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“Reader, I Did Not Even Have Coffee with Him”: Lorrie Moore’s Adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (1847) in *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009)

In the 2012 special issue of the *Journal of American Studies* edited by David Brauner and Heidi Macpherson, they remark—and attempt to redress—the relative dearth of “substantial published criticism” on contemporary fiction writer Lorrie Moore (543). Brauner and Macpherson maintain that, despite consistent praise for her work, Moore remains “critically underrated” (543). They speculate that this critical under-acknowledgement may derive from her propensity for wordplay and humor, her frequent recourse to the short story over the novel, or her uneasy assimilation into postmodernism (in spite of her metafictional turns). Alike Varvogli echoes these speculations, adding that Moore’s ostensibly female-centered, domestic settings often mask larger political and cultural critiques. Thus, although *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), Moore’s most recent novel, is generally considered as a female coming-of-age narrative, or a campus novel, Varvogli argues that it comprises much more: it is a “state of the nation novel” akin to Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010) in its scope and weight (178). Varvogli laments that “even in the twenty-first century, a female-authored book about domestic concerns is viewed as limited to such concerns” (178), and she contends that this story of a woman’s development from innocence to experience “has a lot to say about post-9/11 America’s war on terror, especially the stories that a country in crisis tells itself about its innocence, its racial relations, and its idea of freedom” (178). Other scholars, such as Jo Lampert, Elizabeth S. Anker, and Pamela Mansutti, have also read *A Gate at the Stairs* as a 9/11 novel that uses interwoven domestic narratives to highlight the myopia, narcissism, and hypocrisy underlying much of the middle-class liberal rhetoric on terrorism, race, and ‘home’ security.

However, no one has yet discussed *A Gate at the Stairs* as a contribution to the rapidly expanding area of critical and creative textual production that has been labelled as neo-Victorian literature. Louisa Hadley defines the neo-Victorian novel as “contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both” (*Neo-Victorian Fiction* 3-4), and she stresses the insights that neo-Victorian literature affords not only into the nineteenth century, but

even more importantly, “into twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural history and socio-political concerns” (Kohlke 13). Although the term ‘neo-Victorian’ is often taken to mean contemporary novels with a Victorian setting, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn make clear that “the ‘neo-Victorian’ is *more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century [...] [it] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision*” (*Neo-Victorianism* 4). Neo-Victorian literature thus by definition must go beyond nostalgic pastiche, and instead “advance an alternative view of the nineteenth century for a modern audience” (*Neo-Victorianism* 7), or “re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance of that earlier text to the here and now” (“Neo-Victorian Studies” 170-71). Neo-Victorian fiction uses allusion, adaptation, and narrative deconstruction to “writ[e] back to something in the nineteenth century”, often investigating issues of memory and inheritance, giving voice to the marginalized or silenced, or reinterpreting the identity politics of imperialism (“Neo-Victorian Studies” 170). In the words of Cora Kaplan, the neo-Victorian involves a “self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself” (3). Approaching *A Gate at the Stairs* as a neo-Victorian text thus offers a means of bringing together some of the most compelling strands of scholarship on Moore, particularly with respect to the novel’s experimentation with metafiction, humor, and narrative structure, as well as its participation in contemporary debates on feminism (and on ethnicity, race, and politics in post-9/11 western culture, as well, though these areas cannot be addressed fully in what follows).

At first glance, *A Gate at the Stairs*, with its explicitly twenty-first-century American suburban setting and modern narrative of college life, may not seem to warrant attention as a neo-Victorian text. The novel recounts the story of Tassie Keltjin, a student who leaves her family’s small potato farm to attend university in the Midwestern city of Troy. As Tassie embraces college life, she finds happiness in Sylvia Plath and Simone de Beauvoir, in her romance with a handsome ‘Brazilian’ classmate, and in a quirky friendship with her roommate. Come semester two, she also secures a job as a nanny for

Sarah and Edward, a wealthy white couple who adopt a mixed-race baby girl, Mary-Emma. As buried secrets come to light—first with her boyfriend, then with Edward and Sarah, and finally with her own family—Tassie’s relationships are derailed. Her painful experiences teach her that being passive makes her complicit in the events that unfold.

Yet Moore’s novel can also be approached as a reworking of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Moore not only characterizes her protagonist, Tassie Keltjin, as a Jane-like figure whose quest for acceptance and narrative ownership is bound up with her initiation into adulthood. She also adapts Brontë’s gothic tropes, characters, plot, and spatial metaphors to update the conflicts experienced by Jane (and Bertha) for the twenty-first century. Moore capitalizes on what Katie Kapurch has identified as the “empowerment potential of neo-Victorian representations of young women in popular culture” which define “agency in girlhood as resistance to the kind of social injustice Brontë also critiques” (111, 94). However, Moore’s novel is not simply a twenty-first-century story layered over its nineteenth-century precursor, for it is characterized by one of the hallmarks of neo-Victorianism, “the knowing and historicised, critical and scholarly perspective contained within the fictional text” (“Neo-Victorian Studies” 170). Adopting this critical and self-reflexive paradigm, Moore’s inversion of *Jane Eyre*’s most famous line and reworking of its conclusion comprise meaningful departures from Brontë’s classic.

Moreover, the replacement of the creole madwoman in the attic with the adopted multi-racial baby raises questions about the politics of race, entrapment and victimization in the familial and national spaces of the ‘home’. According to Heilmann and Llewellyn, neo-Victorian novels are frequently set in “the domestic location of the family home” which becomes “an important link to the generational past of the protagonists” but also a space of “narration [...] through which the central characters receive and deal with traumatic historical narratives, and in which they come to understand that the very act of storytelling and (self)narration in relation to the historical past serves as a cathartic moment of traumatic unveiling” (*Neo-Victorianism* 28). In keeping with this neo-Victorian layering of narrative and national histories, Moore not only shows how her protagonist’s inactivity makes her

accountable, in part, for the suffering of her loved ones, but likewise exposes how, in the Anglo-American cultural imagination, *Jane Eyre* may be complicit in perpetuating damaging social fictions. This essay will reveal how Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* both updates and interrogates *Jane Eyre*, in a fusion of creativity and criticism that lies at the heart of the neo-Victorian enterprise.¹ It will also show how considering Moore's novel through this theoretical lens can further the critical appreciation of her work as well as contribute to our understanding of the parameters of the 'neo-Victorian' itself.

