and Gubar 34), Bertha Mason. For a long time she was thought to be a Gothic element, a device to “evoke a mysterious atmosphere and create an ‘objective correlative’ for the main heroine’s anxiety of otherness” (Vrankova 13). This was changed by Jean Rhys, who believed that this oppressed character deserves a whole new novel with some background information instead of a few pages. Her work is *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which functions as a kind of prequel to *Jane Eyre* (Kirchknopf 30). Moreover, watching the innumerable film versions of *Jane Eyre* and the two film adaptations of *Wide Sargasso Sea* it can be seen that the rendering of Bertha Mason’s character to screen shows a great variety. In my work I will examine how the character developed from a simple Gothic element into the symbol of suppressed sexual passion because of the influence of critical writings, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the adaptations themselves.

First of all, I need to clarify here the two basic terms I will use throughout my thesis. It is well known, that Gothic in the 19th century novels also had a symbolic interpretation, for example *Dracula* in Bram Stoker’s famous work represents the fears and wishes of the Victorian society. However, in the analysis of the adaptation I concentrated on Gothic as a tool for creating terror and the symbolic interpretation of *Jane Eyre* regards the feminist reading of the story. The reason, I chose these two aspects, is that contrast between them is very sharp, especially in the case of the 1944 and 2006 versions.

One of the most important theoretical writings that changed the general view about Charlotte Brontë’s novel is *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in which the most significant segment is that Bertha Mason is not a monster but the double or doppelgänger of Jane. As *Wide Sargasso Sea* has a great influence on the interpretation of the *Jane Eyre*, the question of intertextuality has to be dealt with, which is for Harold Bloom “a product of the ‘anxiety of influence’” (Allen 137); that is, a concept

according to which the borrowing and transformation of another author's text happens. Gilbert and Gubar took Bloom's idea about the 'anxiety of influence' as a foundation and created a connection between gynocriticism and intertextuality. They stated that the idea of 'anxiety of influence' is male-oriented (cf. Oedipal model) and created the female version of this by using the term "anxiety of authorship" (Gilbert and Gubar 48-49). They state that in women writers' texts this 'anxiety' often appears in "images of otherness, madness, physical disturbance" (Allen 148). Finally, since my thesis mainly depends on film adaptations, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (Cartmell 2007) and *A Theory of Adaptation* (Hutcheon 2006) will be essential sources in the analysis of the adaptations and the character of Bertha. The examination will focus on how the differences between Hollywood-style adaptations (which allow themselves greater freedom) and heritage-style adaptations (which are often famous for their faithfulness) influence the interpretation of *Jane Eyre*.

2. Depicting Bertha/Antoinette

Before analysing the different film adaptations it is essential to take a look at the two basic works, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which provide the description of Bertha Mason/Antoinette Cosway. At first sight they seem to be two different women; but on closer scrutiny it is clear that Antoinette's development into Bertha Mason is the result of the constant oppression she has to bear as a colonised woman, because this meant that she is not only a woman from the colonies but also a feminine subject. I will examine Bertha's character taking into consideration Antoinette's character and the different critical writings which helped the development of Bertha into a symbol from a Gothic element.

The Bertha Mason appearing in *Jane Eyre* seems to be only a tool to show the angel in Jane; Brontë describes Bertha as the monster or the madwoman in the attic, who has to be defeated for Jane's happiness. Her character could not be called a main one, a protagonist, rather an antagonist (in the sense of an enemy). But could her character be interpreted as an antagonist? Throughout the novel, Bertha moves around like a ghost and causes more or less trouble, like setting her husband's bed on fire or attacking her brother. These atrocities all give Jane a chance to prove her bravery and caring nature. The very first time Jane meets "the monster", her double, face to face is when Bertha enters her room during the night to tear her veil the day before Jane's marriage. Jane describes this event to Mr. Rochester while they are going back to Thornfield.

On waking, a gleam dazzled my eyes; I thought—Oh, it is daylight! But I was mistaken; it was only candlelight. Sophie, I supposed, had come in. There was a light in the dressing-table, and the door of the closet, where, before going to bed, I had hung my wedding-dress and veil, stood open; I heard a rustling there. [...] The shape standing before me had never crossed my eyes within the precincts of Thornfield Hall before; the height, the contour were new to me. [...] It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell. [...] she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass. (Brontë 280-81)

These features were “fearful and ghastly”, she had “a discoloured face - it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!” Moreover she “was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes.” Finally Jane tells that the woman reminded her “of the foul German spectre - the Vampyre” (Brontë 281). This description shows that Bertha is indeed a nightmarish figure who lends Gothic atmosphere to the novel.

However, feminist critics called attention to the fact that the “apparitions” of Bertha have a far more important role, as she also appears as Jane’s double who “not only acts *for* Jane, she also acts *like* Jane” and she “has functioned as Jane’s dark double throughout the governess’s stay at Thornfield” (Gilbert and Gubar 360-61). By this the authors meant that Bertha is the embodiment of Jane’s unconscious desires and fears (cf. Sigmund Freud’s *id*), so for example when Bertha puts on Jane’s veil and Jane sees her in the looking-glass it is the revelation of her anxiety to become Mrs. Rochester. From this scary description it can be also observed that regarding their appearance the two women are utterly each other’s opposite. Jane, on the surface, is like the angel in the house described by Virginia Woolf in her essay “Professions for Women”: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was utterly unselfish. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure.” Furthermore, “[...] human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women” (106). But as Nóra Séllei writes, for Jane Bertha means everything that is regarded unspeakable for women and she always appears when Jane wants something unacceptable, like longing for more freedom or rebelling against the power of Rochester (182). She remains controlled while Bertha, who was a femme fatale for Mr. Rochester, with her open sexuality, aggressive and insane behaviour embodies everything the angel in the house has to avoid. “For what is madness but loss of control?” (Scargill 178). Nevertheless, critics have also pointed out that Bertha appears every time when Jane and Rochester get closer to each other emotionally. On these occasions she usually attacks Rochester and tries to destroy the man who imprisoned her and by pushing her among “the invisible and unheard sex” tried to silence her (Murfin 460). When Bertha is finally presented to the reader, it is still Rochester who tells the woman’s story, who blames Bertha’s Creole origins and lunatic family for the woman’s state. It is known from Jane’s narrative that Bertha “was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and

corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest—more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was” (Brontë 291). Sandra M. Gilbert emphasised that Bertha’s stature is the embodiment of Jane’s desire to be “equal in size and strength” with Rochester (492). I find it important to emphasise that Bertha is not a beautiful and fragile creature according to Brontë’s description, because later on in the film adaptations her character is often depicted as someone gorgeous and compelling as she develops into the symbol suppressed sexual passion.

In contrast, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* creates a very different picture about the madwoman in the attic. First, let me quote Francis Wyndham’s introduction to the novel.

For many years, Jean Rhys has been haunted by the figure of the first Mrs Rochester – the mad wife in *Jane Eyre*. [...] it [*Wide Sargasso Sea*] is in no sense a pastiche of Charlotte Brontë and exists in its own right, quite independent of *Jane Eyre*. But the Brontë book provided the initial inspiration [...] From her personal knowledge of the West Indies, and her reading of their history, Miss Rhys knew about the mad Creole heiresses in the early nineteenth century, whose dowries were only an additional burden to them: products of an inbred, decadent, expatriate society, resented by the recently freed slaves whose superstitions they shared, they languished uneasily in the oppressive beauty of their tropical surroundings, ripe for exploitation. (10-11)

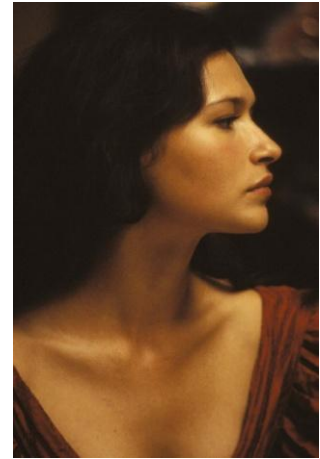
Talking about prequels or sequels always raises on the one hand the question of originality but on the other hand the problem of fidelity and plagiarism (Kirchknopf 30). There is always the risk that the audience will have reservations about the prequel/sequel after reading the original work. In an intertext like *Wide Sargasso Sea* two concerns of authors are manifested: to imitate the original author and to create something original (Allen 134). However, Jean Rhys managed to make a work that is autonomous from *Jane Eyre*; she believed that there are several Antoinettes and hers is not the same as Brontë’s; although she expressed many times her worries about distancing herself from Brontë’s work: “I realise what I lose by cutting loose from *Jane Eyre* and Mr Rochester [...] I believe firmly too that there was more than one Antoinette. [...] How then can *I* of all people, say she [Charlotte Brontë] was wrong? Or that her Bertha is impossible. *Which she is*. Or to get cheap publicity from her (often) splendid book?” (qtd. in Kirchknopf 91).

