

### **How is the conflict between duty and desire explored in these texts?**

Desire is a term conveying a longing for a certain object, person or outcome. It is an emotion from the heart and is unaffected by social opinion. Duty, in contrast, is a moral obligation to an act, which is perceived to be selfless. The decisions made regarding these emotions are significant throughout 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wide Sargasso Sea'. However, these definitions were more extreme during the time that Brontë and Rhy's texts were written. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered a completely selfish act for women to show desire, it was a vulgar emotion that women were expected to control and conceal. The female role during the 1800's was limited; they were expected to be passive and were passed from father to husband, similar to a possession. To perform one's duty to society was regarded as an unspoken rule imposed on all women, therefore, women never truly had the chance to express their true identity or gain real independence. The 19<sup>th</sup> century conflict between duty and desire was a key topic written about by many authors, predominately women, who illustrated personal experiences and beliefs through the characters and their decisions. In both Brontë's and Rhy's novels the authors illustrate the limitations imposed on women, society's views and expectations concerning the conflict, and the importance of finding the balance between the duty and desire.

The life path of women living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely dictated by Victorian society and was limited both in its direction and expression of individuality. Victorian women were forced to conform to the ideologies of patriarchal society and so duties were imposed on them; many of which repressed their desire. In 'Jane Eyre', though Jane's character is very passionate, she adheres to the Victorian morality, in which passion and emotion were kept concealed. Jane learns to become dutiful and to control her passion at Lowood and through the preaching of Helen Burns. However, Brontë shows recognition of the female struggle through Jane's character, who recognises that "Millions are condemned to a stiller doom", acknowledging the oppression felt by women across the nation. In the same paragraph Jane expresses the general female opinion stating women who "are supposed to be very calm... feel just the way men feel", that women too need "exercise of faculties" and when this is not given, like men would, "they suffer from too rigid a restraint". In this section Brontë employs challenging and political language, such as "revolt", "rebellions" and the consistent mention of "restraint" to portray the powerful struggle Victorian women experienced. Brontë experienced the same struggle when trying to publish her novel. She realised that it would be impossible for a woman to publish such a controversial book as 'Jane Eyre' in the patriarchal society she was living in. Therefore, she felt obliged to publish under the pseudonym of "Currell Bell".

In contrast to Jane, the character of Antoinette in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' is extremely passive. Antoinette loses all sense of self by allowing society, (Rochester), to compress her desires and so she becomes completely dependent on others. Rochester symbolizes patriarchal society when he imposes an entirely new identity on Antoinette, by renaming her 'Bertha'. Her lack of self is illustrated when she realises she will have no one to depend on; "what will be come of me?". To this Christophine replies "Get up, girl... Woman must have spunks to live in this wicked world." Rhy's choice of language is significant; "Get up", "must", shows that Christophine is a strong woman who is able to give an order, symbolizing the power of women within the patriarchal society. Christophine describes the world as "wicked" and believes this is because it seems to be ruled by oppressing, hypocritical men. This adjective allows Rhy to portray her view of 19<sup>th</sup> century society and allows the reader to feel empathy for women living during this time. When reading 'Wide Sargasso Sea', Brontë, and the reader would agree with and admire Christophine's view. Here also, parallels can be seen between Jane and Christophine, who are both portrayed as strong independent women. The contrast between

Antoinette's and Jane's characters emphasises Jane's moral courage and enhances the reader's admiration for her character.

During the 1800's female desire was viewed by the patriarchal society as 'evil'. This is highlighted in 'Jane Eyre' when Jane, as child, is forbidden from expressing herself. Jane's instinct for asserting herself was stifled, at a young age and so could only be expressed through defiance. Mrs Reed symbolizes society's view of female passion by likening Jane's traits to those of the devil and this is reiterated by Bessie who describes Jane's passion as "wickedness". After acting out Jane is given time in the red room to reflect, here she compares herself to a "rebel slave" and she realises that she had acted "as if... poisoned", illustrating that Jane is starting to comprehend Mrs Reed's narrow minded view. Helen Burns describes to Jane "the evil consequences" that result from not being dutiful and says "the bible teaches us to return good for evil". Through the opinions of Bessie and Helen Burns, Brontë interestingly portrays how society's view on desire had become ingrained within the female consciousness and how Jane may feel betrayed by other female characters. The view that desire may be linked with the devil is explored in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' as Rochester often describes 'Bertha' like a devil with "uncombed" hair and "eyes which were inflamed". It is suggested that because Antoinette, gives in completely to desire, Rochester is no longer able to understand her and so imposes a new identity, stating "Bertha Mason is mad". This is reinforced when Christophine provides an explanation for Antoinette's mother's madness; "they tell her she is mad", as though an identity has been forced upon her. Rhys illustrates that society found it impossible to accept a female who did not fit the social paradigm of a 'perfect' woman and in doing so, the reader dislikes Rochester and sympathises with Antoinette.

