



Sensational Realism? Jane Eyre and the Problem of Genre

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Sensational Realism? Jane Eyre and the Problem of Genre

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This article explores the issue of Jane Eyre and genre, examining the novel's relationship to a multitude of literary genres, including gothic, realist, fairytale, bildungsroman, and sensation. Critical assessments of Brontë's novel have tended to explore the text's relationships with these various forms of fiction in isolation, focusing, for example, on the narrative's gothic tropes, or its relationship with the Victorian realist novel. This article seeks to explore the tensions inherent in the text's relationship to these differing, often contradictory genres: to what extent are the realist elements of the text undermined by the narrative's reliance on supernatural, sensational, and distinctly unrealistic occurrences? At the heart of this tension is arguably a conflict between high-brow and low-brow literature. How, if at all, does the narrative negotiate and resolve these tensions? In particular, I posit that Brontë's novel can be read as a forerunner to the sensation novel – a form which became popular in the 1860s, and which is marked by a combination of realism and sensationalism. A number of sensation novels, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) – one of the defining texts of the genre – are directly influenced by Jane Eyre, reworking elements of Brontë's narrative (in particular the bigamy plot, and the character of the mad wife). In light of the conflicting aspects of Brontë's novel, I question how useful it is to attempt to pigeonhole the text within a specific literary genre, and to what extent this may in fact limit our reading and understanding of the narrative. I seek to ascertain the extent to which the conflicting elements of Brontë's novel are ultimately resolved, or whether the narrative as a whole is undermined by these contrasting features. In exploring Jane Eyre from this perspective, I seek to highlight not only the diversity of Victorian fiction, but also the problematic nature of genre itself, the boundaries of which, as Brontë's narrative illustrates, are fluid, blurred, and at times imperceptible.

realism, romance, sensation, bigamy, authority, Bildungsroman

‘Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging’¹

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* unquestionably participates in or engages with a multitude of literary genres, including fairytale, gothic, Bildungsroman, realism, romance, and sensation. This article seeks to explore the tensions inherent in the text's relationship to these differing, often contradictory genres, and to analyse the conflict between highbrow and lowbrow literature that emerges through an examination of the novel. I begin with a brief consideration of the characteristics of *Jane Eyre* which result in its simultaneous inclusion and exclusion

¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’ in Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.230 (emphasis in original).

from these various genres, before examining what I consider to be the most significant conflict in terms of genre: the tension between the sensational and realist aspects of the text – a tension which marks much of Brontë's writing. I posit that, in spite of its claims to realism, Brontë's novel can in fact be read as an early example of the sensation novel, a form which came to prominence in the 1860s with the publication of works such as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). The tension between sensationalism and realism can be read in terms of a conflict between high and low literary art – something which Brontë's letters suggest she was both aware of and uncomfortable with. I consider the extent to which the author manages to successfully negotiate this conflict in *Jane Eyre*, in part through an exploration of the novel's reception, and explore the impact of some of these contradictory features on both the novel, and on our understanding of genre itself.

Many of the discussions of *Jane Eyre* and genre focus on the novel's participation in specific, individual genres: Victorian Anderson, for example, discusses Brontë's engagement with fairytales in her article 'Investigating the Third Story: "Bluebeard" and "Cinderella" in *Jane Eyre*';² a plethora of critics have explored the gothic elements of Brontë's novel, including Tamar Heller³ and Margaret Homans;⁴ the notion of *Jane Eyre* as Bildungsroman has been discussed by Hyeyoung Lee⁵ and Lorna Ellis;⁶ Alison Byerly⁷ and Delia Da Sousa Correa⁸ are amongst the critics who have concerned themselves with the realist aspects of Brontë's novel; while Joanne Spiegel is one of a number of critics to concentrate on the romance features of the text.⁹ In terms of the notion of *Jane Eyre* as a forerunner to the sensation novel, a number of critics have made this connection: Winifred Hughes, for example suggests that "[i]n the sensation novel of the 1860s, the emphasis on violent crime was combined with the romantic and sexual motifs of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*",¹⁰ while Victorian commentators such as Margaret Oliphant also noted similarities between Brontë's novel and the later sensation novel, arguing that "a singular change has passed upon our light literature [...] The change perhaps began at the time when *Jane Eyre* made what advanced critics call her "protest" against the conventionalities in which the world clothes itself".¹¹ However, there are no detailed discussions of the sensational aspects of *Jane Eyre*, and their significance to debates about the conflict between high and low literary art in Brontë's writing.

