Unreliable Narration and the Portrayal of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

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C-essay

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Introduction

Not all novels continue to fascinate readers over time. The majority of fiction published quickly falls into obscurity. Published in 1847, *Jane Eyre* is a Victorian novel that still appeals to 21st century readers. One of the reasons it continues to attract an audience is possibly its unique protagonist. A century and a half after the novel’s publication, Jane continues to befriend readers with her intimate voice, and her Cinderella story appears to have a timeless appeal. Many readers adore the plucky Jane, and they find her relationship with the brooding Edward Rochester very romantic.

This essay does not focus on romance, though, but on the narration in *Jane Eyre*, and, more specifically, whether it is reliable or not. Special consideration is taken to how the narration affects Bertha Mason, Edward Rochester’s mad wife, who is locked up in the attic at Thornfield Hall. Bertha is admittedly a character on the margin of *Jane Eyre*. She only appears in a few pages and even then mainly as a ghoulish element. The reason Bertha was chosen to exemplify effects of unreliable narration is that she is a character who may evoke feelings of pity and compassion in a reader, but who receives barely any empathy in the novel. She is obviously ill, but instead of receiving treatment or sympathy, she is vilified, dehumanized, and imprisoned in an attic.

Critics disagree on whether Jane is a reliable narrator or not. To limit the scope, this essay accepts the arguments made by Carol Bock in *Charlotte Brontë and the Storyteller’s Audience* (107), and Lisa Sternlieb in “Hazarding Confidences” (504), which propose that Jane is an unreliable narrator. Instead, the center of attention is on the way in which the narrator is unreliable, and how it affects the portrayal of Bertha. This essay applies Greta Olson’s model of fallible and untrustworthy narrators to the narrator of *Jane Eyre* to examine to which extent her narration can be trusted. Furthermore, the essay analyzes Jane’s portrayal of Bertha Mason to investigate the effects of Jane’s untrustworthiness.
Structurally, this essay begins with an introduction of common terminology within the field of narratology, with special attention given to Greta Olson’s model of fallible and untrustworthy narration as two opposite ends of the spectrum of unreliable narration. An analysis of Jane as a narrator follows. The essay then moves on to analyze and discuss the effects of Jane’s narration as it relates to Bertha. While doing so, it presents evidence to show that while the narration in *Jane Eyre* is part fallible and part untrustworthy, the narrator’s portrayal of Bertha Mason is deliberately misleading; that is, untrustworthy, as defined by Olson.
1. Relevant Narratological Terminology

1.1. Voice

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott defines voice in narration as, “a question of who it is we ‘hear’ doing the narrating” (70). Voice relates to in which person the narrative is told, but also whose voice it is we hear narrating, and how “she injects into the narration her own needs and desires and limitations” (72). This essay analyzes Jane’s voice to establish her tone when she addresses her narratee, and to consider whether her voice makes it easier or harder to classify her reliability.

1.2. Focalization

Abbott defines focalization as “the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative” (73). He explains the difference between voice and focalization as being the difference between whose voice we hear, and whose eyes through which we see the narrative. This essay analyzes the focalization in *Jane Eyre* to provide further information about how the narration is affected by the fact that it is focalized through Jane.

1.3. Distance

Distance refers, according to Abbott, “to the narrator’s degree of involvement in the story she tells,” which is the definition used in this essay to establish how emotionally engaged the narrator is in her story, thereby examining the likely degree of objectivity (74). This essay also discusses temporal distance, which is the time passed between the narrated time and the narrating time.
1.4. Gaps

A narrative gap refers to a missing portion of a story. All narratives contain more or less gaps. Not only is it nearly impossible to cover every single event from the beginning of a narrative to the end; mostly, it is not desirable either. This essay investigates the gaps in *Jane Eyre* to consider whether the narrator appears to deliberately omit information for a reason, and, if so, what reason lies behind the omission.

1.5. Reliability

Reliability is a widely discussed topic in narratology, and several suggestions for definitions exist. This essay relies on a model to discuss unreliable narrators developed by Greta Olson. She accepts Wayne Booth’s definition of unreliable narration, a definition that states that an unreliable narrator contradicts the implied author (Olson 94). Olson then goes on to argue that unreliable narrators can be classified along a spectrum of unreliability, where fallible narration is on one end of the spectrum, and untrustworthy narration is on the other. Olson emphasizes that some narrators cannot be firmly placed in one category or the other; there are narrators whose narration is close to the middle of the spectrum. Furthermore, one narrator can be both fallible and untrustworthy in different parts of a narrative.

