

Translating Charlottes. Clare Boylan's "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester": Between Red Rooms and Yellow Wallpapers

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Abstract:

In her short story "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester", Clare Boylan playfully uses a variation of the postmodern trend of "writing back" Victorian classics to create a sequel of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Shedding light on Jane's married life, Boylan makes a parody of Brontë's language and narrative conventions making Jane an eccentric. In particular, the presence of closed spaces in the story replicates the claustrophobia of the red room in *Jane Eyre*, and from this point of view Boylan's story bears parallels with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Intertextuality and metanarrative perspectives of both stories draw attention to the textual space of the story and the elusive text that is being written/read. The "secret diary" assumed in the title is not the text that appears on the page. In both stories the protagonist and first-person narrator is engaged in writing an elusive text while confined in a secluded space.

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Either at the centre of narration or in peripheral roles, characters off the norm are recurring presences in Clare Boylan's fiction. This can be due to circumstances of social disadvantage or ignorance, as the servant Nellie in Boylan's first novel *Holy Pictures* (1983), or the young girls in the stories "A Little Girl, Never Out Before" (1989) and "The Little Madonna" (1989). The will not to conform marks Dinah in *Black Baby* (1988), while different forms of social and emotional marginalization characterize Patricia Higgins, the electrolysis lady in the short story "A Particular Calling" (1989), and in different ways Annie and Maeve Beattie in "You Don't Know You're Alive" (1989), as their marriages make them victims respectively of unconsumed sex and of fertility.

Thus figures that are literally ex-centrics, off the centre, off the norm, reappear constantly in Boylan's novels and short stories, often as physically handicapped or, more frequently, as mentally disturbed characters, and they seem to belong to places that are, likewise, off the norm. In "Concerning Virgins" (1989) the cruel and implicitly mad father Narcissus Fitzgall lives in a house that seems "to be suspended in water" (Boylan 2000, 316). And in the story "Mama" (1983) William and Joanne stop at an abandoned house that attracts their attention, and their horizontal perception of the garden, the hall and the toy room emphasizes the solid pervasiveness of the presence of the mentally retarded man who lives there. The murderer in "Some Retired Ladies on a Tour" (1983) and the mad woman in "Technical Difficulties and the Plague" (1983) anticipate the unbalanced narrative voice in the disquieting story "The Prisoner" (1997), which focuses obsessively on inner and outer space – "Now I just sit in my room [...] looking out the window at the pub across the road" (Boylan 1997, 167). This sheds light on the wavering of the mind in Alzheimer's disease, the simultaneous presence and absence of consciousness. In *Beloved Stranger* (1999) Clare Boylan focuses openly on mental disturbance, and Dick Butler's first symptoms of bi-polar disorder find an outlet attacking the house he lives in. The etymology of the word "schizophrenia" implies a split mind, so that a "deranged" person inhabits two worlds at the same time, reality and delusion, here and there, now and then, and by doing so he belongs in neither.

In the short story "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" (1995) Clare Boylan follows the *fil rouge* of eccentricity playing with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and making the protagonist a character off the norm in attitudes and behaviour unexpected in the pre-text. At the same time, "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" shows interconnections and cross-references with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" in terms of narrative situation, language and imagery. Gilman's story, first published in 1892, is a narrative account of a case of post-partum depression, another case of eccentricity, and soon became "an American feminist classic" when it was republished in 1973 reaching a status of "canonization" (Lanser 1998, 415). Therefore, the analysis of the various intertextual layers of Boylan's "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" can provide interesting insights in her use of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1996 [1847]) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as explicit or implicit pre-texts.

Considering Clare Boylan's fiction in retrospect, her short story "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" can be read at different levels as a point of arrival and departure. First published in her 1995 collection *That Bad Woman*, the story develops consolidated themes in Boylan's fiction – disappointments and misunderstandings in love, interpersonal and family relationships based on miscommunication, search for identity and meaning in the confusing patterns of life – often dealt with in wry humour. However, the story is also

an interesting experiment in the postmodern trend of "writing back" Victorian fiction, which in some way anticipates *Emma Brown*, the novel she wrote in 2003 (also her last novel) from an unfinished fragment by Charlotte Brontë published posthumously in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1860.