Jane Eyre cannot be said to truly belong to any specific genre (thus supporting Derrida's assertion that "participation never amounts to belonging"). A number of critics have considered the issue of Brontë's engagement with multiple genres in *Jane Eyre*. Robyn R. Warhol, for example, discussing the issue of doubleness, argues that "realism and Gothic romance [...] are not so much in competition as in continuous oscillation with each other,

² In Ruth Bienstock Anolik (ed.), *Horriifying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), pp.111-21.

³ '*Jane Eyre*, Bertha and the Female Gothic' in Diane Long Hoeveler (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Brontë's Jane Eyre* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1993), pp.49-55.

⁴ 'Dreaming of Children: Literalization in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*' in Julian E. Fleenor (ed.), *The Female Gothic* (Montreal: Eden, 1983), pp.257-79.

⁵ '*Jane Eyre* as Christian Bildungsroman'. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Vol. 6, No. 1 (2002), pp.55-75.

⁶ In *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman, 1750-1850* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1999).

⁷ In *Realism, Representation and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁸ In Delia Da Sousa Correa (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Realisms* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁹ 'The Construction of the Romance in *Jane Eyre*'. *Readerly/Writerly Texts*. Vol. 9, No.1-2 (April 2001), pp.133-46.

¹⁰ Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.9.

¹¹ Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine* (September 1867) in Andrew Maunder (ed.), *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, Vol. 1 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), p.173.

serving to double each other at crucial moments of both narratives [*Jane Eyre* and *Villette*]].¹² Warhol uses the example of the red room scenes, noting that what is presented “is the perspective of a Gothic heroine, although the tale is being told by a resolutely realistic narrator, in the voice of Jane’s older self”.¹³ This “resolutely realistic narrator” is overtaken by sensational events which stand in stark contrast to her worldly perspective; thus, while the plot of the novel is undoubtedly sensational, Jane herself remains fixed in the realm of realism. The contrast in the text between these two genres might thus be read specifically as a contrast between narrative events and narrator. Warhol continues: “When the heroine’s experiences are more Gothic than realistic, and the narrator’s perspective is bound by the assumptions of realism, the gap of dissonant self-narration introduces a doubleness of genre to parallel the heroine-narrator’s doubleness of perspective”.¹⁴ Jane cannot avoid the gothic resonances of her experiences in narrating them to the reader, in spite of her stoically realist perspective. Distinguishing between heroine and narrator in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Warhol proposes that “[t]he heroines are living a Gothic romance, and the narrators are telling a realist tale”.¹⁵ Echoing Derrida’s comments on genre, Warhol notes, “binary oppositions between genres (the assumption that either a novel is realistic or not, and that its value resides in its generic consistency) cannot hold, even in any given moment of a particular narrative”.¹⁶ This emphasises the value of Brontë’s text in spite of its generic inconsistencies, and raises questions about the usefulness of attempting to categorise texts in terms of genre. However, while *Jane Eyre* clearly engages simultaneously with both gothic and realist tropes, this engagement is nevertheless marked by tension; if the usefulness of querying Brontë’s participation in contrasting genres can be called into question, it is also worth pointing out that the reason why critics have returned to this issue is undoubtedly because this dual engagement does not sit entirely comfortably with the reader: we are presented with a narrator in the realist vein, who is overtaken by sensational events, but, unlike Jane Austen’s Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, we are led to believe that these experiences are real.¹⁷ Furthermore, while Austen presents a clear parody of gothic tropes, Jane’s gothic experiences are, it seems, just that: the reader is never encouraged to doubt Jane’s version of events.

In another significant assessment, Laura Zuber offers an important analysis of the novel’s engagement with different genres in her article, “‘I can but die’: The Gothic Cycle of Death and Rebirth in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*”.¹⁸ As the title suggests, the discussion is primarily concerned with the text’s engagement with and rejection of gothic conventions. Zuber notes that “[i]t is difficult to pin the novel down under one label or genre”, and proposes that the text “moves from one genre to another”.¹⁹ This would seem to imply that the novel, while engaging with multiple genres, only participates in one genre at any given point. Contrary to this, I contest that the novel participates simultaneously in several different genres, and that it is from this simultaneous participation that tensions subsequently emerge. Zuber proposes that “Brontë seeks to produce a text free from genre”.²⁰ This assertion regarding authorial intent is, I think, questionable. Even if we accept that Brontë is

¹² Robyn R. Warhol, ‘Double Gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*’ in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1800*. Vol. 36, No. 4 (Autumn 1996), p.858.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.861.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.863.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.864.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Warhol suggests that the crucial difference between *Jane Eyre* and *Northanger Abbey* is the narrative perspective (first person/omniscient) (*ibid.*).

