



The Madwoman's Mirror: Clinical Diagnoses and Social Constructs in Feminist Literature

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Abstract: *In women's literary tradition, madness has oscillated between a tool of patriarchal containment and a catalyst for subversive agency, evolving from 19th-century archetypes to mid-20th-century feminist interrogations. This paper analyzes the portrayal of women's madness in the works of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Jean Rhys, with Virginia Woolf as a modernist precursor, to argue that madness constitutes a rational, multifaceted response to systemic oppressions. It delineates clinical madness—psychiatric diagnoses managed through institutional and medical frameworks—from social madness, a patriarchal construct that stigmatizes women's resistance to gendered norms. Employing feminist literary criticism, the study elucidates how Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* reframe madness as emancipatory defiance, Sexton's poetry as unyielding self-interrogation, and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as anticolonial empowerment, resonating with precursors like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. These reimagining positions madness as a justified reaction to patriarchal, colonial, and societal pressures, mirroring real-life women's experiences—from historical figures like Zelda Fitzgerald, who grappled with institutionalization amid creative suppression, to contemporary women navigating work-home conflicts, economic shifts where they out-earn partners, and persistent mental health stigma. By deconstructing pathologizing discourses, this analysis advances feminist literary scholarship and reframes mental health narratives.*

Key words: *Mirror, Clinical, Psychology, Social, Madness*

Introduction

The portrayal of madness in women's literature unfolds as a haunting tapestry, weaving threads of confinement, rebellion, and revelation across centuries, where the "madwoman" emerges not as a mere specter of disorder but as a profound emblem of gendered resistance against the suffocating grip of patriarchal, colonial, and societal forces. Analytically, this figure interrogates the constructed boundaries of sanity, exposing them as insidious mechanisms of control designed to maintain power imbalances. Madness here transcends pathology; it functions as a rational, multifaceted response to systemic oppressions that erode women's autonomy and identity, compelling us to deconstruct how literary representations challenge and subvert patriarchal pathologization. Through a feminist literary lens, this paper examines how 19th-century archetypes—such as the feral rage of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), vividly described as "whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell" (Brontë 321), evoking a primal, animalistic fury that mirrors her entrapment—



evolve into modernist and mid-20th-century reimaginings by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Jean Rhys. These later portrayals reveal madness as a site of subversive agency, where psychological fragmentation descriptively mirrors and critiques the external fragmentations imposed by rigid gender norms, colonial exploitation, and domestic expectations, often rendering the madwoman's inner turmoil as a chaotic yet illuminating storm of self-assertion. Analytically distinguishing clinical madness—manifesting in tangible psychiatric symptoms like hallucinations or depressive episodes, often leading to institutional treatments—from social madness, a cultural fabrication that weaponized “insanity” to silence women's dissent, this study highlights, as Elaine Showalter posits, how “female hysteria masks depression” and behavioral regulation occurs through labeling mental illness (Showalter 147). Drawing on theorists like Phyllis Chesler, who asserts that “women are mad because they are oppressed” (Chesler 56), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who argue that “a life of feminine submission... is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story” (Gilbert and Gubar 34), I posit that such portrayals not only expose the intersections of gender and power but also resonate with real-life women's struggles. From Zelda Fitzgerald's creative stifling under patriarchal shadows to contemporary women's battles with work-home imbalances and mental health stigma, these narratives, in my opinion, reframe madness as an empowering narrative tool that urges a reevaluation of how society pathologizes women's responses to injustice, ultimately positioning the madwoman as a catalyst for broader societal introspection.

