
Volume 2

Issue 1

"Crisis / La Crise"

Editors: Lauren Clark and Matthew Hayward

Article 5

2011

Emaciated Identities in William Trevor's Short Story "Lost Ground" and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Catherine O'Brien

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Catherine (2011) "Emaciated Identities in William Trevor's Short Story "Lost Ground" and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*," *Journal of Franco-Irish Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.

doi:10.21427/D7VQ7V

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol2/iss1/5>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Emaciated identities in William Trevor's short story "Lost Ground" and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Catherine O'Brien, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.

Identity is egocentric. It emerges from the recesses of each individual's psyche and is therefore unique. We form a rudimentary notion of selfhood in the early stages of our development. Integral to this development is our presence within a family unit. Our families provide a safe haven within which we can express for the first time the vagaries of our personalities. However, the community of the family unit is not just responsible for supporting and therefore bolstering our sense of identity. It can also serve to influence that sense of identity, whether to criticise it or push it towards change. Yet the dynamic of the family unit is not the only factor that wields influence over our senses of self. The intricacies of the family unit are in constant correspondence with outside influences, be they societal, political, semantic, patriarchal tendencies, or whatever. This correspondence between the senses of self we construct of our own volition and those which are created for us by outside influences is not always harmonious.

With its potential for the demystification of "reality," literature serves to demonstrate the way in which individual identity can struggle to swim against the tide of collective identity which is pressed against it. In this article, I suggest that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and William Trevor's short story "Lost Ground" from the collection *After Rain* (1996) serve as examples of the kind of challenge that I have described. These texts facilitate an exploration of the extent to which individual identities can become emaciated to the point of disappearance when confronted with the tyranny of the systems which operate in society.

Before proceeding to examine these systems it would seem prudent at this juncture to clarify the general direction which this work will take. The tenets of both Jacques Lacan's and Jacques Derrida's theories will be used as a way of prising open both texts. In particular, Derrida's writings

will be employed in order to allow the reader to “travel within language” (Derrida & Malabou 2004, 207) without falling victim to its innate tendency to impose influential binaries which would impede our abilities to fully appreciate the feat both texts achieve. Both *Jane Eyre* and “Lost Ground” beautifully illustrate the perils of language and its propensity to colonise the intellect with its own objectives, but they also show the ability the author has to thwart this process. Both Charlotte Brontë and William Trevor colonise their own texts to such an extent that their basic integrity remains largely invulnerable to attack. Whilst both texts clearly host their own respective identity crises, the authors remain unflinchingly astute in their treatment of them, allowing the reader to recognise the often veiled and insidious forces at work in the constitution of identity.

The systems which restrict the organic emergence of identity are the linguistic and ideological structures with which we are forced to express ourselves. We can only resort to the realm of language, the only means we have of attempting to ascribe identity to ourselves. Language is used as the filter through which we distil the essence of our beings. We negotiate within the realm of language—psychological, social, familial, regional, ethnic, gender, geographical and biological identities. Jacques Lacan eloquently describes the constant tension which exists between the identity language actually describes and that which we seek to describe: “it is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that confirms what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that which I speak” (Lacan 1977, 182).

Language is inherently flawed because words have no intrinsic meaning; they are, as Ferdinand de Saussure observed “unmotivated signs” (Saussure 1983, 69). The linguistic system only works because of a system of differences which have become naturalised. The meanings of words are therefore relational and cannot be defined in isolation. Words only acquire authority as part of the syntagmatic chain. The meanings of words are dependent not only on their difference from other words to elicit signification but also on their context. Although this system facilitates communication, it can also, by its very nature, prove to be quite hermetically closed. The overall

composition of language and its detachment from reality leaves it vulnerable both to attack and colonisation by coercive forces.

Jacques Derrida identifies this aspect of language as logocentrism. He is opposed to logocentricity as he believes it places limits on the potentiality of meaning. His work *Writing and Difference* dispenses with all the ambiguity and enigma often associated with his work and proclaims that “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (Derrida 2006, 358). However, to disentangle language completely from the logocentric system is a very difficult task. It involves moving beyond philosophy and tradition and

is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have disengaged from. (Derrida 2006, 359)

Derrida’s method of decentring—what he famously describes as deconstruction—provides a partial solution. It does not manage to distance itself completely from language but it does endeavour to disassemble the constituent elements—the nerves, sinews, muscles, as it were—that form the body of language and the ideology it disseminates. The language crisis runs parallel to the identity crises in both of the aforementioned texts and will be revisited throughout this essay.

