

Brontitis

Maria Dahvana Headley

I'm romantic, all right, though I've spent my whole life vociferously denying any romantic tendencies. My mother is a romance novelist aspiring to great literature: everything she writes has winds whistling through moors and consumptive heroines bursting from bodices. She heard me say this once, and sighed for Branwell and his possibly incestuous relationship with Charlotte. In the course of my childhood, we had three hamsters named Mr. Rochester (one female), whether for their brooding manners or their tendency to eat their young, I don't know.

There's nothing that can ruin a girl's tender nature more thoroughly than a mother who wore lace-up corsets all through the shoulder padded 1980's, and who once subsisted for several months on thin gruel and saltines as a show of solidarity with beleaguered literary heroines.

No way in hell I was going to turn out to be a withered poetess, my maidenhead intact at the age of thirty-five, tumbling into a grave packed full of gray woolen underwear. At thirteen, I Lolita-ed my first Humbert. At fourteen, I'd drilled my way through three construction workers. By fifteen, five college professors had professed their love, and by sixteen I

was sick of men altogether and onto women. By seventeen, I'd dyed my hair purple, gotten a few tattoos, and was dating the first of two Chloe's.

From nineteen to twenty-three I was the sort of celibate girl wet dreams are made of -- in short, a terminal tease. It's amazing how easily people can be had, men and women alike. I was shell shocked by the simplicity of sex appeal. My life had become a reverse Bronte. Where buttoned dresses and whalebone ignited the throttled desires of Jane Eyre and her ilk, my drooping camisoles, incessant cleavage-enhancing devices, and painted-on jeans all served to make my libido terminally bored. I was a euthanized sex kitten, a lukewarm tamale, a woman who preferred going to the dentist to going to her lover's bed.

Then, of course, as you've been expecting, Romance came along, shuffling his feet, bearing roses and wine, humming to himself. I saw him coming and my gorge got an erection.

"I want to court you," said Romance in a voice I wanted to wrap around myself. "I don't want to do anything until we're married. We'll be chaste."

"Do you really think that's going to work?" I asked.

"Yep," Romance said, flashing the devil's smile. "It always works."

Let me tell you how Romance looks to a woman so jaded that jade's no longer a color of green. Romance is six feet four. Romance could throw me over his shoulder like a Continental Soldier. Romance is wearing ripped jeans and a T-shirt, and Romance is the sort of man who could be embossed on stationary, the sort who could be used to sell many products, even embarrassing ones, because he's that male. Romance has dark hair and blue eyes and big hands and never wears shoes.

Romance, against my better judgment, makes me drip. I hate Romance. And I love him. I want to jump his bones. Of course I do. I'm deprived. Depraved. Depilated. There's nothing like a fresh bikini wax to send you off onto a mortification-of-the-flesh tangent. My latent Brontitis kicked into gear. Use me, abuse me, and stow me in the attic! Pace the moors in whipping storms and show me your dark and morbid soul! Screw me in a snowstorm, Romance; lick me in a landslide!

Of course, Romance would not. Romance would take me to dinner and the movies, Romance would lean across the table and whisper in my ear, Romance would focus his blue gaze on me for hours at a time. I was a fly rolling in amber, suddenly discovering that the fragile feet are stuck and a couple of legs are missing. Fucking Romance. Fuck Romance. I wanted to fuck Romance. Unromantically, of course. No fade-out fantasy here, I wanted the real deal, ripping of bodices, sweat and claw marks, on

my knees on the floor. I wanted him to Wide Sargasso Sea me, not Jane Eyre-ate me.

Romance called me thirteen times a day and referred to me as "Hey Beautiful..."

I pressed Romance against the wall in my apartment one day when he arrived bearing perfume, lingerie and armfuls of frothing flowers. I told him I could no longer be patient.

"Too bad," said Romance, and grinned the grin.

I was reminded of all the cartoons in which one's bad self and one's good self war on opposite shoulders. The right side has the cherub, the left has the demon with the little red horns and the tail lashing, smirking. I found my demon blathering its mouth off all day, so loudly I couldn't think, telling me stories about how Romance might kneel in front of me to propose and how I could slowly unzip my jeans at that point, and how he would be looking adoringly up at me, enumerating his love, and how I would scoot forward and bury his mouth in my cunt.