Jane Eyre* as an Intertext for *A Gate at the Stairs

Although there has been no explicit consideration of *A Gate at the Stairs* as a neo-Victorian work, its allusions to and thematic overlap with nineteenth-century texts have been noted. Several reviewers of the book have mentioned the echoes of *Madame Butterfly*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre* in the novel, specifically in relation to the themes of orphanhood and abandonment, and Moore herself has discussed some of these texts as influences. Motoko Rich, writing in *The New York Times*, quotes Moore directly on this issue:

I'm interested in adoption because those kids become Jane Eyre. Not to push the 'Jane Eyre' thing too much, but of course there is that racial aspect to it. And there's a racial component to 'Madame Butterfly', so these were the Ur-texts hovering over my desk while I just barreled ahead and wrote a Midwestern story. (Moore qtd in Rich)

It is not "push[ing] the 'Jane Eyre' thing too much" to suggest that *Jane Eyre* is the most prominent of these Victorian "Ur-texts", and Moore's choice to "write back to" this novel itself deserves some consideration. Despite its iconic cultural status, *Jane Eyre* cannot be considered a straightforward symbol for feminism, given the late twentieth-century revisionist critiques of the novel that have highlighted its conservatism with respect to class, race, and empire. As Cora Kaplan has shown, readings of the novel by postcolonial critics like Guyatri Spivak "tie both Brontë's feminist individualism and her emphasis on the feeling self to a particularly problematic strand of feminist

history, one whose pretensions to speak on behalf of ‘women’ as a group masks its own considerable cultural biases, and its implication in the development of imperialism” (25). Moore’s modern re-visioning of *Jane Eyre* thus encourages us to bring a political consciousness to our interpretation of the novel, to note the connections between an Imperial Britain of the nineteenth century and a post 9/11 United States, and to become aware of the novel’s uneasy position within global feminism(s). Moore’s novel also contests the wave of twenty-first century screen and print versions of *Jane Eyre* that reduce it to a nostalgic costume romance. Meghan Jordan has examined several such adaptations which she faults for removing Jane from the “nineteenth-century rhetorics of empire, gender, class, race, and subjecthood” and instead portraying her subjectivity solely “through the lens of lost or thwarted love” (Jordan 83, 82). In contrast with these reductive reincarnations of *Jane Eyre*, Moore refuses to privilege the story of heteronormative love or to transform the novel into prosaic nineteenth-century pastiche, thus highlighting not only the problematic aspects of Brontë’s novel but also the even more problematic uses to which this novel is put in the twenty-first century.

Jane and Tassie: Divided Selves

Moore immediately establishes a link between her text and Brontë’s by echoing the initial scene of *Jane Eyre* in the opening paragraphs of *A Gate at the Stairs*, setting up Tassie, like Jane, as a heroine with a gothic imagination and a rich inner life. Both novels begin on freezing winter days. Though confined indoors due to the bad weather, the ten-year-old Jane Eyre is transported abroad by Bewick’s *History of British Birds*. Her relatives treat her harshly and without love, but she escapes from her discomfort by hiding in a window seat and burying herself in her book. As she reads about the bleak winter shores of the Arctic, her imagination transforms the pictures of migrating birds into a Gothic mode, conjuring “death-white realms,” “marine phantoms,” and a “fiend” that is “an object of terror” (Brontë 8-9). Tassie, meanwhile, walks the streets of Troy in search of a job, but obsesses morbidly about the fate of the birds in the sudden Midwestern cold snap, “imagining them dead, in

stunning heaps . . . dropped from the sky in twos and threes for miles” (Moore 3). In her idiosyncratic first-person narration, Tassie identifies herself as the daughter of a rural potato farmer and a newcomer to the university town of Troy, “the Athens of the midwest” (4). Both heroines are outsiders who seek acceptance in their respective homes; both manage external challenges by withdrawing inward. Like Jane, Tassie, too, will attempt to unite her inner and outer worlds and to reconcile her individualism with her tendency toward compliance.

Both Tassie and Jane also emerge early in their narratives as divided selves. Tassie’s docile, agreeable, unassuming exterior is at odds with an inward nature that is passionate, fanciful, and inventive, one which often appears in her droll and lyrical narrative voice. In her interview for the nanny job, her potential employer, Sarah, describes her plans to adopt while Tassie jokes inwardly:

Adoption seemed both a cruel joke and a lovely day-dream—a nice way of avoiding the blood and pain of giving birth, or, from a child’s perspective, a realized fantasy of your parents not really being your parents. Your genes could thrust one arm in the air and pump up and down. *Yes!* You were not actually related to *Them!* (16)

Her late-adolescent sarcasm, however, cannot offset her unease or her frustrating inability to “find a language, or even an octave, in which to speak” (16). As the interview progresses, she feels she is in “freefall,” unsure what to say (21). She worries that her “meekness could become a habit, a tic, something hardwired that my mannerisms would continue to express throughout my life regardless of my efforts” (14). Her voice, like so many of Moore’s narrators, overflows with puns, Freudian slips, and misconstructions. It plays out her attempts at meaning-making and underscores Tassie’s struggle to make sense of her experience and to give it fitting linguistic expression.² Critics like Michiko Kakutani have complained of Moore’s penchant for “lame little jokes” (“First Time for Taxis, Lo Mein and Loss”). However, it is precisely the imagination, humor, and emotional range of Tassie’s voice that provide the frustrating contrast with her external “meekness” (14).