Language is not pure experience but a distorted reflection and distillation of that experience. Derrida posits the notion that language’s hold on reality is not as taut and steadfast as structuralists would like to believe. The application of his theories to work of Brontë and Trevor will enable us to appreciate the role language has to play both in jeopardising and restoring from the brink of erasure identities within both texts. Derrida’s works mark a sustained attack on the naive assumption that any determinate meaning can be achieved when we are immersed in the realm of language which is dominated by semantic freeplay. Crucially, Derrida’s writings also sought to address the frequent

singularity of the structuralist vision and voice the concerns of the identities which fall into the fissures this kind of determinism produces. In doing so, he exposed the potential of the tenets of structuralist thought to be manipulated in order to construct a power dynamic. False and often premeditated binaries were set in opposition in order for one side of the binary to assume superiority and control over the other. Derrida works to expose the manipulation of these binaries by dismantling and reconstructing them:

To deconstruct is a structuralist and anti-structuralist gesture at the same time: an edification, an artefact is taken apart in order to make the structures, the nerves, or as you say the skeletons appear, but also, simultaneously the ruinous precariousness of a formal structure that explained nothing, since it is neither a center, a principle, a force, nor even a law of events, in the most general sense of the word. (Derrida 1995, 83)

This explanation of the manner in which deconstruction works, and the objectives which it seeks to achieve, is extremely dense, encapsulating in a few short lines a number of Derrida's beliefs: language is never an accurate replica of reality but merely its reflection; language feeds off a system of binaries which are inherently flawed in that they operate under a determinate belief that one side of the binary has achieved superiority over the other. This belief stems from the notion that expression relies on a 'centre' of meaning from which all other meaning emanates. Derrida questions the reliability of such system, which by its very nature erases possible meanings by imposing a false centre of meaning.

In *Writing and Difference* Derrida concedes that a centre permits the "play of its elements inside its total form" however as he also observes:

The center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents and elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden. (Derrida 2006, 352)

The centre ensconced within the protection of the structure becomes somehow invulnerable to attack, criticism and because of its deemed integral contribution, to the functioning of the structure: it “escapes structurality” (Derrida 2006, 352). Derrida boldly suggests in *Writing and Difference* that “the center is not the center” (Derrida 2006, 352). This bold suggestion ruptures our preconceived notion of the superiority of the centre. Deconstruction endeavours to take nothing for granted. Its neutrality lies in its ambition to disengage not only concepts from one another but the language which created them from these concepts in order to discern the true inner workings of the system. Derrida vocalises this ambition in his work *Limited Inc*, in which he asserts that “deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated” (Derrida 1993, 21).

Ideologies are often disguised, seeming to function innocently within language. A Deconstructive feminist approach to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* reveals that “a moment's mutiny” (Brontë 2003, 19) is all it takes to refocus the lens of attention on identities in crisis. In much the same manner as Derrida's deconstruction ruptures the binaries which construct meaning in order to examine them, *Jane Eyre* explores the notions of masculinity and femininity in a new and refreshing light.

Jane Eyre feels an outsider, “an interloper” (Brontë 2003, 24) in the home of her Aunt Reed, who has begrudgingly agreed to raise Jane in order to comply with the death-wish of her late

husband. From the outset of the novel, it is clear that Jane is a passionate and wilful child who abhors the humiliating treatment she is subjected to. Jane confronts her Aunt about her demeaning treatment, and as a consequence is banished to Lowood. However, following her time at Lowood it is obvious that Jane has matured and her fiery passion has translated into contemplation: “it is in vain to say that human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it” (Brontë 2006, 125). Jane, in her very presence within the text, disrupts the conventional role played by females. She is not meek and reserved, but speaks with determination and vigour. In fact, the following commentary could be easily read as a feminist manifesto to rival the vigour of Simone de Beauvoir’s comments in *The Second Sex*,

women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do [. . .] it is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 2006, 125-126)

