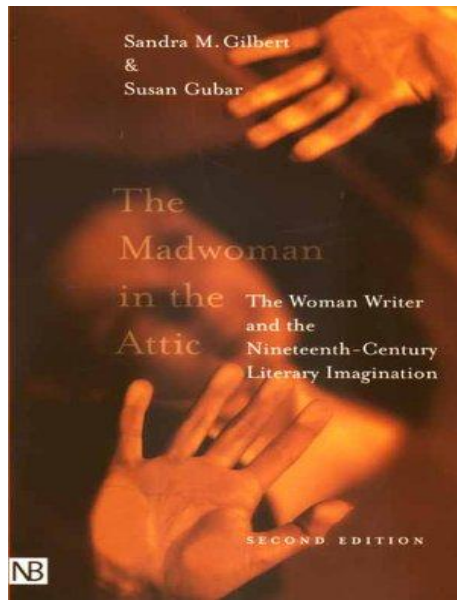


The Madwoman in the Attic

by Sarah Lynn Bertrand



written by

Sandra M. Gilbert

and



Susan Gubar.

Once you have finished reading Charlotte Brontë's, *Jane Eyre*, reading Jean Rhys's, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, an attempted prequel to the latter, is incontestable. Still, another must-read is Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, published in 1979. Gilbert (born in 1936), was a professor of English Emerita at the University of California, Davis, and Gubar (born in 1944), was a professor in English at Indiana University. When both of them decided to teach a course in literature by women at Indiana University in the fall of 1974,

“They were surprised by the coherence of theme and imagery that [they] encountered in the works of writers, [from Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë to Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath] who were often geographically, historically and psychologically distant from each other.” (Preface)

Thus, “attempting the pen,” they decided to draft different sections of the book, equally dividing the tasks, and revising one another in order to certify that there was certain logic among the chapters. Therefore, I will only be focussing on chapter 10, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress.”

The title of this work (*The Madwoman in the Attic*) is drawn from a central concept in Brontë’s, *Jane Eyre*, in which the Byronic hero’s wife is imprisoned in the attic. Chapter 10 opens by explaining what some of the Victorian critics had noticed, critics such as, Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Rigby, and Anne Mozley, and this section also examines the Victorian literature from a feminist point of view. One of the criticisms made in this chapter is that the novel is “pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition.” (337) This shocks many of the Victorian reviewers because Jane, rebellious as she is, constantly refuses to accept her faith when she escapes and steps out of place.

We are often taken through key passages such as Jane’s experience in the red-room which becomes more and more significant as the novel progresses. Jane becomes “imprisoned literally as well as figuratively,” because the red-room represents her own vision of society in which she is trapped. (340) This room is also the representation of the “patriarchal death chamber,” because this is where Jane’s uncle, Mr. Reed, died. (340) She even sees her reflection in the mirror, “where her own image floats towards her, alien and disturbing.” (340) We see her thus, as being doubly imprisoned, in the room as well as in the mirror. This whole scene will chase and hunt her throughout the story, until her own double, the one who is enraged and mad, escapes from another enclosed chamber. The incident in the red-room was intended on Brontë’s part, “to serve as paradigm for the larger plot of her novel is clear, not only from the position in the narrative but also from Jane’s own recollection of the experience at crucial moments...” (341)

Brontë’s use of naming and play on words, takes a larger dimension when studied. “Jane makes a life-journey which is a kind of mythical progress from one significantly named place to another.” (342) “*Gateshead* [is] a starting point where she encounters the uncomfortable givens of her career,” a family that rejects her, an older cousin who physically attacks her, a selfish aunt and two unpleasant cousins. She is thus compared to Cinderella, unequally treated by her stepmother and sisters, forced to live in house her deceased father left them with a family which is not hers, and locked away in chambers when punished. The only thing that differentiates Jane from Cinderella is that she dares to talk back to her aunt without having to rely on a handsome prince to save her. “It seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control” (343) We might interpret this passage as Jane’s “dangerous double consciousness,” that dares to speak up for her, the rage within her which is waiting to be liberated, just like Bertha, the madwoman, herself.

Cinderella is not the only fairy tale Gilbert and Gubar, make references to. Just like the *Ugly Ducking*, Jane is rejected for being, “poor, plain, and little.” (342) Even her name *Eyre*, is indicative: “Invisible as air, the heir to nothing, secretly chocking with ire.” (342) Mr. Brokleyhurst, “the hypocritical patriarch, is compared to the wolf in the *Little Red Riding Hood*, “What a face he had...What a great nose! And a mouth! And what large prominent teeth!” (344)

He is the one that takes her to Lowood where she must suffer from starvation and cold. Where else would the Big Bad Wolf take a little girl other than the woods? Just like Cinderella, Jane manages to turn to her fairy godmother at Lowood, Miss Temple who shelters Jane from pain, feeds the hungry and visits the sick. Still, Jane's most painful experience is in Thornfield.

As the name suggests, "she is to be cast out into a desolate field...she is to confront the demon of rage who has haunted her since...the red-room." Jane's arrival in the mansion of Rochester, the Byronic hero, is described as "gloomy" just like Bluebeard's castle in which he keeps the bodies of women, as opposed to only one, in the attic. Rochester keeps his wife up in the third story and this room becomes the most, "emblematic quarter of Thornfield." (348) Jane senses a presence in the house, "Jane first hears the distinct formal mirthless laugh of mad Bertha, Rochester's wife and in a sense her own secret self." (348) Bertha is compared to the "bad animal" Jane had once encountered in that red-room, who is, "still lurking behind the door, waiting for a chance to get free." (349)

Jane falls in love with Rochester because he treats her as an equal, "My bride is here because my equal is here." (354) Yet, once he disguises himself as a female gypsy, just like he tries to disguise the fact that he has a madwoman in the attic, Jane senses that he is hiding something he does not wish to reveal. Rochester is not seen as a man of power because once he puts on, "a woman's clothes, he puts on a woman's weakness." (355) Jane stands corrected because once Rochester knows she is in love with him, thus fragile, he begins to treat her as an inferior, "...once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just attach you to a chain like this." (355) Jane views one who has secrets and lies as an inferior and Rochester's ultimate secret of keeping his current wife in a locked room on the third floor will underline the inequality between them. He will even admit to having married Bertha only for her status, wealth, in other words, for everything but love and equality.

The day of the wedding, while looking in the mirror, Jane sees "a robed and veiled figure," unlike her but almost like a stranger. We can draw a parallel between this scene and the one in the red-room when Jane felt doubly trapped. Maybe this is a sign that she will be trapped if she decides to go on with the wedding. At this very moment, what Bertha dares to do, is what Jane wants but cannot do. Jane secretly wants to destroy the garment of her wedding dress, so Bertha destroys the veil *for* her. Feeling anxious, Jane wishes to put off the wedding, and again it is Bertha's presence that does that for her. Bertha becomes Jane's, "truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead." (360) Even Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the representation of the master and his servants, will be acted out by Bertha when she decides to burn down the house. That fact that Bertha even kills herself could underline that Jane would no longer need her for the simple reason that all her desires have been fulfilled.

Chapter 10 in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, explores *Jane Eyre*, in deep analysis. It allows you to go beyond what the story actually tells you, and invites you to read between the lines. This book is an eye opener and if you would like to learn more about it, feel free to visit the "Gradesaver Study Guide" to *Jane Eyre*, and *The Madwoman in the Attic*, at this page: <http://www.gradesaver.com/jane-eyre/study-guide/section8/> . To learn more about the history of this book, you can also consult this page by the "Yale University Press": <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=9780300084580> .

Work Cited

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.