

THE MADWOMAN AND THE HOUSE: SPATIAL CONFINEMENT IN *JANE EYRE* AND *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theme of women's madness in Victorian literature using a comparative study of Miss Havisham in Great Expectations and Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre. The paper posits that madness, as portrayed in these literary works, is not necessarily a mental illness but a socially constructed concept based on gender confinement, space control, and containment of narration. Based on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, both women can be understood as manifestations of women's repressed agency. Michel Foucault's theory about madness being socially constructed provides useful insight into the social exclusion mechanisms. Elaine Showalter's perspective helps understand the gender politics that have pathologised female experience. Using Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space, the paper additionally makes the case that the interiority of the home space can serve as a reflection and source of madness. Through textual analysis, the paper shows how these women resist their fate only to be labelled "mad" in Victorian society.

Keywords: Madness, Gender, Resistance, Space, Confinement.

Introduction

Madness in Victorian fiction often appears through women's lives and bodies as they fight against, disrupt, or fail to meet the standards of Victorian femininity. Bertha Mason and Miss Havisham are seen as prime examples of moral and psychological excess and instability. This paper views madness as a construct shaped by gender expectations and situated within specific discursive and spatial contexts. Gilbert and Gubar have re-evaluated the "madwoman" and argued that female madness in 19th-century literature actually represents hidden anger and suppressed resistance. Their interpretation of Bertha Mason as the repressed 'mad' counterpart of Jane Eyre illustrates how displaced female resistance (madness) is confined to both literal and metaphorical margins by patriarchal control. Susan Meyer, in her essay titled "Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of Jane Eyre", writes about Bertha Mason: "As she emerges in the novel, anxieties that have been located elsewhere, notably in the character of Jane herself, become absorbed and centralized in the figure of Bertha, thus preparing the way for her final annihilation" (Meyer, 1990, as cited in Kapadia, p 441). Although Miss Havisham does not live in an attic, she is physically, mentally, and temporally confined within the crumbling structure of Satis House. This spatial aspect of madness becomes clearer when considered alongside Michel Foucault's ideas about madness as a result of systems of exclusion and control. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault shows that madness is not a natural category, but one formed through practices that separate reason from unreason, often through confinement.

Additionally, Elaine Showalter's research on the gendered history of mental illness reveals how women's emotional and psychological experiences have historically been labeled as pathological, reinforcing the link between femininity and instability, often associating conditions like hysteria with women. To deepen this analysis, the paper refers to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, which describes domestic interiors as places of memory, repression, and psychic life. Bachelard argues that attics, rooms, and houses are not neutral spaces but intimate environments that shape and reflect personal identity. Through this perspective, the attic in *Jane Eyre* becomes a place of concealment and suppression, while Satis House appears as a space where time itself is frozen, maintaining trauma and fueling Havisham's obsessive connection to the past. These interiors do not simply contain madness, they actively shape it by structuring experiences and limiting movement, both physical and psychological. Pip reflects on his first visit to Satis House, stating: "It was then I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped like the watch and the clock a long time ago" (Dickens, 2022, 52).

Literature Review

The character of the "madwoman" in Victorian fiction has drawn ongoing attention, particularly in feminist literary studies. Key to this discussion is the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, examines female madness as a symbol of concealed anger and creativity within patriarchal literary traditions. Their portrayal of Bertha Mason as *Jane Eyre*'s double has influenced later feminist critiques of 19th-century fiction. This has led critics to see madness as a narrative device rather than just a psychological issue. Expanding on this idea, Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* places madness within a broader cultural and medical context. She shows how society has pathologised and controlled women's emotional lives. Similarly, Mary Poovey in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, explores how Victorian culture defined femininity, noting that any deviation from traditional gender roles is often labelled as disordered or excessive. Nancy Armstrong, in her work *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, (1987) further explores the connection between domesticity and power, arguing that the Victorian novel significantly shapes gender identity. Michel Foucault's work provides an important perspective on understanding madness as something shaped by society. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault outlines how madness has historically been determined by exclusion, confinement, and institutional control. Spatial analyses of literature enhance this conversation. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* considers domestic spaces as sites of memory and psychological growth, offering insight into how locations like attics and houses shape identity. Henri Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space*, (1991) emphasises that space is shaped by society and carries power dynamics. In literary studies, critics like Doreen Massey in their *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) have expanded on these ideas, demonstrating that space is fluid, relational, and connected to structures of power and identity. Not all of these sources are used in this analysis, but together, they help frame the broader critical context of this study.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive approach based on close textual analysis. The methodology integrates several theoretical frameworks to provide a nuanced reading of the texts. The feminist insights of Gilbert and Gubar inform the exploration of madness as a repressed form of female agency. Showalter's work situates these depictions within a broader historical context of gender-related pathology. Foucault's concepts of madness as a

consequence of control systems guide the investigation of confinement and exclusion. Bachelard's spatial theory supports an interpretation of domestic environments as significant for psychological and symbolic meanings. By combining these perspectives, the study aims to show how madness in Victorian fiction arises from the interplay of gender, space, and power.