Tassie, like Jane before her, faces what Terry Eagleton has called the predicament “of all women of intellect and aspiration in a stiflingly patriarchal order” (129-30). These women are forced to fend

for themselves, guarding a lonely integrity which only survives at the expense of something at their very core. Jane, for example, has to wrestle with her desire for Rochester and her longing for the range of experience and activity that is unavailable to women, especially those of her station. The “sole relief” for her restiveness is:

to walk along the corridor of the third story . . . and allow my mind’s eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it . . . and best of all, to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence. (109)

According to Eagleton, it is through silence and prudence that Brontëan women suppress their desires and stifle their spontaneity (130). Here Jane compensates for her restricted sphere of action and expression by liberating her “mind’s eye” and “inward ear.” Similarly, Tassie’s struggles with “meekness” and stoical endurance appear verbally, in her self-named habit of going “mute,” and her acquiescent conversational refrain of “OK. . . . Sounds good,” the so-called “midwestern girl’s reply to everything” (40). Both Jane and Tassie develop social survival mechanisms that involve the repression of deeper psychic drives. While Jane struggles with her erotic and imaginative desires, Tassie dreams, explicitly, of having a voice. Tassie’s fantasies and regrets revolve around self-expression, and are often couched in linguistic terms: “But what would I say? What grammar, what syntax would hold together [the] sentences?” (308). She yearns to find not only the courage but also the language necessary for meaningful communication.

Tassie resembles the lonesome, self-tormented figures of Brontë’s fiction, and her quest for spontaneous self-expression seems to address girlhood agency in the twenty-first century, much as *Jane Eyre* did in the nineteenth. Because, according to Kapurch, “girlhood is still a categorical site of struggle and cultural paradox,” adapting *Jane Eyre* offers an empowering paradigm for a first-person female *bildungsroman* that represents, and rewards, agency as resistance to social injustice (91).

Moore therefore encourages the reader to expect the kind of narrative journey Brontë so often delivers, which concludes with self-realization, reintegration into society, and the promise of security and status. Moore withholds this resolution, however, denying her protagonist—and her reader—the fulfilment that Jane attains. Tassie’s self-realization will come, but at a cost, and it will not be accompanied by the Victorian trappings of marriage, domestic felicity, or defined social position. Although, as Louisa Hadley has emphasized, it is important to avoid a “reductive view of Victorian endings” as “neat and fixed” (“Feminine Endings” 182), it is clear that Moore sees a need to transform Brontë’s strategy for closure. By raising and then subverting expectations for her protagonist, Moore follows other neo-Victorian novelists in accentuating and challenging the ideologies underlying an iconic Victorian narrative like *Jane Eyre*, and the ways in which certain racial or imperial figures are marginalized therein. Like Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, perhaps the most famous neo-Victorian (and post-colonial) rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs* draws on Brontë to replay aspects of *Jane Eyre* but also to undermine its perceived certainties and to draw attention to its liabilities, specifically as they relate to the problematic identificatory relationship between reader and heroine.

Invoking *Jane Eyre*

In addition to the psychological similarities between Jane and Tassie, Moore uses more explicit allusions to indicate her novel is a retelling of *Jane Eyre*. As a nanny to a rich suburban couple, Tassie occupies the position of a modern-day governess. Like Jane, who works for Edward Rochester of Thornfield Hall, Tassie accepts a position in the home of Edward Thornwood. Her charge, however, is no stand-in for Jane’s pupil, Adele Varens. Instead, the biracial two-year-old, Mary-Emma Bertha Thornwood-Brink, recalls a different character in *Jane Eyre*: Bertha Mason, Rochester’s half-Creole lunatic wife who is locked away on the top floor of the mansion. In the backyard, moreover, Tassie perceives that “most of a large oak tree split by lightning had been hacked and stacked by the garage

for winter firewood” (Moore 12). This visual repetition of the “wreck of the chestnut-tree . . . split down the centre” that Jane finds in the orchard further links the Thornwood-Brink home with Thornfield Hall (Brontë 276). Just as the cloven chestnut tree symbolizes the ill-fated nature of Jane’s proposed union to Rochester, the oak tree likewise warns of hidden secrets that will return to threaten Tassie’s welfare.

The series of references to *Jane Eyre* not only draws attention to *A Gate at the Stairs* as an adaptation, but also creates a gap between the knowledge of the reader and that of the heroine. Although a reader of *A Gate at the Stairs* who is familiar with *Jane Eyre* is likely to register the oak tree as an ominous sign and to regard a character called Edward Thornwood (and his adoptive daughter Mary-Emma Bertha) with suspicion, Tassie does not. In this way, Moore exploits the “palimpsestuous” potential of a neo-Victorian rewrite, with its “simultaneous existence of both narratives on the same page, occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another” (“Neo-Victorian Studies” 170). Using an intertextual version of dramatic irony, Moore accords the reader greater insight into the situation than the young protagonist, foreshadowing what lies in store, and encouraging the reader to feel both anxiety and sympathy for her.

At times even Tassie herself almost seems to sense this irony. Later in the novel, when a “furious” Tassie is unable to stop Sarah and Edward from abandoning the two-year-old Mary-Emma, she links recent events back to her British Literature class (244).

In my mind I did a quick survey: pride, weakness, uneasy deferral to power. Paralyzing strangleholds of the unconscious, amnesia of convenience, dark twists of character, and secrets in the past? Babbling during grief? Jokes while dying? Hadn’t I had a midterm on these? (243)

In moments of paralysis and horror, Tassie’s “tuned-in sense of the uncanny” leads her back to myth and fiction (68). In spite of the similarities between these tales and her own situation, they offer no

direction or practical assistance. Moreover, her meditative associations between life and literature rarely achieve the overt frame-breaking of anti-realist postmodern narratives. Tassie wryly observes that “the people in this house . . . were like characters each from a different grim and gruesome fairy tale,” but she does not, until the final page of the novel, acknowledge herself as a textual reincarnation of *Jane Eyre* (249). Moore flirts with metafiction but remains, mostly, within the bounds of realism, reworking the tenets of the Victorian novel from within the narrative without performing the frame-breaking associated with postmodernism.³ Tassie’s recourse to fiction and fairy tale registers what Steven Bruhm describes as “a crisis in personal history,” a situation so nightmarish that it feels more like a gothic plot than her normal reality (268). For Moore, such “horrifying” returns also signal a “crisis,” or a deliberate rupture, in narrative history (Bruhm 268). What worked for Jane will not suffice for Tassie; what served Brontë will not avail Moore.