Clinical Madness: A Medicalized Cage

The dichotomy between clinical and social madness in women's literary depictions has been analyzed extensively, revealing intricate mechanisms by which women's emotional and intellectual agency has been suppressed under the guise of medical authority. As a researcher, I find this distinction particularly compelling because it underscores how clinical madness, grounded in medicalized frameworks, often biologizes women's experiences, tethering them to reproductive cycles or archaic notions such as the “wandering uterus” (Chesler 62), thereby reducing profound existential crises to mere hormonal imbalances. Chesler's *Women and Madness* (1972) stands out as a foundational text in my analysis, arguing that psychiatric diagnoses frequently mask societal inequities as individual pathologies (Chesler 56), a perspective that resonates deeply with my observations of how medical frameworks oversimplify complex emotional responses. For instance, during periods of intense professional pressure, rest has been prescribed rather than solutions addressing structural demands—a modern parallel to the 19th-century rest cure critiqued in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). In this novella, the unnamed narrator's descent into hallucinatory obsession is descriptively rendered through her fixation on the wallpaper's intricate, labyrinthine patterns, not as a biological failing but as a desperate, almost detective-like attempt to decode the layers of oppression enforced by a patriarchal medical regime: “The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!” (Gilman 10). Analytically, this scene illustrates how clinical interventions exacerbate rather than alleviate distress, transforming the bedroom into a symbolic prison where the narrator's mind unravels in vivid, creeping visions that expose the futility of prescribed passivity.

Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985) further informs this analytical framework, demonstrating how English culture from 1830 to 1980 constructed madness as inherently



feminine (Showalter 3), a notion that, in my view, perpetuates a dangerous essentialism still evident in today's gender-biased diagnostics. Victorian asylum records, as Showalter examines, reveal women's anger or nonconformity frequently labeled as "hysteria," justifying invasive treatments like electroconvulsive therapy (Showalter 158), which I see as extensions of societal violence masked as care. Such historical practices echo contemporary instances where assertive female voices are dismissed as "overemotional," prompting me to argue that these patterns highlight a persistent failure to address root causes. Showalter's contention that asylums functioned as extensions of domestic confinement provides a critical lens for interpreting both historical texts and modern biases (Showalter 55), descriptively evoking images of women locked away in sterile wards, their cries echoing through corridors that symbolize broader patriarchal enclosures.

Socially, madness has been deployed as a label to delegitimize women's "deviant" behaviors—anger, ambition, autonomy—that threaten patriarchal hierarchies, a tactic that analytically reveals the fragility of such systems. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) has been pivotal in my research, introducing the "madwoman" archetype as a symbol of repressed rage (Gilbert and Gubar 78), which I personally interpret as a liberating force rather than a mere victimhood trope. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Bertha Mason's "madness" is descriptively portrayed not as innate but as a visceral reaction to colonial and marital subjugation: "She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest" (Brontë 322), her physicality and ferocity painting a picture of untamed resistance that evokes both horror and empathy. Her attic confinement, a metaphor for the broader silencing of women's voices, has evoked rage and recognition in my readings, resonating with my experiences of being constrained by societal expectations to remain "agreeable" rather than outspoken.

Similarly, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's hallucinatory spiral is analytically presented as a rational rebellion against enforced domesticity: "I've got out at last, in spite of you and Jane!" (Gilman 15), her triumphant declaration amid peeling wallpaper and imagined figures descriptively capturing a moment of breakthrough amid chaos. Her fixation on the wallpaper's patterns, a metaphor for decoding patriarchal designs, parallels my efforts as a researcher to uncover hidden structures of oppression in institutional settings, where women's intellectual contributions are often subtly undermined. Gilbert and Gubar's framing of the madwoman as a figure of resistance has guided this analysis, illustrating how literature transforms socially constructed madness into a critique of power (Gilbert and Gubar 85), a transformation that I believe empowers readers to question their own societal constraints.

The intersectional nature of madness further enriches this analysis, particularly in Bertha Mason's Creole identity in *Jane Eyre*, which complicates her "madness" through racial and colonial Othering (Brontë 304), a layer that, in my opinion, adds a postcolonial depth often overlooked in earlier feminist critiques. Likewise, the class privilege of Gilman's narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* underscores how madness is mediated by social position, not universally experienced (Gilman 3), prompting me to reflect on how privilege can both shield and expose vulnerabilities. Gendered expectations, such as being labeled "too intense" or "overly ambitious," have been navigated within academic contexts, echoing the social madness



imposed on women defying norms, and reinforcing my belief in the need for intersectional approaches.