In this novel “the ‘off stage’ protagonist is taken ‘on stage’” (Vrankova 14), so now Bertha, here Antoinette gets a chance to tell her own story. As the first post-Victorian novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a great example of writings from the 1960s which attempted to deal with the changed situation caused by the loss of British imperial power. They dealt with oppressed voices, feminism and post-colonialism (Kirchknopf 59). Such a muted figure gets voice through Jean Rhys’s novel. Antoinette constantly experiences her environment as threatening and hostile. Because of her Creole origin she belongs nowhere, she is neither English nor black; that is why blacks usually call her kind “white cockroaches” (Rhys 20). Her mother’s ignorance, the threat and the expectations regarding her identity all play a role in the development of her mental state. Elizabeth Abel believes that Rhys’s heroines are not mad but suffer from the so-called “ambulatory schizophrenia” and they feel that their “true self is split off from both body and world and unable to interact in meaningful ways with either” (158). While Antoinette persistently tries to suit the image of the proper English girl, she gradually loses her own identity (if she has ever had one). The final step toward her “split-identity” is Rochester’s renaming (Kirchknopf 90). Antoinette describes the effects when she is already locked up in Thornfield: “Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass” (Rhys 147). There is also a sublime feeling in the novel which poisons the marriage and contributes to Antoinette’s development into Bertha. It is closer to Rochester than Antoinette in the book. He experiences everything as strange and uncivilised. “Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hill too near. And the woman is a stranger” (Rhys 59). He feels that nature overpowers him. The whole experience of the sublime comes from the clash of cultures, it originates from the conflict between “European and West Indian consciousness” (Vrankova 20), from Rochester’s incapability to accept her Creole wife and the indigenous culture of the West Indies. He also believes that “it is the exotic origin and Creole blood that causes Bertha’s lunacy” (Vrankova 14). The differences between Antoinette and Rochester gradually turn into hatred. When they leave for Thornfield their motto can be “let it be hell” (Rhys 144).

I find dealing with the two film adaptations of *Wide Sargasso Sea* relevant here as they also show interesting segments about the transition of Antoinette into Bertha Mason and they will play a significant role later on when the *Jane Eyre* adaptations are analysed. Interestingly enough, even these two versions show great differences in the portrayal of

Bertha and in the presentation of the story created by Rhys. A reason for avoiding the adaptation of this work might be that it is erotically exalted, filled with emotions and deals not only with a woman who is driven mad but also concerned with such issues as slavery, feminism and post-colonialism.

The first version of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from 1993, directed by John Duigan, with Karina Lombard in the main role, is a persuasive adaptation of the novel; however, the audience, after reading the book, might feel some lack of emotions (IMDb). There is a great emphasis on the colour red¹, which is the main symbol of Antoinette's feelings in the novel: the opening picture is made up of bunches of red flowers, the interior of Antoinette's house is dominated by red wallpapers and curtains, and of course there is the red dress which is a symbol both in the novel and in the film, though in the novel there are fewer references to the colour red until the third part. One significant moment when the reader starts to connect the colour to Antoinette is when she says in the convent that "I will write my name in fire red" (Rhys 35). Throughout the novel there are only hints at the colour red by flowers or a curtain but not as much as in the film. It is the last part of the book in which this colour becomes the symbol of Antoinette and her feelings. She fully identifies herself with her red dress. "Have you hidden my red dress too? If I'd been wearing that he [Richard] would have known me" (Rhys 149). All the symbolism connected to the red colour in the last part of the book is emphasised in the course of the movie. The red dress is the "embodiment of her [Antoinette's] sexual identity and transgressive female desire" (Reichmann 52)². Antoinette wears it first on the first night of their honeymoon when she and Rochester are having dinner. It is obviously the symbol of passion and raises Rochester's desires, too. Later, when Rochester has lost every interest in the woman, she tries to win him back by wearing the red dress, hoping that it will bring back the feelings of the man. At the end of the film, when she is already locked up at Thornfield, she is sitting in front of the fireplace, holding her red dress, which faithfully represents the description of the book. It is the dress



¹ The symbol of colour red will often appear in *Jane Eyre* adaptations, for example in the form of a neckerchief or a drapery, which will be discussed in more detail later on. It also has to be noted that the red colour is in connection with Jane too; her passionate nature is emphasised in the red-room scene.

² In Angelika Reichmann's essay "A Womb with a View – Approaches to Classic-novel Adaptation in Recent British Films" the colour red is also connected to Jane, because in the 2006 BBC adaptation directed by Susanna White the red colour often appears in the environment of Jane, which also has a symbolic meaning. This will be analysed in more detail later on.

and the fire that finally makes her realise what she has to do. “I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now” (Rhys 153). In the film this is shown by Antoinette staring in the flames and recalling the burning of their own house.

The three significant events from Antoinette’s childhood are also presented with great care, namely the sight of the dead horse, the burning of their house by the Negroes and the burning parrot. These are important because on the one hand they explain Antoinette’s mother’s madness and also “provide” the insecure background for Antoinette’s life. Through the different narrative voices the film also pictures the different parts first told by Antoinette, then by Rochester.

The difference between civilised and colonial culture is symbolized through dances. The Negroes, who are later described as “cousins, nephews and nieces” are dancing on the court barefoot to the sound of drums when Antoinette joins them and the whole dance turns into a rivalry between Antoinette and Amélie. This can be compared to another scene, in which Rochester attends a ball, with beautiful dresses, elegant gentlemen and classical music. Rochester dances with a lady who was also born in the West Indies, but talks about England as home, where she has never been. She also tells that a lady would never call the West Indies home. This shows a sharp difference between Antoinette and her world and Rochester’s. Antoinette gradually turns aggressive and alcoholic as Rochester treats her more severely; still, they are less passionate than one would expect.

In the case of this adaptation faithfulness to the original work is highly observable; however, an important element, that is the renaming of Antoinette, which is the final step towards her split personality, is left out. What is also conspicuous is the director’s supposition that the audience is familiar with *Wide Sargasso Sea* and knows that it is a prequel to *Jane Eyre*. This may be hypothesized from the ending in which Mrs Fairfax goes up to the third floor to tell Grace Poole that “the master is marrying Jane Eyre”. Still, this is not the best approach as a good adaptation has to be meaningful for both “knowing and unknowing audiences” (Hutcheon 121). It is true that *Jane Eyre* has been known widely by 1993, but it is not evident that everyone has read it.

The latest version of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from 2006, produced by BBC (Maher), grabs faithfully the spirit of the novel; yet the eliminations and the casting in the case of Antoinette are highly questionable. It is true that movies necessarily include reductions in the story and in complexity, but this often has negative effects on the final production

(Hutcheon 36). This adaptation left out the complete childhood of Antoinette, by which the responsibility for the madness of the woman is utterly incumbent on the failed marriage and the madness in the family. Though, as mentioned above, the problem is more complex than this. Director Brendan Maher found a creative solution for the question of connecting *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* without drumming this into the audience's head. He also managed to avoid the problem of the "not knowing audience" by not mentioning directly *Jane Eyre*. The movie starts with the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* when Antoinette is wandering in Thornfield. A painting of the West Indies makes her recall her life story from the meeting with Rochester until the day they departed to England. The very end of the film is the burning of Thornfield, without showing Antoinette's suicide and giving a frame structure to it.³

The other questionable point of the film is the actress, Rebecca Hall, featuring as Antoinette Cosway. Her performance is beyond reproach, she shows the transformation of Antoinette into the madwoman perfectly, although there is nothing exotic or Creole in her features as she is a typical English girl. (The 1993 version is even more authentic as creators paid attention to give an accent to Antoinette.) In the case of this film all the ideas of post-colonialism and colonial woman lose their meaning, such as that white men are highly attracted to colonial women with inevitable sexual seduction for the reason of racial blending and spreading of civilisation (Bókay 533). Here "not knowing audiences" will not understand why Rochester finds Antoinette repulsive.



