

ماهي الأسباب التي أدت الي معاناة بيرثا مسون في جين إير و أيدان في
الصحوة والطفل ديزيريه بقلم الكاتبة كيثي شوبن

د . عبدالرزاق عبدالرؤف خليفة نصرات - كلية التربية الزاوية - جامعة الزاوية

الملخص :

تستكشف هذه الورقة ثلاث روايات شهيرة لجين إير بقلم شارلوت برونتي ، بحر سارجاسو الواسع لجين ريس ، وصحوة وقصص قصيرة مختارة لكيت شوبان ، خاصة معاناة الشخصيات النسائية الرئيسية بسبب المعاملة المتحيزة للمرأة في ذلك الوقت . وهكذا ، تمت مقارنة وتناقض بيرثا مسون وإدنا بونتيليه بدقة فيما يتعلق بأوجه التشابه والاختلاف في نضالهما ضد النظرة التقليدية للأنثوة ، والسلوك القمعي لأزواجهن ، والجهل التام باحتياجاتهم. يشير تحليل الأعمال المتعلقة بالموضوع ، ومراعاة خصوصيات الأنثوة في القرن التاسع عشر ، إلى أن كلتا المرأتين متشابهتين تمامًا بسبب وجهات نظرهما ، والتوقعات العالية للمحيط ، والطريقة التي ينهون بها حياتهم. ومع ذلك ، يمكن تفسير الاختلافات بالطريقة التي يعبرون بها عن معارضتهم ، وأهمية المرأة في الروايات ، وتشجيع المحيط .

الكلمات المفتاحية : الأنثوة المعاناة الأخلاقية ، الأزواج الظالمين ، الآمال الكبيرة

**BERTHA MASON IN JANE EYRE AND EDNA IN
AWAKENING AND DESIREE'S BABY BY KATE CHOPIN .
WHAT DO BERTHA MASON IN THE JANE EYRE AND EDNA IN
AWAKENING AND DESIREE BABY BY KATE CHOPIN SUFFER
FROM :**

Dr. Abdurrazag Nasrat - Faculty of Education –Zawia University
E-mail :Abdnasrat68@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper explores three popular novels *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, and *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* by Kate Chopin, mainly the sufferings of the main female characters due to the biased treatment of women at that time. Thus, Bertha Mason and Edna Pontellier are accurately compared and contrasted concerning the similarities

and differences of their struggle against the traditional view on womanhood, the oppressive behavior of their husbands, and the total ignorance of their needs. The analysis of the works, related to the topic, and the consideration of the womanhood peculiarities in the 19th century suggest that both females are quite similar due to their points of view, high expectations of the surroundings, and the way they end their lives. However, the differences can be explained by the way they express their opposition, the women's significance in the novels, and the encouragement of the surroundings.

Keywords: womanhood, moral suffering, oppressive husbands, high expectations Bertha Mason and Edna Pontellier: *Madwomen in the Attic*

Introduction

Women have not always enjoyed more or less equal rights with men, being more independent and free to make important decisions. The nineteenth century would certainly be surprised to see the contemporary females, who totally differ from women of that time. The world literature is a precious source of knowledge, which allows the readers to get acquainted with people's beliefs and habits in the past and compare them with the modern times. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, and *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* by Kate Chopin are great examples of how females were treated by the society and how they struggled against the biases or accepted them submissively. Bertha Mason and Edna Pontellier bear resemblance due to the inability to accept the traditional view on womanhood, the oppressive behavior of their husbands, and the total ignorance of their needs, being different in the way they express their opposition, their significance in the novels, and the encouragement of the surroundings.