¹⁸ In *The Common Room*. Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 2008), http://deptorg.knox.edu/engdept/commonroom/Volume_Eleven/number_two/Zuber/index.html

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

consciously attempting to produce a genre-less text, we must surely also accept the impossibility of fulfilling such an ambition: texts inevitably engage with established literary genres, and indeed Brontë engages directly with earlier traditions and works in her novel – referencing numerous other texts, and arguably assuming a degree of prior knowledge on her reader's part in this respect.

In terms of the novel's engagement with the gothic, Zuber argues that Brontë seeks to escape the confines of this genre; however, she concludes that while the text "attempts to liberate itself from genre convention [...], even in rejecting its protocols, the novel ends up affirming genre's authority", and proposes that "[t]he way that *Jane Eyre* struggles with genre conventions is in itself an uncanny experience for the reader, to the point that it evokes sentiments uncanner than those a typical Gothic novel could produce",²¹ thus seemingly suggesting that the narrative's attempts to escape the gothic are, in a sense, ultimately futile. Zuber's reading implies that the novel deliberately sets out to subvert and ultimately eschew the conventions traditionally associated with specific literary genres. However, I would like to suggest that the blurring of genres in *Jane Eyre* is in part an unconscious process by the author, resulting to some extent from her own varied literary influences, and in part an attempt by Brontë to fulfil the requirements perceived necessary for publication, which resulted in something of an ideological conflict.

This conflict is illustrated in Brontë's response to G. H. Lewes's assessment of *Jane Eyre* as too melodramatic,²² highlighting the conflict between sensationalism and realism in her work. Her rejoinder addresses this anomaly directly, and is worth quoting at length:

You warn me to beware Melodrama [*sic*] and you exhort me to adhere to the real. When I first began to write, so impressed was I with the truth of the principles you advocate that I determined to take Nature and Truth as my sole guides and to follow in their very footprints; I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement: over-bright colouring too I avoided, and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave and true.

My work (a tale in 1 vol. [*The Professor*]) being completed, I offered it to a publisher. He said it was original, faithful to Nature, but he did not feel warranted in accepting it, such a work would not sell. I tried six publishers in succession; they all told me it was deficient in "startling incident" and "thrilling excitement", that it would never suit the circulating libraries, and as it was on those libraries the success of works of fiction mainly depended they could not undertake to publish what would be over-looked there – "*Jane Eyre*" was rather objected to at first [on] the same grounds – but finally found acceptance.²³

This statement offers one possible explanation for the confusion of genres in *Jane Eyre*, and suggests that while Brontë favoured realism, she was forced to adopt the conventions of more sensational genres in order to find favour with publishers.

The generic tensions in *Jane Eyre* can thus be partly explained by the conflict between the author's own literary preferences, and the demands of publishers and readers, and this offers some explanation for the subversion of various generic forms in the novel. I wish now to briefly discuss the ways in which Brontë breaks with and merges generic conventions in the novel, making it impossible to reach any satisfactory conclusion regarding the position of the text in relation to genre.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² G. H. Lewes's review of Brontë's novel declared it contained 'too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating library' (G. H. Lewes, Unsigned review, *Fraser's Magazine* [December 1847] in Miriam Allott [ed.], *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974], p.85) – an institution which was later held responsible for the popularity of sensation fiction: the critic H. L. Mansel blamed 'periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls' for this 'phenomenon of our literature' (Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels' in Maunder, *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, p.34).

²³ Charlotte Brontë to G. H. Lewes (6 November 1847) in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (London: Viking, 1997), p.168.

