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# An Incurable Malady? Representations of Female Madness in Nineteenth Century-Twenty-first Century Literature

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An Incurable Malady? Representations of Female Madness in Nineteenth Century-  
Twenty-first Century Literature

by

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Table of Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Hysteria and Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis of Dora
- III. *Jane Eyre* and the Madwoman, Bertha Mason
- IV. Antoinette "Bertha" Mason – A Different Perspective in *Wide Sargasso Sea*
- V. The Madwoman in the Cockpit as Depicted in *Grounded*
- VI. Analysis from Feminist Theorists
- VII. Conclusion: Notes Towards a Counter-Narrative

## **I. Introduction**

From William Shakespeare's Ophelia to Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, representations of female insanity can be identified across an infinite amount of literary texts. Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* (1949) that male writers have used their pens to create a divided world where females exist as lesser beings, in opposition to men. Furthermore, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyze in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), women writers have had the tendency to portray their female characters as insane as a way of representing agency and resistance to retaliation. These authors create characters who fight the restrictions forced on them by a patriarchal society. Gilbert and Gubar also address the theory of the pen being a metaphorical penis, which means that women have felt a sense of debilitating imprisonment when producing their own written work. As such, women have always been classified and understood to be the "other" in literary texts.

The representation of the madwoman in literature has consistently sent the message that females are fragile, dangerous, and need to be contained. In Victorian literature, the exemplary images of women emphasized the importance of being virtuous. This means that these women should possess qualities of delicacy, purity, and domesticity. Any female who exemplified the opposite of this model woman resulted in psychological and physical problems, causing them to be shunned and deemed as outcasts.

How has madness been traditionally defined in European and American literature? Textbook and dictionary definitions describe madness as the state of being

mentally ill, or a state of frenzied, and chaotic activity. In *Women and Madness* (1972, 2005), Phyllis Chesler asserts that madness of any type is a complete divergence from traditional roles. She writes, "What we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role, or the total or partial rejection of one's sex role stereotype" (Chesler 93). Taking her definition into consideration, it is not an overgeneralization to assume that the one substantial social class that shapes our view of madness is gender. Madness has been diagnosed and defined in connection with a specific gender as we see in the etymology of hysteria (more discussion on this subject will follow). To put it simply, we often identify cases of madness by first observing whether the person in question is male or female.

In literature, madness has been represented for centuries metaphorically and literally as a feminine ailment, and continues to be gendered into the present-day, both in literary works and in popular culture. By looking at the representations of female insanity in literature, we can discover shifting ideas about gender, social class, and the effect these factors have had on current events. This thesis will explore the historical context of madness as a gendered concept by glancing at Freud's, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), and primarily by examining illustrations of female insanity in three specific literary works: *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, published in 1847, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by Jean Rhys, published in 1966, and *Grounded*, by playwright George Brant, published in 2013.

From the mad heroines of classic Victorian literature to the depictions of female insanity in modern Western writing, women suffering from mental instability have been a notable and common recurrence at the center of plotlines. Could it be that the

representation of female madness in literature is a result of just their feminine nature? Are these women actually suffering from psychological problems or are they experiencing a case of what American literary critic and feminist, Elaine Showalter, describes as “female malady?” Showalter proposes the theory that gender is a contributing factor in determining psychiatric diagnoses and treatment. She also argues that feminine mental illness is a protest against feminine subjection and exploitation, and that women have been labeled “mad” because mental illness has been defined and codified by male psychiatrists (Storr 2). She alleges that changing social attitudes to women have affected psychiatric diagnosis and treatment.

## **II. Hysteria and Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Dora**

Literary critics and psychoanalysts have considered the place and impact of gender in the diagnoses of insanity and madness. As Elaine Showalter explains in her book, *Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*, “Hysteria needs a doctor or theorist, an authority figure who can give it a compelling name and narrative...the nineteenth century was hysteria’s golden age because it was then that the moral presence of the doctor became normative as never before in regulating intimate lives” (Showalter 11). Historically, psychological studies have been primarily male-dominated, and one of the most notable is the work of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. As mentioned in his works, *On the Sexual Theories of Children* (1908) and *Observations and Analyses Drawn from Analytical Practice* (1913), Freud coined the term, “penisid,” or “penis envy.” He proposes that young girls wish to possess the organ itself, as they would “rather be a boy” (Freud 205), which would in turn provide the social advantages having

a penis would give. Freud also argues that women are mutilated men who need to learn how to live with the “deformity” of not having a penis.

Prior to Freud’s publication of *On the Sexual Theories of Children and Observations and Analyses Drawn from Analytical Practice*, he published *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905 [1901]), a case study about an eighteen-year-old girl named Dora (a pseudonym given to her by Freud to protect her identity). She suffers from a variety of “hysterical” symptoms including dyspnea (when one experiences difficulty with breathing), aphonia (when one loses their voice and ability to speak), as well as nervousness, coughing, and migraines. After going to Freud himself for a paralytic attack, Dora’s father takes her to Freud for psychotherapeutic treatment. Freud is convinced that Dora's circumstance is an “ordinary” case of female hysteria, as Dora suffers from the most common occurring physical symptoms. She also showcases mental symptoms such as a detachment from society, lack of social ability, and depression. Although Freud considers the case to be common, he declares that the examination of this normal instance of hysteria in Dora will be valuable in expanding a distinct understanding of the disorder.