Brontë’s Jane does not adhere to the identity which has been ascribed to her. This identity of feminine refinement and beauty seeks to endanger Jane’s development in her youth, and brings her alienation from her relatives. However, she quickly learns to value her difference and even in her youth becomes immune to attempts to violate it in any way. She states boldly: “this reproach to my dependence had become a vague sing-song in my ear, very painful and crushing but only half intelligible” (Brontë 2006, 20). The intrusion of the systems of conventional thought and categorisation of identity continues throughout Jane’s life. It manifests itself once again during Mr Rochester’s courtship of Miss Ingram—the antithesis of Jane Eyre. Miss Ingram is the embodiment of a convention that does not perturb Jane, who has no interest in the system she represents. Although she may appear glamorous and enticing on the outside, Jane is not affected:

Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling. Pardon the seeming paradox: I mean what I say. She was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature. (Brontë 2006, 210)

Jane's comfort in asserting her own subjectivity is markedly evident here. In fact, it is her staunch self-confidence which preserves her identity and prevents her from becoming consumed by the centre. Jane is cognisant of the sacrifices she would make were she to move towards the centre. She sees these sacrifices in the figure of Miss Ingram, who has expended with an individual sense of self, resorting to convention and stereotype. One could argue that *Jane Eyre's* narrative voice is interwoven with deconstructive reasoning. Like Derrida, the deconstruction which she practices does not seek to be cruel;

it is not negative, even though it has often been interpreted as such despite all sorts of warnings. For me, it always accompanies an affirmative exigency, I would even say that it never proceeds without love. (Derrida 1995, 83)

Rather, deconstruction seeks to expose the pretences and falsehoods which govern our received notions of what it means to be female. To a large extent, Jane's commentary amounts to a counter narrative which relentlessly interrogates the linguistic and ideological system at play in the novel. Although the language of the novel may at times appear archaic and betray the true age of the novel its, treatment of the concept of gender is undeniably progressive. In an era of debate regarding gender which has seen the advent of gender re-assignment surgery *Jane Eyre* is a remarkably relevant novel. Our biological identities determine our sex but our gender identity is

something which is learned and not innate. Therefore all the traits which we associate with masculinity and femininity are learned. Jane possesses a female body biologically yet does not see the attributes she displays as corresponding with that identity. The binary oppositions at work in the novel equate men with reason, objectivity and logic, and women with emotion, a whimsical nature and the absence of serious thought. Jane's disruption of these binaries amounts to a resistance of their influence over her. Her proactive and determined nature rescues her identity from the brink of crisis.

Jane refuses to accept the subordinate role which society has ascribed to her. Jane demonstrates her resistance to such subordination in a symbolic way when she refuses to accept the marriage gifts which Rochester attempts to shower her with. She sees his generosity towards her and bestowal of gifts upon her as a means of appropriating and controlling her: "He smiled and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (Brontë 2006, 301). Jane Eyre is clearly no slave, and her rebellious presence within the novel continually displaces and impedes the master-slave dialectic which tries to impose itself upon her throughout the novel.

However, Jane is at pains to escape the ideological framework that underlies the novel. The novel corresponds with Simone de Beauvoir's assessment of humankind in *The Second Sex*:

This humanity is male and man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. [. . .] She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her. He is the subject, he is the absolute—She is the other. (de Beauvoir 1997, 16).

Jane Eyre works against the traditional paradigm in which man is imbued with superiority from the outset. The Bible describes how God created woman from man. Woman is a product of man and

is therefore his inferior, his other, owing to him her very existence: “the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Moses 2. 21-23).

In addition to Jane, another female character, Bertha Mason, plays an important role in the novel, and this despite the fact that she is largely denied a voice. Jane’s fervent need to express her identity—“speak I must” (Brontë 2006, 45)—is set in stark contrast to Bertha Mason who is marginalised to such an extent that her identity approaches non-existence. Jane’s continual attention to the preservation of her own identity allows her to assume a degree of control over her destiny. She wishes to be the governor of her own destiny, free from influences which may seek to mould her identity to what it requires: “I only want an easy mind, sir; not crushed by crowded obligations” (Brontë 2006, 302). She feels that she is Rochester’s equal: “I felt at times, as if he were my relation, rather than my master” (Brontë 2006, 166). In direct opposition, Bertha Mason’s identity is crushed by the weight of social conformity which bears down upon her. Her character becomes the personification of hysteria: “it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours, it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal” (Brontë 2006, 327-328). She is locked away, a madwoman in the attic. The differences between Jane and Bertha are foregrounded by the text: “compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder” (Brontë 2006, 329).