1.5.1. Fallible Narration

Fallible narrators are narrators who do “not reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased” (Olson 101). An example of fallible narrators are the child narrators Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*. The girls do not alter their narration in attempt to mislead anyone; rather their limited understanding of their surrounding context in the Belgian Congo causes them to misreport events. Olson classifies such narrators as fallible,
and mentions that readers often “regard the mistakes of fallible narrators as being *situationally motivated*” (102). Olson suggests that readers tend to forgive fallible narrators their mistakes. Explaining further, she states that: “external circumstances appear to cause the narrator’s misperceptions rather than inherent characteristics. Readers may justify the failings of fallible narrators—just as they would tend to justify their own similar mistakes—on the basis of circumstances that impede them rather than on their intellectual or ethical deficiencies” (102). In other words, a fallible narrator is one whose unreliability is due to external conditions rather than their character. The child narrators of Kingsolver’s novel are fallible because they are children, not because of flaws in their sense of moral or personality.

1.5.2. Untrustworthy Narration

The untrustworthy narrator is an unreliable narrator at the opposite end of the spectrum of unreliability. Olson explains that, “the untrustworthy narrators strike us as being *dispositionally* unreliable. The inconsistencies these narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest” (102). A classic example of an untrustworthy narrator, according to Olson’s definition, is Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Humbert, a child molester who at the time of narration is imprisoned for murder, repeatedly contradicts himself and his narrative. He signals to the narratee that he cannot be trusted, and almost all of his actions are motivated by self-interest. His unreliability is not related to outer circumstances, but to inherent characteristics—to flaws in his morale and psyche.
2. Analyzing Reliability in *Jane Eyre*

2.1. Voice in *Jane Eyre*

Voice in *Jane Eyre* is related to reliability because voice plays a large role in the narratee’s perception of Jane, which in turn affects how likely the narratee is to question Jane’s accounts of events. The novel is a first-person narrative, and the narrator is an older Jane Eyre. Jane’s voice is immediate, and she relates a sense of presence in the moment. Her voice is also intimate, and the tone is confiding. Jane brings a lot of herself into her narration, and the reader “hears” her voice clearly. She is not a casual observer of events; instead, she draws the reader into the narrative. She repeatedly addresses the narratee directly with utterances beginning “Reader,” especially toward the end of the novel. Jane’s friendly and personal tone creates a sense of loyalty toward Jane in the narratee. Carol Brock explains that:

> directly addressing the reader normally compels us to acknowledge our role as narrative recipient; but these addresses are minimal in the early chapters of *Jane Eyre*, though they increase dramatically near the end of the novel, as if Brontë were attempting to remind us of a situation that she had earlier encouraged us to ignore. The first of these direct addresses … turns out to have the reverse effect that invocations of the audience usually have: it strengthens our alliance with Jane. (103)

This alliance serves a specific purpose in *Jane Eyre*. Voice sets the stage; it creates the bond between narrator and narratee that is needed for the narratee to accept Jane’s version of events. Nevertheless, analyzing voice alone is not enough to get a clear image of Jane as a
narrator. To fully understand the complexity of the reliability of narration in *Jane Eyre*, it is necessary to look at the novel’s rather unique focalization and distance.

2.2. Focalization and Distance in *Jane Eyre*

According to Olson, if we can imagine that a narrator at a later stage in life would depict things differently; that with more information and reflection, the narrator’s story would change, then we are dealing with a fallible narrator rather than an untrustworthy one (103). In *Jane Eyre*, the reader is dealing with a narrative that alternates its focalization between the character Jane, the narrated self, and the older narrator, the narrating self. In the beginning of the novel, the character Jane is only nine years old, and the narration is focalized through a child’s eyes, in spite of the fact that Jane is actually narrating the story twenty years later. Brock points out that “the presence of this adult narrator in the Gateshead section is so inobtrusive that most readers do not even take notice of her … ; we become so thoroughly absorbed in the narrator’s past that we fail to pay attention to the narrative present in which we listen to the storyteller’s tale” (104).

The first part of the novel, focalized through 9-year-old Jane, and Jane’s recollections of this early part of her life, could be classified as fallible, because Jane is not attempting to mislead her narratee. She is simply mistaken about certain facts because she was a child at the time the events took place. Jane’s memory of her journey from Gateshead to Lowood is an example that supports such a reading. She says, “I remember but little of the journey: I only know that the day seemed to me of a preternatural length, and that we appeared to travel over hundreds of miles of road” (Brontë 35). Certainly, the day was not longer than any other day, and she did not travel hundreds of miles, but she is alone and she is leaving the only home she knows for the first time in her life, which has an effect her memory. When the coach stops at an inn, she describes “an immense room with a fireplace at each end” (35).
While the existence of an immense room in an inn is possible, it is undoubtedly not very common. It is more likely that 9-year-old Jane experiences the room as enormous because she is a small girl, all alone in a strange place.