Heidi Macpherson has praised Moore’s unique narrative dexterity:

It is perhaps for this skill that Moore should be more highly rated: her ability to meld a postmodern experimentation with a gendered sense of identity, a way of focussing on the fragmented self not just as a reaction against the constraints of a realist narrative, but as an opportunity to explore multiplicity and artistic agency. . . . Repetition and revision allow Moore to analyse female agency from a multitude of perspectives, with a humorous yet serious eye on feminism, postfeminism, and the negotiations between them.” (578)

Although Macpherson does not employ the term “neo-Victorian” explicitly, she implies its relevance by highlighting Moore’s penchant for “postmodern experimentation,” “multiplicity,” and “repetition and revision.” Placing Moore’s innovative narrative strategies within this wider umbrella not only facilitates a reconciliation of the unusual combination of formal experimentation and deep characterization that Macpherson suggests “sits uneasily between postmodernism and other forms of contemporary fiction” (566). It also furthers the “conceptual clarification” of the term “neo-Victorian” itself called for by scholars such as Heilmann and Llewellyn, Louisa Hadley, and Helen

Davies (*Neo-Victorianism* 10). Hadley reminds us that the genre's "temporal and generic boundaries remain fluid and relatively open to experimentation" (*Neo-Victorian Fiction* 3); Davies stresses the "plurality of textual voices – literary and critical – that are at work within this rapidly expanding field of writing" (2). Several neo-Victorian critics have argued that the genre need not be limited by historical setting, and critical accounts of neo-Victorianism, by Sarah Gamble and Cheryl Wilson, for example, include fiction not set in the Victorian era. However, even the work of Gamble and Wilson still examines historical fiction, and few critics seem to have considered how a twenty-first-century narrative such as Moore's might contribute to our understanding of neo-Victorianism by expanding or at least complicating our sense of its "boundaries."

Adapting Brontë's Gothic Motifs

In Moore's strain of neo-Victorianism, spatial metaphors and elements of romance from *Jane Eyre* are incorporated in *A Gate at the Stairs* in order to dramatize the gothic dimensions of domestic life. One of these is the Thornwood-Brink house itself, which at first seems nothing akin to the antiquated castles, crypts, or convents of classic gothic fiction, in which hidden secrets of the past haunt characters physically or psychologically.⁴ Nonetheless, this sprawling suburban home is occupied by at least one ghost of an earlier time. Gabriel, Sarah and Edward's dead four-year-old son, plagues the couple as an unspeakable memory from a guilty past, and haunts the home as the unspoken impetus for their adoption of a new child. On her first day of babysitting for the family, Tassie learns that this newly adopted, "angelic" girl is napping in her room on the third floor, the former attic (134). When Tassie hears "a whimper, then a full cry," she heads for the nursery (132). To get there, she has to navigate a "maddening" series of staircases and locked stairwell gates that separate her from the now "full-scale wailing" of the child in the attic (132). In a "low-level panic," Tassie finally arrives at the nursery "spread out beneath the eaves," its "room-darkening shades" broken only by the "lurid orange" of a child's nightlight, to see the baby standing in her crib "clinging

to its rail” as if to the bars of a prison (132-33). The child held captive in her cot in this hidden chamber, crying out in pain, is reminiscent of Bertha Mason, another female figure incarcerated in a secret domestic compartment. The scene’s allusive configuration provides a visual clue to the buried domestic history of the Thornwood-Brinks. Like her namesake from *Jane Eyre*, Mary-Emma Bertha Thornwood-Brink is connected to the secrets of the past both in the fictional world of this family, and in the history of fiction. Eventually, when the unsettled conflicts and crimes can no longer be concealed, they will resurface to wreck the domestic peace of this family and of Tassie herself.

In her oblique visual reference to *Jane Eyre*, Moore adopts what Susan Wolstenholme characterizes as Brontë’s own self-conscious use of Gothic “scenes specifically framed *as* scenes” (Wolstenholme 6). Tassie’s encounter in the attic recalls Jane’s experience on the third story of Thornfield Hall, with its “dark and low” rooms, its “hush [and] gloom” and its “aspect of a home of the past: a shrine of memory” (Brontë 105-6). It is in this lonely outlet, which Jane compares to a “corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle,” that Jane, unbeknownst to her, is first arrested by the “tragic” and “preternatural” sound of Bertha Mason’s laughter (107). Brontë’s allusion to Bluebeard, the fairy-tale villain who hid the bodies of his previous wives in a locked chamber, hints at Rochester’s imprisonment of his wife on the top floor, and signals persistent fears about the violent consequences of female transgression. Moore’s allusion to Brontë thus replays Brontë’s own allusion to Bluebeard, foreshadowing the revelation of a guilty past which will emerge later in the novel. The mixture of fairy-tale and gothic imagery works here as it did in *Jane Eyre*, articulating the female protagonist’s perspective, and establishing intimacy with and empathy from the reader.⁵

However, the echoes of *Jane Eyre* not only foreshadow the outcome of the plot, but also indicate the ways in which Moore redirects Brontë’s gothic motifs and their symbolic resonance. If, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued, Thornfield Hall supplies a metaphor for “the house of Jane’s life, its floors and walls the architecture of her experience,” then the spatial imagery of the attic here may refer to a similar social enclosure in which the heroine finds herself trapped, again and again

(Gilbert and Gubar 348). Brontë highlights the domestic confinement of women enacted by patriarchy, and uses Gothic metaphors to dramatize the social reality of Jane's position as an orphan, her restriction within narrow roles and spaces, and her desire to escape. Moore invokes Thornfield Hall to carry forward Brontë's concerns about constraints on women's autonomy, but also to offer what Heidi Macpherson has termed "a metafictional critique of prevailing narratives" (572), in other words the "narrative paths [...] of women's potential life choices" (573). In *A Gate at the Stairs*, Moore underlines the continuities *and* the ruptures in the "architecture" of female experience. As Tassie herself appreciates: "Blasts from the past were like the rooms one entered and re-entered in dreams: they would not stay nailed down. When you returned to them, they had changed—they suddenly had more space or a tilt or a door that had not been there before" (316). One such change is that Tassie's textual double no longer takes the form of the livid, libidinous, lunatic wife, but the vulnerability of a toddler. Though by the end of the novel Tassie will bravely choose a "narrative path" different from her Victorian predecessor, the child figured here will remain, perhaps not so unlike *her* textual namesake, the passive victim of a "tug-of-war" between forces out of her control (Moore 258).