In opening her first-person narrative with the various scenes from Jane's childhood, Brontë seems immediately to position her novel as a female Bildungsroman, while the detail she provides of the hardships experienced, first at Gateshead and subsequently at Lowood school, anticipate the high-Victorian realism of authors such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell. However, these characteristics of the text are immediately contrasted with the heroine's pseudo-gothic experience in the red room, in which the young Jane is imprisoned, and subsequently convinces herself that the room is haunted by the ghost of her dead uncle. Though the scene clearly portrays the vivid imagination of a scared child, it introduces the theme of imprisonment that is so crucial to the text, and in particular anticipates the later descriptions of Bertha Mason, imprisoned in the top storey of Thornfield Hall, and subject, as Jane is here, to excessive outbreaks of emotion. The theme of imprisonment is understandably crucial to readings of the text as a gothic novel, and this early scene and its association with the later image of Rochester's first wife, for modern scholars at least, also serves to introduce one of the key feminist aspects of the text: the notion of Bertha as Jane's double, her secret, repressed self.²⁴ Through its association with the gothic genre, the novel is also associated with Romantic literature, in spite of its status as a definitive Victorian novel,²⁵ an association reinforced through the descriptions and symbolic significance of nature in the text, as well as through the portrayal of Rochester as a Byronic hero.²⁶

If Brontë's portrayal of Rochester links him to Romantic and gothic literature (an issue I will return to shortly), Jane is hardly the typical gothic heroine – accurately characterised by Maggie Kilgour as “passive and persecuted”.²⁷ Indeed, while the opening of the novel introduces gothic as well as realist elements, it quickly becomes apparent that Jane is not going to play the role of passive heroine, thus the text deviates from the conventions associated with the gothic, even as it suggests to the reader the possibility of the novel as gothic romance.

Jane's opening rebellion against the tyranny of John Reed marks the first of several rebellions against patriarchal authority. This posits Jane as a pseudo-feminist heroine, and the novel traces her path to (financial) independence, through her repeated rejection of the constraints which threaten to undermine that independence, even when such rejection involves a degree of self-sacrifice or inevitably ends in some form of punishment (her initial rebellion against John Reed, her refusal to become Rochester's mistress; her rejection of St. John Rivers's marriage proposal). Throughout the text, Brontë deviates from gothic convention by portraying her heroine as strong-minded and strong-willed.

However, in the conclusion to the novel, Brontë arguably compromises Jane's position as quasi-feminist heroine through the depiction of her marriage to Rochester – a character who simultaneously fulfils the roles of villain and romantic hero. Consequently, the notion of *Jane Eyre* as romantic love story is undermined through the problematic portrayal of the ‘hero’. If genre in Brontë's novel occupies a position of conflict, the text also offers a conflicting and contradictory depiction of Rochester. The reader is encouraged to engage with the Jane/Rochester love story, to desire the happy-ever-after ending that Brontë ultimately

²⁴ This is suggested by, amongst others, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who describe Bertha as Jane's ‘own secret self’ (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979], p.348).

²⁵ For many readers, *Jane Eyre* has come to epitomise the Victorian novel, yet the literary conventions of Victorianism were barely established when Brontë's novel first appeared in 1847.

²⁶ For a discussion of Rochester as Byronic hero, see Sarah Wootton, “‘Picturing in me a hero of romance’: The Legacy of *Jane Eyre*'s Byronic Hero’ in Margaret Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (eds.), *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.229-42.

²⁷ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.4.

provides (“Reader, I married him”).²⁸ Yet Rochester is also the stereotypical gothic villain, the Bluebeard figure who locks his first wife away, and attempts to deceive Jane into a bigamous marriage. He is one in a long line of patriarchal figures who seek to assert their authority over Jane, including John Reed, Brocklehurst, and St. John Rivers. These characters, as Barbara Hill Rigney observes, “are agents of [...] a sexually oppressive system”,²⁹ who repeatedly attempt to contain or control the heroine. Jane encounters the first of these ‘agents’ of patriarchal rule at Gateshead, in the form of John Reed, who, she informs the reader, “bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, nor once or twice in the day, but continually” (16). Jane’s attempt to defend herself against one of his attacks results in her imprisonment in the ‘red room’. At Lowood, John Reed is replaced by Mr Brocklehurst, who humiliates Jane in front of the entire school, denouncing her as a liar, and forcing her to stand for an hour on a stool – “a pedestal of infamy” (79) – as punishment for her alleged sins. Jane’s “impulse of fury against Reed, Brocklehurst, and Co.” (77) at this point in the narrative is indicative of her attempts to resist patriarchal control in her quest for selfhood and independence.