Boylan's "daring enterprise" of finishing Brontë's unfinished story magnifies the affinity she had always felt with a writer with whom she shared birth-date and initials (Miller 2003); like Charlotte Brontë, Clare Boylan started writing at an early age building up a fictive world with her sisters (Quinn 1987 [1986], 19); and Brontë is the writer Boylan loved ever since reading *Jane Eyre* as a teenager "entranced by the [...] verbal interaction of Jane and Rochester", something that – she said – never happened in real life (Vincent 2003). Boylan also tried in vain to complete a play "based on the last year of Charlotte's life" (McDonnell 2006) and "a woman in search of her identity" (Miles 1990 [1987], 39) is at the heart of all Brontë's novels as well as Boylan's fiction too.

At the opening of *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist is an alien, an interloper and is called a liar by the Reed family (Fusini 1996, 121), so she does not belong and does not conform, she is off the centre and therefore her childhood and youth are characterised by exclusion and confinement. Likewise, the nameless protagonist of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an eccentric because her post-partum depression keeps her confined in an attic room, excluded from companionship and work. As a matter of fact, parallelisms between Brontë's novel and Gilman's story are pointed out in the landmark of feminist literary criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which considers "The Yellow Wallpaper" "a striking story of confinement and escape" like *Jane Eyre* (Gilbert, Gubar 1984 [1979], 89).

The title of Boylan's 1995 collection *That Bad Woman*, the macrotext, is significant and sheds light on the eccentric characters at the heart of the volume. As Boylan herself wrote in *The Irish Independent*, "bad women are not really bad, they are merely self-seeking" and they "are not out for revenge but for revelation" (Boylan 1995, 9). Secrets and revelations, as well as self-revelation, are at the centre of "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester", and this is in line with the setting of *Jane Eyre*, as Thornfield is a house of secrets (Lamonica 2003, 68). The story is Boylan's "first attempt at getting into the mind of Charlotte Brontë" (Anon. 2006), in which she keeps a surface language that Brontë might have used, at the same time playing with the pre-text. In fact, the "Leviathan of change" (Boylan 2000, 218) that sets in motion Jane's discovery of Rochester's lies recalls the Biblical background of *Jane Eyre*. Likewise, Clare Boylan exploits language strategies characteristic of *Jane Eyre* as a form of continuity with the pre-text. For example, "Jane always calls Rochester 'my master'" in the novel (Figs 1982, 127) and Boylan repeatedly follows Brontë's use of language – for example, "I found my master as reduced as I was advantaged"; "I was compelled to be my master's eyes", "my master prefers a beauty of the man-made kind" (Boylan 2000, 217, 217-18, 218). Interestin-

gly, Boylan concentrates the use of the expression “my master” with reference to Rochester in the first part of the story and gradually replaces it with the more neutral “my husband” (220), “Mr Rochester” (218, 221), or simply the personal pronoun “he” as the story develops, thus underlining Jane’s growing self-awareness and authority in the text. The expression is resumed only in the final paragraph, where Boylan playfully has Jane assert her authority over Rochester: “I have curtailed my master’s excesses by [...] keeping his allowance very small” (225). Boylan keeps the continuity of the narrative organization of *Jane Eyre*, in which “the narrator is herself ten years after she has become Mrs Rochester” (Figs 1982, 130), but does not provide time frames, yet the use of the phrase “independent woman” (Boylan 2000, 217) early in the story creates expectations and anticipates the development of the plot. Finally, the repeated address to the reader, including “Reader, I married him” (*ibidem*) counterbalances the deconstruction Boylan makes of Brontë’s novel.

The opening paragraph is a playful use of direct quotation:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. The sky was flooded grey and the wind was aroused to a malignant frenzy. Fainting branches clawed at my window and birds held their breath as the forest giants wrestled with invisible foe. Yet, it was not the storm that hampered me. I was at the mercy of an element less rational than tempest. (*ibidem*)

Boylan reproduces the scene of confinement that opens *Jane Eyre*, and like the beginning of the novel, the beginning of the story is a negative statement (Shor 2002, 172), which besides being a direct quotation also alerts the reader that this is a conscious and playful act of rewriting, implicitly also denying the pre-text. The rhetorical use of the explicit intertextuality of direct quotation (Doležel 1998, 201) in the first sentence is followed by expansion of descriptive elements highlighting the Gothic strain in the novel. Brontë’s “leafless shrubbery” is turned into “fainting branches” and “forest giants”, the “cold winter wind” is now “aroused to a malignant frenzy” transforming the “penetrating rain” of the original into “a storm” and “a tempest”, while sombre clouds have a parallelism in the “grey sky” (Brontë 1996 [1847], 13). This emphasizes the negative statement of Brontë’s opening, disrupting the stability of the protoworld (Doležel 1998, 206) and anticipating that the happy ending of *Jane Eyre* is going to be rewritten.