Hysteria as a condition attributed to women has a history that dates as far back as 1900 BC. The word hysteria is derived from the Greek word, "hysteron," which means "womb." Initially, the use of the word was thought to be from the Greek notion that hysteria was caused by disturbances of the uterus. Showalter details the term’s negative connotations:

Being hysterical means being overemotional, irresponsible and feminine,...'hysterical' is what you contemptuously call your opponent when you're keeping your cool and he's losing his. It's a term that particularly enrages

some feminists because for centuries it has been used to ridicule and trivialize women's medical and political complaints (Showalter 8).

From the disorder's first formation, its indicators have involved numerous psychological and physical ailments, including amnesia, paralysis and anxiousness, loss of speech, sleepwalking, hallucinations, and convulsions. Traditional dictionary definitions of hysteria describe it as emotional excess and behavior exhibiting uncontrollable emotions, such as fear or panic. These definitions also state that hysteria is a mental disorder characterized by emotional excitability and sometimes by amnesia or a physical deficit, such as paralysis, or a sensory deficit, without an organic cause. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "hysterical" as having Latin and Greek origins, with hysteria being thought to be specific to women only. The exact cause of hysteria was not clearly defined, but it was thought to be the psychological manifestation of a disease of the womb. The idea of the "wandering womb" had its beginnings in the teachings of Hippocrates. Ancient Greek medicine theorized that many female pathologies had their roots in a displaced womb. The idea that women are more predisposed to irrational and hysterical behavior was supported by Hippocrates and later Plato, and eventually persisted into the Victorian era (Woods 2). It is clear that Freud's theories regarding hysteria were directly influenced by these beliefs.

In *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud's study of his subject led him to believe that hysterical symptoms originate either from psychological trauma and/or sexual complications. During his therapy sessions with Dora, she alleged that she received unwelcomed sexual advances from a family friend, which Freud dismissed. He suggested that she imagined the occurrence altogether. These "fictional" events, according to Freud, were disturbing enough for Dora to develop a case of hysteria. This

study introduced the foundation of his psychosexual stages of development theory, a theory that suggests personality development occurred in stages, and if any of these stages were not appropriately completed, it would result in unfortunate psychological conditions, such as hysteria, which would manifest and become problematic for the individual later on in life.

During the psychotherapy sessions, Dora tells Freud about her family and past in order to get to the root of the symptoms she is experiencing. Her family consists of her mother and father, and one older brother. Dora explains that as a young girl, she was particularly affectionate towards her father who was responsible for her education, and she grew closer to him when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Her father befriended a married couple named Herr and Frau K. Dora developed a close friendship with Herr K., and he often escorted her on walks and gave her presents. When Herr K. made a sexual advance to Dora during one of their walks, their relationship became strained. Eventually, Dora told her father about the incident, but Herr K. denied that it ever happened, and her father agreed that she imagined it. Freud believes that this specific experience was a direct cause of Dora's hysteria. In a separate session, Dora reveals a second encounter with Herr K., where he arranged for Dora to meet him alone in his office and then kissed her by surprise. Dora expresses to Freud that she became disgusted by what he had done, but Freud finds it unusual that Dora was repulsed by an experience that, in his opinion, should have caused her to be sexually excited. He uses this situation to confirm Dora's hysteria.

Freud's study of Dora has been criticized by feminists since its publication. Scholars and feminists have argued whether psycho-analytic theories should be

rejected as a result of their masculine assumptions. In *Women and Madness*, which was revised and republished in 1972 and 2005, Phyllis Chesler attests that all people are taught to view women as somehow naturally mentally ill, saying that “women were hysterics, malingers, child-like, manipulative, either cold or smothering as mothers, and driven to excess by their hormones” (Chesler 2). She also says that the initial publication of her book was criticized by those in positions of power within the psychiatrist and therapist positions: “While this book was embraced by other feminists and by many women in general, my analysis of how diagnostic labels were used to stigmatize women and of why more women than men were involved in ‘careers’ as psychiatric patients, was either ignored, treated merely as a sensation, or sharply criticized” (Chesler 9). Although her books were written much later than Freud’s case study of Dora, the undertone speaks volumes in harsh critique of a predominantly male profession in psychiatry. Like many other feminist commentators, she strongly disagrees with Freud, saying that he was completely inaccurate in his theory of women having penis envy:

Freud was wrong about women’s masochism and penis envy...We now understand that Freud-as-genius did not transcend the patriarchy of his time. Did anyone? I do not want to underestimate the importance of Freud’s discoveries or his popularization of concepts such as the unconsciousness, denial, repression, projection, dream analysis, etc. However, Freud’s theories may, in fact, have become as popular as they did – and when they did – for a wide variety of reasons. What was done in Freud’s name – whether Freud intended it this way or not – sometimes supported the most backward of institutional psychiatrists. While some analytic patients, both male and female, learned treasured things about themselves, more often Freudian-inspired psychoanalytic therapy in America was used to curtail potential feminist political fervor in each woman, one by one...Therapists are often the soft police of the dominant culture (Chesler 24).

This means that Freud’s theories and analysis of women and hysteria are viewed as the potential source of the patriarchal attitude against women which must be fought. Some

may read Dora as the heroine of the case study – a woman who disrupts the traditions of the patriarchal family while simultaneously viewing her as an unfortunate victim of masculine power. Freud appears to be a passive confidante and scientist, but he is not, and is criticized for his assumptions and diagnosis of women via his case study of Dora.

