

Women and Madness in Literature

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According to Elaine Showalter's *Female Malady*, madness became a 'female malady' in England towards the end of the 18th century when madness came to be culturally and symbolically related with women rather than with men. In her book she analyses the cultural and social mechanism behind the history of mad women from the 18th century through the 20th century and shows us how cruelly and unjustly mad women continued to be produced and treated by male doctors and male-oriented society.

My main interest is in the fact that mad women could be produced socially, culturally, and even politically, especially in an age when there was great sexual inequality. What I am going to do in this paper is to take up several novels which depict mad women and discuss the social and cultural factors involved in making up mad women and explore their meanings.

In the first chapter I will discuss Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798). It is a story of a wife who is thrown into a madhouse by her husband who tries to usurp her fortune. In 18th century England there existed a lot of private madhouses which husbands could easily take advantage of, sometimes in order to get rid of their wife, and sometimes to use her money freely. Even if a wife was not insane at first, imprisonment in a madhouse could easily derange her mind. Thus mad women were deliberately produced. Madhouse also becomes a metaphor for marriage as imprisonment. Mary Wollstonecraft makes Maria

protest against the inequal marriage law which enslaves women both mentally and physically.

In the second chapter, I will compare the two Berthas, one in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the other in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. When we focus on the passages which describe Bertha, Rochester's mad Creole wife in *Jane Eyre*, we find that Bertha is described not as a human being any more but as a beast, who is cunning and dangerous. A mad woman as a beast must have been a general image at Brontë's time, but more important is the fact that the logic of the novel itself requires Bertha to be a beast. In order to attract readers' sympathy to Rochester and to make Jane's affection for him feasible, Bertha had to be a beast, not a pitiful woman driven mad by imprisonment and Rochester's cruel treatment. Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a rewriting of the story of Bertha (Antoinette in this novel) based on Rhys' own reading of *Jane Eyre*. In it, Rhys explores the sexual, cultural and social struggles fought between Rochester (anonymous in this novel) and Bertha (Antoinette) and how Rochester deliberately drives her mad by his treatment. Rhys herself was a West Indian Creol, and she wrote this novel in order to show 'the other side' of *Jane Eyre*. It is the other side seen from a Creol woman's postcolonial point of view.

In the third chapter, I will discuss Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which describes an ordinary middle class wife, who is driven mad at the end of the story. The wife seems comparatively happy, for her husband at least loves her and tries to heal her mental depression. But his 'rest cure' deprives her of all intellectual activities and freedom. The husband means well, but he is not aware of his treatment being oppressive for her, nor is really the wife. Because they more or less share the social assumptions about male-female relationship in patriarchal society, the wife feels guilty not to fulfil her duty as a wife and cannot

articulate her protest logically and reasonably. She could find no other way to get free but by escaping into madness. We feel close to this couple and find it more bizarre than any other case, because this couple is nothing special but an ordinary, average couple, and their tragedy could happen to anybody.

The history of mad women is also a history of angry women. Their anger was sometimes directed towards their husband, their family, and society which took sexual inequality for granted and tried to impose men's ideas and values on women and exclude rebellious women who would break away from such imposed standards. I would like to stress that there is a political aspect to mad women in that society sometimes deliberately judges those women to be mad simply to get rid of them or to make them powerless. If patriarchal and unequal society has thus produced such women for a long time, is the situation any better for women who now seem to have gained their right and freedom to speak out and protest? Is madness no longer a female malady, or are women really free from social and cultural biases in today's society? I would like to find out the answer by continuing to pursue this theme.