Chesler's call for women to dominate institutions to prevent their misuse resonates deeply with me: "It is clear that women are mad because they are feminists must gradually and ultimately dominate public and social institutions—so as to ensure that they are not used against women" (Chesler 301). In my advocacy for inclusive academic spaces, I've observed persistent institutional biases framing women's assertiveness as irrational, yet literature offers a counter-narrative. The "madwoman" in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* is portrayed not as a passive victim but as a figure of rebellion, exposing the violence of patriarchal structures in descriptive bursts of fire and frenzy. This subversive potential continues to inspire my efforts to amplify marginalized voices while reflecting on my positionalities within these systems.

Madness: Reimagined through time

Madness, far from innate pathology, functions as a patriarchal technology for disciplining female deviance; women writers from Brontë to Rhys subvert this by reframing it as legitimate rage, creative genesis, and anticolonial refusal. Gilbert and Gubar's "madwoman in the attic" thus indexes not clinical aberration but the structural violence of containment, a spectral figure pacing the eaves of Victorian propriety (78). In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason's roars erupt as a semiotic surplus exceeding Rochester's colonial ledger—her "guttural" cries, thick with the humidity of Thornfield's hidden corridors, register the unspeakable cost of imperial extraction and marital nullification, the air itself vibrating with the musk of scorched silk and suppressed Creole fury (Brontë 322). Gilman's narrator, by contrast, interiorizes the cage: the wallpaper's "suffocating" arabesques—yellowed, fungal, smelling faintly of damp plaster and medicinal ether—map the prescriptive grammar of rest-cure therapeutics onto the conjugal bedroom, its grotesque whorls coiling like the tendrils of a smothering vine, such that perceptual distortion becomes the only legible protest against epistemic erasure, the room's stale air heavy with the scent of confinement (Gilman 10).

Virginia Woolf recalibrates this dialectic through modernist form, her prose a liquid mercury spilling across the page. *Mrs. Dalloway* stages a gendered nosology amid the clamor of London's June streets: Septimus Smith's shell-shock is granted the dignity of public tragedy—his body twitching like a marionette cut loose on the pavement, the acrid tang of cordite still clinging to his memories—while Clarissa's dissociative larks—"What a lark! What a plunge!"—are disciplined into social ornament, her mind darting like a kingfisher over the Thames, iridescent yet perpetually snared in the net of drawing-room etiquette (Woolf 3, 86). The novel's free indirect discourse performs a diagnostic sleight-of-hand, rendering female interiority simultaneously hyper-visible and illegible under patriarchal surveillance, the city's din—clanging trams, floral perfume, the distant toll of Big Ben—muffling the quieter cacophony within. Woolf's essay *On Being Ill* radicalizes this insight: illness suspends the "army of the upright," the sickbed a dim-lit chamber where fevered skin prickles beneath starched sheets, exposing normative health as a coercive fiction that polices women's access to creative negation, the air thick with the camphor of invalidism (12). Stream-of-consciousness thus emerges as a tactical derangement, a formal analogue to the "mad" refusal of linear domestic time, sentences unfurling like cigarette smoke in a Bloomsbury drawing room.



This formal rupture licenses Plath's confessional escalation, her language a scalpel dipped in frost. *The Bell Jar* converts clinical depression into a negative ontology: Esther's "eye of a tornado" stillness is less symptom than epistemological vantage, the hospital's fluorescent hum and the metallic tang of electroshock tables revealing the void at the heart of 1950s femininity's achievement script, the air sterile yet suffocating under the bell jar's curved glass (Plath 3, 178). In *Ariel*, Plath weaponizes this compression: "Lady Lazarus" stages suicide as autocritique, the speaker's resurrection—"Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair"—a pyrrhic surplus, her locks blazing like arterial fire against the poem's ashen backdrop, consuming the male spectator it ostensibly serves, the scent of scorched flesh mingling with the ozone of rebirth (17). "Daddy" extends the indictment, collapsing personal and political patriarchy into a single vampiric corpus: the poem's ottava rima enacts a ritual exorcism amid the black boot-polish stench of fascist memory, its truncated final line—"I'm through"—a guillotine for filial and fascist legacies alike, the blade falling with the finality of a coffin lid (49).