Bertha is the embodiment of non-conformity, something which patriarchal society does not permit amongst women. She is other, a savage creature. Her character descriptions bear strong similarities to the delineation of Heathcliff’s character in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff is defined by his fiery temperament “an unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without civilisation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone” (Brontë 1994, 125). Bertha is also characterised by her primal and animalistic responses. She is “at once intemperate and unchaste” (Brontë 2006, 345). Rochester, who is immersed in the patriarchal ideology of the time, sees Bertha’s madness as relinquishing him from the responsibilities of marriage. Rochester presides over the locus of power and believes he has the authority to decide to remarry if he chooses: “That

woman, who has so abused your long suffering—so sullied your name; so outraged your honour; so blighted your youth—is not your wife; nor are you her husband.” (Brontë 2006, 347)

Rochester believes he has the authority to break his marriage vows, but in doing so he attempts to erase Bertha’s identity as his wife. Bertha’s enforced silence is juxtaposed with Jane’s ardent struggle throughout the novel to reclaim her identity from the brink of effacement at various stages. This struggle to form and nurture her burgeoning sense of identity commences at Gateshead where she continually felt ‘discord’ (Brontë 2006, 23). Jane’s experiences at Lowood teach her the value of fortitude and forbearance of character. She learns from Helen Burns to look inward rather than outward for reassurance that she is making the correct decisions: “If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends” (Brontë 2006, 81). However, Jane is unsure and explains to Helen “that is not enough: if others don’t love me, I would rather die than live” (Brontë 2006, 81). Helen clearly finds the binaries of inner-outer and public-private identities by which some people choose to live their lives repugnant.

This mindset is again seen in the episode where Jane decides to leave Thornfield Hall and abandon Rochester forever. She vacillates between feeling resolute in her decision that she must leave him as she does not want to become a mistress to a married man and a yearning to run into his embrace: “there was a heaven—a temporary heaven—in this room for me, if I chose: I had but to go in” (Brontë 2006, 359). Jane succeeds in ridding herself of her femininity, which, if stereotypes were to be believed, would lead her towards an irrational and emotive response to her dilemma. Eventually, she triumphs over her emotions and manages to leave Thornfield. Is Jane’s decision to leave symbolic of her triumph over the binaries which have impinged on her individuality throughout her life?

Well, Jane’s journey towards self-actualisation is not yet complete. Her ability to forge a coherent sense of self lies precariously on the edge of a precipice over which St John Rivers may

succeed in nudging Jane if she shows weakness. St John urges Jane to accompany him to India as his wife. Jane is aware that such an action would result in the loss of identity and declares that "such a martyrdom would be monstrous" (Brontë 2006, 451). She declines St John's invitation, and instead returns to Rochester who she has learnt is now a blind cripple.

Although Jane returns to and marries Rochester, her role as a powerful and independent woman has not been diminished. Jane does not return to be Rochester's mistress. If Jane had opted to go to India with St John, or to become Rochester's illegitimate wife, she would have had to surrender her identity. This identity is marked by her strength of character, which endeavours to be invulnerable to outside influences. Rochester makes reference to this quality of Jane's character when he remarks: "I know what sort of mind I have placed in communication with my own; I know it is not liable to take infection: it is a peculiar mind; it is an unique one" (Brontë 2006, 163). Jane defies the expectations of how a subservient woman should behave and returns to Rochester not as his mistress but as her own: "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (Brontë 2006, 483).

However, as previously mentioned, Jane is not the only female protagonist the novel houses. Although she is largely denied a voice, Bertha Mason serves an important symbolic function in the novel. A deconstructive approach to both Bertha's and Jane's situations reveals that both women jeopardise the stability of the roles which society has assigned to them. Jane challenges the conventional feminine role which is thrust upon her and Bertha in a similar manner threatens the domestic space of England.