### **III. *Jane Eyre* and the Madwoman, Bertha Mason**

One century prior to Freud's case study of Dora, Charlotte Brontë penned and published, *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel that easily and very obviously demonstrates – both in physical and emotional descriptions – a vivid portrait of the Victorian madwoman. Bertha Mason is depicted as the violently insane wife of Edward Rochester, who is locked away on the third floor of Thornfield Hall. Before we find out her identity, we learn that she is an unstable and even threatening presence: “What creature was it that masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?” (Brontë 225). Bertha is the source of mocking laughter that Jane hears while living at Thornfield Hall. She is also accountable for setting fire to Rochester's bed, attacking her own brother, Richard, and for ripping Jane's veil the night before her wedding. When Bertha is finally introduced, the rhetoric used to describe her has degrading and dehumanizing undertones that suggest she is more beast than human: “In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face” (Brontë 316). Bertha is regarded in a disrespectful and animal-like manner, leaving

those who are near her frightened and cautious. When Rochester admits to Jane that he is married and is forced to reveal who she is, he speaks of Bertha in even more demeaning terms, blaming her family and parents, and even victimizes himself:

I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago, — Bertha Mason by name; sister of this resolute personage, who is now, with his quivering limbs and white cheeks, showing you what a stout heart men may bear. Cheer up, Dick! — never fear me! — I'd almost as soon strike a woman as you. Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard! — as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. I had a charming partner — pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man. I went through rich scenes! Oh! my experience has been heavenly, if you only knew it! But I owe you no further explanation. Briggs, Wood, Mason, I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs. Poole's patient, and *my wife*! You shall see what sort of a being I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human. This girl," he continued, looking at me, "knew no more than you, Wood, of the disgusting secret: she thought all was fair and legal and never dreamt she was going to be entrapped into a feigned union with a defrauded wretch, already bound to a bad, mad, and embruted partner! (Brontë 314).

Rochester chooses offensive language to name-call his wife using words like “mad,” “maniac,” and “idiot,” to describe her, suggesting that he was tricked into marrying her. He describes her as being terrifying hence her brother’s “white cheeks” and declares that he (Rochester) is not the one to be feared, but she is. He says that she inherited her family’s madness and insults her intelligence. It should not go unnoticed that Rochester mocks Bertha’s race and cultural background in a very passive way. So not only is he stating that his wife is a “maniac” who “copied her parents dutifully,” but he also makes it a point to detail the fact that she was a Creole. (This relationship between race and insanity being gendered is a topic I will cover in the next section). Although he says he does not owe further explanations, he continues to speak degradingly and

excessively. We might interpret this as a demonstration of Rochester's feelings of guilt for entrapping her in his attic and getting caught by Jane before their wedding.

Ironically, Bertha Mason serves as Jane's direct foil. Where Bertha is known as the "lunatic" and "big woman in stature," Jane is the fragile and angelic girl who Rochester desires the most. Bertha is the designated "other" of the story, who is labeled as a creature, "goblin," and even a vampire who "sucked the blood" and threatens to drain Mr. Mason's heart (Brontë 227). On the other hand, Jane epitomizes the ideal Victorian woman. There is even a moment in the story when Rochester compares the two against one another, painting an obvious and distinguishable portrait of the differences in both women:

That is *my wife*, said he. Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know — such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And *this* is what I wished to have (laying his hand on my shoulder): this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon, I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. Wood and Briggs, look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder (Brontë 317).

Rochester seemingly places both women in their own respective and confined metaphorical boxes – Bertha is the insane "other" or beast, and Jane is voiceless and delicate. He makes fun of Bertha's eyes, referring to her as a demon, and reiterating that Jane is her opposite. According to him, both women can and never would overlap or share similarities with the other.

And yet it should be noted that Jane herself shares several resemblances to Bertha. In the beginning of the novel, Jane is treated much like Bertha is. She is categorized as troubled, "not worthy of notice," and labeled as a "wild cat" who should not be associated with (Brontë 23). She is banished to the Red Room – where her

uncle, John Reed, “breathed his last” and where he “lay in state” (Brontë 9) – as punishment for her anger and lack of conformity. Jane even speaks of her own feelings of imprisonment and her longing for freedom, saying:

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; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. 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 115).

She speaks of what women are expected to do and how they are “supposed” to behave – an expectation that is always clear cut but thought without rationale. She also points out the flaws in this belief system, saying that women should be allowed to pursue the same dreams that men do without being laughed at. In a way, this particular moment in the novel sets the tone of a story that highlights the feelings of women writers entrapped by a patriarchal society. The passage very explicitly explains that Victorian women suffer from being metaphorically imprisoned by the men of that time. This also seems to constitute Brontë’s critique of stifling Victorian conceptions of proper gender roles. It suggests that Brontë’s writing of this novel served as a coping mechanism for the reality she was facing as a female writer – something that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar cover in their analysis, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which I will also examine later in this thesis.