Bertha Mason as controversial character

Firstly, Bertha Mason appears in two different works with the negative traits in *Jane Eyre* and lively, full of human feelings in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Thus, the readers have different attitudes towards the woman, as they readily accept the authors' descriptions, ignoring or even hating Bertha but sympathizing Antoinette. According to Ismat Ara, Bertha is quite an important character in *Jane Eyre*, while all the crucial events happen with her direct or indirect participation but she is not honored to say a word to

defend herself. Jane Eyre and Richard Rochester are actually the only persons who characterize the woman, acquiring only the negative adjectives to describe her (Ara). Thus, they call her “a mysterious lunatic”, who came from “a mad family, idiots, and maniacs through three generations” and looked more like “a beast or some strange wild animal” (Brontë 556-559). Moreover, Jane Eyre refers to her as “it”, as if she were even unworthy to be a human being (Brontë 559).

The main factors of the negative attitude towards Bertha Mason

However, there are serious reasons for such a biased treatment of the surroundings, which can be explained by the peculiarities of womanhood in the 19th century. According to Barbara Welter, females were expected to be extremely pure, religious, subdued to their husbands, focusing on children and housework (152). While men could be far from religion, women had no right to deny it, otherwise, they were cast out (Welter 152). Thus, males could find salvation only through females' love, loyalty, and a strong belief in the Gospel (Welter 152). It was a woman's nature that presupposed her religiousness, which also supported the men's dominance at all spheres of life (Welter 152). Moreover, the necessity to be pure was essential for the successful marriage, otherwise, women could not count on the appropriate parties for them (Welter 154). Besides, females could not actively participate in the political and social life of their communities, while their main tasks were to bring up children, cook food, and take care of their husbands' comfort. It goes without saying that all the important decisions concerning the household were also made by men so that women were regarded to be unfit and not so intelligent for such matters (Welter 154).

Having analyzed the main peculiarities of womanhood, it is easier to understand why Bertha Mason was negatively depicted in *Jane Eyre*. Thus, the author does not give the readers much information about the woman's religiosity, so they can only make some assumptions. However, it is clear that Bertha is not the kind of females, who gladly obey their husbands and are ready to do anything to please them (Ara). Although she is called mad, the woman does not actually do anything wrong to the inhabitants of the house but her anger is aimed at Mr. Rochester, her ex-husband (Ara). Her sudden attacks can be explained by his misunderstanding of her thoughts and beliefs,

the lack of attention, and the total ignorance of her personality. Besides, Bertha has all the chances to harm Jane, who is her vivid competitor but she just tears the veil as if to indicate “her frustration with the idea of marriage” (Ara). This attitude towards the institute of marriage is unacceptable in the 19th-century society, which does not forgive her the disrespectful behavior towards her husband. So, being unable to fit into the characteristics of the womanhood and become a perfect mother and a wife, makes the others claim the poor woman insane. Besides, the way that the woman chooses to end her sufferings emphasizes her emancipation and the protest against the boundaries and limitations that restrict her actions (Ara).

Antoinette – a lively representation of Bertha Mason

Meanwhile, the author does not give the readers a detailed description of “the madwoman in the attic” but those poor moments when her appearance is slightly revealed suggest that she is not white (Ara). While the decent women strictly followed the main expectations from womanhood, this fact explains her “madness” and the inability to fit in the society. Thus, the author implies that the non-white female could lose her mind, as she was not of a noble origin, a daughter of the doubtful parents (Ara). Nevertheless, *Wide Sargasso Sea* manages to make Bertha Mason a lively character with her feelings and emotions, who can think, understand, and suffer. It appears that her name is Antoinette, which Mr. Rochester changes into Bertha to erase her identity, subdue to his needs, and prove the man’s dominance over the woman. This fact emphasizes the lack of respect and attention to the female, who seems to be a thing that can be renamed several times (Ara).

Gradual transformation to “the madwoman in the attic”

The inability of the man to accept his wife’s origin and the vigorous attempts to diminish her traits to make her more English prove the male’s desire to submit the female to his own beliefs (Postemsky 16). Thus, Antoinette becomes the victim of the 19th-century dominant husband, who fails to accept her identity, race, upbringing, and sexuality (Postemsky 16). Jean Rhys dedicates some chapters to the intimate relationships between the newlyweds, describing their passion and desire (55-56). However, Mr. Rochester seems to be afraid that his wife can be independent and is capable of certain feelings that make her unique and not submissive (Postemsky 16).