Anne Sexton inherits this performative extremity yet reroutes it through mythic archetype, her verses steeped in the brine of institutional antiseptic. "Her Kind" reclaims the witch as a proto-feminist ontology: nocturnal flight is not delusion but a cartography of exile, the speaker soaring over moonlit suburbs, the wind whipping through her hair like a broomstick's bristles, her "I have been her kind" a collective enunciation that converts the asylum's linoleum corridors—waxed to a sickly sheen, echoing with distant cries—into a negative community (Sexton 15). "The Double Image" complicates this sorority by interrogating maternal transmission under patriarchal optics: the mirror sequence literalizes the Lacanian capture of female subjectivity, the glass fogged with breath and the faint perfume of talcum, yet Sexton's refusal of resolution—ending mid-gaze—insists on psychosis as an ethical refusal of reconciliation, the room's shadows pooling like spilled ink (35). Madness here is neither cure nor curse but a dialectical image, suspending the subject between the clinical capture of fluorescent-lit wards and the poetic autonomy of candlelit confession.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* detonates the archive itself, its prose thick with the rot of tropical decay. Antoinette Cosway's "madness" is revealed as a creolized epistemology: her hallucinatory question—"who I am and where is my country"—articulates the aporia of the colonial subjectile, neither English rose wilting in the hothouse nor Caribbean obeah woman swaying beneath coconut fronds heavy with rain, the air saturated with frangipani and the salt sting of the sargasso (Rhys 103). The novel's tripartite structure performs a counter-diagnostic: Part I's lush sensory excess—parrot screams, the sticky sweetness of rum, hibiscus petals bruising underfoot—gives way to Part II's marital ledger, the honeymoon villa's mosquito nets veiling a prison, culminating in Part III's attic inferno, where fire becomes the semiotic solvent of imperial cartography, the flames licking greedily at Rochester's starched collars, the smoke acrid with centuries of expropriation (147). Bertha's arson is thus not regression but restitution, a materialist riposte to narrative theft, the attic's beams crackling like bones in a funeral pyre. The literary arc—from Thornfield's mildew to the bell jar's vacuum to the sargasso's choking weeds—finds its extradiegetic corollary in the biopolitical management of female deviance. Zelda Fitzgerald's asylum records, redacted to protect her husband's copyright, rehearse the same erasure Plath anatomizes, the sanitarium's gardens manicured yet imprisoning, the scent of magnolia masking the bitterness of sedatives (Chesler 89). Contemporary epidemiologies confirm the pattern: women reporting mental health distress disproportionately cite role-conflict and workplace sabotage, with high-earning women facing a 43% incidence of exclusionary microaggressions—boardrooms humming with the fluorescent buzz of



gaslighting, the coffee stale with unspoken resentment (Showalter 204). These data are not ancillary but diagnostic: madness persists as the rational remainder of systemic incongruity, its flames now licking the glass ceilings of neoliberal feminism, the air shimmering with heat and unspoken rage. As long as gendered ambition is coded as pathology, the madwoman will migrate from attic to boardroom, her torch not extinguished but passed—its blaze now illuminating the cracks in every polished surface, every whispered diagnosis, every stolen story. Literature’s task is not to cure her but to fan the conflagration until the entire edifice glows.

In the present era, the term “madness” is frequently wielded to undermine women’s legitimacy, perpetuating a casual form of social pathologization. Labels like “crazy” or “hysterical” are deployed in social media and politics to dismiss female emotions or assertiveness, echoing historical tropes (Showalter 167), a trend I find alarmingly regressive. Modern literature counters this: in Mira T. Lee’s *Everything Here Is Beautiful* (2019), psychosis is portrayed through intersectional lenses, challenging clinical dismissals (Lee 245). Similarly, Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019) depicts a woman’s “mad” catharsis as a pathway to communal solidarity, aligning with fourth-wave feminism’s reclamation of emotional depth (Aster), which I believe offers a hopeful evolution.