#### **IV. Antoinette “Bertha” Mason – A Different Perspective in *Wide Sargasso Sea***

The novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by Jean Rhys was published in 1966, one century after *Jane Eyre*. Rhys centers the perspective of Bertha Mason by giving her a previously unheard voice. She provides a background story for Bertha, or as she

renamed her, Antoinette, that explains, and in many ways, justifies her madness. Where Brontë uses Rochester to explain Bertha's insanity by saying that she simply inherited it from her parents. Rhys uses *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a creative response to *Jane Eyre*, revealing that Bertha/Antoinette is a victim of her circumstances.

Part one of the novel is narrated by Antoinette which gives insight to her background. Antoinette's story begins when she is a young girl in early nineteenth-century Jamaica. She is the white Creole daughter of ex-slave owners and lives on a plantation called Coulibri Estate. Her father dies of drunkenness when she is very young, and her mother, Annette, marries an English man, Mr. Mason, who visits their town. Annette's madness, which according to Antoinette, has revealed itself slowly throughout her childhood, fully surfaces after their house is set on fire, leaving Antoinette's brother dead. Her mother is placed in the care of a black couple, and when Antoinette visits her, she aggressively pushes her away: "Then 'no no no' very loudly and flung me from her. I fell against the partition and hurt myself. The man and the woman were holding her arms" (Rhys 29). This is very similar to the scene in *Jane Eyre* when Bertha attacks both her brother and Rochester. Rhys' gives a different interpretation and a backstory for Bertha/Antoinette to ultimately disprove Rochester's claims. Antoinette even has to deal with the bullying of her classmates who call her "crazy like her mother" (Rhys 29) just as Rochester does in *Jane Eyre*.

When Antoinette is older, she marries Rochester, though his name is never mentioned in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Even while remaining nameless, he narrates the second part of the novel where, from his perspective, we see the deterioration of

Antoinette's sanity. He receives letters from an illegitimate child of Antoinette's father that warn him of her madness:

I take up my pen after long thought and meditation but in the end the truth is better than a lie...you have been shamefully deceived by the Mason family...That girl she look you straight in the eye and talk sweet talk...and it's lies she tell you. Lies...There is madness in that family...The madness gets worse and she has to be shut away for she try to kill her husband (Rhys 57-58).

This completely alters the way in which he views Antoinette, and once receiving these letters, he begins to detect signs of her insanity. Eventually, he sleeps with a servant girl who lives in their home while Antoinette is in the next room. Rhys uses these moments to fully show the reasons that contribute to Antoinette's alleged madness. Because she shows this side of her to him, he decides to take her to England where she will be entrapped in Thornfield Hall: "Yes, but she'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other...She said she loved this place. This is the last she'll see of it. I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but mine, mine" (Rhys 99). Her husband proves that he only views Antoinette as his possession to do as he pleases, rather than as his loving wife. Instead of attempting to understand and listen to her side of her history, he chooses to believe what her half-brother, another man, has spoken of her. He refers to her disrespectfully as not just a "lunatic," but *his* lunatic, something of his belonging. His feelings drastically change for her seemingly overnight because he is now convinced that she is insane.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë represents Rochester as an innocent victim ensnared by a madwoman. However, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys creates a background story for the madwoman he holds captive where she comes across as the true victim, and even more so, a victim of her marital circumstances. Rhys also exposes the culpability of

Antoinette as a function of narrative conventions (Hite 38). In this novel, Antoinette is the central character who acquires motives which not only justify and solidify actions that already exist in the earlier book, but also exonerate her in the process (Hite 39). As such, Antoinette's madness is a result and consequence of being cast out, not that she was insane to begin with. Furthermore, Antoinette is evidently victimized by the institution of marriage. Because she is married to Rochester, he uses his patriarchal position and title as her husband to hold his wife prisoner in his attic. He also uses his "authority" in this manner to rename her: "'Don't laugh like that, Bertha.' 'My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?' 'Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.'" (Rhys 81). And, because he thinks of her and refers to her as "Bertha," she then becomes Bertha, without her own consent.

It is not possible to speak further on female insanity in *Wide Sargasso Sea* without mentioning the racial and cultural context of the story that Rhys quite clearly presents. In Victorian literature, the concepts of madness in women are common, and Rhys uses this idea to set her novel within that Victorian ideology context through a postcolonial lens. In *Jane Eyre*, we learn of the Creole madwoman who is married to Rochester. *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives a rich history of Bertha/Antoinette and we learn that the story takes place in Jamaica. The setting of the novel is also placed a few years after the passage of the Emancipation Act of 1833 which freed black slaves and led to the demise of white slave owners. Throughout her childhood, Antoinette consistently battles with both her white and Creole sides: She says: "I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, 'Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.'" I walked

fast, but she walked faster. ‘White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away’ (Rhys 13). She describes the hostility she encounters as a young child because she is both black and white. She is confused about herself and upbringing from an early age, and in response to the little girl teasing her, she says: “It was a song about a white cockroach. That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all” (Rhys 13-14). This thought expressed by Antoinette shows that she has conflicting thoughts regarding her identity. In this way, Rhys explores the mechanisms of colonial oppression extant in Brontë’s text, as well as the mechanisms of patriarchy (Adjarian 1).