So, he does not allow her to develop her personality and rejects all her initial trials to become free, which does not suit the 19th-century woman (Postemsky 16). Even Bertha's stepbrother, who comes to visit her, fails to recognize the woman, "looking at her as though she were a stranger" (Rhys 109). Thus, the submissive attitude of Mr. Rochester towards his wife makes her change inside and outside, gradually becoming "the madwoman in the attic".

Nevertheless, even though Bertha is getting insane, it is up to her husband to help her recover. Charlotte Perkins Stetson has a very similar piece that deals with the woman's madness and the man's lack of desire to admit it. Thus, *The Yellow Wall-Paper's* main character suffers from some mental disorder but no one actually takes it seriously (Stetson 647-648). Unlike Mr. Rochester, John is a loving husband but he also does not think that the woman's complains are worth considering. So, he believes that the best way to recover is to do nothing but rest, which actually facilitates that the woman becomes insane quicker (Stetson 648). This way, the female feels neglected and abandoned, while all she needs is attention and concentration on something important. The same thing happens with Antoinette, who also ends up being locked in the attic, while her husband refuses to encourage her, as she is unlikely to become a submissive wife and a good mother. The misunderstanding of the women's nature and the inability to accept them as free and independent creatures cause their madness and facilitate their fatal outcomes. So, instead of encouraging Bertha and allowing her to engage in some useful activities to recover from her "madness", Mr. Rochester acts like a typical man of the 19th century.

The importance of "a room of one's own" and the freedom of actions

What is more, Bertha Mason is not only subdued by her husband but she is actually limited in all her actions, without "a room of her own". According to Virginia Woolf, it is almost essential for any human being to experience freedom and independence, which are necessary to live and create. Thus, she analyzes why men usually exceed women in the world literature, explaining the tendency by the ambiguous treatment of females (Woolf). In order to write a decent piece, a person needs money and one's own accommodation to find inspiration and have enough resources to pay for it (Woolf). Having investigated the main peculiarities of the womanhood in the

19th century, it would be sensible to admit that two genders were not equally treated. Women could hardly ever support themselves, while marriage presupposed that men had to run the family budget (Welter 169). Bertha Mason has “a room of her own” but it is not that decent accommodation, aimed to boost one’s mood and give some inspiration to recover from the physical or mental illness. On the contrary, Mr. Rochester locks her there so as not to see her anymore, being very little interested in her recovery.

Besides, Bertha’s husband is very similar to “the irritated trader” from *Woman in the nineteenth century* by Margaret Fuller. Thus, he is so angry that women may participate in the country’s political life and vote, sacrificing “the family union” (Fuller 22). The man cannot even presuppose that females may not be necessarily satisfied with their home duties and the importance of taking care of the males’ comfort (Fuller 23). The same thing concerns Mr. Rochester when he does not think about his wife’s needs, who actually lives among the strangers, where everything is new to her. Thus, she does not belong to the typical Victorian women and her thoughts and beliefs may suppress his dominance, so her husband decides to claim her mad and lock in the attic.

Edna Pontellier – another victim of the 19th-century womanhood

The next character, who is very similar to Bertha Mason in the way she suffers from the feminist point of view in the 19th century, is Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* by Kate Chopin. Edna’s marriage is not so miserable and doomed to failure from the very beginning, while she is the mother of two children and the author introduces the woman already after several years of family life. However, Edna’s husband is somewhat similar to Mr. Rochester, as he also complains that “his wife evinced so little interest in things which concerned him” (Chopin 9). The readers can observe the same dominant attitude of both males, who are used to the fact that their interests are valued more than their wives’ ones. The society also disapproves the main character’s desire to put her own happiness in the first place and not only be satisfied with one’s maternal duties.