Gilbert and Gubar: The Madwoman as Repressed Female Agency

The feminist framework developed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* fundamentally reconfigures the understanding of female madness in nineteenth-century literature. They argue that the "madwoman" is not merely a pathological figure but a symbolic representation of suppressed female anger, creativity, and resistance within patriarchal literary structures. In their reading, women writers and female characters are constrained by a cultural binary that positions them as either "angels" or "monsters," leaving little space for autonomous subjectivity (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Madness, therefore, becomes a site where repressed desires and frustrations surface, albeit in distorted or socially unacceptable forms.

This framework is most explicitly articulated in their analysis of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, whom they interpret as the dark double of Jane herself. Bertha embodies the rage and rebellious impulses that Jane must suppress in order to conform to Victorian ideals of femininity. Confined to the attic and denied a voice, Bertha becomes the physical manifestation of what cannot be expressed within the dominant narrative. Her violence and apparent irrationality are thus not signs of inherent madness but expressions of a silenced subjectivity displaced onto a marginal figure (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). The attic, as a space of confinement, reinforces this symbolic function, containing and obscuring the disruptive potential of female agency. Bertha Mason's encounter with Rochester is described by Jane thus: "The lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman in stature, almost equalling her husband and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest- more than once she throttled him, athletic as he was" (Bronte, 2006, 259). In comparison, Jane is described as "quiet and grave". However, Sandra Gilbert in her seminal essay "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress" is of the view that "Bertha is 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" (Gilbert, 1979, 480). The Red Room scenes show an aggressive side of Jane's personality. Sally Shuttleworth writes "Bronte explores in *Jane Eyre* two alternate institutional models for the disciplining and controlling of female energy, two forms of "asylum", Lowood and the third floor of Thornfield". (Shuttleworth, 1996, 160).

While Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* does not occupy the same structural position as Bertha, Gilbert and Gubar's framework can be extended to her character. Havisham represents a different configuration of the "madwoman," one that is less hidden yet equally confined within the domestic sphere. Abandoned at the altar, she withdraws into Satis House, where she constructs a world defined by repetition, decay, and arrested time. Her obsessive attachment to the moment of betrayal and her manipulation of Estella can be read as expressions of unresolved anger and emotional trauma that cannot be articulated within acceptable social norms. Like Bertha, Havisham's deviation from normative femininity is pathologized, and her refusal to reintegrate into society marks her as aberrant. Linda Raphael

in her essay “A Re-Vision of Miss Havisham: Her Expectations and Our Responses” writes: “Miss Havisham-bedecked in her withered bridal gown and half-arranged veil, resembling grave-clothes and a shroud, one shoe on, one off creates a vivid and lasting image for the reader” (Raphael, 1989, 402)

Madness, Confinement, and Exclusion: A Foucauldian Perspective

The concept of madness proposed by Michel Foucault is of utmost importance to the analysis of characters like Bertha Mason or Miss Havisham as representations of madness in Victorian literature. According to Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation*, madness was neither a state nor an illness but rather a category created by processes of power that define reason and oppose it to madness (Foucault, 1965). This dichotomy is sustained by exclusion, and especially by the practice of confinement of some individuals to a special institution as "mad people". In other words, madness is a consequence of being separated from society by being confined in a special place and thus deprived of the possibility to be seen and to see.

In *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham is not imprisoned but the confinement in which she traps herself in Satis House shows internalisation of systems of discipline. Here again, it seems as if the house itself becomes a means of controlling Havisham's existence, separating her from any notion of temporality and societal progress, showing her deep psychological trauma, where her psyche is frozen. As Pip notes, everything in Satis house seems “to have stopped ... a long time ago,... I glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow had been trodden ragged” (Dickens, 2022, 52). Miss Havisham's mental state results not just from her pain but from her being removed from ordinary social life. Using Foucauldian terminology, we can say that Havisham's madness stems not just from her emotional state but from her separation from society, making her a subject of deviation, unable to interact with others. This definition perfectly fits Bertha Mason. She is literally locked in the attic and therefore goes crazy. The attic functions as another important arena of Foucauldian disciplining. It is a liminal space where chaos is isolated so that order might prevail everywhere else in the household. Bertha needs to be kept hidden from the civilized society of Thornfield because, without her concealment, the social system of Thornfield could not run as smoothly as it did. This implies that madness does not go away; it is merely regulated geographically. The idea that Bertha represents the result of a system whose definition of normalcy includes exclusion means that madness is not an intrinsic feature; it is created by the very system.