Boylan exploits the medium of the short story as a variation of the post-modern trend of “writing over” of Victorian classics (Humpherys 2002, 442), so that her aftertext could be an unwritten final chapter of *Jane Eyre*. Here Boylan imagines Jane’s life after she has become Mrs Rochester; marriage turns out to be disappointing and her married life is based on deceit.

Jane Eyre has often provided a very popular source for aftering (Humpherys 2002, 452), and retellings or related tales include Jasper Fford’s *The Eyre Affair* (2001) and Bianca Pitzorno’s *La bambinaia francese* (2004). So if Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a “prequel” to *Jane Eyre*, a rewriting

of *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the first Mrs Rochester, "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" belongs to the series of "sequels" that include, among others, Elizabeth Newark's *Jane Eyre's Daughter* (1999) and D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000).

Boylan's choice of the short story departs from the usual trend and the shorter form seems to be consistent with and to emphasise the *topos* of entrapment and claustrophobia that recurs in her fiction from her first novel *Holy Pictures* to her short stories. For example, in the story "You Don't Know You're Alive" the protagonist spends her days in a coffin-like place: "Annie lived downstairs in the kitchen [...] It was a black sort of kitchen with a high, sooty wall outside the window and a long dark passage leading to the sink" (Boylan 2000, 92). Likewise, an allomorph for traditional settings in Gothic tales can be found in "Mama" and "Flat shadows" (1997), where the unknown house is a place of entrapment and claustrophobia.

The backdrop of Jane's married life is a difficult and unpleasant place (Boylan 2000, 220), as the sombreness of Ferndean with its enclosed space and dark isolation is a coreferent to Rochester's contradictions and past and future lies. In fact, "Edward had once declared that he could not put his mad wife there for fear its climate would end her wretched life" (*ibidem*), yet he has no hesitation to settle down in its darkness with Jane. Ferndean is a place where "sunlight never entered" (*ibidem*), and Jane is "compelled to be (her) master's eyes" (217-18) leading him around the estate. Talking to him recalls the principle of companionship and equality that characterises *Jane Eyre*: "We talk, I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking" (Brontë 1996 [1847], 500).

Yet, language is deceiving, since conversation with Rochester is often full of sarcasm. His insistence on Jane describing her clothes replicates Rochester's "boastful conquest and insistence upon adorning Jane with jewels and silks" (Lamonica 2003, 82), a form of possession. Jane finds out that Rochester has lied to her about his blindness, that he has had his sight back since before Jane's arrival at Ferndean, that the servants "have all been party to [her] deception" (Boylan 2000, 222) and that he has trapped her into marrying him. Boylan demythologises Rochester's telepathic call that Jane hears at Moor Head in Chapter 35, which is explained simply as "my poor self [...] concealed beneath some shrubbery" (223). The accumulation of lies and deceit closing around Jane gives rise to the same violent reaction against John Reed's abuse Brontë described in Chapter 1 of *Jane Eyre* in which Jane calls him "Wicked and cruel boy!" and compares him to "a murderer", "a slave-driver", "like the Roman emperors" (Brontë 1996 [1847], 17). This will lead to her confinement in the red room. Clare Boylan adds a physical element to a parallel episode in the story: "I do not quite know what was in my mind but when I came close to that erratic giant who had earned my utmost devotion, I felt the whole extent of my humiliation and struck him a violent blow" (Boylan 2000, 223). Boylan's use of the word "giant" emphasises