Nevertheless, Edna is totally dissatisfied with her marriage, which is actually unacceptable for the Victorian female. However, Edna believes that her marriage is a mistake, “resembling many other marriages (Chopin 21).

This way she characterizes the 19th-century society with its unequal relationships between the males and females in the families, which results in the women's sufferings. Unlike Bertha, Edna is not physically locked in the attic and is the central character of the novel that enables her to express her feelings. Besides, the readers are able to trace the reasons for her suicide, while Bertha is not honored to defend her rights and her death is almost unnoticeable to the audience. Moreover, both men explain the deviations in their wives' behavior and the lack of desire to subdue by their possible madness. Edna's husband also decides that her isolation and the change of priorities are caused by her insanity, while her actions are not typical of the Victorian woman.

Edna's long process of awakening

Additionally, the world literature witnesses a lot of females, who suffer from the unfair treatment and the inability to fit in the society's norms. Thus, Stetson's Jane from *The Yellow Wall-Paper* also rebels against the interpretations of women as weak and dependent creatures, being accused of madness after the childbirth (Stetson 647). The society does not pay much attention to the women's sufferings, regarding them insignificant and facilitating Edna's death and Jane's mental disorder. However, Edna, unlike Bertha and Jane, experiences a long way of realizing her unhappiness, being able to compare two types of women, who drastically differ from each other. So, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent the opposite kinds of females, while the first one is an ideal 19th-century wife and mother and the second one is the emancipated 21st-century woman, who refuses to subdue to one's decisions (Siegel).

What is more, both characters are essential for Edna's awakening, helping her rethink her marriage and life priorities (Siegel). Thus, Ratignolle perfectly suits Welter's description of womanhood in the 19th century with the emphasis on "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 152). Nevertheless, this woman facilitates Edna's understanding that it is not that kind of life she would like to live, which is the beginning of her transformations (Siegel). At the second stage, Reisz becomes the most vivid example of a free, independent woman, who is unlikely to sacrifice her preferences to become a perfect wife and mother (Siegel). Compared to

Ratignolle, Reisz appreciates art, which is one of the most important activities that serve for self-development (Siegel). Edna is also attracted by the opportunity to do something for her pleasure and not just perform the household duties to please her husband and the children. What is more, the woman's desire for passion causes her relationships with Robert that satisfies her needs but results in the misunderstanding on behalf of the society.

Meanwhile, Edna's attempts to awaken from the out-of-date beliefs and become free of the biased treatment of womanhood are either resisted by the surrounding or ignored. So, the female's rights to develop her personality, gain a decent education, and make decisions are not even considered due to the contradictions of the epoch. If Edna were a male, unsatisfied with the family life and the vigorous desire to change the priorities, she would not have met such a strong opposition. On the contrary, she would have probably succeeded without the necessity to prove her right and end her life by the suicide. Thus, Woolf makes up a fictional character of Shakespeare's sister, who is as talented as her brother but is unlikely to become so popular and win one's attention only because of her gender. Regardless of her explicit talent and profound knowledge, she cannot take advantage of them, while only men are able to achieve success (Woolf). So, since the very beginning, Edna's search for real self is doomed to failure, as no one takes seriously the female's interests other than her husband and the children.

The similar fate and sufferings of both characters

Finally, both women bear a resemblance in the way they suffer from the feminism of the 19th century, though their struggle is somewhat different. While Edna is the main character of the story, Bertha is hardly mentioned in the novel and lacks the chance to explain her behavior, though she is an important person and a lot of crucial moments are connected with her (Ara). However, another author allows the poor woman to tell her story and express her feelings, facilitating the readers' understanding of the real causes of her strange behavior (Ara). Furthermore, both females are misunderstood by their husbands, who immediately claim them mad and do not want to find out their true emotions and change their submissive attitude towards their wives (Siegel). Edna and Bertha married the typical men of the 19th century, who believe that women have to take care of the household, bring up children, and