Brontë’s Rochester deems Bertha/Antoinette insane as a result of her Creole blood. Rhys’ interpretation leaves room for readers to speculate and eventually conclude that she was driven to madness because of other forces and influences in her life beyond her control. It should be noted that Antoinette’s madness is truly shown during Rochester’s narration in the second part of the novel. In this way, he shows and asserts his position of power, not only as a white male in Caribbean territory, but also as her husband. This also clearly symbolizes the ways in which the colonizer viewed the oppressed, while mirroring the way Victorian men viewed women. He even demonstrates his uncertainty before he was going to marry Antoinette: “...but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry...I played the part I was expected to play...” (Rhys 45). This means that he viewed the act of marrying Antoinette as a job that needed to be completed, or an act of business, like colonization. Similarly, he

“colonizes” Antoinette, especially when he renames her “Bertha.” Although she asks him not to and exclaims that is not her name, it is his way of taking control over her body and overall identity. All of these factors contribute to the deterioration of Antoinette’s sanity, as Rhys represents it.

#### **V. The Madwoman in the Cockpit as Depicted in *Grounded***

The 2013 play, *Grounded*, by male playwright, George Brant, is arguably a more modern take on the “madwoman in the attic” trope. The plot centers on a woman who is an ace fighter pilot from the Air Force and is completely enveloped within and in love with her job. She never wants to take her uniform off and clearly shows that she mostly identifies herself as a pilot, obviously not seeing herself as either male or female; this was something she earned and worked hard for (Brant). She is completely compelled by the blue skies and loves the danger that goes along with being a pilot, viewing it as her escape:

Lucky I got shit to distract me  
I got tracer fire  
I got RPGs  
And I’ve got the blue  
It’s good to be back in the blue  
Alone in the blue (Brant).

She even speaks of “going out with her boys” (presumably her Air Force male co-workers), to a “Pilot bar” to drink with them, and goes on to imply that men do not usually approach her:

A guy comes up to me  
A guy always comes up  
No not always  
It takes balls  
Hard to casually sidle up to a bunch of drunk Air Force on leave  
Maneuver yourself through all the boys to get to me  
That takes some offensive flying of its own (Brant).

The tone of this comes across as extremely emotionless and almost detached. Ironically, she begins an intimate relationship with Eric, a man who bravely approaches her during one of these outings, and someone who is her exact opposite on the emotional spectrum. He is affectionate and loving, both qualities she appears to lack given her abrupt and direct verbiage in the play. Eventually, the pilot becomes unexpectedly pregnant and the audience learns that she is unable to fly while carrying a child due to Air Force rules and regulations. Furthermore, even the title of the play suggests that not only is she physically “grounded” since the regulations forbid her from flying, but it also implies that the pilot is restricted in her career and identity.

When the pilot goes for one last “fly” while pregnant before telling her Commander, she explains that the baby (who she predicts is a girl) needs to know what the rush of flying feels like, immediately announcing that the child “will not be a hair-tosser, cheerleader, or needy sack of shit” (Brant). For the female audience, the fact that Brant is a man and is describing women (or a certain subset of hyperfeminine women) in this way, through the voice and eyes of his female lead, could be viewed as extremely problematic. Further on in the play once giving birth and returning to work, her Commander tasks her with the job of being a drone pilot. She asks if this is “punishment” for becoming pregnant, which speaks to the ways in which she views being a woman. Pregnancy, for her, is a sign of weakness as opposed to a positive and empowering aspect of womanhood.

For the heroine of the play, being a drone pilot is almost as terrible as being grounded. She describes it as taking a step backward from her former position. She refers to the new situation as the “Chair Force” and calls it the “Bermuda Triangle” for

fighter pilots since “no one ever comes back” (Brant). She appears to be content at home for a while but eventually staring at a grey screen all day as opposed to flying into the “blue” negatively impacts her psyche in a big way. For example, after coming home from work one night, she kisses her daughter as she is sleeping and suddenly sees her, too, as grey and not breathing:

She's grey  
She's grey she's grey she's grey  
I grab her is she not breathing is she why is she grey why  
Why  
She screams awake  
Eric turns on the light  
Color comes back  
She's pink again  
Pink is good pink is very good I'll take pink now I'll take it (Brant).

Clearly, Brant is showing his audience that his character's sanity is deteriorating, and her husband Eric takes note of it, suggesting Air Force counseling. Once she visits the counselor, she shows even further signs of madness and paranoia, stating:

You don't know guilty  
I know the guilty  
I see the guilty every day  
Don't speak to me of guilt  
Don't speak to a god of guilt

Her saneness is questioned, not only by the audience and reader, but by her husband and the psychiatrist. She no longer appears to be the composed, childless, and unmarried pilot from the play's start. She continues to wear her fighter pilot uniform even though she has no need for it. The uniform and job itself gives her a sense of self-worth, and without it, she is demonstrating signs of mourning and depression, along with the loss of her sanity.

When she is ultimately given the task to kill a man, she notices his daughter:

But then  
The girl  
Her face  
She stops running and I see it  
Her face  
I see it clearly  
I can see her (Brant).

This is a pivotal moment in the play, as the heroine's sanity again comes into question.

Instead of fulfilling her job of committing an act of murder through the drone, she chooses not to, because she believes the girl is her own daughter:

It's not his daughter it's mine...  
The team screams fire and all it would is my thumb  
my thumb has orders to annihilate but it's her it's her and I  
can't kill her I can't kill her I can't" (Brant).

Her colleagues take the shot instead. They kill the girl and her father, and her Commander reveals they had been watching her the entire time because he had noticed the "warning signs" of her sanity deteriorating.