Soon after her arrival at Thornfield, it is Rochester who takes on the role of patriarchal male intent on mastering the apparently wilful Jane – a role in some sense already fulfilled by their respective positions as master of the house and governess. After the revelation of the existence of his first wife, he is unable, however, to bend Jane to his will and convince her to live with him as his mistress, and she again escapes patriarchal rule, only to encounter it in yet another form at Marsh End, in the figure of her cousin St John Rivers who, though compassionate (taking her into his home after the servant woman has previously refused her entry), nevertheless attempts to exert control over her, insisting that she must marry him if she is to accompany him as a missionary. Indeed, the masculine authority these various figures wield over Jane is reinforced by the comparison she draws between herself and “a masterless and stray dog” (378) when she arrives starving and friendless on her cousins’ doorstep. In this respect, then, the doubling of Bertha and Jane is mirrored through the replication of the patriarchal male character; John Reed, Brocklehurst, and St John Rivers can all, in a sense, be read as Rochester’s doubles.

A feminist reading of the text might argue convincingly that Jane’s ‘progress’ and self-development are thus repeatedly undermined as she constantly exchanges one form of imprisonment for another, and that her marriage to Rochester at the end of the novel (through which, under the marriage laws of the time, she relinquishes all her wealth and possessions, including, significantly, the inheritance which has provided her with financial security and independence) is merely symbolic of her final and ultimate containment.³⁰ Such a reading inevitably undermines the notion of the novel as both a proto-feminist Bildungsroman and a romantic love story, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of the gothic theme of imprisonment to the story as a whole.

The confusion of differing, sometimes seemingly opposing literary genres in *Jane Eyre* is, therefore, particularly evident through the author’s portrayal of Rochester as both hero and villain. This, in turn, links to Brontë’s engagement with and subversion of fairytales in the novel, for Rochester is both Prince Charming and Bluebeard, while Jane is caught in a position which promises/threatens either a Cinderella-like transformation, or imprisonment

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; London: Penguin, 1996). Subsequent references to this edition are given in the body of the text.

²⁹ Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing and Atwood* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p.17.

³⁰ Though the implications of the marriage in this respect are not made explicit, the announcement of the union is preceded by a scene in which Jane’s financial independence is repeatedly emphasised: reunited with Rochester, Jane informs him, ‘I am an independent woman now’; he responds, ‘Are you an independent woman? A rich woman?’, and she again asserts, ‘I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress’ (483).

and perhaps death at the hands of her own husband. John Sutherland, commenting sardonically on the similarities between Rochester and Bluebeard, highlights the potential dangers of the apparently-reformed villain:

Doubtless if, instead of killing Bluebeard, the wife's brothers had merely blinded him and cut off a hand (with the threat that if he did not behave himself they would come back and cut off some more), the old rogue might have become a tolerably good husband. But what if, like Edward Rochester, after ten years of marriage, his sight were to return and – barring the minor blemish of a missing hand (common enough, and even rather glamorous in these post-war years) – Bluebeard still cut a handsome figure. Could one be entirely confident that his wife-killing ways would not return?³¹

Through its use and subversion of fairytale, the novel again emphasises the potential conflict for the reader: should we embrace the happy-ever-after ending, or worry for the successor to the mad Bertha Mason? The manner in which we interpret the text in this respect affects how we view the novel in terms of genre: if we accept the former scenario, the novel can comfortably occupy the position of Victorian love story; if we concur with the latter perspective, the novel remains rooted in the conventions of gothic fiction, concerned until the end with the issue of female imprisonment and male villainy. Ultimately, however, this conflict, like many others in the novel remains unresolved.

I turn now to what is arguably the most significant conflict in the *Jane Eyre* in terms of genre: the division between realism and (gothic) sensationalism. The realist elements of the text, introduced in the opening section of the narrative, are called into question not only by the contrasting gothic elements, but also by improbable coincidences (Jane fortuitously ending up on her cousins' doorstep) and seemingly supernatural occurrences (most notably the scene in which Jane hears Rochester calling to her, though he is many miles away), as well as by the sensational elements of the text, which mark it out as forerunner to the sensation novel.

Offering an authoritative definition of sensation fiction is problematic, but the features typically associated with the genre include a contemporary setting, the presence of villainous, sometimes criminal women, a concern with the breach of traditional class boundaries, and an emphasis on themes such as crime, madness, marital breakdown and bigamy. Until relatively recently, the genre was primarily associated with the 1860s, with Collins's *The Woman in White* generally cited as the earliest example of the form. However, in his introduction to *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, Andrew Maunder revises earlier assumptions about the genre and argues that it was an important literary form from 1855 until 1890, thus suggesting that it initially emerged only a few years after the publication of the Brontës' novels in the late 1840s and early 1850s.