Jane's rage and growing authority in a parody of David and Goliath, which is anticipated at the beginning of the story by the use of the same word in both a similar and a different context. In fact, Rochester is first introduced as "a proud giant" forced to "stumble like a fledgling raw to flight", and in the opening paragraph the effects of the storm are ominously described in "the forest giants" wrestling with "invisible foes" (217). Jane's "violent blow" marks the distance of the aftertext from the pre-text, and a mirror scene occurs at the end of the story, when Jane cannot accept Rochester's request of forgiveness and understanding, and in a dramatic switch from romance to farce, Boylan has Jane lose control:

Mr Rochester was very remorseful. He begged my forgiveness and even endeavoured to earn my understanding, insisting that he had never meant to keep me contained, but only assigned me to the attic because my shrewd evaluation of his nature made him fearful of losing me. I disposed of this debate by rendering him senseless with a copper pan. (225)

Her eccentric and violent behaviour contrasts with the protagonist's composure and control in the pre-text and makes the story an alternative rewriting of the Victorian classic, while resorting again to the expression "Mr Rochester" Boylan here underlines the distance Jane is taking from her husband.

As a matter of fact, "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" is much more complex than it might appear in the first place. To recall Lubomir Doležel, the story is based on the "expansion of the protoworld" (1998, 206), so that the gap of Jane's married life is filled. Yet, Boylan seems to play with the temporal overlappings of the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* and her own story, so that her rewriting is not a polemical act of subversion (223), but a playful engagement with various layers of texts and intertexts.

For example, the conclusion of the story makes fun of Rochester as a "Gothic hero-villain" (Kitson 2002, 165) shedding light on the "life of ideal domesticity" Jane has reached "by the simple expedient of keeping his allowance very small", so that Mr Rochester is now "as useful around the house as any one-armed husband, and as blindly devoted as any tamed beasts" (Boylan 2000, 225). An allusion to *The Taming of the Shrew* in female form is apparent, alongside a reversal of Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" in *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, speaking of her fifth husband, Alison says that "many a blow / He struck me" and Jane's act of making Rochester senseless with a pan turns the violence of "This gay young student, my delightful John" upside down: "[...] he smote me once upon the cheek / Because I tore a page out of his book / And that's the reason why I'm deaf" (Chaucer 1951, 269, 299). Incidentally, John "used to preach and scold" about wicked women taking examples from his books, which makes an interesting cross-reference to Boylan's collection *That Bad Woman*: "And he would take the Bible up and search / For Proverbs in Ecclesiasticus, / Particularly one that has it thus: / 'Suffer no *wicked woman* to gad about'" (299-300; emphasis added).

However, in the intertextual construction of "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" the predominance of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* obliquely intertwines with another story and displays interesting cross-references and parallelisms with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". The disquieting first-person narrative of a young woman imprisoned by her doctor-husband in an isolated country house, and gradually falling into a pathological state of insanity, can be read as a case history and a subversive text. Obsessed by the ugly yellow wallpaper of the room at the top of the house her husband has chosen for her, she perceives in its confusing pattern an imprisoned woman she tries to set free by peeling the paper off the wall.

Clare Boylan's "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" draws together *files rouges* that typically characterise both *Jane Eyre* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" to create an aftertext, whose complexity is worth fathoming, especially in relation to features like eccentricity, isolation, entrapment, and the elusive quality of language.

Susan Lanser has pointed out parallelisms in *Jane Eyre* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" that can provide a structural basis for Boylan's story too. In fact, the description of the country house in Gilman's story belongs to the realm of fiction, to the world of the written word: "It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that *you read about*, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock" (Gilman 1998 [1892], 42; emphasis added). Thornfield comes to mind as one of the "places you read about" and the nameless narrator perceives the place as a Gothic prison ("hedges", "walls", "gates"). Likewise, the setting of Boylan's story is a place of seclusion whose entrapment is magnified as the story goes on. Far from being a "natural edenic setting" (Peterson 1999, 105), Ferndean is "not a cheerful place", it is "densely wrapped in forest" and "[s]unlight never entered our house" (Boylan 2000, 220). The descriptive emphasis on darkness highlights the entrapment of the house. Darkness as enclosure is magnified when Jane "withdrew to a small room at the top of the house" (222) as an act of rebellion against Rochester's deceit. The "top of the house" is both a prison and a form of escape: the roof at Thornfield is a place of freedom for oppressed Jane in the novel, and when she sets fire to the mansion Bertha escapes to the roof (Figs 1982, 133). Jane is locked in this ambiguous place when she accuses Rochester of having deceived other women before her. Considered mad, she remains in that "miserable room without a candle" (Boylan 2000, 224) until she is set free by St. John Rivers. The room is an allomorph of the secret room on the third storey where Bertha Mason was kept in *Jane Eyre*. "That infernal place" with "no light" is also an explicit cross-reference within the story to the red room in which Jane was locked as a child at Gateshead Hall in Chapter 2 of *Jane Eyre* (*ibidem*).