Multiple questions come to mind when analyzing this 2013 play. Some analysts and critics believe it to be loaded with lessons on technology and warfare, but when delving even further beneath the surface, several gender-related discussions come up, as well as the trope of the insane woman in literary works throughout history. It is implied that the pilot's mourning of the loss of her original job as a fighter pilot is viewed as her becoming mad. Her behavior is surely different from the play's beginning, but what exactly classifies her as being insane? What is an acceptable reason for her change in character (i.e.: the pilot taking notice of the grey versus the blue, wearing her uniform even when not working, mistakenly believing her child was dead when she was just in a deep sleep, etc.)? Furthermore, it is worthwhile investigating who is questioning her sanity. In these cases, it is mostly her husband, Eric, and when she fails to complete

the drone-killing mission, her Commander expresses that he did not trust her judgement since she returned to work after her maternity leave of absence. Even though her husband is depicted as a sensitive and emotional person, it is he who decides that she should see a counselor to discuss her mental state, and although she is tasked with a mission to kill, it is the Commander who takes control of the situation and ultimately and literally “calls the shot.”

According to mainstream heteronormative stereotypical narratives, the pilot’s femininity and vulnerability is illustrated when she meets Eric and begins an intimate relationship with him, because she experiences emotional and loving feelings for something other than her career. She is secure in herself before meeting Eric, but after she marries and carries their child, her reality and sanity is shown as deteriorating. The female pilot finds her identity in “hanging with the boys,” but once she has exercised her womanhood by marrying and being intimate with a man and giving birth to a child, the playwright chooses to make her go “mad.”

I believe that *Grounded* most obviously demonstrates the double standard faced by women in comparison to men, especially in regard to mental health. Melanie Klein’s, essay “Love, Guilt, and Reparation,” speaks about the role of women, touching on an individual’s subconscious relationship with and capacity for love versus hatred. Klein concentrates on the feminine role in relation to the development of personality during childhood, its impact on the strength or wellbeing of adult relationships, and its ability to encourage lasting aggressive tendencies in individuals. Her fixation on the maternal role (and other females in family and friendship circles) suggests that women have the most substantial influence on the evolvment of the personality and its inclination towards

empathic behavior. Klein also outlines the sympathy human beings have with others. When we can relate to one another, we are able to put ourselves in their positions and empathize with them. She writes: “To be genuinely considerate implies that we can put ourselves in the place of other people: we ‘identify’ ourselves with them. Now, this capacity for identification with another person is a most important element in human relationships in general and is also a condition for real and strong feelings of love” (Klein 66). Evidence of this idea is undoubtedly seen in *Grounded*. The drone pilot identifies herself with the man and his daughter, therefore influencing her choice to not murder them. Instead, she sees her own child in the face of the child she is ordered to kill, which is what influences her lack of action against them. Klein goes on to say: “We are only able to disregard or to some extent sacrifice our own feelings and desires, and thus for a time to put the other person’s interests and emotions first, if we have the capacity to identify ourselves with the loved person” (Klein 66). This is further proof of the drone pilot’s empathy towards the man and child, and her choice of not killing them. It is likely that Klein would say she is acting out of consideration and identification as a parent, though this surely poses the question of why she is viewed as going insane instead of acting in a normal maternal manner.

## **VI. Analysis from Feminist Theorists**

“A life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story.” (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*)

Dora, Bertha/Antoinette, and the drone pilot are all deemed psychologically disturbed by the men who “diagnosed” them within their stories. Apart from Dora’s case

and *Grounded*, we are introduced to fictional insane women characters also written by women. The concept of the madwoman in the attic clearly originated from a Victorian-era ideology and way of thinking, and very much showed through in the literary works published during that time. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar picked up on the common pattern of mad women being present in literary works and wrote about it in their well-known 1979 analytic work, appropriately titled, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The common theme, they found, in these texts, was that male authors at the time presented the females in their books as either innocent and angelic, or uncontrollable and insane. This is something, that according to Gilbert and Gubar, immensely frustrated the female writers of that century, and thus inspired them to incorporate the same type of extremely “mad” character in the form of females in their own novels.

*The Madwoman in the Attic* is a feminist criticism of the idea that nineteenth century female writers felt confined and restricted within their own writing: “Enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominant society, these literary women were also, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs...” (Gilbert and Gubar 32). The title of the book itself is taken directly from *Jane Eyre*, with Bertha Mason’s character serving as the inspiration and symbol for their argument. As we know, Bertha is literally locked away by her husband, Rochester, in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Her ominous character is described as uncontrollable, animal-like, sensual, and mad. Gilbert and Gubar explain that the interpretation of *Jane Eyre* is “thought to depend upon the dehumanization of Bertha Mason Rochester, the Jamaican Creole whose racial and geographical marginality oils the mechanism by which the heathen, bestial Other could

be annihilated to constitute female subjectivity” (Gilbert and Gubar 54). On the surface, Bertha is the quintessential madwoman in the attic because she is literally described as mad and is imprisoned in an attic. What Gilbert and Gubar bring to light is that nineteenth century novels written by women are full of characters just like Bertha because men have created two types of women – angel and monster – with the angelic woman being the more acceptable of the two. They say:

A woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must "kill" the "angel in the house." In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been "killed" into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the "monster" in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity. For us as feminist critics, however, the Woolfian act of "killing" both angels and monsters must here begin with an understanding of the nature and origin of these images. At this point in our construction of a feminist poetics, then, we really must dissect in order to murder. And we must particularly do this in order to understand literature by women because, as we shall show, the images of "angel" and "monster" have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitively "killed" either figure. Rather, the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly: until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/ monster image that lives on what Mary Elizabeth Coleridge called "the crystal surface" (Gilbert and Gubar 10).