This film is also framed by means of the dresses. When Antoinette and Rochester go to the honeymoon house the woman wears a black dress with a white collar, which is very similar to the one Bertha wore in the 1944 *Jane Eyre* adaptation. This dress is a kind of symbol of Western civilisation; she is the embodiment of the decent English girl. Until the end of the film she usually wears a simple white dress, except when Rochester tells her to put on the red dress, which makes her a femme fatale, the seductive, exotic woman and

³ Interestingly enough, here the picture of Thornfield bears an uncanny resemblance to the scene used in the *Jane Eyre* adaptation released a month earlier (White), in which Jane watches the flickering light of Rochester's candle as he is approaching the third floor room of Bertha. Here this scene indicates Antoinette as she approaches the roof.

the object of Rochester's desire. She will hold that dress while she is eavesdropping when Rochester is cheating on her with Amélie. At the end when Rochester tells her that they are going to England, she wears the black dress again with her hair made into a bun. As opposed to this the colour red, which is an important symbol and mainly connected to Antoinette does not appear very strikingly in this version, but by paying attention it can be discovered in many scenes in flowers, in a coverlet or in the wallpaper⁴. At the end of the film Antoinette's departure is visualised in a symbolic way: she takes her black hat from her dressing table on which a bunch of bright red flowers remain, which can be interpreted as Antoinette's leaving behind her old life and accepting the role of Bertha Mason.

In both analyses I deliberately avoided naming Antoinette Bertha, because this name is not mentioned in either version. In the 1993 one, renaming is completely missing, while in the latest one Rochester does not rename her but gives her the nickname 'Netti', which can be even a sign of affection. As I have pointed out above, giving Antoinette an English name, which is alien from her mother's, had a great significance.

It is true for the two *Wide Sargasso Sea* adaptations that what is missing from one can be found in the other. Both films left out essential elements, which prove Robert Richardson's theory that "what makes a good film doesn't make a good novel and what makes a good novel doesn't necessarily make a good film" (Cartmell 1). It is also true that for creators it is often hard to make a text of their own, which results in an unsuccessful adaptation (Hutcheon 20). However, in the case of these movies it cannot be claimed that they are unsuccessful; they both have their shortcomings but there are certain points which make them adequate.

Antoinette is clearly muted by Rochester by the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and what remains for her in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is the groaning and laughing which means rebellion against full oppression. The death of Bertha, the death of the monster means the end of Jane's struggles as "after the broken marriage ceremony the mad woman and all she represents stand as a barrier between the lovers" (Scargill 178). Although it is important to note that the death of Bertha has more meaning than simply the triumph of the heroine. First of all, Jane cannot be regarded as a traditional heroine who won the battle as she ran away after the main obstacle was revealed. Bertha committed suicide by which she made equality between Jane and Rochester possible by the "symbolic castration" of the man (Gilbert and Gubar 368). The second point is the consequence of the first one, that *Jane*

⁴ The 2006 *Jane Eyre* adaptation and this version are connected by the wallpapers, because thanks to their colour and pattern, they are very similar.

Eyre has a happy ending but not in the traditional sense. There is a “hesitation between [...] a happy and an unhappy ending” (Lodge 149). The lovers are reunited and they can marry but they cannot live without the shadow of the mad wife who made the man a cripple needing the help of his wife through his entire life.⁵

After having a closer look at the character of Bertha it is possible that her role had been invented only for creating a Gothic atmosphere, but through a critical eye it becomes noticeable that mainly thanks to critical readings, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the background information it provides, she rather becomes a symbol of rebellion against oppression in the latest film adaptations.

⁵ According to some theorists Jane also “participates in creating an English national identity by acting as an idealist purifier of Rochester's alliance with another race, whom, though maimed and blinded but cleansed, she finally marries” (Kirchknopf 104).

3. Film adaptations of *Jane Eyre*

The following section will focus on the film adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, in particular on the characterisation of Bertha Mason searching for the possible influences which explain the differences. *Jane Eyre* can pride itself on a long motion picture history, as there are adaptations from the very beginning of film making, which are black and white silent movies. Then the talking picture appeared, like the 1934 or 1944 versions followed by the technicolour ones. Since then *Jane Eyre* has been made into Hollywood prestige films and also series by the BBC. The great variety in the representation of the madwoman was the one that made me curious, as this proves that directors from time to time understood this character differently also because of the influences that surrounded them at their time. The era itself and such writers as Virginia Woolf, works like *Wide Sargasso Sea* (accompanied by its adaptations) and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* had a great effect on the forming of Bertha Mason. After watching and analysing the movies it is noticeable too that not only critical and theoretical works but also the adaptations themselves influenced each other and their creators by giving inspiration for the representation of certain parts or for creating the mystery around Bertha Mason's character, therefore some common features can be found in certain versions of the films. It is also true that nowadays, when there are innumerable *Jane Eyre* adaptations, directors are required to show novelty in their versions, they are haunted by Bloom's "anxiety of influence" (Allen 137), which also helped Bertha's development from an ignored or underrated character into a symbol of suppressed sexuality. Thus, in my analysis I will follow this progress of the madwoman in the attic: how she evolved from a simple Gothic device into a symbol. It will be generally true that the earliest version does not pay much attention to Bertha's character, as for a long time critics found the character a romantic exaggeration, an unnecessary Gothic element. From this state she emerged, by the help of feminist writers, as Jane's "doppelgänger" (Séllei 171, 174); her role's Gothic interpretation reaches its peak by the 1944 version. After this the 1970 and 1973 adaptations will mark a transitory period by fusing a Gothic reading with a symbolism of oppression. By comparison, the 1996 version will mean a setback as it ignores both Gothic and symbolic understanding. Emblematic representation reaches its peak by the help of the 2006 mini-series, while the 2011 version will, on the one hand, employ symbolic interpretation, but on the other hand will also isolate itself from earlier adaptations and introduce novelties in representation. Therefore, in the following I will have a closer look at *Jane Eyre* adaptations by analysing

how the five significant events regarding Bertha, namely the first laugh heard by Jane, setting Rochester's bed on fire, attacking Richard Mason, tearing Jane's veil, introducing the madwoman in the attic and setting the house itself on fire, and the character herself are depicted in the different film adaptations. As Bertha's character, these events are treated in various ways; some parts are omitted, sometimes the madwoman is not shown at all and in other versions she has a greater role than in the book.

3.1. "It was a curious laugh – distinct, formal, mirthless"⁶

According to critics those occasions when Bertha Mason somehow appears in the book are the best examples of Rochester's oppression towards both women. Jane is not allowed to ask about the above mentioned events, and also Bertha is the object-lesson, as she is the victim of "Rochester's masculine authority, she herself is doomed to silence", only the screams, deeds and the laugh remain for her (Séllei 181). From the early times up to 1996 it will be seen that creators used Bertha's character or rather her laugh to create a Gothic atmosphere but in the two latest versions the first laugh will gain a symbolic interpretation.

It is true in general that the early adaptors of *Jane Eyre* were quite liberal regarding the story created by Charlotte Brontë. In the 1940s a questionnaire proved that only few people had read *Jane Eyre*; consequently the audience did not have real experience with the book, which means that they were not affected by it (Hutcheon 121-22). For them the film meant the first encounter with the story of the governess, which gave greater freedom to the scriptwriters and directors. The earliest version of the *Jane Eyre* adaptations I have chosen is from 1934 directed by Christy Cabanne with Claire Du Brey in the role of Bertha Mason (IMDb). The film was released by a Hollywood film studio, Monogram Pictures and as other Hollywood prestige films, it treated the plot and setting in an extremely liberal way (Troost 76). On The Internet Movie Database this work received only 4,7 points from 10 and one of the posts says: "Worst Version Ever". This "critique" is of course a bit harsh and after taking into consideration that in 1934 not many people knew what *Jane Eyre* is, the production cannot be judged by comparing it with the book. In itself this version is a romance with a dramatic element, which is Bertha Mason. The well-known laugh (the first sign of Bertha's existence) which Jane heard on the second day of her arrival to Thornfield is replaced by a loud and rather terrified scream followed by a hysterical laugh. However,

⁶ Brontë 108.

it is not treated as something serious and the shivering feeling evoked by the novel is missing (00:23:26-00:23:54). The whole scene resembles rather a melodrama.