There are striking similarities between *Jane Eyre* and the sensation fiction of authors such as Collins, Braddon and Wood. Significantly, both are heavily influenced by the gothic fiction of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (thus *Jane Eyre* arguably occupies the space in between gothic fiction and the later genre of sensation fiction); both transfer the mysteries of the gothic novel – typically set abroad – to the more familiar landscape of nineteenth-century England.³² Similar character types appear in *Jane Eyre* and in the typical sensation novel: for example, the patriarchal male authority figure, and the poor governess who succeeds in breaking through the class barrier and attaining a degree of wealth and status.³³ Furthermore, a number of the central themes of sensation fiction mirror those of

³¹ John Sutherland, *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.80.

³² This is one of the distinctive features of sensation fiction. As one contemporary critic famously observed, 'Proximity is, indeed, one element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion' (Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels' in Maunder, *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, p.38).

³³ Brontë worked as a governess for a short time, so the presence of the character in their fiction is hardly surprising. Sensation novels featuring the figure of the governess include *East Lynne*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Collins's *Armada* (1866).

Jane Eyre: illicit affairs, illegitimate children (Adele), marital conflict, madness and bigamy, for example. In his Bibliography of sensation fiction, Andrew Maunder includes several works that appear to be directly influenced by *Jane Eyre*,³⁴ hence a number of sensation novels seem to explicitly draw on, if only to subvert, aspects of Brontë's novel.

Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is undoubtedly the most famous example of a sensational reworking of *Jane Eyre*. Both novels tell the story of an impoverished governess who marries into the upper classes, and the themes of bigamy and madness feature in each text. The madwoman in both narratives has become an important figure for feminist critics, largely as a consequence of her perceived rebellion against patriarchal authority – a rebellion symbolised by the attempt made by the protagonist in each novel to kill the male oppressor as he sleeps, by starting a fire. However, unlike Brontë, who does not appear to identify in any way with the figure of the madwoman, Braddon seems to acknowledge the significance of the mad wife, and to imply that patriarchal structures may be to blame for her madness, and, furthermore, that she may be entitled to sympathy from the reader. In Braddon's novel, the characters of Jane and Bertha (and indeed to some extent Rochester – the scheming, would-be bigamist), are combined in the character of the novel's (anti)heroine, Lucy Audley. While the protagonist's behaviour is ultimately condemned, and she is left to die in a madhouse, the narrative makes it clear, through Lady Audley's confession (unlike Bertha, the madwoman in Braddon's novel is granted a voice), that she has little chance of improving her lot in life unless she marries well (she cannot, as Jane does, rely on fortuitous coincidence to save her). While both texts point to marriage as both a form of imprisonment, and a form of escape, Braddon's critique of marriage is much more damning, and the narrative implies that if anyone is responsible for Lady Audley's 'madness', it is patriarchal society.

The theme of bigamy also takes on a greater significance in sensation fiction than in Brontë's novel, in which the bigamous marriage is avoided at the last minute, and in which, significantly, the potential bigamist is the upper-class male, for whom sexual indiscretions were more acceptable than for the respectable Victorian woman. Bigamy became a hugely popular plot device in sensation fiction – indeed, the bigamy novel has been perceived as a sub-genre of sensation fiction by some critics³⁵ – so in this respect too Brontë seems to anticipate the sensation novel, though the bigamy plot in sensation fiction differs from *Jane Eyre*, as Winifred Hughes has suggested: "in the authentic sensation novel, [...] Jane no longer runs away from the would-be bigamist; she is much more likely to dabble in a little bigamy of her own".³⁶ However, while this suggests a degree of subversion absent in Brontë's earlier work, in fact, sensation fiction tends to ultimately adhere to Victorian convention in the conclusion of the story: the challenge to morality is generally only temporary, and, like *Jane Eyre*, the typical sensation novel concludes with the marriage of the hero and heroine.

The critical reception of Brontë's novel and the later works of Braddon *et al* also warrants comparison. Reviewing *Jane Eyre* shortly after its publication, the *Atlas* pronounced it "a tale of passion, [...] a book to make the pulses gallop and the heart beat"³⁷ – a description that anticipates later assessments of the sensation novel, which, according to one reviewer, did nothing more than "preach to the nerves".³⁸ Elsewhere, *Jane Eyre* was described as

³⁴ Amongst others, Mrs M. A. Bird's *The Hawkshawes* (1865), John Berwick Harwood's *Plain John Orpington* (1866) and Mrs Margaret Argles's *Lady Banksmere* (1886).

³⁵ See Jeanne Fahnestock, 'Bigamy: The Rise and Fall of a Convention' in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (June 1981), pp.47-71.