Accordingly, the mood of the attic scene in *A Gate at the Stairs* differs from its counterpart in *Jane Eyre*, as Moore replaces the "clamorous peal" of the madwoman with the plaintive cries of a child (Brontë 107). Where the "low, syllabic tone" and "odd murmur" of Bertha Mason's laughter fills *Jane Eyre* with terror, the crying of the "warm and soft" Mary-Emma inspires Tassie only with pity: "I felt sorry for Mary-Emma and all she was going through, every day waking up to something new" (Brontë 107; Moore 133-34). The newly adopted Mary-Emma, whose first words to Tassie, moments later, are "'Uh-oh!'", is a toddler already familiar with "both the sound and the language of things going wrong" (133-34). Like Tassie herself, the "fantastically engaged: scholarly, unjudging" Mary-Emma is an adept reader of human interaction and the language of emotions, even if she cannot yet fully express her own feelings (134). The tearful child with her "face [that] seemed to smile and sob at the same time" is neither creepy nor fearsome, but pathetic (135). Tassie will soon bond with the

“needy and sweet” Mary-Emma, feeling for her and hoping that “her new life story, beginning here, would perhaps be a triumphant one” (149).

Tassie’s response to Mary-Emma moves quickly from compassion to self-identification, which is perhaps no surprise given that Moore establishes the baby as a reincarnation not only of Bertha but also, in this scene, of Jane herself. Though Tassie recognizes how lucky she herself has been in comparison to the bewildered child before her, she also acknowledges the similarities in their situations:

She would grow up with love, but no sense that the people who loved her knew what they were doing—the opposite of my childhood—and so she would become suspicious of people, suspicious of love and the worth of it. Which in the end, well, would be a lot like me. So perhaps it didn’t matter what happened to you as a girl: you ended up the same. (134)

Tassie fears that Mary-Emma will grow to be skeptical of what she terms “love of the most useless kind,” the kind that is felt but not exhibited (317). The scene suggests not the terror of the supernatural that Jane experiences, but a specter still present to women in the twenty-first century: the haunting nature of girlhood suffering.

The construction of this attic scene suggests that Moore agrees with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who interpret Jane and Bertha as different facets of the same personality. As a baby girl in a lurid-orange nursery, Mary-Emma recalls the hidden suite in Thornfield Hall where Bertha is imprisoned, as well as the red-room of Jane’s childhood trauma. In this formative experience, the terrified young Jane attempts to soothe herself by “wip[ing] [her] tears and hush[ing] [her] sobs” before growing so “oppressed” with fear that she cries out for help (17). She gets only a brief but sympathetic “hold of Bessie’s hand” (17), before her unfeeling aunt forces her back into the red-room, where her distress and loneliness catalyze a loss of consciousness. Like the young Jane, Mary-Emma is also an orphan crying out for pity and comfort, and rendered dependent because of her family situation, poverty, and age. Tassie identifies her as an innocent victim of inadequate

parenting and wider social injustice. Moore's overlapping *Jane Eyre* allusions collapse the difference between Jane and Bertha, the prototypical angel and monster, affirming the affinity between them. Each faces a form of imprisonment in patriarchy. Mary-Emma embodies aspects of both, and yet she remains, in Tassie's eyes, "lovely and uncorrupted—no matter what terrible tale she had actually been plucked from" (149). Like Bessie with Jane, Tassie shows kindness to Mary-Emma and as the story proceeds, Tassie's compassion for and identification with the baby facilitate her own growth into maturity.

However, Tassie's growth into adulthood both draws on and differs from Jane's. In Brontë's novel, Bertha Mason supplies the obstacle to Jane's union with Rochester, and her death frees the couple to marry, allowing for a happy ending to the novel. Jane is united with her lover, and is rewarded with the sense of belonging and security she has craved. As Wolstenholme explains, it is at the expense of Bertha that Jane is ultimately permitted to occupy the subject position, and Jane (much like Tassie here) "achieves her speaking voice at the sacrifice of another woman" (Wolstenholme 65). Where Bertha's death makes way for Jane's alliance with Rochester, though, the reclaiming of Mary-Emma by the adoption agency in *A Gate at the Stairs* does not bring relief or freedom to the protagonist, but despair: "I missed her. . . . One spring day tumbled after another, identical and dull, and the semester seemed to be closing up shop, indifferent to me. . . . I was reduced. I was barely there" (260). The loss of Mary-Emma figured here involves a metaphorical attenuation of Tassie herself. She seems to have lost not only the young girl in her care, but a part of herself as well.

This experience of suffering and loss causes Tassie to achieve an awareness of her own faults which is necessary for her development into adult selfhood. Late in the narrative, Tassie notices that everyone "called Mary-Emma by a slightly different name, like she was no one at all" (256). The baby is even sometimes denoted by her initials: "M.E." (126). Mary-Emma is therefore linked to Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre, but also to Tassie, and perhaps even to the reader ('me'). Like Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this child has so many appellations that her identity seems nominal, obscured, and contingent. Her lack of a fixed identity is juxtaposed with Tassie's

development of one. As in *Jane Eyre*, the erasure of the protagonist's "secret self" enables her own self-discovery and growth. Here, however, the loss of Mary-Emma brings sorrow rather than liberty. Tassie's deep sense of loss and sadness, and the failure of the family home to protect its most vulnerable inhabitants, has been linked to a portrayal of "the national home as divided, inauthentic, and lacking in innocence," a symbolic representation of the ways in which "'othered' children are treated in their homeland" (Varvogli 183, 182).