Bertha's character bears many similarities to that of Milton in William Trevor's "Lost Ground". Just as Bertha's character jeopardises the conventions of the domestic space of England, Milton's character represents a threat to the political and cultural imperatives of Ireland. A deconstructive reading of the text reveals the central question posed by the text. This central question bears many similarities to the questions posed by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, in that

William Trevor's "Lost Ground" also interrogates the potential for a subject to swim against the tide of collective identity.

William Trevor's short story "Lost Ground" functions in a similar manner in that it too interrogates the elements of the equation which result in the formation of a sense of identity. Both *Jane Eyre* and "Lost Ground" gradually yet steadily begin to undercut the influences which affect identity. In both works, meaning is dislocated from the safe haven of authority it has cultivated for itself. Displaying many similarities to Brendan Kennelly's *Cromwell*, both works are executed in a manner which "aggressively resists generic categorizations" (McDonagh 2003, 322).

Trevor's "Lost Ground" weaves into the fabric of the text a hybrid of postcolonial and postmodernist concepts. In fact, the text may be said to marry the two in order to extrapolate meaning and incite questioning. In the first instance, it foregrounds Milton's character, the colonial other of the text. The story delves further into the intricacies and vicissitudes of Milton's identity and in so doing documents his struggle to form a sense of personal identity which is not invaded by the notion of a collective national identity. Milton plays a pivotal role within the text; his character functions on a symbolic level to represent the struggle of the individual identity to assert its authority amid a staunchly held collective identity.

Milton is a member of the Leeson family. The story quickly moves to establish a domesticated rural setting in Co. Armagh. The influence of Milton's family upon his character is made clear in subtle yet unmistakable ways from the outset. The centrality of the family unit is symbolised by the physical dimensions of the house. The house and its environs are demarcated by the text as indicating and "reflecting the hard-working Protestant family the Lessons were" (Trevor 1996, 150). The table around which they sit to have their meals—"an oak table, matching the proportions of the room, dominated its centre" (Trevor 1996, 150)—has been in the family for generations. The table may be said to represent the fact that Milton's family's beliefs stand at the centre, stabilising his identity and the identity of all the family members in the direction which it

deems appropriate. The table which lies at the heart of the family is reminiscent of Derrida's concept of the centre; the family becomes a microcosm which transcends its "Leeson territory" (Trevor 1996, 150).

One day while out in his father's orchard, Milton sees an apparition. At first, the story disorientates the reader into thinking that the apparition may have been a dream, like the dream he had about one of the local girls. However, while we initially dismiss the apparition as a product of puberty and Milton's burgeoning sense of manhood, it quickly becomes apparent that this is not the case: "the next morning the dream quickly faded to nothing, but the encounter with the stranger remained with Milton" (Trevor 1996, 152). The lady which appears to Milton in the orchard claims to be St Rosa and gives Milton the following instruction: "'Don't be afraid,' she said, 'when the moment comes. There is too much fear'" (Trevor 1996, 153). In the meantime, we encounter Milton's brother Garfield:

[I]n Belfast Garfield was more than just a butcher's assistant. Garfield had a role among the Protestant paramilitaries, being what he himself called a "hard-man volunteer" in an organisation intent on avenging the atrocities of the other side. The tit-for-tat murders spawned by that same hard-man mentality, the endless celebration of a glorious past on one side and the picking over of ancient rights on the other, the reluctance to forgive.

(Trevor 1996, 155)

As the story progresses we receive a more vivid introduction to the manner in which the family is coloured ideologically. They proudly march "bowler-hatted and sashed" to celebrate "King William's famous victory over Papist James in 1690" (Trevor 1996, 156). While Milton participates, the text appears to suggest that there is something ineffectual about his contribution:

“before Garfield had gone to Belfast he’d marched also, the best on the flute for miles around. Milton marched, but didn’t play an instrument because he was tone-deaf” (Trevor 1996, 156).

Milton is troubled by the memory of his encounter with the woman. He finds himself at an impasse as he is unable to unburden himself to his family. It is intimated by the text that he fears their response. Such is the extent of the family’s immersion in their particular ideology, Milton cannot unburden himself to his mother: “it seemed wrong that his mother, who knew everything about him [. . .] shouldn’t have been confided in” (Trevor 1996, 157). Instead, Milton tells his brother-in-law, and, later, a Catholic priest of his experience. However, neither of the people he confides in are able to look beyond the divide which separates them:

He had been affronted by the visit, but he didn’t let it show. Why should a saint of his Church appear to a Protestant boy in a neighbourhood that was overwhelmingly Catholic, when there were so many Catholics to choose from? (Trevor 1996, 167).