³⁶ Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, *op. cit.*, p.9.

³⁷ Unsigned review, *Atlas* (23 October 1847) in Allott, *The Brontës*, p.68.

³⁸ Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review* (April 1863) in Maunder, *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction*, p.33.

“unnatural”³⁹ (an epithet frequently applied to the sensation novel). Brontë was also accused of “courseness” and vulgarity,⁴⁰ again terms that frequently appeared in critical assessments of sensation literature. Of particular concern to reviewers of both *Jane Eyre* and the female sensation writers was the notion that women could produce such immoral tales. One critic, writing before the gender of the author of *Jane Eyre* became known, commented, “if they [the Brontës’ novels]⁴¹ are the productions of a woman, she must be a woman pretty nearly unsexed”,⁴² while the *Pall Mall Gazette* took umbrage with the female sensationalists “that outrage morals, manners and probability”,⁴³ declaring that “[t]hese baleful writers should be tolerated no longer [...] Indecorous and proclaimed sensuality in a female writer should be visited with a punishment as appropriate to the offence as it is in the power of critics to inflict”.⁴⁴

In spite of such assessments, as well as the thematic similarities between *Jane Eyre* and sensation fiction, there are of course significant differences – in particular, in terms of the representation of the heroine. Unlike in sensation fiction, the ‘deviant’ women in *Jane Eyre* (Bertha Mason, Adele’s mother) do not take centre stage. The (anti)heroine is a crucial feature of the sensation genre, and sparked intense controversy when she first appeared – characters such as Braddon’s Lady Audley, whose beautiful façade (which starkly contrasts the plain features of Brontë’s Jane) conceals an evil nature, and Collins’s Lydia Gwilt (*Armada*), a villainess who is also marked by her outstanding beauty. Deviant women are sidelined and marginalised in Brontë’s novel, thus Adele’s mother, for example, is present only through Rochester’s description of her, and appears as a stereotypical fallen woman: “a French opera-dancer” (160) who deceives Rochester (the ‘innocent’ victim?), and later abandons her own child.

As is evident from her response to Lewes’s criticism of her novel, Brontë vehemently defended herself against what were essentially accusations of sensationalism. The author’s discomfort with melodrama is apparent not only in her comments to Lewes, but also in statements made in *The Professor* and in a number of her letters. In *The Professor*, the first novel Brontë wrote, but the last to be published, the narrator, William Crimsworth, makes it clear that his story is not a romantic or sensational one: “My narrative is not exciting, and above all, not marvellous”.⁴⁵ Later on in the text, he notes, “Novelists should never allow themselves to weary of the study of real life”,⁴⁶ seemingly expressing the views of the author: asked by her publishers for a second novel following the success of *Jane Eyre*, she again proposed *The Professor*, arguing that “it contains more pith, more substance, more *reality*, in my judgement, than much of ‘Jane Eyre’”.⁴⁷ Ironically, it seems this emphasis on the real, the mundane, was one of the reasons for the novel’s failure to find a publisher, pointing once again to the fact that the author’s own ideals of fiction were contrary to and in conflict with those of her publishers and readers.

³⁹ Unsigned review, *Spectator* (November 1847) in Allott (ed.), *The Brontës*, p.74.

⁴⁰ See Unsigned review, *Christian Remembrancer* (April 1848) in Allott, *The Brontës*, p.89; Elizabeth Rigby, Unsigned review, *Quarterly Review* (December 1848) in Allott, *The Brontës*, p.110-11.

⁴¹ It was assumed, when *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* first appeared, that they were the productions of the same author.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.116.

⁴³ Unsigned, ‘Peculiarities of Some Female Novelists’, *Pall Mall Gazette* (January 1870) in Mauser, *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction*, Vol. 1, p.228

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.229

⁴⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (1857; London: Penguin, 1989), p.47

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.186.

⁴⁷ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams (14 December 1847) in Barker, *The Brontës*, p.173, my emphasis.