please their husbands (Fuller 23). The problems of both women start with their unhappy marriages that turn them into the slaves of the 19th-century womanhood and the dominant role of husbands in the family life. It is no wonder that Edna and Bertha feel miserable instead of admiring their marital status and the role of mother (for Edna). Moreover, Edna openly admits that her marriage is a mistake, “resembling many other marriages”, enabling the readers to guess that it is a common thing that women were dissatisfied the way they were treated routinely (Chopin 21). Although Bertha does not say a word about her regrets concerning the oppressive spouse, her actions confirm that the character cannot just accept her situation quietly. So, the way Bertha treats Jane’s wedding dress symbolizes her dissatisfaction with her unsuccessful marriage and means that she also believes it to be a great mistake.

What is more, Brontë and Chopin similarly describe the gradual process of the men’s misunderstanding of the women’s needs and even the contemptuous treatment of their personalities. Mr. Rochester ignores her wife’s presence in the attic and prefers to find relief in the company of the typical Victorian woman, who totally agrees with the male’s authority and dominance. Rhys pays much more attention to Bertha’s feelings, that is why her novel is more informative concerning the way that the woman passes to struggle for her identity. While Bertha’s husband renames his wife to change her identity and make her submissive, Edna faces the total ignorance of her interests and the possibility to do anything except her maternal duties. Thus, Mr. Pontellier finds it hard to imagine that a woman can be engaged in something other than home and children when “his hands are full with his brokerage business” (Chopin 9). Both women contradict the 19th-century belief that husbands should control their wives' personalities and behavior (Welter 171), opposing their trials to lock them at home directly (Edna) and indirectly (Bertha). Moreover, Mr. Rochester and Mr. Pontellier treat their wives as if they were inanimate objects without human feelings and emotions, while the first one locks his wife up and restricts her freedom of actions but the second one controls and criticizes her.

Besides, Charlotte Brontë and Kate Chopin depict two kinds of females in their novels to show a great contrast between a perfect wife-mother

and a real woman with her own interests except her family duties. Thus, Bertha Mason is opposed to Jane Eyre, who reflects a perfect Victorian woman and easily fits in the 19th century. Meanwhile, Edna Pontellier completely differs from Adele Ratignolle, who is pleased to be a typical woman and enjoys the limitation of her rights (Siegel). Lastly, both females are almost alone in their struggle against the unfair treatment of their husbands and the whole society, so they see suicide as the only way to do away with it. Thus, Bertha and Edna show their opposition to the biased attitude towards women in the 19th century and find relief in being finally responsible for their fate at least at the end of their lives.

The differences in the struggle with the biased treatment

Although the analyzed female characters encounter with the similar fate and suffer from the lack of understanding, there are some differences in the way they are depicted in the novels. Bertha is physically locked by her husband in the attic, being guarded by a servant, but Edna is comparatively free to move wherever she wants. Thus, she is able to find another woman, Mademoiselle Reisz, who experiences the same feelings towards the feminism and the biased treatment of the females (Siegel). So, compared to Bertha, Edna can be possibly encouraged and find support in her struggle against the unfair attitude. What is more, both females choose different ways to show their opposition to the husbands' dominance and excessive power. Thus, the scenes with the torn wedding dress and the sudden attacks on Mr. Rochester are not the results of Bertha's insanity but the proof of her dissatisfaction with the marriage. On the contrary, Edna is not prone to such violent actions, as she openly protests against her husband's oppression and the ungrounded accusations or just "has a good cry to herself" because "the foregoing was not uncommon in married life (Chopin 10).

Moreover, only having read three novels - *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories* – the readers are able to track the sufferings of the mentioned female characters. The matter is clear when it concerns Edna Pontellier because the author provides enough information to analyze the woman's fate. However, *Jane Eyre* itself does not comment a lot on the feelings of the "madwoman in the attic", so the readers have to believe Jane and Mr. Rochester, as they are the only ones, who

mention Bertha. Thus, only the fact that there is some insane female, locked up and guarded to prevent any dangerous outcomes, can be concluded from the novel. The author does not think that Bertha is worth dedicating at least several lines about the motives of her strange behavior, so she quickly mentions the woman's suicide.