Jane also relates several stories about her interactions with her aunt and cousins at Gateshead. Speaking of John Reed, she states that, “I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer” (Brontë 9). She recollects the time she spent in the Red Room with passionate language, and the passage is clearly focalized through the frightened and humiliated 9-year-old. However, at a later time, prompted by Miss Temple to tell her about the events that preceded Jane’s departure from Lowood, Jane says:

Exhausted by emotion, my language was more subdued than it generally was when it developed that sad theme; and mindful of Helen's warnings against the indulgence of resentment, I infused into the narrative far less of gall and wormwood than ordinary. Thus restrained and simplified, it sounded more credible: I felt as I went on that Miss Temple fully believed me. (60)

Following this incident, there is a shift in Jane’s manner of expression, and subsequent recollections from Jane’s school years are focalized through a more subdued young girl. The memories in question are still not reliable, though. Jane has a tendency to polarize characters and describe them as either only good or only bad, and her characterizations of her friend Helen Burns, who dies young from tuberculosis, and her teacher Miss Temple mention no unpleasant character traits at all, but rather portray Helen and Miss Temple as saints. The lack of nuance in these characterizations is, however, most likely not an attempt to mislead the narratee either. It would be unfair to blame Jane for
wanting to portray her loved ones in a favorable light. They are rather further examples of Jane’s recollections of her childhood being fallible.

During the majority of the novel, Jane is in her late teens. The narration is still focalized through the narrated self. The narrator describes events the way she experienced them when they happened, not as if she is looking back with perspective, even though we know thanks to her own comments that she is. However, toward the end of the novel, when Jane repeatedly addresses the narratee, and comments on what the narratee is supposedly thinking with utterances such as “reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity?—if you do, you little know me” (367), the focalization is no longer the same. While the narrator remains highly emotionally engaged in the narration, these parts are focalized through the narrating self.

As previously mentioned, the early parts of Jane’s narration could be classified as fallible, but the same cannot be said for the entire novel. If Jane Eyre were focalized through the narrated self throughout the novel, focalization and distance in the novel would also suggest that Jane is a fallible narrator, because it would make it possible for the reader to believe that an older and more mature Jane would have provided a more nuanced narrative. However, the narrator in Jane Eyre is the older Jane, no matter how unobtrusive her presence is in the majority of the novel because of the focalization through the narrated self. Toward the end, the novel is finally focalized through the older Jane. Because 10 years have passed between the narrated instance and the narrating instance, Jane is presumably more mature than the character through whom the narrative has been focalized; she has had time to reflect about people and events. This is the mature Jane’s opportunity to clarify, or explain any mistakes made in the narration because of focalization. She could provide some nuance to her harsh characterizations and judgments, because Jane is rather merciless in her portrayals of others. Yet, no such allusions are made. She has every chance to redeem herself, but she does
not. Thus, it appears fair to conclude that the temporal distance between narrated instance and narrating instance, as well as the alternating focalizations, has an impact on reliability in *Jane Eyre*. The narrator constructs the story with intent. Considering then, that in *Jane Eyre*, the older narrator is present throughout the story, and the narrative is focalized through her in the latter parts of the novel, it is clear that any contradictions or biases in the novel are not likely to change no matter at which stage in life Jane’s narration takes place. Taking into account, that Olson claims that fallible narrators can be imagined to tell a more nuanced story at a later stage in life, while an untrustworthy narrator would not; it can be concluded that focalization and distance in the latter parts of *Jane Eyre* are markers of untrustworthy narration.

2.3. Gaps in *Jane Eyre*

Just as Jane controls the pace in which the information about details in the narration is revealed, she also omits parts of the story altogether. While all narratives certainly contain more or less gaps, it is important to consider the reasons why the gaps in question exist. In Jane’s case, it appears reasonable to surmise that since she is in great control of the construction of her narration, significant gaps in the story are intentional. In one instance, Jane even declares that she skips eight years of her story since nothing interesting happens. Moreover, Carol Brock points out that, “a good deal of artistry is actually being employed when a storyteller withholds such information from her audience” (105). The information Brock refers to is the things the narratee remains unaware of until the end of the novel because the narrative is in large part focalized through the narrated self instead of the narrating self. The Rivers being Jane’s cousins is an example of such information. Brock suggests that while some critics argue that this is a natural way for a narrator to create suspense, it is actually rather a sign of the narrator’s complete control of the narrating situation. She claims that it is not just a matter of the narratee seeing things through Jane’s
point of view, “but that the storyteller prevents us from seeing anything except what she
wants us to see” (105). Brock thus proposes that these gaps of information in the narrative are
not merely a result of the narrator’s efforts to create suspense, but rather a conscious attempt
to control and manipulate both the narrative as well as the narratee’s response. The most
important indicator of this is, according to Brock, the same as in the matter of focalization;
the narrating self is present in the novel, but she chooses not to step in. In other words, the
gaps in Jane Eyre that keep the narratee from crucial information about the narrative are
deliberate. Therefore, such gaps of information are indicators of untrustworthy narration.
These gaps, incidentally, play a large role in Jane’s construction of Bertha Mason’s story.