However, the darkness of Boylan's story recalls the entrapment in the attic nursery in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". The nursery is "at the top of the house" (Gilman 1998 [1892], 43), its windows are "barred for little children", which recalls the "thick black bars" (Brontë 1996 [1847], 26) Jane sees between

waking and sleeping after her fit in the red room in Chapter 3 of *Jane Eyre*. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” identifies the room as a place of discipline, “playroom and gymnasium” and yet the presence of “rings and things in the wall” (Gilman 1998 [1892], 43) and the “great immovable bed” that is “nailed down” (48) seem to suggest that the nursery “has roomed a madwoman or two before her” (Wiesenthal 1997, 27). Based on Gilman’s autobiographical experience of post-partum depression, the story is a “tale of hysterical confinement” (Jacobus 1986, 229) which sheds light on the narrator’s illness as a “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency”, “a nervous condition”, “nervous weakness” (Gilman 1998 [1892], 42, 43, 46). It is to be noted that in the nineteenth century a diagnosis of “hysteria”, neurasthenia or depression was a synonym of a wide range of women’s diseases (Treichler 1984, 61, 65), and it is the same diagnosis Rochester gives Jane in “The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester” when she accuses him of having driven Bertha Mason and probably “many more unfortunate women” to madness “with similar deceptions” (Boylan 2000, 223): “Pray do not be *hysterical* Jane [...] I know that your *nerves* have been weakened by many trials and that you were subject to *fits* as a little child, but I warn you to *compose* yourself” (*ibidem*; emphasis added). Rochester’s verbal control loses ground when Jane’s accusations hit the target – “Was Céline Varens truly the devil you depict or another poor girl tricked into bigamous marriage?” (*Ibidem*), and his “single utterance” (224), his diagnosis “you are mad” is expanded in the non-verbal language of action by locking the door: “A small scratching signified the turning of a key”. A direct reference to the red room episode in *Jane Eyre* openly sheds light on the intertext of the story: “I was abandoned in that miserable room without a candle, as when I was ten years of age and locked in the red room by Mrs Reed” (*ibidem*).

Rochester’s initial order to “compose” herself replicates the narrator’s “rationalist physician-husband”’s (Jacobus 1986, 230) stress on self-control in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Gilman 1998 [1892], 43), so that both male characters take up a patronizing attitude that expresses itself in similar verbal and physical behaviour. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” John the husband uses terms of endearment as a form of control and in a prison-like embrace “he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose” (51); “Dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed” (49), calling his wife “his darling” (*ibidem*), “little heart” (44). Likewise in Boylan’s story Rochester “caught me up in his arms” (Boylan 2000, 221) when revealing his lies about his blindness and calls Jane “beguiling elf” and “adorable idiot” (220, 223). Boylan thus rewrites the infantilising attitude of the doctor-husband in Gilman’s story, at the same time reverting the use of animal imagery from woman to man. In Brontë’s novel Abbott calls Jane “little toad” (Brontë 1996 [1847], 34) and Jane is a “mad cat” when locked in the red room (19). Boylan repeatedly refers to Rochester with animal epithets that are present in *Jane Eyre*’s “caged eagle” (479). In a playful mocking

reversal, he is alternatively a "fledgling", a "falling sparrow", he has a "lion's face", is a "captive lion" and finally "a tamed beast" (Boylan 2000, 217, 218, 220, 225). In a similar way, Rochester's libertine behaviour in *Jane Eyre* is replicated in "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" as "Mr Rochester resumed his old bohemian existence and was abroad for some time" (224). An *alter ego* of Rochester, in "The Yellow Wallpaper" John leaves his caged wife alone as he "is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious" (Gilman 1998 [1892], 44), thus implicitly betraying her, which is reiterated a few pages later: "John is kept in town very often by serious cases" (48) and his control is replaced by the sister-in-law Jeannie, who acts as a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper" (47) and whose name shows her as John's female *alter ego*.