This divide is the result of a collective identity which had been cultivated by both sides to differentiate themselves from each other. These collective identities are based on exclusion, the rendering of another identity as other, and do not reflect the communality of human experience. Instead, these collective identities are based on artificially constructed, rigid notions of what it means to belong to a particular group. John McDonagh in his article ‘Blitzphrenia’ traces the significance of these “plastic pictures.” In the case of Ireland’s construction of the concept of nation, McDonagh comments that

One of the most enduring “external plastic pictures” of Ireland was portrayed by Eamon de Valera after the end of the Second World War, when in response to Winston Churchill’s thinly veiled criticism of the Free State’s official neutrality, he declared that despite being

'clubbed into insensitivity' over 'several hundred years' Ireland 'stood alone against aggression' and emerged as 'a small nation that could never be got to accept defeat and has never surrendered her soul'. (McDonagh 2003, 327)

This idea of the "soul" is very important according to McDonagh, and liberates Ireland to apportion credence to its means of attaining freedom, because the end, the preservation of Ireland's "soul," is seen as justifying the means, whether violence or death. However, this idea of the "soul" of a nation's identity is not exclusive to the Republic of Ireland. Trevor's "Lost Ground" illustrates that the preservation of a nation's soul was used as a means of justification on both sides of the divide. Garfield acts as the guardian of this "soul"; therefore his role is valid because it has been inherited from the past and deemed natural and pre-ordained. McDonagh asserts that Kennelly also acknowledges in his epic poem *Cromwell* the damage which a notion of collective yet exclusive identity was capable of eliciting: "In *Cromwell*, Kennelly does not shirk from highlighting the violence committed by both sides in Ireland's sectarian conflict" (McDonagh 2003, 329).

"Lost Ground" illustrates the extremes which can be resorted to in order to preserve a sense of identity. When Milton eventually reveals his experience to his family and tells them he wishes to preach, they lock him up in their house. His perceived insanity is seen as a threat of their cultural image and identity. His mother banishes all of her maternal sentiments, such is the extent of her disgust: "'Shame?'" Milton said when his mother employed the word. 'On all of us, Milton'" (Trevor 1996, 173). The text performs a relentless emasculation of his character. It is here that the similarities between Milton's character and that of Bertha Mason become apparent. Hysteria and insanity were stereotypically feminine phenomenon in 1847. Milton's "femininity" threatens the masculine ideal which is asserted throughout the text. Just as it necessitates Bertha's demise to restore harmony to the domestic space and facilitate Rochester and Jane's legitimate union, it takes Milton's assassination to unburden his family of the threat he poses.

Derrida's writings on the notion of sexual difference are particularly interesting with regard to Milton's and Bertha's characters. A deconstructive reading of each text reveals the manner in which identities which do not conform to traditional structuralist binaries can be effaced, sucked into the matrix of a system which stifles to the point of silence anything which does not conform to the tenets of that particular framework. Identities are seen to be emaciated to the point of extinction by a system which fails for whatever reason to voice them. In this respect, Derrida views the system as inherently flawed. The closed nature of language and in particular its parasitic dependence on opposition obstructs its ability to denote sexual difference. When sexual difference is subjected to the constrained nature of the linguistic system the system corrodes its integrity and absorbs it into its being. A being which forces it to ascribe itself to a binary. He does not elucidate on how such an alteration would be possible or actuated, but Derrida suggests that the voicing of each individual's sexual identity would involve the inauguration of a new expressive system of sexual difference. He notes that

in order to be exposed to the braided polyphony which is coiled up in every voice, perhaps we must come back to a vocal difference rebellious to any opposition and which is not derived from anything else: it belongs to no one, it carries spacing and does not let space be assigned to it. [. . .] Even bisexuality is insufficient for it. Nor does it "express" a community, if we mean by that a totality of subjects, a "we" a collection of egos, men or women—"we men," "we women," etc. (Derrida 1995, 162).

Derrida suggests that we must escape the structural constraint which mutes difference. He observes that the unique nature of difference is simplified and objectified to a singular by the process of structuralism: "it is the brutality of assignation which multiplies hypostases in order to oppose vocal

difference, to turn difference into opposition, into an opposition without multiplicity" (Derrida 1995, 162).