At the same time, it can also be linked to Moore's neo-Victorian critique of *Jane Eyre* and the reductive—and destructive—readings of it that persist in the twenty-first century. Moore's protagonist will come eventually to the devastating realization that despite her love for the baby in her care, and their shared experience of childhood pain, they do *not* "en[d] up the same." Sarah and Edward's ultimate decision to forgo what David Brauner terms their high-minded "experiment" of adopting a "biracial" child (alternately described as "black" and "half-black and "more like a quarter") underscores not only the sensitive and contentious discourses about race in contemporary America, but also the child's status as an objectified site of debates on identity politics (597). Ultimately, Brauner suggests, the child is contrasted starkly with Tassie, even though she "regards herself as occupying the same liminal territory," and with Reynaldo, Tassie's supposedly Brazilian boyfriend who is "able to exploit the ambiguity of his appearance" (597). Though Brauner focuses particularly on issues of ethnicity, it seems that not only Mary-Emma's race, but also her poverty, youth, orphanhood, and gender, conspire to prevent her from being able to carve out an identity for herself or to determine her own "narrative path." As in much Gothic fiction where child characters signify the personal and cultural past, here Mary-Emma brings together both Tassie's own upbringing, and a textual past that links her to *Jane Eyre*.⁶ As a sympathetic revisioning of Bertha Mason, Mary-Emma's fate points to the enduring reality that certain (black, female, marginalized) subjects still do not get to choose a "narrative path" at all.

Rewriting Rochester

Moore also rewrites the “narrative path” of Edward Rochester, whose exultant marriage to Jane is replaced in *A Gate the Stairs* with Tassie’s indignant rejection of Edward Thornwood. Moore thus recasts Edward Rochester, the deceitful yet passionate hero-villain of *Jane Eyre*, divesting Brontë’s Byronic hero of his softer side, and foregrounding, instead, his cruelty and abuse of patriarchal power. Selfish and sadistic, Edward’s “penchant for torture” is confirmed to Tassie when he scorches a moth in the microwave for fun (182). Edward, with his “habit to almost imperceptibly dominate,” lurks around the Thornwood-Brink house like a scheming Gothic tyrant (91). He appears alternately as a predatory “figure in the doorway” leering over Tassie in her underwear, or a sneaky adulterer, whose “brown shoes, and pant cuffs, hiding in the shadows” of the pantry remind Tassie of the “witch’s feet under the short door” of “Dorothy’s house . . . in Oz” (145, 230). Moore uses gothic flourishes and allusions to fairy tale to position Edward as the villainous architect of the unfolding domestic tragedy.

Like Rochester, Edward has a guilty past which returns to uproot the lives of both Mary-Emma and Tassie. As Tassie eventually learns, Edward and Sarah have adopted Mary-Emma as a replacement for their own son, Gabriel, who was hit by a car years earlier, after Edward forced him to get out of the vehicle on the side of a highway as a punishment for a temper tantrum. Though Edward pulled the car over and commanded the four-year-old out, Sarah was complicit, as she did nothing to stop him. When the unearthing of their criminal negligence jeopardizes the adoption process with Mary-Emma, Sarah and Edward decide, simply, to surrender the baby to the agency without a fight. They attempt to justify their behavior by pronouncing that the child “deserves better than us . . . she should be with black parents” (245-46). The consequences of their selfish passivity and empty rhetoric take effect almost immediately: Mary-Emma is reclaimed by the adoption agency, and Tassie looks on horrified. Though she is “furious” at their carelessness and self-interest, she remains “quiet,” questioning herself and feeling “neutralized and mitigated” (245, 248).

Sarah and Edward's repeated parental negligence becomes one of the catalysts for Tassie's own self-discovery. As Tassie indicts Sarah mentally for her pride, self-centeredness, and inactivity, she is pained by her own inability to express herself, and longs for language that could be used to change Sarah's mind, or to galvanize her into action. Tassie wonders, "Where were effective urgent words when the world most required them?" (248) Heart-broken, paralyzed with anger, and yet still unable to find the words with which to intervene, her "heart pounded against [her] chest like a prisoner against bars" (246). The simile harks back to the attic scene with Mary-Emma in her crib, and back again to Bertha in her domestic cage, emphasizing that Tassie feels both *for* and *like* Mary-Emma. Her concern and love for Mary-Emma fuel her outrage at Sarah and Edward, but her impotence aligns her with the child. She feels they are both victims.

The loss of Mary-Emma enables Tassie to see herself not only as an "angelic" victim, but also as an adult perpetrator of the behavior she deplores in Sarah (134). Initially the "reduced" Tassie can only pine for Mary-Emma (260). Like Jane's flight from Thornfield after learning of Rochester's secret first marriage, Tassie's disappointment and sorrow take her back to her parents' farm for the summer where she gets news that her brother has died in the war in Afghanistan. Her feelings of "guilt and inaction" are redoubled when she realizes that she never responded to an email her brother had sent, in which he had begged her to dissuade him from enlisting in the army (262). She had unwittingly heeded Edward's advice: "Don't worry about brothers. . . . Worry about yourself" (180). Nevertheless, she is not guilty of Edward's sadism or self-regard, but the solipsistic negligence of Sarah. Tassie's culpability finally dawns on her: "I had tried to be Amber, recalcitrant, oppositional, but had also, like Sarah, ended up as passive, translucent, and demolished . . . just watching the baby go" (259).