The motif of light and darkness underlies *Jane Eyre* from the gloom of the red room with "the blinds always drawn" and its "deep surrounding shades" (21) to the comfort of the fire in Mrs Fairfax's room when Jane first arrives at Thornfield. Clare Boylan elaborates on the motif of darkness at Ferndean in "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester", which also characterizes "The Yellow Wallpaper". In fact, the narrator's close observation of the obsessive wallpaper gradually takes up both her days and nights, and the iterated use of the detail of moonlight (Gilman 1998 [1892], 43, 50) – light in darkness, and thus magnifying darkness – draws attention to the strangeness of the house. In fact the house has "something queer" (41), "there is something strange" (42) and the moonlight belongs to the symptoms of mental disturbance as there is no boundary between day and night: "The moon shines in all around just as the sun does" (50). It is thanks to the moonlight that the wallpaper becomes readable, or less unreadable, and therefore can be decoded or deciphered.

As a matter of fact, both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" share with *Jane Eyre* the device of first-person narration and Boylan's rewriting of *Jane Eyre* also sheds light on the conscious construction of the story as story and as a written text, at the same time undermining its authority. This can be also identified both in the fictional autobiography of *Jane Eyre* and in the diary form of "The Yellow Wallpaper".

If on one hand Boylan's "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester" is an after-text, on the other the medium of the short story draws attention to the textual space of the story. In *Jane Eyre* Thornfield is a house of secrets and "the function of the house is to conceal family history and contain secrets" (Lamonica 2003, 78). In Boylan's story, at Ferndean Jane has to unveil and disclose further and further secrets purposefully built for her own deception. This is emphasised by the story's proleptic title. In fact it soon appears that the "secret diary" is an elusive text and ambiguity is cast on its presence on the page:

It is not commonplace to give an unrelieved account of married life so I have set down what is agreeable and reserve the factual report for my private diary, in the hope that it may one day find that true reader who requires not to be assured that all ended happily [...]. (Boylan 2000, 217)

By openly and consciously referring to the fiction of a happy ending Boylan points out that in its self-reflexivity the text is not what it claims to be. Expectations are shattered and the secret diary remains secret and elusive waiting for a “reader” that is obviously not engaged in “this” reading.

The accuracy in control over writing creates a discrepancy between the actual text being written and read and the “factual report” of the private diary. Is this, then, the secret diary or something else? Is the referent in the title misleading? What text is the reader engaged in his act of reading? The reference to a “true reader” implies the impossibility to have access to the secret diary, while the reader repeatedly addressed in the story in a Brontean fashion (“Reader, I married him”, *ibidem*; “Reader, I missed the dear flesh that housed the dark soul”, 224) has access only to part of the text.

Likewise, if the issue of deceit is pivotal in Boylan’s story, the repeated reference to deceit and the predominant use of expressions such as “deception”, “charade”, “you pretended”, “you dressed up”, “you disguised”, “you deceived” (223) contribute to raise doubts on the narrator’s reliability and on the authority of the text and suggests that maybe the secret diary is a fiction too.

A further metatextual reference occurs earlier on in the story, when Rochester suggests going on their honeymoon to “Paris, Rome and Vienna” (218). Considering Rochester’s blindness and disability the “grand plan” is “now mere parody” (219). The use of the word “parody” refers to the virtual journey they have as “fireside travellers”, which enhances the *topos* of entrapment that characterises the story. “Parody”, however, is also the textual journey of the story, a conscious admission that “The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester” is in a way a parody of the pre-text *Jane Eyre*. According to Genette, parody is playful transformation, pastiche serious imitation, which poses Boylan’s story half-way between the two (Genette 1982, 37).

Similar doubts are evident also in the autobiographical stance of *Jane Eyre* itself, as, with an authorial intrusion, the opening of Chapter 10 reflects on its own referentiality:

Hitherto I have recorded in detail the events of my insignificant existence: to the first ten years of my life, I have given almost as many chapters. But *this is not to be a regular autobiography*: I am only bound to invoke memories where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection. (97; emphasis added)

Notably in Boylan’s story the second paragraph has a similar function. Acting as a summary of the major events in Brontë’s novel, it casts a bridge between pre-text and aftertext. This is emphasised by the time reference that marks the opening of the paragraph (“A year ago, I had returned to Thornfield Hall”) and by the direct quotation closing it (“Reader, I married him”, Boylan 2000, 217), so that the textual frame of the second paragraph makes it an open reflection on intertextuality.