Ten years later came another production from Hollywood, directed by Robert Stevenson and released by the Twentieth Century Fox Studios with Orson Welles as Mr Rochester and young Elizabeth Taylor as Helen Burns (IMDb). At first sight it is another typical Hollywood movie, although it is much closer to the book than the previous one. The common element in them is that they solved the problem of an autobiography⁷, namely the monologue parts by showing the diary or the book itself which connects the parts. However, the 1944 version is far more Gothic in atmosphere, it is usually dark, the castle itself is like one from a horror movie, there are often storms and ground fog and the music is often fast and scary, which is a good foundation for a thriller with some romance. The first laugh as it appears in the book is omitted or rather it is blurred with another scene; it will be the sound that wakes up Jane when Bertha sets Rochester's bed on fire (00:45:08). The same is true for the first coloured version from 1970 produced by British Omnibus Productions (Mann).

The mini-series from the year of 1973 (Craft) produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation adapted the story in five episodes, which (as series usually) provides more time for presenting the details of the book. Serials show more fidelity to the plot and the dialogues; however, this does not mean that they fully resemble the original (Troost 78). In this adaptation the laugh is depicted as written in *Jane Eyre*, but it happens in a different situation. Jane is with Adèle, they are studying when Jane hears the "mirthless laugh" (Brontë 108). Adèle pays no attention to it, but Jane goes out to find the source when she meets Mrs Fairfax, who of course tells her that it is Grace Poole⁸ (Episode 2, 00:33:03-00:34:27).

⁷ *Jane Eyre* was originally published as *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*. Selling a fictional work as a story based on real events was a common method in Brontë's time to give the work more credibility.

⁸ Grace Poole's role during the novel is more than keeping Bertha at the attic room. As Gilbert and Gubar observed it: "Grace Poole, the most enigmatic of the women Jane meets at Thornfield [...] is obviously associated with Bertha, almost as if [...] she were the madwoman's public representative" (350).

The next adaptation, which is an American-European collaboration, is the work of the famous director, Franco Zeffirelli, from 1996. Despite the fact that the book is simplified and many significant events are left out or changed, the first laugh is at the right place at the right time, but the scariness is missing as the dark, daunting Gothic castle is turned into a bright, cosy building which no one would suppose to be a haunted place. Among these circumstances it sounds strange that Mrs Fairfax tells Jane that her room is small but more friendly than the bigger ones in the front, which are “dreary and solitary and no one ever sleeps there; one would almost say if there were a ghost in Thornfield Hall that would be its haunt” (00:30:20-00:30:29). Although after the comparison of the corridor that leads to the front and the one in the 1944 version it becomes obvious that the Gothic image is completely changed into a rather Romantic one.



Another BBC mini-series is from 2006 (White), which is an excellent example of fusion adaptation with heritage elements too. As time passed “the BBC expanded its mission beyond providing education and culture to the nation [...] serials and telefilms changed. Faithfulness to the novel was no longer paramount. [...] Hollywood style and British heritage style fused” (Troost 82). This explains the reinterpretation in the 2006 version, in which the laughter scene gained a far more symbolic emphasis than earlier ones as the laugh was completely replaced with a red fabric, which is tied to one of the windows and gently floats in the air. The colour red is closely connected to Bertha and, although it does not become obvious until the end of the series that the fabric belongs to her. So the mystery, caused by the laughter in *Jane Eyre*, still remains, although in a more symbolic way. (The image of the floating red fabric appears several times in the episodes.) Jane believes that Adèle plays up in the tower room, but Mrs Fairfax explains that no one lives there only Grace Poole goes to that place every now and then (Part 1, 00:20:03-00:20:35). This “metaphorical sequence of red clothes-heat-fire-blood-passion-love-desire-destruction” will feature in the whole series (Reichmann 51).



The latest version of this cult book was directed by Cary Fukunaga and was released in 2011 as the cooperation of the English BBC Films and the American Focus Features (IMDb). It is also a fine example of fusion adaptation as Fukunaga is almost entirely faithful to the dialogues; however, he completely changed the narrative sequence of events. The whole story is drawn up from Jane's flashbacks; she constantly remembers details from her past while she is staying with the Rivers family. These shifts in time are "potentially more effective than in prose fiction where the narrating voice stands between the characters immersed in time and the reader" (Hutcheon 63). This new kind of interpretation can be explained by Fukunaga's desire to show a by that time well-known story from another point of view. "When I signed on for the job I was like, 'there hasn't been a movie in 70 years! It's about time!' Then suddenly I found out there were like 20 versions of it" (Whitehouse). Yet, in another interview he also admits that he has seen only the Robert Stevenson version of the novel from 1944⁹ (Roberts). His originality appears in the case of Bertha's first laugh which is replaced by a story from Adèle which rather sounds like a childish nightmare: "Sophie told me there is a woman who walks the halls of this house at night. I have never seen her but people say she has hair black as ebony white skin like the moon and eyes like sapphires. She can also walk through the walls. They say she comes to suck your blood" (00:30:27-00:30:58). This portrayal can remind the audience of a vampire, but this is different from Jane's description of the "foul German spectre" (Brontë 281)¹⁰. The woman described by Adèle sounds to be attractive and irresistible, which corresponds to these days' general view about vampires.

In these scenes it is noticeable that in the first half of the adaptations most creators treated Bertha as a Gothic component to evoke curiosity and shivering. However, the two latest versions already involve connotations about suppressed passion by the use of the red fabric or by the suggestion about vampires, who are usually imagined as seductive creatures. These elements replace the laugh, which is the first sign of Bertha's existence and give her a more mystical and symbolic atmosphere.

⁹ The scene when Jane first meets Rochester shows lots of similarities to the 1944 version which might be regarded as a proof for this.

¹⁰ However, the image of an ebony-black haired and white skinned woman can also recall the figure of Snow White.

3.2. “Who is there? Something gurgled and moaned. [...] Tongues of flame darted round the bed: the curtains were on fire”¹¹

The second time that the “ghost” of Thornfield uses its/her voice is when Jane hears that something or someone is tampering with her door, but when she steps out of the room, she finds only a burning candle and smells smoke in the air. She finds Mr Rochester in the midst of the flames, wakes him up and they put out the fire together. Then the man leaves her alone in the room to run some errands (Brontë 149-151). Naturally, the scapegoat of the whole event is Grace Poole. Fire is a widely recognised symbol of passion; however, only the 2006 version will use it in this sense. Nevertheless, all of the creators considered it important enough to depict the fire scene in their films, though it was interpreted in various ways (some used it as the first apparition of Bertha and others put greater emphasis on it than the rest).

As I have already mentioned, earlier versions handle the plot of the novel in a liberal way and this is quite true in the case of the 1934 version. The whole scene takes place when the Ingrams are already staying in Thornfield. Rochester is in his bed, sleeping, when a shadow appears on his blanket and then a hand holding a candle is shown which sets one of the curtains of the bed on fire. It is depicted that Jane is having nightmares and at the same time Bertha is shown as she calmly walks back to her room, and after closing the door she laughs hysterically. This is what wakes Jane, who then smells the smoke and goes to find its source (00:35:07-00:35:42).¹² In my opinion this little interlude has no serious role compared to the book; it does not evoke fear as Bertha herself seems to be a decent woman and the characters themselves ignore it, which makes the viewers uninterested too.

As I have written above in the 1944 adaptation the first laugh is blurred with the fire scene. Jane hears “a demonic laugh” (Brontë 149) which wakes her up and opening the door she finds a candle on the floor. The laugh and a very fast, sharp music of violins give a scary atmosphere to the scene. Jane runs to Rochester’s room where half of the bed is burning. Here the violins are accompanied by trumpets and drums, which make the whole scene more effective. Jane is left alone in the room and watches Rochester or rather the

¹¹ Brontë 149.