When writing about female passion Brontë and Rhys emphasise the limited patriarchal view concerning female roles and how women were separated into only two categories; either the 'Virgin' or the 'Whore'. However, Jane and Antoinette refuse to be classed, and so create an alternative identity; Jane says that "I am not an angel, I am me" and 'Bertha' is dehumanised into a "beast". Antoinette is given a negative identity, as she is not able to balance desire with duty. Whereas, Jane learns how to combine the two, and so forms a new, stronger character which the reader respects.

Through their novels, the authors reveal the solution to the conflict between duty and desire; the freedom to be able to choose duty rather than having it imposed onto you. This idea is revealed at the end of 'Jane Eyre' when Jane desires to carry out her duty and so manages to combine the definitions of both duty and desire. The journey towards achieving this balance begins when Jane decides to perform duty to herself before duty to St John. She explains that she has "always restrained" herself and has always been "forced to keep the fire of [her] nature continually low". Brontë's choice of adverb suggests a form of inactivity, both mental and physical to which women living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century suffered from. Through this dialogue Brontë compels the reader to feel empathy towards all women who suppressed their inward desires and those, like Jane, who "never utter[ed] a cry". However, Jane continues by saying, to persist in suppressing her "imprisoned flame... would be unbearable" and so the reader is relieved that she is listening to her personal desires, informing the reader "I am my own mistress". This is reinforced when Jane Eyre states "reader I married him"; here the order of words is extremely significant, because it is clear that it is Jane's choice and through this Brontë symbolizes the power of women.

In contrast, Antoinette chooses duty when marrying Rochester expecting to receive desire in return, yet in doing so she loses all identity. She is then disappointed when Rochester does not behave as she had hoped and unintentionally becomes a possession of Rochester, to whom she is obligated to by marital duty. Antoinette demonstrates her selfish desire and brief power when she says "here I can do as I like". However, Rochester later appropriates it; "then I said it too, "Here..." " and from then on Antoinette's desires are repressed and Antoinette

recognises “everything belongs to him,”. This is similar to the way the colonisers took over and so it is fitting that Antoinette later revolts like a slave, by setting alight to Thornfield.

Charlotte Brontë also experienced suffering throughout her life as a direct result of conforming to duty. Charlotte wished establish her own school, yet by 1849 (due to the deaths of her siblings) she was left alone with her sick father and she recognised that it was her duty to stay with, and care for him. Later in 1854, after turning down his first proposal, Charlotte performed her duty to the patriarchal society by marrying Arthur Bell Nicholls and soon after she fell pregnant. It was said that she was then attacked by "sensations of perpetual nausea and ever-recurring faintness"\* caused by severe morning sickness, which lead to her death. Therefore, even Charlotte Brontë's life illustrates the conflict between duty and desire and the importance of finding the balance, as it was conforming to duty, many people believed, that killed her.

Throughout the novels fire is a symbol of passion; similar to Antoinette's slave-like actions at the beginning of Brontë's novel Jane calls herself a “rebel slave”. However, the consequence of giving in to too much to passion is death, and this is shown in ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’ when ‘Bertha’ dies. As fire is symbolic of passion, both Rhys and Brontë illustrate how passion and desire can also kill you.

Brontë illustrates her own belief through the decisions made by Jane; that the most important thing to consider when facing a conflict between duty and desire is yourself and the duty you owe to yourself. Although, Brontë's opinion, in the past, may have been viewed as superficial and somewhat self-centred, the audience can form a different view when reading the text subjectively, as they have learnt of the struggles and limitations imposed on women.

#### References

\*Quotation from Elizabeth Gaskell Charlotte Brontë's earliest biographer.