Nevertheless, both women become really insane, being unable to contradict the society and suffering from the lack of attention. Even though both stories contain the similar scenes of the females' death, Bertha's suicide is not so emphasized and considered, while Edna's last moment of life is described in details. The readers do not know what "the madwoman in the attic" felt when she was dying by fire, whether she felt relief and satisfaction to be finally free or regretted the ill-considered action. Only sometime later, another author makes Bertha Mason the main character of her novel to explain her difficult fate and why she is tired of struggling with everyone to prove her good sense. Nevertheless, Kate Chopin gives the detailed picture of Edna's suicides so that everyone is sure that the woman is glad to do away with the injustice and gender inequality (125).

Finally, the final outcome of Edna's life could have been different, while, unlike Bertha, she is not only a wife but also a mother. On the contrary, poor "madwoman" has nothing to rely on and her despair results in the suicide as the only way to end her sufferings. However, Edna is actually not alone, as she has got support and approval of Mademoiselle Reisz. Nevertheless, the experience of the last turns out to be not enough to stop the main character from death, so she ends her life the same as Bertha does. It can be explained by the fact that there are more expectations from Edna because she does not properly cope with the roles of a wife and a mother, meaning that she has twice a pressure than Bertha Mason. These extra demands are likely to make Edna commit suicide, especially when she understands that she has failed to find true happiness and relief with her beloved Robert Lebrun.

Conclusion

To sum it up, the literature witnesses enough examples of women, who complain about the biased treatment and are desperate to find their "selves". Edna Pontellier and Bertha Mason would certainly find encouragement in the 21st century, so their fates would not be so tragic.

However, both characters are so unlucky to live in the wrong time that limits the women's interests to their households, demands the exceptional religiousness and submissiveness to their men. Although there are certain differences between the females, they both have to die to be later heard the society. The analyzed female characters both suffer from the inability to accept the traditional view on womanhood in the 19th century, the oppressive and submissive behavior of their husbands, and the total ignorance of their needs. Besides, Edna and Bertha are contrasted with the other women - Adele Ratignolle and Jane Eyre accordingly- who represent the perfect wives and other of the Victorian age. Nevertheless, the women are different in the way they struggle with the misunderstanding, while Bertha is physically restricted in her actions, is unable to explain her motives, and suffers silently. However, Edna's feelings are open to the audience and she can verbally and emotionally oppose contradict, though there are more demands from her, being a wife and a mother.

References

- Ara, Ismat. "The Madwoman In The Attic: How "Mad" Was Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre?" *Feminism in India*, 21 July 2017, <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/07/21/bertha-mason-jane-eyre/>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Planet PDF, 2017. *eBook Collection (Google Scholar)*. http://www.planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free_ebooks/jane_eyre_nt.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*. Boson Books, 1990.
- Fuller, Margaret. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. London, George Slater, 1850.
- Postemsky, Diana. *Through the Looking-Glass: Reading and Reflecting from Wide Sargasso Sea to Jane Eyre*. Brynmawr.Edu, 2003. *eBook Collection (Google Scholar)*. <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/647/2003PotemskyD.doc.pdf>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.
- Siegel, Allison. "Edna Pontellier: Straddling Creole Conformity and Modern Feminism." *Literary New Orleans*, 26 Mar. 2013, <https://urliteraryneworleans.wordpress.com/2013/03/26/edna-pontellier-straddling-creole-conformity-and-modern-feminism/>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.
- Stetson, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wall-Paper". *New England Magazine*, Jan. 1892, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151-174. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/2711179.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. The University of Adelaide, 2015. *eBooks@Adelaide*. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Edited by Judith L., Norton Critical Edition, 1999.