However, *Jane Eyre* is not a regular autobiography as it links "spiritual autobiography with domestic memoirs (Peterson 1999, 16). By being two things at the same time it is neither. Likewise, Mrs Rochester's secret diary is not a diary in a conventional sense, as a fairly straightforward and uninterrupted narration formally replaces the expected journal daily entries. The diary does not belong to the text, it is a referent outside, the actual diary is displaced and doubts arise about its existence.

Similar questions underlie the narrative organisation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", which is set in the form of a diary, made of twelve entries separated by a blank to mark either interruption in the writing or the passing of time between entry and entry (Bates Dock *et al.* 1996).

Prohibited to "work" – that is to write – in an imposed "rest cure", the narrator has to do her diary-writing "clandestinely" (Wiesenthal 1997, 27) in order not to raise suspicion. Early in the story her diary becomes a protagonist formally and self-referentially in the use of deictic tenets: "*this is dead paper* and a great relief to my mind", "*Here* comes John, and I must put *this* away"; "I don't know why I should write *this*" (Gilman 1998 [1892], 41, 44, 49, emphasis added). Doubts arise if "the text the narrator is writing is arguably the very text we are reading" (Golden 2003, 14).

It is interesting to notice that in the self-referentiality of the story Gilman calls the diary "dead paper" as it anticipates the living wallpaper (Treichler 1984, 66). "I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman 1998 [1892], 47), later to be identified as "a woman stooping down and creeping about that pattern" (50). Still, the pattern remains unreadable and "diary and wallpaper are textual antitheses" in their "resistance to being read" (Wiesenthal 1997, 32). "The narrator is faced with an unreadable text, a text for which none of her interpretative strategies is adequate" (Lanser 1989, 420). The reader of Gilman's story finds himself in a similar position, as the puzzling relationship between the narrator and the unreadable text of the wallpaper can only be dealt with in another text, the text of the diary.

The self-conscious construction of the story is implied in the formal use of the diary form (Treichler 1984, 73). Yet, as in the case of Boylan's secret diary, common features as time markers, dates, or names of weekdays, generally used in diaries are missing as in Boylan's story, and entries are marked by blank spaces. Time is a blank, the diary is a blank.

Partial "journal-like textual references" (Treichler 1984, 72) support the fiction that the protagonist is keeping a journal, and yet doubts on the diary nature as a text arise that are recalled in Boylan's "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester". "How can the narrator keep a journal when, as she tells us, she is sleeping, creeping, or watching the wallpaper the whole time? In her growing paranoia, would she confide in a journal she could not lock up? How did the journal get into our hands?" (*Ibidem*).

The stylistic insistence on the verbs “creep” (Jacobus 1986, 282) and “crawl” identifies first the movement of the woman behind the wallpaper and then the nameless narrator herself, who, like Bertha Mason creeps and crawls, thus highlighting a direct reference to *Jane Eyre*. Likewise, the narrator remains nameless until the end where “she hints that her name may be Jane” (Golden 1992, 306). Golden suggests that this could be a misprint for Jennie, the name of the sister-in-law, or a deliberate choice implying that the protagonist has freed herself from both her husband John and sister-in-law Jennie (*ibidem*). As a matter of fact the question and mystery surrounding her name is a coreferent to the ambiguous ending of the story thus obliquely highlighting the secrecy of the text the reader is engaged with.

In “The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester” Clare Boylan draws together different subtexts that display interesting cross-references with its direct pre-text *Jane Eyre* and with the less obvious intertextuality of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. In similar ways the mutual relationship between secrecy and spatial constriction characterises Clare Boylan’s “The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester”, as well as *Jane Eyre* and “The Yellow Wallpaper” leaving some questions open about the texts themselves. Boylan’s choice of the short story for a rewriting rather than a novel seems to stress the containment and confinement of the text. A secret diary is hidden or imprisoned in the text, and as the diary of the nameless narrator in Gilman’s story, Jane’s diary remains elusive. Maybe it remains unwritten.

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