For Derrida, if the writing of sexual difference is to achieve any semblance to the reality of which it speaks, a new species of writing must emerge, "a singular writing, the idiom of an inimitable difference that is not true to a type" (Derrida 1995, 165). However, this type must mark a new beginning and be what Derrida describes as a "type without type" (Derrida 1995, 165). However, the nagging question which Derrida acknowledges as part of his commentary remains: "how to negotiate with phallogocentric axiomatics that have dominated so long?" (Derrida 1995, 170).

It is intimated in "Lost Ground" that Garfield murdered his brother in order to erase the threat which he posed:

Looking at him across the open grave, Hazel suddenly knew. In ignorance she had greeted him an hour ago in the farmhouse.....The shame had been exorcized, silence silently agreed upon. (Trevor 1996, 181)

Unsurprisingly, it is Milton's sister who draws this conclusion—someone who has shunned contact with her family because she fears the strength of ideology. Her femininity, against stereotype and convention, offers clarity and reason, as opposed to the absence of logic with which she would typically be associated. Her enforced silence within the story screams with significance. An immediate affinity is evident between Hazel and her brother. To what extent did Milton's sojourn into the realm of "femininity" and sensibility offer him clarity? Why was Milton viewed as such a liability?

The story's title and conclusion offer insight in this regard. By the story's denouement it is clear that Milton is the "Lost Ground" of the story's title. "Milton had disobeyed" (Trevor 1996,

182) in that he dared to venture outside of the territory which validated the preservation of collective identity in an unquestioning manner. Poignantly, his character acts as a sacrificial victim illustrating the result of privileging national identity over personal or familial identity. The Leasons may believe that “Milton’s death was the way things were, the way things had to be: that was their single consolation. Lost ground had been regained” (Trevor 1996, 182-183). However, the story begs the question—at what expense has lost ground been regained? Does the end indeed justify the means or is the end a phantasm as unattainable as the myth of identity which lies at its ideological centre?

Through their respective narratives, both *Jane Eyre* and “Lost Ground” demonstrate that in order to fully adopt a hegemonic ideology, a renouncement of difference must occur. Difference must be shunned in order to achieve sameness. The irony is that, as Edward Saïd maintained in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, our sense of self is relational to and in opposition to the sense of our other. The linguistic link between self and other is indissoluble, as one requires the other to achieve expression. The maintenance of this link can also be strategic in that it can be exploited in order to establish a false dynamic of power. The deconstructive approach to literature has the potential, as we have seen, to create a more egalitarian relationship between the centre and the margins. In particular, deconstruction—by inverting the trend of giving prevalence to the centre—restores those in the margins and gives them and their situations a voice. In a postmodernist manner, questions proliferate. Both *Jane Eyre* and “Lost Ground” pose two very important questions which continue to trouble us long after we have finished reading. Who gives credence to and sanctions the validity of ideology? Which “souls” do we treasure? These are questions crucial to an understanding of the crisis of identity; they demonstrate literature’s ability to raise concerns in a manner which precipitates further probing and investigation.

Works Cited:

Brontë, Charlotte, 2006. *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin.

De Beauvoir, Simone, 1997. *The Second Sex*: translated and edited by H.M. Parshley. London: Vintage.

Derrida, Jacques, 1993. *Limited Inc.* Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, 1995. *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*. Edited by Elizabeth Weber. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. California: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, 2006. *Writing and Difference*. Oxon: Routledge Classics.

Derrida, Jacques and Catherine Malabou, 2004. *Travelling with Jacques Derrida*. Translated by David Wills. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

De Saussure, Ferdinand, 1983. *Course in General Linguistics*: translated and annotated by Roy Harris. Guildford: Biddles Ltd.

Lacan, Jacques, 1977. *Écrits: A Selection*. Great Britain: Tavistock Publications Ltd.

McDonagh, John, 2003. 'Blitzophrenia: Brendan Kennelly's Post-Colonial Vision' in the *Irish University Review*. Dublin: Colourbooks Ltd.

Orchard, D and Revd R .C. Fuller (eds), 1966. *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Edition*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.

Trevor, William, 1996. *After Rain*. London: Penguin.