Gilbert and Gubar argue here that these two types of characters need to be metaphorically killed in order for changes in cultural perception and awareness to occur. I would say that these two types of women should not always exist in novels. This excerpt from their book explains that the existence of these sole two types of women – especially at the hands of men – have hindered and continue to hinder women writers, ultimately killing their creativity. In *Jane Eyre*, we see the picture of angel versus demon with Jane and Bertha, respectively. Books written primarily by male authors during the

Victorian era painted their female characters as either angelic or monstrous. In other words, the women in their novels were either entirely submissive and without a metaphoric backbone, or they were deemed as uncontrollable, insane people who are undesirable, like Bertha. Their argument extends further to the female writers of that time, and explains that the placement of these mad women in their own novels was an act of frustration and rage against the misogynistic world in which they resided in.

It is both astounding and absurd that it can take one misplaced and negative perception to completely tarnish the reputation of all women. When we look at Dora's case, we see a young woman receiving treatment and advice from Freud who diagnoses her with hysteria, even though their sessions never carried out to completion. In Jacqueline Rose's essay, "Dora: Fragment of an Analysis," she asserts that the idea of feminism and femininity first turns to psychoanalysis because it is seen as the best place to describe the coming into being of femininity (Rose 128). This means that this is usually considered the first alleged sensible step in attempting to understand femininity how it – and its happenings – have come to existence. However, Rose, like the vast majority of feminist theorists who have read the case of Dora, states that Freud's study was a complete failure from the very start. This is because Dora was repressed as a woman by psychoanalysis and what was left of Dora as somehow retrievable is the insistence of the body as feminine, and since it is a case of hysteria, in which the symptoms speaks across the body itself, the feminine is placed not only as source (origin and exclusion) but also as manifestation (the symptom) (Rose 129). Keeping this explanation and definition in mind, it is clear that the idea/concept of hysteria and insanity has always been solely a condition applied to women and the feminine body.

This solidifies Rose's thought that hysteria is assimilated to a body as site of the feminine (Rose 129).

In a sense, it becomes clear that Dora was already diagnosed prior to her first meeting with Freud all because she was a woman. Rose even argues that because his sessions with Dora ended prematurely and abruptly, Freud was led to fill in the empty gaps on his own by utilizing the fragments of sessions he did have with her and putting them together to draw definitive conclusions in his psychoanalysis. So in this case, how is it acceptable or even accurate to diagnose Dora with hysteria? Even from the title of his case study: *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, our initial introduction to Dora is tied to our acknowledgement that she was previously suffering from hysteria and now just needed that to be clarified per her sessions with Freud. The study was not something that was built against her in order to conclude that she was psychologically disturbed – Freud's diagnosis had already applied hysteria to her. Therefore, a conclusion was drawn about Dora, prior to even hearing about her experiences.

The most obvious problem with Freud and Dora is that he is a male psychoanalyst who diagnoses a young woman. In her book, *Women and Madness* (1972), Phyllis Chesler cites several studies indicating that a predominantly female population has been diagnosed, psychoanalyzed, researched, and hospitalized by a predominantly male psychiatric population. We can absolutely detect this in the literary works I mentioned. There is Freud, who takes an authoritative stance by diagnosing Dora with hysteria, filling in empty pieces of her story, and not accepting her word as she explained. Instead, he draws his own conclusions and assumes that Dora's behavior was an indication of underlying sexual feelings being repressed. In *Jane Eyre*,

Rochester takes it upon himself to imprison his wife against her will. Rochester, of course, believes he is doing society a favor by keeping her locked away instead of seeing that her imprisonment and his infidelity are what caused her insanity.

While her object is sociology, (not literary representation), Chesler also points out that there is an obvious double standard of mental health, as well as morality (Chesler 24). In Brant's, *Grounded*, the drone pilot's behavior post-partum is viewed as insane and she is advised by her husband to seek therapy because she is not behaving "normally." Chesler's argument is that the norms for female behavior have always been determined and are different from the norms of male behavior (Chesler 27). This means that a woman is consistently classified as healthy, neurotic, or psychotic according to and compared to a male standard or ethic of mental health. Chesler claims that the "normal" woman is posited as an unemployed stay-at-home wife and/or mother. Anything else would mean that she is different and acting out in rebellion with a need to be tamed and contained.

Although women have been confined to this "housewife" persona, progress has been made today. Women are fighting for their rights more frequently and loudly by acts of protest in an ongoing attempt to obtain gender equality. While there has been significant improvement – a sea of change even – the biases that Chesler first wrote about in 1972 still exist (Chesler 33). In her revised version of *Women and Madness* (2005), Chesler says that even now in the twenty-first century, those who are less likely to gender-stereotype still exhibit an (often unconscious) preference for men over women. Their sexism may be sophisticated, subtle. Sometimes females are much harder on women... They may feel they have to be – as a way of distancing themselves

from a despised group (Chesler 34). She argues that women are very much aware that they are still considered “the other” and try to separate themselves from that group. The excerpt also means that even currently, women are not necessarily more objective than men; they, too, hold sexist views.

