

---

# Is Jane Eyre an Angel and a Monster?

Micaela Bussolotti

*Jane Eyre*, along with other female authored novels, led to the publication of the book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000), which will be taken as a reference for this analysis. The authors of the volume, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, suggest that women in books could be considered – especially by men – “angels” or “monsters” depending on their behaviour; and they suggest that “a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her’ (p. 54). Considering this, we can apply their idea to the protagonist of our novel, Jane Eyre, and think why she could have been considered both – angel and monster – by the readership of the patriarchal society of the Victorian Age. The opposition and difference in these two images make it hard to believe that they can compose one single person. However, our protagonist shows her purity as well as her rebellion in many opportunities.

This feminist piece was introduced in a world in which women (specially the poor and orphaned ones like the main character) had almost no rights at all. Jane then seems to try to confront these ideas and the way of thinking and position women had in the English society. Jane Eyre, a brave and heroic woman who makes decisions that are not appropriate for a female of the period, could have seemed a monster from the masculine point of view of the past. But at the same time, she is a woman who hides in many occasions the monster that lives inside her. She chooses to respect the authorities, to avoid complaining (hence to lament in solitude), and to be seen by her tutors and classmates – and people in general – as an angel. She cares about what people think of her, and wants to be seen as a kind and good-hearted person.

The aspect of the dichotomy that we call “angel” refers to a woman considered (at the time) pure, virtuous and saintly because of how she was and acted. Regarding this image, we can see Jane Eyre’s purity in her attitudes, such as her submissiveness towards authorities like her aunt, professors and even Mr. Rochester. In spite of her anger, as a child she obeys and also suffers mostly in silence due to her aunt’s unfair scolding. Although her aunt chooses not to see this – blinding herself and justifying her son’s deportment blaming her niece –, Victorian readers may have observed that Jane Eyre behaved properly. She also respects her professors, understanding their hierarchy, trying to be – what was then considered – a good pupil and girl, and working hard as a student and later on as a teacher. As regards Mr. Rochester, she always addresses him as ‘sir’, and obeys him, not only because he is her master, but also because he is a man. He even recognises her aid with phrases such as “‘I knew (...) you would do me good in some way, at some time; –I saw it in your eyes when I first beheld you.’ (Brontë, 1847/1999, p. 132). Jane is always willing to help as a *good* woman should, she shows it in her behaviour and in her words to Mr. Rochester: ‘I’d give my life to serve you.’ (Brontë, 1847/1999, p. 179). These words express what a flawless female servant, and, in this case, later on wife, should be in the Victorian Age. This shows how women devoted themselves to men (mainly, their husbands) and lived to serve them instead of serving *themselves*.

Apart from her behaviour, Jane’s purity is also demonstrated in her religious beliefs. She is so attached to her religion that she almost travels to India with the only objective of serving God and,

which would involve abandoning the rest of her life for her faith – clear characteristics of an angel. In addition, we can consider the importance that Christian marriage has in her life. It may be possible to think that she does not care for a husband and children due to her attitude in some parts of the novel. But in the end, she decides to return and marry Mr. Rochester and have children. She opts, thus, to have the life that every woman was supposed to desire. This is an ending that shows that, in spite of her nonconformity in many aspects she chooses to be the stereotype, the custom, the rule.

Jane, however, is not only an angel. She can also be considered a monster or, perhaps a more accurate term, a 'rebel'. Jane Eyre seems to be searching for another destiny and has the courage to escape from a place of safety that could give her money and a husband. After leaving Thornfield, she starts her journey alone, penniless and trying to find a job in a world in which women were accepted in only a few of them. She is a woman who considers it unsatisfactory to be just someone's mistress or someone's wife. She is looking for her own life and destiny. Jane is also the type of person that, as a little girl, can tell her aunt how much she hates her disregarding the respect that she is meant to show only because Mrs. Reed is an adult. Finally, although Jane is very religious, some critics, like Elizabeth Rigby (1848), considered the novel "anti-Christian." But is this actually true? Jane is vocal about her principles and the importance of believing in God, such as when she is grateful to Him for being rescued or when she tells Mr. Rochester: "Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven." (Brontë, 1847/1999, p. 279). Jane could be a rebel and a feminist, but in religion she will always be an angel.

Jane Eyre is a woman who could have been considered an angel and a monster in the Victorian Age. These two polarities could be seen in her due to what she chooses to say and do in order to accomplish her destiny and construct her life. Her rebellion was contrary to the opinions of the age; and consequently, made her be seen as a monster when she had all the characteristics of an angel and had a pure soul. The notions of 'angel' and 'monster' are encompassed in Jane Eyre, it only depends on which perspective readers chose to see.

## References

- Brontë, C. (1999). *Jane Eyre*. Wordsworth Classics. (Original work published 1847)
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Yale University Press.