

LIT13-10-Thu1

Representations of Female Defiance: *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Contact details:

Instructor: Iana Seerung

Instructor email: iseerung@brandeis.edu

Meeting Times/Location:

Session: March 13- May 22, 2025

Time: Thursdays from 9:30-10:55

Zoom link: <https://brandeis.zoom.us/j/93478314476>

Required Texts: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Classics 9780141441146 and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* W. W. Norton & Company 9780393352560.

(If you already have copies of these texts, you are more than welcome to use any edition of these texts)

Course Description:

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) remains one of the most iconic of the Victorian period. Readers have long admired Jane's tenacity and grit against cruel authority figures, with feminist critics reclaiming both Jane and the "madwoman in the attic" as emblematic figures of patriarchal resistance. While *Jane Eyre* is set in the early nineteenth century, its publication in 1847, a decade after the abolition of slavery, puts questions of slavery, freedom, and empire at the forefront of any discussion of the text. Over a century later, the Caribbean writer Jean Rhys would take inspiration from *Jane Eyre* and seek to tell the story of Bertha Mason, the creole woman whose imprisonment by Mr. Rochester marks the central conflict of the novel. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is at once a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and a masterpiece of fiction in its own right as it explores in lyrical prose themes of consent, "female hysteria," post-emancipation social roles, and resistance against patriarchal and colonial control.

This course proposes an in-depth reading of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. At the level of content, these texts clearly pair well together, but at the level of genre and form (how the text itself is written), these works could not be more different. This class aims to develop students' capacity to read across multiple genres of literature using the theme of female defiance in these two texts. We will explore how texts are constructed, what tropes and generic conventions they use to create their narratives, and probe how we can read the different investments of these authors in their choices of form and style. We will also ask historical questions related to the representation of women by women in literary works to think about the different conditions of women's writing in these two periods.

Learning Objectives:

Students in this course will:

1. Learn about the history of nineteenth-century Britain with topics including slavery, abolition, race, gender, marriage and religion.
2. Explore the generic conventions of the Victorian Novel and Caribbean Modernism and judge how these terms do and do not apply to the novels we study.
3. Engage in close reading of novels, identifying how formal aspects of these texts (sentence structure, use of literary devices, voice, tone, and narration) produce different kinds of representation of the female protagonists.
4. Develop their own taste for literature and be able to articulate their affinity for certain literary genres over others with greater specificity.

Before our First Class: There will be optional readings and videos to get you oriented to the course, but you will likely want to get a head start reading *Jane Eyre* if you are able to.

A note on reading: Both of these texts are challenging in their own ways. *Jane Eyre* is long and dense with a dizzying amount of detail, while *Wide Sargasso Sea* is sparse and quick making it difficult to grasp the meaning of the text. Each week I will offer guiding questions to help focus on specific parts of the novel, please also bring your own questions to class and we can work through them together.

What to expect from class: We will do a mix of lecture and discussion.

Course Schedule

3/13: Introduction to course

Topics to be covered:

1. Biographical introduction to Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys, including the politics of publishing as a woman in their respective time periods
2. Introduction of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*
3. Introduction to key themes of the class: representations of women, female defiance, questions of genre and form
4. Historical context of both the Victorian period and twentieth century Jamaica

Optional readings:

1. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* chapters 1-3 (Elizabeth Gaskell was a contemporary of Brontë's and wrote an amazing biography of her. It is worth reading in its entirety at some point if you are interested).
 - a. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1827/1827-h/1827-h.htm>
2. Eloise Millar, "Out on her own: The lonely magic of Jean Rhys"

- a. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/sep/24/ouonherowntheloneymagi>

3/20: Seeing Red, *Jane Eyre* chapters 1-8

Topics to be covered:

1. Genre conventions of the bildungsroman (coming-of-age novel)
2. Context of time period (both of the narrative, which is early nineteenth century, and the publication which is 1840's)
3. How to read a Victorian novel (and what constitutes a "Victorian novel")

3/27 Victorian Boarding Schools, *Jane Eyre* chapters 9-15

Topics to be covered:

1. The trope of the boarding school in British literature (and its different manifestations in American literature)
2. Female friendship and representations of liminal space
3. Discussion of heterotopias (a concept from Michel Foucault) and geometric representation

4/3 The Gothic Tradition, *Jane Eyre* chapters 16-21

Topics to be covered:

1. Ann Radcliffe and the conventions of British gothic literature
2. Brontë's inheritance of the gothic across her works
3. Hysteria and how the gothic genre allows female characters to confront and resist the label of hysteria

4/10 Ghosts of the Slave Past, *Jane Eyre* chapters 22-27

Topics to be covered:

1. History of British slavery and Britain's colonization of the Caribbean
2. History of the procedure of marriage in Victorian Britain
3. Jane's moral sensibility and the question of personal autonomy

4/24 Turning Toward India, *Jane Eyre* chapters 28-34

Topics to be covered:

1. History of British South Asia and post-abolition British empire
2. Jane's resistance to St John's moralizing and the relationship between personal desire and moral duty

5/1 A Successful Marriage Plot? Finish *Jane Eyre* chapter 35-end

Topics to be covered:

1. We will discuss the end of the novel and whether we think Jane's decision in the end is an act of independence or a submission to patriarchy

5/8: Ruinate and the Natural Environment of Post-Abolition Jamaica, read Part 1 of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Topics to be covered:

1. Concept of “ruinate” (a Caribbean term that refers to abandoned plantations that have been overtaken, or reclaimed, by nature)
2. History of Jamaican Independence and the historical context of *Wide Sargasso Sea*
3. Compare and contrast between the childhood descriptions of Jane and Antoinette

5/15: Narrative Interruptions, Female Defiance, read Part 2 of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Topics to be covered:

1. Caribbean Modernism and questions of form and genre in contemporary literature
2. Reading Antoinette’s interruptions of Rochester’s narrative and developing an idea of textual resistance (or resistance at the level of the sentence)

5/22: Seeing Red: Jane versus Antoinette, read Part 3 of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Topics to be covered:

1. Study of the vibrant, hallucinatory colors of the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*
2. Comparing the account of Bertha’s ending in *Jane Eyre* versus *Wide Sargasso Sea*
3. Concluding thoughts on these two texts and their approaches to representing female defiance