‘Down Superstition!’: Realism and Supernaturalism in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

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RECAP: Crash Course of *Jane Eyre*
MY QUESTIONS: Realism and Supernaturalism in *Jane Eyre*

- How are realism and supernaturalism defined?
- What is “real” in *Jane Eyre*?
- What is “supernatural” in *Jane Eyre*?

- If realism and supernaturalism coexist within the novel, what does this mean for the narrative, and how does it affect both character and plot development?
DEFINITION: What is Realism?

Realism: “the doctrine of the real existence of universals, independently of the mind” (OED).

“Inclination or attachment to what is real; (hence) the attitude or practice of accepting a situation as it is and being prepared to deal with it accordingly; any view or system contrasted with idealism” (OED).
Realism in *Jane Eyre*

- Although this is a fictional novel, readers can understand that the characters and their surroundings in *Jane Eyre* are realistic, and for the most part, aside from the seemingly “supernatural” occurrences, what the characters experience in the novel is also realistic to them.
DEFINE: What is Supernaturalism?

- **Supernaturalism**: “supernatural things or occurrences” (OED).

- **Supernatural**: ”belonging to a realm or system that transcends nature, as that of divine, magical, or ghostly beings; attributed to or thought to reveal some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature; occult, paranormal” (OED).

“More than what is natural or ordinary; unnaturally or extraordinarily great; abnormal” (OED).
“Approaching the discourse of the supernatural in Victorian novels requires reference to the Gothic mode of writing. The Victorian era may be regarded as the most productive time for the Gothic genre. Teeming with supernatural experiences and insanity, the Gothic created a distinct genre of eeriness and morbidity . . . ” (Boghian 55).

Gothic: “Mediæval, ‘romantic’, as opposed to classical” (OED).

- Mystery & Suspense
- Supernatural/ Inexplicable Events
- Heightened Emotions
- Gloomy/Decaying Settings
- Setting Reflects Psychology
- Romance & Damsels in Distress
“The Discourse of the Supernatural in Victorian Novels”

- Supernatural elements = narrative techniques
- “Supernatural elements are introduced to manipulate the plot – it is easier to turn the plot as one wishes by leaving reality aside and introducing fairy-tale narrative tricks” (Boughian 60).
Realism to Imagination to Supernaturalism?

JANE’S IMAGINATION

- “The imagination presented in Jane Eyre . . . can be used or abused by those who possess it” (Searle 54).
- “Bronte draws upon . . . the imagination; its nature and direction are always traced back to the relational allegiance of the heart” (Searle 35).
Jane’s imagination connects the realism and the supernaturalism in the novel, and, in turn helps readers understand the psychology of Jane’s character. The supernaturalism Charlotte Brontë uses in *Jane Eyre* are fundamental to both character and plot development.
3 SETTINGS:
“Supernatural” Occurrences in *Jane Eyre*

- GATESHEAD HALL: The Red Room
- THORNFIELD HALL: Bertha Mason
- MOOR HOUSE: Telepathic Communication
“Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room: at this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No; moonlight was still, and this stirred; while I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in a likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by someone across the lawn: but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I uttered an involuntary cry; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort” (Brontë 13).

“Oh! I saw a light, and I thought a ghost would come” (Brontë 13).
“The next thing I remember is, waking up with a feeling as if I had had a frightful nightmare, and seeing before me a terrible red glare, crossed with thick black bars. I heard voices, too, speaking with a hollow sound, and as if muffled by a rush of wind or water: agitation, uncertainty, and an all-predominating sense of terror confused my faculties” (Brontë 15).
“In five minutes more, the cloud of bewilderment dissolved: I knew quite well that I was in my own bed, and that the red glare was the nursery fire” (Brontë 15).

“I felt physically weak and broken down: but my worse ailment was an unutterable wretchedness of mind: a wretchedness which kept drawing from me silent tears” (Brontë 17).
After reading *Jane Eyre*, what comes to your mind when you think of Bertha Mason’s character?
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

- “The shape standing before me had never crossed my eyes within the precincts of Thornfield Hall before . . . Fearful and ghastly to me -- oh sir, I never saw a face like it! It was 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!” (Brontë 340-41).

- “I lost consciousness : for the second time in my life -- only the second time -- I became insensible from terror” (Brontë 341).
“In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face” (Brontë 352).

“The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognized well that purple face -- those bloated features” (Brontë 353).
THORNFIELD HALL: Bertha Mason

It's true Jane, I do have a terrible secret.

But Edward we are just about to be married.

It's my wife, I locked her in the attic. I was pretty sick of her. I'm sorry I never said. She's nuts also.

Argh...
BOUGHIAN’S ARGUMENT:

- Supernatural = cause & explanation of mental illness (i.e. madness)
- Supernatural & madness = 2 main themes of Gothic literature
- Jane & Bertha represent the 2 sides of the Victorian view of women
“All the house was still; for I believe all, except St John and myself, were now retired to rest. The one candle was dying out the room was full of moonlight. My heart beat fast and thick I heard its throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake. They rose expectant: eye and ear waited while the flesh quivered on my bones. ‘What have you heard? What do you see?’ asked St John. I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry -- ‘Jane! Jane! Jane!’ -- nothing more” (Brontë 507).
“Down superstition! . . . this is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature” (Brontë 507).
CONCLUSION: ‘Reader, so what?’

- “References to the supernatural command attention because they contribute to the novel’s representation” of what is presented as “natural” or “normal” (Smajić 6).
- In this novel, supernaturalism is fabricated by the mind -- by the imagination. This imaginative fabrication is why the supernatural is a direct link into a person’s psychological state. Through elements of the Gothic, and the connection between realism and supernaturalism through the imagination, Charlotte Bronte allows readers to have access into the characters.


Mishou, Aubrey L. "Surviving Thornfield: Jane Eyre and Nineteenth-Century Evolutionary Theory."


Are there other aspects of the text that seemed supernatural to you? If so, what made them seem supernatural?

The last example -- telepathic communication -- is different from the other two because it is never given a “realistic” explanation. Jane accepts it for what it is, and denies its supernaturalism. Why might Jane try not to rationalize this instance, when she managed to rationalize the others? What does this say about Jane’s character (at the end of the novel)?

Do you think imagination is what connects realism and supernaturalism, or is it something different, like terror/horror? Or, can imagination also create terror/horror?