## **VII. Conclusion: Notes Towards a Counter-Narrative**

There is simply no way to deny that diagnoses of insanity continue to be applied to women even more now in the twenty-first century, not only in literature but in society as a whole. In the literature I spoke about, I covered four texts of different time periods – all of which share the commonality that women were identified by men as being psychologically unstable. I will not restate what other feminists and theorists have said about this, but I will state my opinions on the matter. First, as a woman myself, I obviously take issue with the negative ways women have been represented and misrepresented in literature. It is undeniably frustrating that men have continued to have a metaphorical upper hand so to speak – whether in writing or in all societal aspects. Although arguably, progress has been made in terms of striving for and attaining gender equality, there is still a quiet, lurking ghost of the past that I cannot ignore. We may never be able to rewrite history or the ways in which women have been categorized. Because of this fact, I am uncertain if women will ever be able to escape the persona of the madwoman. In a sense, the etymology of the word hysteria, the frustration of Victorian female writers, and Freud’s diagnosis (or rather misdiagnosis of Dora), has already tarnished the way women are viewed. We are continuously the punchline of jokes and are even made a mockery in politics. I am unsure if I can provide a solution or mere suggestion to rectify this problem. We can attempt to stop victimizing women and

seeing them as powerless. But my concern is whether or not the damage has already been done. By constantly bringing attention to the problem of women being deemed insane and inferior to men, are we doing more harm than good?

I also have conflicting thoughts about more current events that have taken and are taking place politically and even in popular culture. Freud's case study of Dora led me to connect his interpretation of what she said versus what he assumed to the "Me Too Movement" that came to surface last year. The movement began when a vast amount of accusations of rape and sexual misconduct were made against movie producer, Harvey Weinstein, by several female actors in the movie industry. It eventually turned into a crusade of women coming forward with cases of sexual harassment faced by them at the hands of men in power. This has also especially caused an uproar with the recent rape allegations made against Brett Kavanaugh, who now serves as an Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. The nation was divided on the authenticity of the accusations made against him, with many believing his accuser, while others believing Kavanaugh did no harm. This reminded me of Freud's take on Dora's encounter with Herr K. Why did he believe that Dora was repressing feelings he assumed she had? Why did he not just believe her words and take them for what they were? This is a clear subject of debate in light of current events where men are often known to interpret what women want versus what they say. Anything that strays from the norm can of course be interpreted as the sanity of the woman in question deteriorating.

We have explored Freud's case of Dora, Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, Jean Rhys' interpretation of Bertha as Antoinette Cosway, and George Brant's unnamed

drone pilot, and the ways in which their experiences have been treated and diagnosed as madness. By exploring these works, it is easy to notice that the existence of the madwoman is a concept and common trope that has antecedents in the nineteenth century and has certainly found its way to present day literature, albeit in different forms. Through all four works, we can see that insanity has continued to be a gendered concept well into the twenty-first century. The plots of these stories all include women who have been objectified and viewed as insane and weak as a result of circumstances beyond their control, and at the hands of men in their lives. Dora, deemed hysterical and powerless against Herr K. by Freud, could not even speak, and when she did express herself, she was told that her feelings were not actually what they were. Bertha/Antoinette is physically described as beast-like and monstrous up against the angelic and delicate Jane. The fighter pilot of *Grounded* is labeled mentally ill once she has a child and is unable to perform her task to kill. The pilot herself even views being a woman as a weakness, especially when she expresses her contempt for extremely feminine girls and the fact that she does not want her daughter to be one of them. This absolutely coincides with Jane's idea of the way women are "supposed to be," which she describes as "calm" and not acting out on their personal desires.

In the twenty-first century, many still question and challenge what it means to be a woman. Is it performative or a recurrence of specific limited acts that are culturally-defined? Is it simply a biological fact or difference? Insanity is consistently something we see that is applied to women by society, and more specifically by men. Society has continuously set out to put women in their "correct" places, implying the existence and reality of the female body as a rationalization for no equal pay within the workforce,

keeping women at home to tend to their children, husbands, and families, and not considering them for professional and political advancement.

Women are often considered mad when they stray from customs and norms society imposes on them and we notably witness this within literary forms. The more we study the theorists and feminists mentioned, the further it confirms that women still struggle against the power of entrenched stereotypes. Gilbert and Gubar have argued that women writers felt an “anxiety of authorship,” and were confined within their writing in order to make their female characters embody the angel or monster. How do we tear down these old ideas and trends and set forth a new way of thinking and a new way of portraying women? It may be irreversible or ineffective to attempt to separate women and madness, since both are historically intertwined. We know that there is nothing in the genetic makeup of women that prove madness to be a female condition. But it is important and even necessary to look within the societal construction of womanhood and femininity to find the answers. Women have been depicted in literature as beautiful, weak, and distracted, creating a cultural tradition that represents “woman as madness” (Showalter 4). Women should be able to define themselves and who they are as individuals, even if this means straying away from traditional roles. It may not be enough or possible to offer such a resolution to such a vast and complex problem, but it is crucial that the process begins and is ongoing in order to make a positive change.

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