¹² Interestingly enough, as they showed who committed the crime the Grace Poole explanation is completely impossible here, but what is more, Jane is not really interested in the cause of the fire. By this the mysterious, Gothic line of the story is erased. The viewer is rather curious about the identity of the woman but does not feel fear.

light that flickers through the small windows as the man goes up to one of the towers¹³ (00:45:05-00:46:25). Except for this part the scene itself is faithful to its source text, the change is necessary as in a film visual experiences are the telling parts. In the book Jane sits in the dark and listens to noises as Rochester leaves and then returns (Brontë 151); in the film this is solved by Jane's watching the light fading away and then flashing again.



Faithfulness to plot and dialogue dominates both in the 1970 and 1973 adaptations in which the happenings follow that of the book. In the 1973 version Jane is lying in her bed, contemplating when she hears the cracking of the floor outside. When she asks “Who is there?” the answer is a frightening laugh which then, unlike in the book, turns into a desparate, sobbing sound. Apart from this the two films go on in the same way: stepping out of the room, Jane finds the burning candle on the floor and sees the smoke coming out of Rochester's room. Both pillars and curtains of the bed are on fire, but as there is no music as in the earlier version the dramatic feeling is missing. By this time *Jane Eyre* was a more familiar story and as this version is a series there are more correspondences between the book and the adaptation, since by that time there were expectations on the part of the audience. As Linda Hutcheon writes, “Without foreknowledge, we are more likely to greet a film version simply as a new film” (121).

Franco Zeffirelli's romantic love story skips most of the Gothic elements of the book, but it keeps the fire scene; however, it evokes different feelings than what is expected. The function of it is rather like in the 1934 version, only an interlude which brings Jane and Rochester together, the panic it causes turns into a romantic moment in Rochester's study (00:57:17-00:58:36). Zeffirelli used here a horror movie cliché with a window slamming in the wind which wakes up Jane, so Bertha's laugh and the tampering with the door has lost its priority.

The other BBC mini-series that I have examined takes this whole scene in a very dramatic way. This is the version in which there is great emphasis on fire, passion and the colour red, for which this part of the series is a good example. In previous adaptations only one or two curtains were on fire but here the picture is more impressive. One evening Jane wakes up because someone is shaking her bedroom's door. In this version there is a constantly returning music which will be later connected to Bertha; it is a slow, threatening

¹³ This solution will inspire two directors of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* adaptations later on in 2006 as both versions will use a very similar image for this scene.

music with piano, organ and violins and a ticking sound of a clock, which besides being threatening contains something mysterious. It is usually “music that reinforces emotions or provokes reactions in the audience and directs our interpretation of different characters” (Hutcheon 81). In this case the intruder is only Pilot, but Jane seems to be scared and the experience provides the basis for the next evening. She wakes for the door again, the ticking sound starts (like the clock striking midnight, the time when ghosts appear), although Jane is not scared yet as she believes it is the dog again. “Go away Pilot!” (Part 1, 00:47:55) but opening the door she finds no one there.

The viewers can hear the wind whizzing, running steps and a laugh like that of a mischievous child. Jane follows these sounds while Bertha’s theme is being played and she gets to Rochester’s room. What she finds inside is Rochester lying in the middle of a frame made up of fire (like passion trying to consume him). This depiction of the scene is far more impressive and spectacular than in any other adaptation. Part one ends with this shot which is a good marketing device as it provides audience for the next episode. In the following the viewers can feel some déjà vu; Jane is left alone and goes to the window where she “watches Rochester or rather the light that flickers through the small windows as the man goes up to one of the towers” just like in the 1944 version.



Emotions are missing the most from the latest version of *Jane Eyre*; the fire scene lacks both fear and passion. Jane hears some noise and a brief laugh, which she does not mention later and when she sees the fire she is rather calm and acts in a slow-paced manner (00:48:30-00:49:02). It is well-known from the book that “women are supposed to be very calm generally” and maybe that is why Fukunaga depicted Jane in this way; however, in the book she rushes and runs (Brontë 111, 149-50). Interestingly enough, Jane does not get, moreover does not even claim an explanation for the whole incident; consequently, the Grace Poole line is left out. In an interview the director spoke about his opinion regarding the woman: “I think the whole Grace Poole plotline and suspecting Grace Poole is like... Jane, in the book never really goes all out to find out what’s happening to Grace Poole, and I feel like these days, it would be like, why wouldn’t she? If she thinks Grace Poole is doing these things, why would she be okay with being in a house with her, why would she

be okay with her wandering around starting fires in people's bedrooms? It just creates more questions than it answers" (Mellor).

As it can be seen the symbolical meaning of the fire scene was the most dominant in the 2006 version; in the earlier versions it serves as a Gothic element and the creators were faithful to the book, while in the 2011 version the symbolism of the fire is less emphatic, although Fukunaga's novelty appears in the exclusion of Grace Poole from the events.

3.3. "Good God! What a cry!"¹⁴

As the story gets closer to the concrete manifestation of the madwoman, later versions from 1970 and 1973 start to use more symbolism in their representation, thanks to mainly the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which was published only a few years earlier and brought fresh insights into the character of Bertha Mason.

The next occasion when Jane has to prove her bravery occurs during the visit of the Ingrams and an unknown man who is later introduced as Richard Mason. There is a full moon¹⁵, when a cry interrupts the silent evening in Thornfield. Everyone is frightened but Rochester explains that "a servant has had the nightmare" (Brontë 206). Jane is the one whom Rochester chooses to help; as it turns out there is no problem with the servants but with the stranger, Richard Mason. They arrive at

a room I [Jane] remembered to have seen before, the day Mrs Fairfax showed me over the house: 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. Mr. Rochester, putting down his candle, said to me, "Wait a minute," and he went forward to the inner apartment. A shout of laughter greeted his entrance; noisy at first, and terminating in Grace Poole's own goblin ha! ha! *She* then was there. (Brontë 208)

Jane is left alone in the room, to take care of Mason, and she feels the terror of the situation as only a door keeps away the "monster" (in her mind Grace Poole) from her. Sitting there

¹⁴ Brontë 205.

¹⁵ The full moon is sometimes correlated with lunacy for which we can find an explanation in the etymology of the word itself as it comes from the Latin word *lūna* which means moon.

with the wounded man, terrified she has to “listen for the movements of the wild beast or the fiend in yonder side-den. But since Mr. Rochester’s visit it seemed spellbound: all the night I heard but three sounds at three long intervals,—a step creak, a momentary renewal of the snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan” (Brontë 209). It seems that Bertha turned into an animal-like beast (a werewolf) during the full moon.

Although this scene has a great significance in Jane’s development, it is not adapted by all creators. In the case of the 1934 version there is not much to do as this part of the book is completely ignored. As there are many changes in the film compared to the book this absence has no deeper meaning it is only because of (as in previous parts) the lack of background knowledge on the part of the audience. In contrast, the 1944 version gives an impressive and genuine representation: Thornfield is presented from the outside and the focus is on a window where shadows of fighting people¹⁶ appear followed by the scream of a man accompanied by the menacing music of tubas, trumpets and drums. After arriving to the room on a winding staircase the rest of the part is more or less faithful, but to make it a bit scarier instead of “step creak, a momentary renewal of the snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan” (Brontë 209) someone desperately tries to open the door which separates Jane and Grace/Bertha, which is followed by a bitter weep. Later when Rochester returns also a harsh scream is audible (01:03:08-01:04:54). These changes make the scene more frightening and make this Hollywood movie more effective.



In terms of faithfulness the 1970 and the 1973 versions are the best ones regarding this part of the book. The events happen as they were written down in the book, and Bertha makes the voices described in the novel; however, in the earlier one instead of a step the audience can hear that she breaks something. But it is true that in both she is rather like an animal (she makes dog-like sounds in the earlier and cat-like sounds in the latest version). In the 1970 adaptation some possible effect of *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be traced: the door that was covered with a tapestry in *Jane Eyre* is here covered with a bright red curtain that hides Bertha with her passion and anger. In the prequel these emotions are symbolised by her red dress and this colour red will be identified with Antoinette.

¹⁶ This technique is a typical cliché in detective stories, thrillers or even in horror movies.