3. Analysis of Jane’s Depiction of Bertha Mason

3.1. Introducing Bertha

We now turn to Bertha Mason and her part in the narrative. Bertha Mason is Edward
Rochester’s wife. She is Creole, and she was born in the West Indies. Rochester alleges that
mental illness runs in her family, and that her family knew of her illness when she married
him, but chose not to tell him about it. He took her with him back to England when he left the
Caribbean, and he now keeps her locked up in the attic at Thornfield, where a nurse, Grace
Poole, cares for her. No one in the nearby village is aware of Bertha’s presence, although
rumors circulate about strange occurrences at Thornfield. Femi Oyebode explains in her
article “Fictional Narrative and Psychiatry” that mentally ill people during this time were
ordinarily cared for in mental asylums, but there is no mention of such institutions in the
novel (143). Instead, Bertha leads an isolated existence, confined to the attic at Thornfield.

Bertha receives very little direct attention in Jane Eyre. She only appears in a few
scenes, and she never speaks. Nevertheless, she is always present, initially as a ghostly laugh,
suggesting that something is amiss at Thornfield Hall, and later as an obstacle to Jane’s and Rochester’s love.

Bertha’s illness makes her behavior unpredictable. When her brother Richard Mason comes to visit her, and he approaches her alone in spite of Rochester warning him against so doing, she attacks him. On several occasions, she makes her way down into Jane’s and Rochester’s living quarters; one time she sets a fire in Rochester’s room, and the other time she appears in Jane’s room on the night of Jane’s and Rochester’s wedding. In the end, she is the most likely suspect to have set fire to Thornfield. She commits suicide by jumping from the burning building, and thus ends her life.

The only information about Bertha’s background available in the novel is provided by Rochester. Considering that he is not always truthful, even to Jane, and that he continuously acts out of self-interest, it seems reasonable to question whether the background he provides is reliable or not. Wolfgang G. Müller points out that “even when Bertha Mason is presented in persona in the novel, the witnesses are influenced by Rochester’s account and never come to doubt his version of her madness” (69). The context in which Rochester is providing Jane with Bertha’s background is also worth noting. Finally forced to tell Jane who the woman in the attic really is, he recounts the story of his marriage to Bertha as he pleads with Jane to stay with him at Thornfield Hall, in spite of the fact that he is already married. Even if he is telling the truth, he is likely emphasizing anything that will help him reach his goal.

3.2. Jane and Bertha

3.2.1. Jane on Bertha.

Jane’s characterization of Bertha is an excellent example of how focalization in the novel has an effect on the portrayals of another character. Moreover, the previously mentioned alliance between narrator and narratee, created by Jane’s confidential tone, also
has a devastating effect. Because Jane has made the narratee her ally, the narratee is less likely to question Jane’s characterization. When Jane dehumanizes Bertha, and her tone of voice signals to the reader that Bertha is Jane’s antagonist, Jane’s accounts of events are less likely to be questioned.

Jane portrays Bertha as a non-human entity, and she commonly refers to Bertha using the pronoun ‘it’, which contributes to the dehumanization (Maurel 156). In addition, Jane refers to her as a creature and a demon: “What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman’s face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?” (Brontë 179). Later in the novel, while in the attic, Jane emphasizes Bertha’s similarity to an animal when she says: “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” (250). She goes on to call Bertha a clothed hyena and a maniac, and continues: “she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face—those bloated features” (250). In other words, Jane rarely acknowledges the fact that Bertha is a woman. She reduces her to nothing, and in the process, she diminishes the likelihood that the narratee will view Bertha in compassion rather than horror.