Gender, Pathology, and the Female Malady: A Showalterian Perspective

In addition to these theories, the works of Elaine Showalter offer important insights into the gendered aspects of madness. According to Showalter, the perception of madness has always been inseparably linked with the image of woman, as women have constantly been viewed as emotionally intense, sexually aggressive, and disobedient subjects (Showalter, 1987). Thus, madness can be seen as a term used predominantly for women whose behavior does not conform to social conventions regarding femininity, when social transgression is translated into the sphere of mental pathology.

With this in mind, the character of Bertha Mason should be perceived from the standpoint of cultural concerns associated with unbridled female sexuality and bodily excesses. Showalter is of the view that flogging girls to overpower the disorderly flesh and rebellious spirit was routine in Victorian era. Showalter writes “Bertha Mason is the incarnation of the flesh of female sexuality in its most irredeemably bestial and terrifying form”. (Showalter, 2006, 430).

Miss Havisham, too, becomes an example of the pathology of female emotions as outlined by Showalter. Her actions can be understood only through the language of mental illness. Her decaying bridal body and her fixation on revenge reflect a transformation of emotional pain into pathological excess, aligning with Victorian medical discourses that linked women’s psychological states to instability and hysteria. In both cases, madness emerges at the intersection of gender and cultural expectation, revealing how Victorian society constructs and regulates female subjectivity by framing deviation as disorder.

The Poetics of Confinement: A Bachelardian Perspective of Space and Madness

In order to comprehend the depiction of madness thoroughly within these literary works, the importance of the concept of space needs to be analyzed, drawing upon the theories of Gaston Bachelard. As suggested by Bachelard in his work *The Poetics of Space*, domestic spaces like houses, rooms, and attics should be interpreted not only in terms of architecture but as an integral part of one’s personal psychology (Bachelard, 1964). Domestic spaces become containers for emotional memory, as they contribute to the constitution of one’s inner world. It is especially interesting to consider this idea with regard to Bertha Mason, since her imprisonment in the attic of Thornfield Hall is not merely about her being confined physically. In the context of Bachelard’s ideas on the attic, we can understand how it is a place where things are concealed and marginalized. It is a place where something repressed exists. This is why Bertha’s location in this particular space indicates how she herself is a repressed part of the story. Her insanity is created through isolation.

Similarly, Satis House in *Great Expectations* can be read as a Bachelardian interior, where space becomes a site of memory and psychological fixation. The house is characterized by darkness, decay, and temporal stagnation, preserving the moment of Miss Havisham’s betrayal in a perpetual present. Everything stopped ages ago suggesting that the space itself enforces a suspension of time. For Bachelard, such spaces intensify emotional experience by enclosing it, allowing memory and trauma to persist without interruption. Miss Havisham’s madness, therefore, is not simply a result of personal trauma but is continuously sustained by the spatial environment she inhabits. The house becomes an extension of her psyche, shaping her identity through repetition, enclosure, and immobility. Pip, on his first visit to the house, describes it thus: “Behind the furthest end of the brewery was a rank garden with an old wall”. (Dickens, 2022,55). Rank suggests decay and degeneration prevalent everywhere in this house.

In both texts, space is not a passive backdrop but an active force that produces and maintains madness. The attic and Satis House function as intimate, enclosed environments that structure experience, limit movement, and intensify psychological states. Through a Bachelardian lens, madness emerges as a spatial phenomenon, deeply embedded in the lived experience of domestic interiors. When read alongside Gilbert and Gubar’s emphasis on repression,

Foucault's analysis of exclusion, and Showalter's focus on gendered pathology, Bachelard's theory completes a multidimensional understanding of madness as a construct shaped by the interplay of space, power, and gender.

Conclusion

The concept of madness in *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* does not appear to stem from a natural state, but rather from an imposed one that takes into account factors such as gender, confinement, and discipline. It is possible to interpret Bertha Mason and Miss Havisham in light of the insights provided by the readings of Gilbert and Gubar, Foucault, Showalter, and Bachelard, resulting in their characters becoming examples of the subjugated expression of female autonomy

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