Franco Zeffirelli in his version made some speculation about how Richard Mason could get close to Bertha; however, this is not explained in the book. Grace Poole seems to be intoxicated from which Mason takes advantage (01:09:26-01:09:40). Besides this the scene ignores all the Gothic, horror-like elements. No groaning, no creak, the whole scene is about a minute long. There is some talking about a mysterious person who wanted to suck Mason's blood and who, despite of this, should be protected according to the man. This might make Jane and the audience curious but definitely not scared.

Before the 2006 mini-series depicts this event it makes the audience excited by a story told by Adèle, just like the later 2011 version with its tale about the ghost who wanders around the house at night.¹⁷ After this basis the sharp scream that roams Thornfield becomes twice as scary as in previous adaptations. Again, the 2006 adaptation shows similarities to the 1944 version. First, in both films Jane and Rochester go up on a spiral staircase to Bertha's chamber. Secondly, instead of strange voices someone furiously tries to open the door just like in the 1944 version (Part 2, 00:35:13-00:40:50).

In the latest version of *Jane Eyre* there are quite great differences compared to the book. The tapestry which hides the door and which should be half hung is completely covering the entrance here. From behind it no clearly identifiable noises come, some cracking and something like the whoosh of wind but it sometimes sounds like a human who imitates a ghost with a long-drawn 'boo'. Besides this the whole scene is, as in the 1996 version, cut short, Rochester returns quite quickly (01:02:45-01:05:01).

As it was already mentioned in the 1970s *Wide Sargasso Sea* meant a very fresh experience and gave a radically different picture about the madwoman in the attic. This might be the reason for a more widespread usage of the symbols of the novel in later *Jane Eyre* adaptations. It can be also noticed that the shaking of the door, which was used twice in the film versions is first (in the 1944 version) a Gothic element to raise fear, then in 2006 it is the symbol of breaking out of oppression.

3.4. "...she took my veil from its place [...] she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror..."¹⁸

Before the reader meets Bertha Mason "face to face" she takes another journey in the house, now to Jane's room where she puts on Jane's wedding veil and examines herself in

¹⁷ I cannot declare that Fukunaga got the idea from this version as in an interview he admitted that he has only seen the 1944 version. If this is true, than both directors invented two very similar additions; if it is not, Fukunaga surely had his reason to deny the truth (Whitehouse).

¹⁸ Brontë 281.

the looking-glass. This is the first time Jane sees her double, but as she wakes from several nightmares her description of the woman is filled with fantasy elements. Then, before leaving the room, she takes off the “veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them” (Brontë 281). As it was already observed above Bertha has a more important role in this part than it seems. After Gilbert and Gubar called attention to it, the act of tearing the veil gained greater significance. When Rochester starts to treat Jane like a doll and dresses her in beautiful and expensive clothes she starts to feel that the new Jane is a stranger. When she looks in the mirror wearing her wedding dress, Jane Rochester looks at her, not Jane Eyre, and this frightens her. Taking this into consideration, critics claimed that Bertha here is the “avatar of Jane” and when she tears the veil she fulfils Jane’s desire (Gilbert and Gubar 359-60). When Jane sees Bertha’s veiled face in the mirror, it is the first time she sees her “terrible double” (Gilbert and Gubar 362). This symbolical scene also reveals the truth for Jane, something like a warning that this will happen to her if she marries Rochester. However, not all of the creators are of the same mind with critics, which is proved by the fact that only three of them adapted finally this part. In the earlier versions (1970, 1973) the creators tried to grab the essence of this scene, but both versions were released before Gilbert and Gubar’s work, so the products lack the real symbolism of the event, though the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is still traceable just as in the 2006 version. That is why the 1934, 1944 and 1996 versions are not relevant here and it is recognisable that these are the versions which mostly lack symbolism, but the fourth one from 2011 is slightly different. In the final version of the film this scene does not appear, although thanks to modern technology and extras on DVDs deleted scenes are often available, which is very useful here as it is the most impressive depiction of the scene and consequently I will include it in my analysis.

The 1970 version reinterpreted the scene in a way that suggests the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as Bertha is not shown directly but the whole scene is seen from her point of view and this is the first time the audience see the happenings from her perspective. Her breathing can be heard as she slowly gets closer and closer to the sleeping Jane. Then she turns her head towards the wedding gown and the veil on it, which she puts on. As it completely covers her face and there is only a shaft of light she remains unidentifiable (01:03:22-01:04:25). It is important that Jane does not wake up and does not



see Bertha as she later in the book tells Rochester that she is sure that it was not Mrs Fairfax or Sophie, not even Grace Poole (Brontë 281). The tearing of the veil is also left out here; Bertha simply drops it on the ground, which has no significance as Jane can say that it simply slipped down. (Otherwise, if the tearing took place, as in the novel, it would be a mystery how it happened.)

The adaptation created three years later clearly includes the possibility that the director took into consideration both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and feminist writings. This is the most faithful one compared to other adaptations. When Bertha enters Jane's room, her hair is covering her face and she starts to chuckle as she looks at Jane, then suddenly turns sad and agonized. Afterwards, she takes Jane's wedding dress and examines herself in the mirror, where the possible impact of *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be detected: Bertha stretches out her hand to touch her reflection but springs back in fear. In the third part of the prequel Antoinette writes: "there is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now" (Rhys 147). This fear then can be interpreted as a shock caused by the sight of her present appearance. The looking-glass is a central motif in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and even when Antoinette states she sees herself, she "is simultaneously seeing the other" (Erwin 144). After that Bertha puts on the veil, though when Jane starts to speak "Sophie, what are you doing?" she furiously tears the veil in two, throws it on the ground and tries to hide in the dark. When she sees that Jane stares at her she grabs the candle, puts it close to her face and when Jane lies unconscious Bertha puts out the candle and leaves the room laughing (Episode 4, 00:21:36-00:22:10).

The 2006 version, from which a detailed representation of the plot would be expected, devotes only 30 seconds to the whole scene; still it involves a short reference to *Wide Sargasso Sea* as only the hand which holds the candle¹⁹ and the red sleeves of the dress the figure is wearing are depicted. The audience is informed of the events later when Jane shows Rochester the veil torn in two (Episode 4, 00:35:09-00:36:34). As this version depicted Bertha differently than described in the book, here the creators had to avoid showing the woman directly. (This will be explained in more detail in the following section.)

As I have already mentioned, the 2011 version is slightly different than the other adaptations; the veil scene is shot, but it cannot be found in the final version of the film, only among the deleted scenes. Significantly, this way the gorgeous visualisation of the

¹⁹ It can be noted that the picture is similar to the one we have seen in the 1934 version.

events in this version does not influence the audience and the symbolism of the scene is lost too; although, it is a great loss. Bertha is crouching before Jane's cupboard, wearing the veil when Jane wakes up. She believes it is Adèle or Sophie, but when the woman turns around she becomes frightened. Bertha pushes the veil close to her own face, in a manner which suggests that she wants to suffocate herself, but then she tears it into two to create a hole and takes a deep breath, like getting rid of the strain of being Mrs Rochester. In the following seconds the symbolism suggested by feminist critics, namely that Bertha is the embodiment of on the one hand Jane's suppressed sexuality and on the other hand her anxiety about "the world of sexual passion, physical intercourse [...] which she feels she is on the point of entering into" (Edwards 93) is clearly depicted. The whole scene turns into an erotic vision as Bertha lies on Jane and smells her body, which seems to be also an "answer to Jane's [...] vague sexual longings" (Moglen 124). When she reaches Jane's neck, the girl wakes believing that it was a dream until she sees the torn veil.

It is clear therefore that the three adaptations that depicted this scene moved toward a symbolic interpretation, but in the 1970 and 1973 versions suggestions to the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* are more emphatic than Bertha's role as Jane's double. The best adaptation in this case would have been the 2011 one as it fully marks the transition of Bertha into a symbolic figure of suppressed sexual power.