The demons. Damn them. I couldn't think about true love when the demons were thinking of true lust instead. And then there were the angels. Most people's angels tell them the right thing to do. Most people's angels would tell them to get married, as Romance wants, most

people's angels would tell them that getting fucked whilst bent over the back of the couch prior to marriage is an unethical thing to want to do, and that I shouldn't even think about it. My angels couldn't speak. They'd start to open their mouths and melted butter would run out. They'd sit on their hands and end up fingering themselves.

The demons made me do things like yank up my skirt in places like the library, trying to get Romance to notice.

Romance looked at me, smiled, and said, "That's beautiful, I wish I could sketch you." He didn't touch me. He didn't move. Romance's entire goal was to drive me insane.

He did things like develop a thin layer of sweat on his upper lip, making me want to suck him until I reached the rind.

"Fine," I said incoherently, "I don't need you to knead me, I can make my loaves turn to fishes all by myself." I made sure he was watching and then slid a couple fingers into my pussy. "Ooh," I said, spying on him from the corner of my eye.

"Yeah, right," he said, knowing very well I was faking. My capacity for giving myself pleasure was gone. I only wanted him.

Finally, I cracked.

Romance had arrived at my apartment and was reclining on my couch. Romance, that asshole, was wearing a long black coat. Romance was not naked beneath the coat. Romance would not let me wear him. Romance was reading Proust. Romance had become my madeleine. He was the cookie I would never be allowed to swallow. I eyed him from the kitchen while burning dinner. I heaved. I quivered. I trembled. I fell to my knees.

"Marry me," I bellowed gracelessly, jamming onto his finger the ring that cost me the money I was saving to get the tattoos proclaiming me, in ninety-seven languages, forever single. It was like the end of *Taming of the Shrew*. My hand wanted to go beneath his foot. I unknit my threatening, unkind brow. I prostrated myself at his feet. I wanted to wed, to wantonly wive, to whore, to wend, weave and wallow.

He smiled. He said, "But, do you love me?"

No. No, I didn't fucking love him. He's Romance. You don't love Romance. You love spaghetti. You love Branwell Bronte, if Branwell Bronte is the name of a cereal, not a man. Look at what happens in *Jane Eyre*, for example. The mad wife in the attic. The fire. The weather, for fuck's sake. No one wants that weather. No one wants the wind wailing over the moors. No one wants the boning in the corset that causes your internal organs to go squish and start looking like half-priced meat. No one wants

the bedbugs and the terrible little dogs and having to be not seen and not heard ad infinitum. No one wants to be a goddamned maiden schoolteacher. No woman wants the drafts and the gruel and the dark brooding hero who can't do shit for himself.

I correct. Every woman wants the dark brooding hero who can't do shit for himself. Just as I wanted Romance. "Marry me," I whimpered. Triumphant music played. The sun came out. The wind started humming something possibly from West Side Story. And we got joined in holy macaroni.

Now he lies on the couch all day reading Colette and languishing. If consumption were still fashionable, he'd be coughing up specks of blood into a silk handkerchief. Romance failed to mention that he's never owned a checkbook, never had a job, never even owned goldfish.

I sit in my steel chair and write smutty novels to pay the bills. It's actually much better money than you'd imagine, and I sign my name Jane.

At night Romance makes love to me by candlelight. I drip the hot wax onto his chest and he slides the candle into my cunt, and all in all, it's a fairly good deal.

Still, of course, he won't actually fuck me. He is waiting for me to really love him, waiting for unity of our souls, waiting for me to be

reduced to an amoeba of desire. Waiting for me to take some vows of some sort, though I'm not sure what.

I'm thinking if I become a nun, he might love me. I've gone through seventeen bodices, ripping them and shredding them, and as I become more and more enslaved, as his packages arrive from Amazon.com filled with first edition leather-bound French novels, and his deliveries of orchids and champagne bubble over, he says, smiling the wicked smile of a man with pussy wrapped around his fingers, "It always works. "

What can I say? I'm romantic.

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[Maria Dahvana Headley](#) is a Seattle-based playwright and fiction writer. A few years ago, her play, Drive Me, introduced a quaking Boise, Idaho audience to a dildo dubbed the Massive Mambo, as well as to the censor-worthy line, "cold hands, warm cunt." In an effort to justify her expensive NYU education through utilization of literary references in conjunction with steam, smut and smirking, she is currently working on a book about innocence (a little) and experience (a lot). THE YEAR OF YES, the book mentioned here, will be published by Hyperion Books in January 2006.