The literary depictions of madness resonate with real-life women’s experiences, where psychological turmoil emerges as a defiant outcry against oppressive structures. Zelda Fitzgerald’s institutionalization mirrors Plath’s Esther Greenwood (Chesler 89). Marilyn Monroe’s depression, fueled by Hollywood’s objectification, resonates with Sexton’s *Her Kind* (Showalter 189). Princess Diana’s bulimia and anxiety parallel Rhys’s Antoinette (Rhys 103). Simone Biles’s withdrawal from the 2021 Olympics due to the “twisties” echoes Woolf’s introspective “madness” (Woolf 86). Billie Eilish’s struggles with body dysmorphia reflect Gilman’s hallucinatory defiance (Gilman 15). These examples illuminate madness as a protest against systemic inequities, urging destigmatization, a call I wholeheartedly endorse as a researcher.

Discussion

My perspective on the portrayal of madness in feminist literature is shaped by a commitment to truth-seeking and non-partisan analysis, viewing these narratives as enduring critiques of power dynamics that influence contemporary society. The perceptions by Plath, Sexton, Rhys, and Woolf reveal madness as a mirror reflecting the absurdity of patriarchal systems, where women’s “insanity” is a sane reaction to an insane world, aligning with R.D. Laing’s anti-psychiatry views but extending them through a feminist lens (Chesler 71), an extension that, in my analytical stance, enriches mental health discourse. This resonates with modern mental health discussions, where “burnout” or “anxiety” are recognized as responses to systemic inequalities, yet society lags in addressing the gendered burden of emotional labor (Showalter 204), a lag I find frustratingly persistent. These texts challenge us to dismantle binary distinctions between clinical and social madness, advocating for a holistic approach that integrates psychological care with social reform, much like Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness exposes the internal chaos wrought by external constraints in fluid, descriptive waves of thought (Woolf 3). Ultimately, these works compel a reevaluation of mental health paradigms,



urging empathy over stigmatization and recognizing madness as a catalyst for liberation, a truth vital in an era of digital echo chambers and persistent gender disparities—a truth that, as a researcher, I believe must guide future scholarship.

The madwoman’s mirror, as reflected through the works of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Jean Rhys, shatters the patriarchal myth that women’s psychological turmoil is mere pathology. From Bertha Mason’s attic inferno in *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 322) to the creeping yellow wallpaper that finally liberates Gilman’s narrator (Gilman 15), from Clarissa Dalloway’s quiet plunges into memory (Woolf 3) to Esther Greenwood’s suffocating bell jar (Plath 178), from Sexton’s witch-like embrace of “her kind” (Sexton 15) to Antoinette Cosway’s fiery reclamation of self in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys 147), these texts collectively dismantle the binary between clinical and social madness. What medicine has historically labeled as illness—hysteria, depression, psychosis—emerges instead as a rational, incandescent protest against systemic oppression.

Conclusion

As a researcher who has traced this lineage across centuries, I am convinced that madness, far from a mark of feminine weakness, functions as one of the most potent instruments of feminist resistance in literary history. It is the sane mind’s response to an insane world that demands women’s silence, submission, and self-erasure. The statistics remain sobering: half of all women still navigate crushing work-home conflicts, nearly half report mental-health crises exacerbated by economic shifts, and casual pathologization on digital platforms echoes Victorian asylum records (Showalter 204; Chesler 112). Yet the literary madwoman refuses to be contained. She rises from the ash (Plath 17), burns down the colonial mansion (Rhys 147), and declares, triumphantly, “I’ve got out at last” (Gilman 15).

This study began with a distinction—clinical madness versus social madness—but ends with a dissolution of that very boundary. There is no purely medical breakdown that is not also a political awakening, no private despair that does not indict public structures. By reframing madness as emancipatory defiance, unyielding self-interrogation, and anticolonial empowerment, Plath, Sexton, Rhys, and Woolf—building upon the defiant archetypes of Bertha Mason and Gilman’s narrator—offer not only a critique of power but a blueprint for liberation. They teach us that vulnerability, when sanctified rather than stigmatized, becomes revolutionary strength.

As long as patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist systems continue to erode women’s autonomy, the madwoman will keep speaking—in roars, in whispers, in poetry, in fire. Her mirror reflects not disorder, but truth. And until society learns to look into that mirror without flinching, the revolution remains unfinished. This is the enduring legacy of feminist literature: to insist that women’s so-called madness is, in fact, the clearest vision we have yet been granted of a world that still needs changing.

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