3.5. "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not at first sight tell..."²⁰

Hitherto there were only preparations to the meeting with Jane's monstrous double, but now she is introduced to the reader. Following the sequence of events described in the novel Richard Mason interrupts Jane and Rochester's wedding telling that Rochester still has a wife, Bertha Antoinetta Mason. As Rochester knows that there is no way to hide the truth anymore he makes a decision: "I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs Poole's patient, and *my wife!*" (Brontë 290). I have already given Jane's description of Bertha above but despite of her detailed narrative, it will be seen that there are no two creators who represent the mad woman in the same way. My earlier remark about the change of Bertha's role, explicitly that the 1944 version is the one in which a Gothic atmosphere dominates, the adaptations from the 1970s mark a transition and that the 2006

²⁰ Brontë 291.

and 2011 versions are filled with symbolism, is the most noticeable in the adaptation of this scene.

The earliest of the films draws an extremely different picture of the madwoman than what is given in the book. She is rather calm when she wanders into the hallway where Rochester and Jane are planning their wedding. (It is rather interesting how she is able to walk alone in the house when she is constantly locked up.) She wears a simple black dress with a white collar and her hair is combed into a bun²¹, which gives the impression of a well-mannered lady, not an animal like mad woman. Then she addresses Rochester, which reveals that her mental state is not as stable as it looks like. She calls Edward her husband and believes that the wedding preparations are made for them for a second wedding and thinks that Jane will be one of the guests. When she is taken away by Grace Poole and some of the servants, she becomes confused, starts to shout and then comes the “curious, mirthless laugh” (Brontë 108). Practically this is the only thing that reminds us of the Bertha from the book (00:49:05-00:49:55).



The most peculiar thing about the 1944 version is that Bertha is never shown directly, her face is not visible. When Rochester opens the door that locks away Bertha, the camera depicts the scene from behind the woman. The whole room is very dark as Bertha attacks Rochester accompanied by growling and animal-like sounds, like a dog trying to lacerate its prey. Bertha grabs Rochester and pulls him into the dark room; only the noises of the fighting can be heard. When Rochester manages to overpower her, he pushes her back into the darkness (01:20:46-01:21:52). The contrast is very sharp between this obscurity and the brightness of Jane’s white dress. As it can be examined, the whole emphasis is on Bertha’s evilness compared to Jane’s purity, they have shown the madwoman as dark as possible with the symbolism at the end of the scene, that the woman is doomed to darkness. There are different possible reasons for not showing Bertha. Many critics believed that the



²¹ At the end of 2006 adaptation of *Wide Sargasso Sea* the very same image can be observed when Antoinette, before leaving the West Indies, puts on a black dress with a white collar and combs her hair into a bun.

madwoman is an unnecessary Gothic element, which might have been the opinion of Robert Stevenson too (Séllei 175). Another reason can be found in the era itself. From the 1930s until the 1960s censors were severe with adaptations. The Hollywood Production Code put down that “movies must not lower the audience’s moral standards by showing any sympathetic representation of evil, crime or sin” (Hutcheon 119). These might serve as an explanation for the reason why Bertha is such a dehumanised figure in this version.

In the 1970 TV movie version directed by Delbert Mann, Jean Marsh is starring as Bertha Mason (IMDb). In this movie the scene I am analysing gets more attention than in the others and the director added some details to the book in the form of a “conversation” between Rochester and Bertha. The first shot puts the main emphasis on Bertha, she occupies almost half of the frame, and her face is undistinguishable because her hair, which is long and dishevelled, is covering it. The chamber is dark and made of stone; it resembles a prison cell, and Bertha is sitting there in the dark with a small window behind her. Rochester goes near her, which makes his figure threatening as he creeps the woman, who is sitting there silently; it seems that she is not aware of her visitors. However, when they start to speak, Bertha jumps on his back violently. (She is wearing a white gown and a shawl.) When they are on the floor, the audience would expect that Bertha will scratch the man’s eyes out, but instead she gently touches his face. Here again there is a contrast between black and white as Bertha’s face is shadowed while Rochester’s is in light. Bertha’s face is visible only for a few seconds during which she seems tired and skinny. Delbert Mann pictured beautifully the difference between the two women; as Bertha sits down and gets into darkness again, Jane rises from the ground in her bright wedding dress. “What should I do with her?” Rochester asks, while Bertha sits with no emotions displayed on her face. After this some possible effects of *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be observed as there are some faint remnants of the once intimate relationship that might have existed between Rochester and Bertha. “Now, Bertha. What shall we do tonight? Shall I play for you? And sing? Will you sit with me and tell me the story of your day? Shall you hold my head on your breast while I sleep? Shall you? Shall you?” While he speaks Bertha seems to be hopeful for a second but otherwise she shows no emotions at all, like someone after a nervous breakdown (01:07:00-01:10:10).



In the 1973 mini-series Bertha is what she is described in the book: a lunatic who lost every control of herself. However, there is some addition by director Joan Craft as Bertha (Brenda Kempner) talks to Rochester, which again might be the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Entering Bertha's room she is depicted sitting on the floor, between a heap of clothes (including a red dress) and pampering a pillow. The room is dark, plain and small and Bertha usually stays in the shadow. When she hears the lock of the door she becomes afraid and uses the pillow to protect herself, however this suddenly changes when she tries to attack Rochester and suffocate him with her "shield". She shouts at Rochester: "You lied! You said you take me home." She looks very miserable, pitiful and tortured; otherwise her appearance resembles the book description. Because of her behaviour, she is finally tied down, and starts to laugh hysterically and cruelly when Rochester asks the others to leave because: "I must shut up my prize" (Episode 4, 00:43:43-00:46:01).



Despite the fact that in Franco Zeffirelli's 1996 version, with Maria Schneider playing Bertha, there are some references to the duplicity of character, the conclusion of the film is not what critics suggest about Bertha, both the Gothic and symbolic interpretation is lost here (IMDb). There is a part when Jane is teaching Adèle to draw and says, "Remember, the shadows are just as important as the light." Then she continues, telling Rochester that she believes that there is good and bad in every person, nothing is black or white. (00:50:08-00:51:35) However, after meeting the madwoman in the attic one would not find Jane and Bertha doubles, which is also the result of the fact that Zeffirelli left out, or eliminated every emphasis from those key scenes that made feminist critics treat Bertha as Jane's doppelgänger (Reichmann 51). As opposed to other versions, here Bertha's room is spacious and luminous; the walls are undecorated with some burned spots on them. Bertha herself is not that Gothic, lunatic figure, she is rather calm and the audience would even feel some sympathy and pity for her as Rochester tells their story and blames her wife for every misery. Bertha's behaviour (she holds on to the edge of the fireplace, her hand and her lips are shaking, she seems to be frightened) does not verify the truth of Rochester's words; she seems to be crashed, ashamed and terrified, which is



confirmed by her appearance too with her long, uncombed hair and pale skin with dark circles round the eyes. The only point where she gets desperate and hopeless is when she sees Jane and hears that Rochester wants to marry her. This is when she grabs a piece of burning wood and tries to attack Jane, which is a novelty as opposed to previous adaptations and the book in which Bertha always attacks Rochester (01:30:59-01:32:44).

Critical writings did not have too much influence on Bertha's figure so far, but in the following versions there is more emphasis on the symbolism of the character depicting Bertha by young, seductive women. As previously mentioned, there is a strong red dominance in the 2006 version, in which the beautiful and exotic Claudia Coulter plays Bertha (IMDb). The motto of Bertha here could be that an ordinary and peaceful appearance can hide a monster inside, which is previously mentioned by Mr Eshton (Part 2, 00:21:22-00:21:30). The influence of feminist and postcolonial works is obvious, as well as that of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. While approaching Bertha's room her theme is played again. The first picture when entering the room shows Grace Poole, who is sewing a red cloth.

The room itself is impressive: the walls are covered with red wallpaper patterned with black roses; however, on closer scrutiny it turns out that the paper is ripped in many places with traces of nails on it. Like the third part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* this short scene is extremely dominated by the colour red, which marks the influence of the prequel. Bertha herself is sitting at a table and gently smiles and bows towards her visitors. She wears a beige gown and a dark red robe, her hair is black and her skin is pale. She is calm and moderate until she glimpses Jane; at that moment



she screams "Putá!", which means 'whore' or 'slut' in Spanish. This exclamation corresponds with the idea that was held about governesses in the 19th century, namely that they meant a threat to the lady of the house, as they were young, intelligent and therefore attractive for the master of the house. Consequently, Bertha looks at Jane as a seducer, which explains her attempt to attack Jane, but Rochester prevents her so she hits the man. She has to be pushed down to the ground by Grace and Rochester and then the two women are left alone in the room (Part 3, 00:42:08-00:43:26). It also has to be mentioned that this

is the first version in which Bertha has an exotic appearance, which marks that not only the feminist, but the postcolonial reading of the story was taken into consideration too.