While Brontë may have bowed to pressure from publishers to construct a more exciting, sensational story, it is clear that she was uncomfortable with this aspect of *Jane Eyre*, and aspired towards a realism which she perceived as offering an increased possibility of artistic achievement. In a letter to her publishers written after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, she provides a significant insight into her attitude towards writing and fiction, and in particular the emphasis she placed on both originality and realism:

The standard hero[e]s and heroines of novels, are personages in whom I could never, from childhood upwards, take an interest, believe to be natural, or wish to imitate: were I obliged to copy these characters, I would simply – not write at all. Were I obliged to copy any former novelist, even the greatest, even Scott, in anything, I would not write – Unless I have something of my own to say, and a way of my own to say it in, I have no business to publish; unless I can look beyond the greatest Masters, and study Nature herself, I have no right to paint; unless I can have the courage to use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of Conventionality, I ought to be silent.⁴⁸

Brontë's unease with sensational literature is palpable not only in her responses to her own work, but to her sisters' productions as well, and goes some way towards explaining her criticism of their fiction. Discussing *Wuthering Heights* (1847) in a letter to her publishers, she asserts "Ellis [Emily] has a strong, original mind, full of strange though sombre power: when he writes poetry that power speaks in language once condensed, elaborated and refined – but in prose it breaks forth in scenes which shock more than they attract",⁴⁹ thus echoing reviewers' criticisms of the novel. She was similarly critical of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), declaring, "[f]or my own part I consider the subject unfortunately chosen – it was one the author was not qualified to handle at once vigorously and truthfully – the simple and natural – quiet description and simple pathos are, I think, Acton Bell's forte"⁵⁰ – a telling commentary which again reveals the emphasis Charlotte Brontë placed on the importance of realism. Her criticism of her sisters' work continued after their deaths. In her preface to a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, she publicly denounced Anne's second novel, asserting that "the choice of subject was an entire mistake".⁵¹ Such criticism further highlights the author's discomfort with fiction that appeared intended merely to shock and outrage the conservative reader, though she was well aware that this was not her sister's intention.

While a number of aspects of Brontë's narrative link it to the sensation novel, to label *Jane Eyre* an early example of sensation fiction is problematic: not only as it cannot be said to definitively belong to any one literary genre, but also because such an assertion suggests that the boundaries of sensation fiction are firmly drawn, which, inevitably, is not the case. Indeed, like *Jane Eyre*, sensation fiction can be seen to incorporate a number of features of the typical *realist* novel: Lyn Pykett suggests that "aspects of sensation narrative [...] bear many of the marks of realism".⁵² Hence, while Brontë's novel features characteristics typically associated with the sensation novel, the works of Collins *et al* include characteristics familiar to Victorian realism, further emphasising the blurred boundaries of literary genres.

As Brontë's response to G. H. Lewes's criticism of *Jane Eyre* illustrates, the author was embroiled in a conflict between the desire to produce 'high' literary art, and a tendency towards the 'low' art of the popular novel – in particular, gothic and sensation fiction. While Brontë was clearly uncomfortable with the blurred boundary between realism and

⁴⁸ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams (September 1848) in Barker, *The Brontës*, p.206.

⁴⁹ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams (21 December 1847) in Barker, *The Brontës*, pp.174-5.

⁵⁰ Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams (31 July 1848) in Barker, *The Brontës*, p.202.

⁵¹ Charlotte Brontë, Biographical Note for the second edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* in Allott, *The Brontës*, p.274.

⁵² Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel from The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote Publishers, 1994), p.38.

sensationalism in her work, this conflict was not confined to her work. Indeed, the division between realism and sensationalism in *Jane Eyre* can be seen as representative of a much broader conflict between ‘low’ and ‘high’ art in the nineteenth century. If *Jane Eyre* embodies many of the tensions inherent in attempting to negotiate and define texts’ association with specific genres, it also represents an authorial conflict between the desire to produce work of a high literary standard, and the desire for popular success.

The tensions inherent in *Jane Eyre* between conflicting literary genres remain largely unresolved: the text remains embroiled in its own internal conflict between realism and sensationalism. However, as Derrida notes, it is practically impossible for texts to obey to the letter the rules of a particular genre: “[T]he law of the law of genre [...] is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy”.⁵³ In many respects, then, *Jane Eyre* serves to emphasise the futility of generic labels, which remain, at best, ambiguous, and to call into question the usefulness of attempting to categorise literary works in this manner. The novel clearly supports the notion that generic categorisation is in many respects – if not entirely fruitless – problematic. *Jane Eyre* encompasses characteristics associated with the Bildungsroman, fictional autobiography, the gothic novel, sensation fiction and realism, as well as containing elements of the supernatural and making extensive use of fairytale – yet it does not belong entirely to any one of these various genres. The text must necessarily remain, therefore, outside the boundaries of specific literary genres, participating but never belonging, thus supporting Derrida’s argument. To this end, Brontë’s novel forces a reassessment of critical concepts of genre.

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⁵³ Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, p.227.

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