

THE MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC
THE THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO NINETEENTH
AND TWENTIETH CENTURY WOMEN NOVELISTS

A THESIS SUBMITTED BY
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CONCLUSION

The applicability of Gilbert and Gubar's theory to the writings of Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and Virginia Woolf was examined in terms of how far these works lent themselves to a binary opposition approach (angel/monster, images of confinement/images of escape). Attempts were made to find out whether or not 'the Madwoman in the Attic' figure was conjured up within the works under discussion. If so, the question how far the author expressed her anger and her rage through the mad/figure was raised. Finally, the fact whether or not the theory offers an incisive reading of the works under discussion was looked into.

As far as Jane Austen is concerned, binary oppositions do exist in her works. Indeed, the angelic figures exist side by side with the more lively and outspoken characters. However, the position each character occupies within the text differs from one novel to another according to the changes that took place in society. In Pride and Prejudice, the 'Angel in the House' as embodied in Jane Bennet is relegated to a minor role while in Persuasion she becomes the heroine of the novel. As for what Gilbert and Gubar came to term as the 'mad matriarchs', they are not an embodiment of the 'Madwoman in the Attic' figure, and if the mad figure is the cornerstone of Gilbert and Gubar's theory then it is not applicable to Jane Austen. First, they are not marginalised by society or considered as outsiders, but are fully accepted by it. Secondly, far from expressing Jane Austen's

anger with patriarchy, through the 'mad matriarchs', they are means through which Austen exposes how society can give power to worthless characters who abuse their authority and endanger the well being of others.

'The Madwoman in the Attic' theory does not also account for the development in Jane Austen's novels. We are left with the impression that she wrote her novels synchronically unaffected by the social changes and repeating her characters again and again which is far from the truth.

As for Emily Brontë, she creates binary oppositions to deconstruct them. As a mystic, Emily Brontë, rather than subsuming entities into separate categories tries to create out of them one whole, the unity effected between Heathcliff and Catherine at the end being the ultimate act of unification. If Emily Brontë does not think in binary oppositions this means that the sane/mad dichotomy does not feature in her works. Indeed, nearly all the characters oscillate between madness and sanity, madness being the lower limit of human existence and not a separate entity. Thus, a figure as sane as Lockwood suffers from fits of madness while Heathcliff whose bereavement had driven him nearly mad can reason as well as anybody in everyday life. Thus, there is no madwoman per se, madness pervading the whole novel not as an unnatural phenomenon, but as a normal part of human existence.

Wuthering Heights also refuses to be confined within the restrictive theory established by Gilbert and Gubar. As one of

the first modern texts, Wuthering Heights lends itself to many interpretations. By subsuming the text under the myth category and trying to come up with the definite meaning for each episode in the novel, Gilbert and Gubar end up by distorting the novel and offering a very reductionist reading of it.

As far as Charlotte Brontë is concerned, the theory because based on one of her novels fits her works perfectly and can account for different aspects of them. Though this is denied by Gilbert and Gubar, Charlotte Brontë does think in binary oppositions. The figure of the 'Angel in the House' as represented by Helen Burns can be easily identified and so can be the figure of the monster as embodied in Mrs. Reed. In Jane Eyre or as Zoraïde Reuter in The Professor. Furthermore, the Madwoman in the Attic is conjured up by Charlotte Brontë and she does voice her creator's anger and rebellion. Several parallels are also established between the heroine and mad figure.

As far as Virginia Woolf is concerned, the theory is applicable to her work, but again most of the concepts which can be considered the cornerstones of the theory, such as the idea of the angel and monster are derived from the critical works of Woolf. However, despite the fact that the theory can account for the content of the novel, it does account for the form. Though this is one of the deficiencies of the theory with reference to all the works under discussion, this becomes more crucial with Virginia Woolf where the demarcation lines between content and form becomes non-existent and where the form becomes an integral part of the meaning.

The very fact that some works lend themselves to Gilbert and Gubar's theory and some do not is quite telling. It means that the works under discussion cannot be subsumed under one unifying tradition. Furthermore, the very fact that all the authors conjure up the figure of the angel or the monster does not necessarily mean that they are alluding to the same thing. The figure of the angel, for example, is very much affected by the social context. In Jane Austen, the angel is the accomplished and docile girl while in Virginia Woolf, it is the perfect hostess that gives parties and is a social success. Even the concept of madness differs from one period and from one person to another. In Jane Austen, madness does not while in Charlotte Brontë, the mad is a figure nearer to an animal than to a human being. As for Woolf, the mad is a person in his own right, neither deprived of speech nor of full expression, a true victim of psychiatrists and society.

Because Gilbert and Gubar do focus on the commonalities they lose sight of the differences, that makes it impossible to include the abovementioned writers into one overarching tradition. Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar fall under the impression that they can find the key by which they unlock all the texts, an illusion that has been nourished throughout the ages and that has always proved fallible.