As her struggle to gain a sense of self dovetails with ongoing frustrations at her "meekness," Tassie's journey toward narrative ownership becomes, like Jane's, a means of taking control and responsibility. Determined "not to lose heart," Tassie returns to Troy the following year, resumes her studies, and secures a new part-time job at Starbucks (284). Tassie becomes allied with "the side

of dissent” and notices herself growing “hard, bittersweet, strong” (315, 312). One day she receives a call out of the blue from Edward, who informs her that he and Sarah have separated, and then explains his reason for calling: “Listen, I got your number from the people at Starbucks who called here asking for a referral. I’ll have you know I sang your praises. To the skies. And so I thought I’d give you a call. Since I found myself thinking about you” (319). In a telling reference to his Victorian namesake, Edward Thornton “blindly” continues: “Well, I was wondering if you’d like to go out to dinner with me sometime” (320). Overcome with “disbelief,” Tassie can only echo “Dinner?” (320). In the book’s final beat, Tassie forgoes her default response of “Okay . . . sounds good” and instead puts down the phone without a word. Her moment of empowerment has arrived at last: “Reader, I did not even have coffee with him” (321). Tassie’s rejection of Edward symbolizes a change from the “meekness” she has identified, and criticized, in both Sarah and herself. Her decision to hang up on him announces a growth towards selfhood and independence, and a development of individual agency. Heidi Macpherson suggests that this frame-breaking moment of addressing the audience signals the protagonist’s freedom to opt for “a different narrative closure” (572) and Moore’s deft use of metafiction as a means of feminist critique.

Yet Moore’s inversion of the famous *Jane Eyre* line, “Reader, I married him,” does not simply reiterate Jane’s similar moment of empowerment (Brontë 448), for it is also a parody. Where Jane’s ultimate redemption is through romantic love, consecrated in lawful marriage to Rochester, Tassie’s comes through a rejection of the suitor. In refusing to have dinner with Edward, Tassie defends her moral integrity and sexual autonomy, and yet this moment may not be as optimistic as it initially appears. As Margaret Stetz has argued, the power of comedy in women’s writing often remains fleeting and individual, and here, Moore’s comic inversion may be “humour for survival, humour as a haven—not humor for subversion or change” (*British Women’s Comic Fiction* 476). As in much feminist comedy, Moore uses humor to create a shared social enjoyment. For the reader, the repudiation of Edward is satisfying, and its inversion of Brontë—Moore’s neo-Victorian in-joke—makes it funny. Tassie refuses to be courted by Edward, or to be seduced by the alluring fiction of

the Byronic hero, unmasking him instead for what he is: “an asshole” (Moore 31). Though hanging up on him makes her rebuff clear, their conversation ends wordlessly: “Edward remained silent, as did I” (322). Tassie’s punch line is delivered off-stage, in a wink at the reader, who is positioned to appreciate the dramatic irony. Her resistance to patriarchy is limited to the realm of personal victory. Jokes like this one allow self-assertion and a release of aggression, but do not, ultimately, shift power. As Tassie herself notes,

the comic triumph of the poor was the useful demi-lie. Jokes were needed. *And then the baby fell down the stairs*. This could be funny! . . . To ease the suffering of the listener, things had better be funny. Though they weren’t always. And this is how, sometimes, stories failed us: Not that funny. Or worse, not funny in the least. (251)

Moore’s witty final scene may “ease the suffering of the listener” through her protagonist’s momentary “comic triumph” and symbolic progress toward maturity and agency, but as Heidi Macpherson has argued, it “provokes uneasy laughter, but no firm or lasting answers” (566). Moore’s intertextual humor and momentary chastening of the patriarch can neither rescue Mary-Emma nor prevent Edward from continuing in his selfish and unscrupulous behavior. Cora Kaplan has explored how Jean Rhys reworks the ending of *Jane Eyre* in order to “dispers[e] the long shadow that the imperial imagination cast on colonisers and colonized” (154). Moore may be highlighting the ways in which overinvestment with Jane (or here Tassie) makes readers complicit in the imperialist agenda that willingly sacrifices Bertha, or sorrowfully relinquishes Mary-Emma. Moore both replays the empowerment of *Jane Eyre* with her allusion to Brontë’s famous line, and at the same time, interrogates it, resisting the perceived conventions of the Victorian novel. Marriage or romantic union would signal closure and conflict resolution, but humor remains open-ended, for, as Tassie observes, “the end of comedy was the beginning of all else” (Moore 321).

This open-endedness needs to be seen as more than a simple withholding of the closure of a ‘traditional’ Victorian novel. Despite the persistent misconception that Victorian endings are about

neatness and certainty rather than complexity (“Ethics and Aesthetics” 32; “Feminine Endings” 185), critics have documented that not only were unhappy endings becoming fashionable by the mid-Victorian period (Sadrin 170), but Charlotte Brontë herself parodies the conventional “wind-up” with her “concluding yet inconclusive ‘Farewell’ from Lucy Snowe” in *Villette* (“Ethics and Aesthetics” 31). Moore, then, may not be resisting Brontëan conventions in order to critique their inadequacy, but in fact raising questions about how we approach and make use of Victorian fiction in the twenty-first century.

Indeed, the true ending of *Jane Eyre* is often elided in modern film and television adaptations, encouraging the false impression that the novel culminates with the blissful union of Rochester and Jane. The last chapter of *Jane Eyre* in fact closes with three paragraphs about the “unmarried” St. John, whose missionary zeal has taken him to India where he “anticipate[s] his sure reward” in death and salvation (452). The domestic “concord” (451) of Rochester and Jane, who is “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” (450), sits oddly alongside the affirmation of St. John’s “ambitious” Christian (and colonial) mode of self-sacrifice, and the tone of his final “pledge” —“Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!” (452)—remains ambiguous. Though modern scholars such as Michael Tackeff see these paragraphs resolving the plot neatly through a series of religious images and allusions that affirm both St. John and Jane as Christ-like figures (“A Biblical Sendoff”), many Victorian critics did not. Elizabeth Eastlake’s caustic treatment of *Jane Eyre* in the *Quarterly Review* of 1848 pronounced the novel “anti-Christian” on account of its “proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man” and its “pervading tone of ungodly discontent” (173-74). Eastlake’s comments remind us that Brontë is bold in the resolution she imagines for her so-called “unregenerate and undisciplined” (Eastlake 173) heroine, who finds an earth-bound love that rivals St. John’s heavenly one.