In the 2011 adaptation compared to the previous one there is not such a self-evident symbolism of Bertha as Jane's suppressed passion, but she is again depicted by a young, beautiful woman, Valentina Cervi (IMDb). Bertha's room is rather like in previous adaptations with stone walls and wooden shutters. While people are speaking around her the voices are heard like coming from a distance, so it seems that Bertha is not paying attention. She is sitting on the floor and humming with her back to the camera, but when she hears them, she nervously stands up and sits in the window, then slowly goes to Rochester while coquettishly looking at Jane and hugs the man. "My own demon" says Rochester. Bertha behaves as a deluded wife, who tries to get her husband back. She expresses her feelings by spitting a dead fly on Jane's dress but then she also blames Rochester and attacks the man (01:16:55-01:17:50).



It can be recognised that the two latest versions turned away from the book description and put more emphasis on Bertha as the femme fatale she was once, than the madwoman she became.²² The development of the madwoman in the attic from a Gothic figure into the symbol of suppressed sexuality is best visualised when the audience is presented to her. The 1944 version is the best example for the Gothic interpretation while the production from 2006 is the most symbolic one.

3.6. "...she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement"²³

The last scene and the last time the audience sees the madwoman is when she removes the last obstacle from Jane's way to happiness, namely herself, by setting Thornfield on fire and jumping off the roof. The interpretation of this episode is treated with great variety; however, most creators decided not to film the event itself, but have it narrated by one of the characters, which corresponds to the book in which this event is not Jane's first-hand

²² It is also observable that as Bertha became more attractive, Rochester turned more handsome too. In an interview Cary Fukunaga talked about this twist when the interviewer reminded him that Rochester is often described as being ugly in the book. "I know, but don't you often think that guys that girls are attracted to are only attractive to them?" He believes that it is a question of subjectivity, and we get to know Rochester through the eyes of Jane (Mellor).

²³ Brontë 423.

experience. However, this part is a telling one, on the score of my thesis as Bertha's suicide means an escape from oppression and also marks the belief that "female sexuality is consistently equated with degeneration, disease, and death" (Gilbert and Gubar 31). In Brontë's work it is the host of a nearby inn who describes the happenings to Jane. In the 1944 and 2011 adaptations it is Mrs Fairfax, in the 1970 one it is Old John while the 1973 one is completely faithful to the book in this scene.²⁴ The most interesting version, regarding my thesis is the one from 2006, which again employs symbolism in the depiction of the happenings. In the case of the other versions the Gothic atmosphere as well as the symbolism is not dominant at all as most directors chose not to represent the events themselves, they are only told.

In the earliest version, after Jane leaves Thornfield, Rochester follows him on a horse but as he looks back he sees that the building is on fire. Bertha is shown from one of the windows, surrounded by the flames and when Rochester gets into the house her scream is heard. It is not explained what caused the fire, but in the following scene Jane is shown, who works in a kitchen, when a Sam Poole (according to the film Grace Poole's husband) enters the place and tells Jane that the lunatic they took care of with the "missus" burned down Thornfield and she burned to death in it (00:54:58-00:59:45).

The 1996 version takes the scene in a quite liberal way. According to the book, Bertha set "her prison" on fire at night, two months after Jane left, but in the movie, she commits it right after Jane leaves during daylight. She grabs a burning piece of wood just as in the previous scene and goes to Jane's room, where she sets her wedding gown on fire. First, the audience sees that she is on the roof, but Grace probably managed to get her into the house because when Rochester enters the building Bertha and Grace Poole are in the hallway. Grace falls down from the gallery and dies, and Bertha, who seems to be out of her wits, follows her soon (01:33:44-01:36:00). It is not clear whether she falls or jumps, although this has its own importance, as jumping means a conscious decision, while falling is only an accident; moreover, by this last omission the film fully ignores the idea that women could escape from oppression only through flight (here the suicide), starvation or madness (Gilbert and Gubar 341). Consequently, it is obvious that this scene, as the whole adaptation disregards every aspect of *Wide Sargasso Sea* or feminist readings.

²⁴ These less harsh depictions could be explained by the fact that some adaptors prefer "to mute tragedy or horror" to make the ending happier (Hutcheon 37).

It is the 2006 version which gives extra meaning to this scene. It is a shepherd who tells Jane the story, but he highlights that no one really knows precisely what has happened. Then the tale comes to life and Bertha is shown as she wanders into Jane's room where she finds her wedding dress. After setting it on fire she pulls it through the corridor and leaves it there while her theme is played. Her face is not shown during the scene, only when she reaches the roof and fresh air. Thornfield, Bertha and the sky soak in red, which recalls a sentence from *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it" (Rhys 150). Added to this Bertha's suicide is symbolised by a flying snowy owl, "the motif of a beautiful white owl interprets Bertha's death as a flight from her imprisonment in Imperial Britain, in Thornfield and in marriage" (Reichmann 52). I would like to devote some extra attention to the 2006 adaptation as the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is stronger here than in other adaptations. Bertha's existence is more emphatic in this version than in any other; the red curtain in the window, floating in the wind is the sign at the beginning, later on the happenings are often depicted from Bertha's point of view as she watches Rochester and Jane. After Rochester recalls their meeting with Bertha, the man, Jane and Adèle are represented from the woman's viewpoint and she is humming the melody that was played during the memory.²⁵ It is also visible, that in the other versions the audience is invited into Bertha's room or prison and her escape is not stressed. But in this adaptation, through the white owl, she literally flies away, she even imitates the movement.



Bertha's last scene is depicted with great variety and it ranges from concrete depiction to hearsays. Among the concrete depictions only the 2006 version can be seen as a faithful adaptation, however it is filled with symbolism and is highly influenced by *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

²⁵ In this version it is not only Bertha and her acts that symbolises Jane's passion. In the first episode little Jane is sitting in a desert wearing a red skirt and a red shawl (Part 1, 00:00:37-00:01:36); after she saves Rochester from the fire she almost constantly wears a red neckerchief, which indicates her love for the man.

4. Conclusion

In my thesis I have examined Bertha Mason's character through the source novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* and through the various film adaptations of these works. My aim was to demonstrate the transition of a Gothic element into a symbol of suppressed passion under the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and such critical writings as *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Before the concrete analysis I have found it important to quote Bertha's description from *Jane Eyre* so that it could serve as a basis for the later comparisons. After the examination of the adaptations it became obvious that the different critical works and *Wide Sargasso Sea* itself had a huge influence on the depiction of Bertha Mason. Until Charlotte Brontë's novel reached its popularity it can pride itself on today, film makers enjoyed great liberty regarding the plot, the dialogues and the characters. Besides audiences' experience with the book, the style of the adaptations was significant too. Hollywood prestige films allowed themselves greater freedom than heritage-style adaptations which are usually famous for their faithfulness. In my analysis I have tried to show that this ignored and misunderstood figure is more important than a simple Gothic element, however this is not always reflected in the adaptations. On the other hand there were many critics, adaptors and writers who have found her interesting enough to deal with her role in more detail and let the madwoman out of the attic. By 2006 the prequel of *Jane Eyre* and the numerous critical readings about Brontë's novel and Bertha gained so much significance that they cannot be disregarded. Slowly but surely adaptations reached the level of symbolism from the early Gothic interpretation. At the very beginning (1934) Bertha's role was not a dominant one; afterwards in 1944 the Gothic atmosphere came into focus. The publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* evoked a transitory period in the case of the adaptations, while Franco Zeffirelli's version from 1996 meant a setback in this progress. By 2006, under the influence of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, critical writings and the "anxiety of influence" (Allen 137) or the effort to show something new, Bertha transformed into the symbol of suppressed sexuality. Since then the challenge for directors is to find new perspectives from which *Jane Eyre* can be represented as it was done by Fukunaga.

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