3.2.2. Gaps and Bertha

As previously shown, Jane omits parts of the narration in a deliberate manner. These gaps contribute to a biased portrayal of Bertha. In order to reduce and dehumanize Bertha, Jane excludes any details that would make Bertha appear more human. Jane never comments on the fact that Bertha has many opportunities to harm her, but actually never does (Sternlieb 510). According to both Jane herself, and the innkeeper to whom Jane speaks as she returns
to Thornfield after her stay with the Rivers, Bertha frequently roams around the house in the middle of the night, but she rarely attempts to harm anyone. In fact, if she is as dangerous as Jane claims, why is she able to leave the attic at all? While the innkeeper claims that Grace Poole is too fond of gin, and that Bertha steals the keys from Mrs. Poole when she falls asleep while drunk, this seems to make the case that Bertha is innocuous even stronger.

Knowing Bertha is able to escape the attic on occasion, would Rochester not be more likely to put her in an asylum, or at least somewhere else, away from Thornfield, if she were so dangerous? He seems interested enough in saving himself not to leave a potential murderer wandering around his estate. Sternlieb even goes as far as to question the incident where Bertha sets Rochester’s bed on fire, suggesting that it is odd that Bertha manages such a task when she according to Jane is inept enough to never even attempt an escape from Thornfield (510). Sternlieb hints that the reader ought to question the narrator’s motives for highlighting these conflicting events, and that Jane in fact deliberately “sets herself up in contrast to Bertha” in an attempt to “advertise her own utter harmlessness” (509).

Contradicting such a reading is the detail that Bertha is the most likely suspect to have caused the fire that burned Thornfield to the ground. Even so, considering Bertha’s plight, imprisoned in an attic thousands of miles away from home, it can also be argued that Bertha is not acting solely out of madness when she torches Thornfield Hall, but rather out of desperation. She may simply have set the building on fire to end her own life.

It is also worth noting that it does not appear as if Bertha has attempted to put anything on fire, or harm anyone in any other way, until Rochester starts courting Jane, which leads to another fact pointing to troublesome gaps in the narration; Bertha appears more aware of events than Jane wants her narratee to believe. The incident where Bertha materializes in Jane’s room in the middle of the night on the night before Jane’s and Rochester’s wedding supports such a reading. After ripping Jane’s veil, she approaches Jane,
but does not hurt her. Instead, after her visit to Jane’s room, she returns to the attic. This scene should not only make us question why Bertha politely goes back to her prison after scaring Jane (Sternlieb 510); the incident also speaks in favor of the idea that Bertha is aware of Rochester’s plans to marry Jane. Moreover, Bertha appears to understand that she is Rochester’s wife, or she would have little reason to try on, and subsequently tear, Jane’s veil. While it is not entirely impossible to imagine that a mentally ill woman may tear a veil without good reason, it would be quite a coincidence that this happens on the very night before Jane’s wedding. Bertha knows that the wedding is scheduled for the following day. Had she been as crazy as Jane indicates, she would most likely not have had such awareness. While Jane is so petrified of the apparition of a woman who reminds her of a “vampyre” (Brontë 242), she never appears to consider that perhaps Bertha is trying to tell her something. It is possible that Bertha, in her own way, is telling Jane that the man she loves is already married.
Conclusion

Applying Greta Olson’s model of unreliable narration to the narrator of *Jane Eyre*, it becomes clear that the reader is dealing with a narrator whose narration is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of fallible and untrustworthy narration. Part of Jane’s narration is fallible, for instance the parts where she recounts her childhood memories. In these sections of the novel, mistakes appear unintentional and mainly caused by flawed memories because the events took place when the narrator was a child. Even if the older narrator were to make herself heard in these sections, which she actually does on occasion, it appears fair to conclude that she is not deliberately misleading the narratee; she is recounting events the way she actually remembers them. Any factual mistakes are unintended.

However, there are parts of the novel that whilst focalized through the narrated self become misleading because the older and more mature narrator remains silent about any misconceptions that the narrated self passes on to the narratee. Furthermore, at the end of the novel, which is focalized through the narrating self, the narrator has the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings about events or characters mentioned in the novel, but she does not. Because she does not, her distortions or omissions of facts ought to be considered deliberate, and could be classified as unreliable. Thus, it can be concluded that the narrator of *Jane Eyre* is alternately fallible and untrustworthy in different sections of the novel.

Additionally, this essay analyzes Jane’s portrayal of Bertha Mason in order to investigate the effect of Jane’s untrustworthy narration on one of the characters in the novel. Jane’s characterization of Bertha is deliberately misleading. It contains several gaps that on closer inspection make it clear that the reader is not receiving the full story. Moreover, because of focalization, the narratee does not obtain more information about Bertha than the narrated self has, and this information is never added to or corrected by the narrating self. Thus, what remains is an inconclusive, biased, and deliberately misleading characterization.