Thus Moore’s comedic rewriting of Brontë’s ending does not completely undermine *or* endorse it but transforms it to raise important questions about the efficacy of narrative ownership as a form of empowerment. Critics such as Carol Bock have underlined the importance of authorship for resistance and self-determination, especially for female characters. Framed explicitly as an

autobiography, *Jane Eyre* “presents this process of self-actualization through reading and storytelling as political in nature: nearly all of Jane’s attempts to interpret her experience and tell her story involve a struggle for power” (Bock 102). That Jane wins the struggle for authorial control is often linked to her agency and maturity at the end of the novel. Even if her rejection of Edward is couched in silence, Tassie also develops a voice by the end of *A Gate at the Stairs*, albeit a textual one. As Llewellyn reminds us, aesthetic decisions about the structure of a narrative are bound up with the ethical concerns about its meaning: “all histories are stories. . . .and the best neo-Victorian fiction seeks to recognize and acknowledge that in the process of the storytelling itself” (“Ethics and Aesthetics” 30). The restorative potential of storytelling is, of course, tempered at the novel’s close by Tassie’s inability to save Mary-Emma. In their discussion of young adult literature, Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair suggest that empowered girls are characterized by independent thinking and self-reliance, usually followed by autonomous action that “solve[s] a problem thrust upon them by the adult world” (26-7). Tassie can save herself but she cannot “solve” the problem of the novel; she cannot recover Mary-Emma, or her brother, or Gabriel. Still, Moore’s sophisticated interweaving of “metafictional feminism” (Macpherson 566), humor, and Victoriana may hold out some promise of hope for the future. Tassie draws on her experience, and in her own final line, “That much I learned in college” (322), showcases the importance of imparting this learning through her story. Moore thus stresses the potential but also the limits of textual empowerment, and of the kinds of agency offered—and celebrated—by both *Jane Eyre* and *A Gate at the Stairs*.

Conclusion

A Gate at the Stairs therefore reflects many of the trademark features of neo-Victorian fiction. It involves the “two-step process of adoption and transformation” identified by Hadley (*Neo-Victorian Fiction* 163) that requires the “active engagement” (143) of the reader and raises awareness of “the purposes the Victorians are made to serve” and particularly the “political and cultural uses of the

Victorians in the present” (14). Moore encourages us to rethink *Jane Eyre*, and specifically to appreciate it as a text that both resists and enables forms of oppression. To this end, Moore redeploys Brontë’s gothic tropes to highlight Mary-Emma’s affinity with both Bertha and Jane, and to establish Tassie’s identification with the child. She also uncovers the lie of the Byronic hero, highlighting Edward as a selfish, callous villain. Moore constructs a heroine as likeable and individual as Jane, with similar strengths, struggles, and achievements, and yet one who, like the reader (should they identify too much with the protagonist), becomes complicit in the injustices of the novel’s narrative outcomes. These injustices take place in a domestic household which, as several critics have suggested, may stand in for a national home that continually fails to protect its marginalized, minority, or ‘othered’ members.

Moore’s reimagining of *Jane Eyre* remains subtle enough to leave the realism of Tassie’s twenty-first century narrative intact, and to ensure that her heroine appears authentic, individual, and compelling. Indeed, Moore places her readers, time and time again, in the position of the protagonist who often registers that “the surrealism in this house was like a poltergeist” (239). Like Tassie for most of the narrative, however, some readers may hear echoes of *Jane Eyre* only to dismiss them. If they do, the text still works, and the accessibility of Moore’s novel to readers unaware of its allusive significance should be seen as an achievement. Ultimately, Moore, like many Neo-Victorian writers, seems comfortable with the fact that intertextuality offers powerful multiple resonances but also profound uncertainties. Tassie herself arrives at a similar realization:

I had also learned that in literature—perhaps as in life—one had to speak not of what the author intended but of what a story intended for itself. The creator was inconvenient—God was dead. But the creation itself had a personality and hopes and its own desires and plans and little winks and dance steps and collaged intent. (264)

Like a baby, then, a literary text matures beyond the embryo in which it is conceived, taking on its own character, humor, and expressive movement. Its interaction with the world is shaped, but not

circumscribed, by the intentions of its creator. Perhaps this ambiguity, the “collaged intent” of creation, comprises both the rigor and the richness of the neo-Victorian novel. Considering *A Gate at the Stairs* as a neo-Victorian text remains significant in recognizing and assimilating its complex literary, political, and cultural critiques, but also in demonstrating the capacity of this genre itself. It confirms that neo-Victorianism, despite its concern with nineteenth century culture and narrative, need not be limited to historical fiction set in this period. As Nadine Muller has argued, Neo-Victorian fiction not only revisits issues such as race, gender, or imperialism, but “engages with these themes because they present problems that are as fundamental to Western societies today as they were in the nineteenth century” (130). Moore’s decision to rewrite *Jane Eyre* in the twenty-first century therefore reminds us that neo-Victorian texts do not just recover the lost or suppressed voices of the nineteenth century, but teach us to recognize the ways in which Victorian precursors may still be (detrimentally) dictating the scripts of contemporary life.

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Notes

¹ See Mark Llewellyn’s “What is Neo-Victorian Studies?” (2008) for a discussion of this neo-Victorian “critical f(r)iction” (170-71).

² For a comprehensive analysis of Moore’s narrative voice(s), see Alison Kelly’s *Understanding Lorrie Moore* (2009).

³ For a discussion of similar strategies as they appear in neo-Victorian texts like *The Quincunx*, see Carroll, p. 186.

⁴ Jerrold E. Hogle gives a concise overview of such gothic tropes in his “Introduction: the Gothic in Western Culture” (2002). See also Varvogli for a discussion of the Thornwood-Brink house as a symbolic gesture toward the gothic elements of modern suburban spaces with their tensions between captivity and freedom.

⁵ See Kapurch, p. 94, for a discussion of this same effect in other *Jane Eyre* adaptations.

⁶ See Jarlath Killeen’s *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1825-1914* (2009) for further exploration of the significance of the child in gothic texts.

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