

In which is  
imprisoned in the attic



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In this essay, I intend to explore the attitudes towards madness and the factors that influence them. These include gender, genetics, and social factors.

I intend on giving examples, such as physiognomy and 'doubling' to examine the texts. I will be examining the differing portrayals of madness in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brönte (1847) and *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Braddon (1862). Madness and insanity have been portrayed in novels as something that is bordering on the supernatural.

The study of Psychiatry was in its infancy and it was believed that women were more affected by insanity than men. Elaine Showalter states that female insanity is linked with the "instability of the reproductive system. The female psyche would weaken during the biological crisis of the female life cycle; puberty, pregnancy, and menopause." <sup>1</sup>The archetype of the generic insane character has shifted genders. The females in the novels were no longer seen as the docile 'angels'. They are instead portrayed as individuals who are capable of committing heinous crimes.

Additionally, however, it should be noted husbands could even pay for their spouses to be imprisoned in asylums for not obeying their commands. The workings of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar stated that the sexist manner in which the males attacked the female psyche was to gain greater control over their opposing sex: "Men have fastened masks over women's faces - identifying them with eternal types of their own invention to possess them more thoroughly."<sup>2</sup> I will now examine how the authors differed.

The presence of Bertha Mason is evident at Thornfield residency before Austin reveals her existence. She is described as a 'clothed hyena', an animal whom of which is imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield. Bertha is always described using the neutral pronoun 'it' as opposed to being referred to as 'her'. Bronte describes Bertha Mason in a manner which is similar to that of generic literary monsters: " 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." The clear psychological problem that occurs from within Bertha is portrayed and personified in the animalistic sense of her physical appearance and demeanor. The horrific physical appearance of Bertha Mason helps to emphasize the madness. Bertha's physical appearance is a manifestation of the damaged psyche from within the character.

In Lady Audley's Secret, the opposite is evident, with the beauty of Lady Audley, being used to conceal her psychiatric problems. In Gubar and Gilbert's famous critique, they state that " specifically, a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male writers have generated for her." <sup>3</sup>The discourse of Jane Eyre possesses real-life validity so the monster has to be something that presents in real life. As stated earlier, beliefs regarding mental health alternate between realism and the supernatural. Gilbert and Gubar describe Bertha as Jane's " truest and darkest double". An example is the idea of the 'doppelganger' which was a common gothic motif. It is used in literature to add certain complexities to the text.

I believe the pure, protestant Jane has certain similarities to that of Bertha Mason. They are both subjected to imprisonment, Jane in the red room and Bertha the attic. They are both love interests of Rochester, however, Bertha is actually Janes antithesis. The gothic imagery of doubling is extended as she is described as a " goblin" and a " vampire " who threatens to " drain Mason's heart." 4 This idea could be making reference to the notion of either split personality disorder or schizophrenia. This idea of doubling can easily transfer into the idea of the psychiatric illness of schizophrenia. Bertha represents the dark, dual persona of Jane, much like in the manner of the fragmented mind of someone whom of which suffers from schizophrenia. I feel the treatment of Bertha Mason by Rochester raises some salient points.

Initially, it could be deemed most appropriate due to the limited knowledge of psychiatry and its treatments during this period. During the composition of this book by Bronte, however, these attitudes were changing. " In a review of the 1844 report by the Metropolitan Commissioners on Lunacy, the Westminster Review reported that the 'disposition of the public' towards the mentally ill was becoming 'more enlightened and benevolent.'" 5The ill-treatment of this woman by Rochester could offer an explanation for the deterioration of her mental health, and ultimately her transformation into the 'beast' that is imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield. It could be considered that Bertha is a victim of the 'Cassandra complex'.

This " describes those whose suffering - is disbelieved by others on the basis of emotionality. Historically, this has been especially problematic for women diagnosed with hysteria." 6 (Wellington, 2017 )This could also be one of the many reasons for a woman to be locked up in an asylum. Bertha is of

Creole descent and her marriage to Rochester was forced for economic gain for both of the families involved. Rochester claims that she was mad and unchaste from an early age.

The idea that she lacks chastity, can be emphasised by the act of ripping Jane's wedding veil – the most common image of virginal purity. Brontë made reference to the work of the physician James Cowles Pritchard, in particular, his work 'Treatise on insanity and other disorders affecting the mind.' I believe it is apparent Bertha Mason suffers from congenital insanity, the idea that madness was hereditary was boldly emphasised in the 19th Century and there are parallels to Lady Audley's form of madness. James Cowles Pritchard first coined the term 'moral insanity', he defined the term as: 'madness consisting in a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the interest or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucinations.'

'7 It could be argued by following this hypothesis, Bertha was always going to end up going mad, through genetic predisposition. There are many variables that come together to give an explanation behind Bertha Mason. It could be argued that the form of her madness, in combination with the ill-treatment she receives, come together to create a storm of psychological distress in the head of the character. The idea of hereditary illness is also emphasised in Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*.

The reliance on this hereditary disease is something the lady uses to cover up for her heinous acts that she commits throughout the duration of the story. She is a deviant criminal who appears hell-bent on climbing the social ladder displaying and psychopathic characteristics. She exhibits examples of abnormal and violent behavior regarding her treatment of the majority of the characters in the novel. The acts of which Lady Audley commits, are ones of which no woman would be thought able to commit in the Victorian society (or in the present day).

One of the most outstanding yet audacious crimes she commits is the act of bigamy, to help improve her mobility through the social classes. The idea that 'madness' is inherited is a common theme in 19th Century society and literature. Helen was told that her Mother went mad after giving birth to her. The idea that the madness could genetically be passed from mother to daughter is something that Lady Audley uses later on in the novel to mask her acts of bigamy and evil, believing she is just waiting for the madness to seep through, "...the hidden taint I had sucked in with my mother's milk" Braddon, p 312 and "...the only inheritance I expected from my mother was - insanity" Braddon, p 278. This could act as an explanation to the crimes she committed as hereditary madness can be genuine. It could also be argued that Lady Audley suffers from 'Munchausen Syndrome' which is described as a 'psychological disorder where someone pretends to be ill or deliberately produces symptoms of illnesses in themselves.

'8 As her mother suffers from madness, she believes that she must also suffer from a similar disease. Anti-personality disorders are a mental condition in which a person has a long-term pattern of manipulating,

exploiting, or violating the rights of others and is heavily linked with Munchausen Syndrome, which would help explain her psychopathic disregard for others. Doctor Mosgrave, however, believes that Lady Audley's actions are calculated and cunning; " she committed the crime of bigamy... There is no madness in there...She employed intelligent means and she carried out a conspiracy which requires coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that." Whilst difficult to prove, I believe this is the case and used as a means to facilitate social climbing.

The pre-Raphaelite portrait that she keeps locked away in her dressing room " shows sinister aspects of Lady Audley's personality that are not visible to those who meet her in person." 9. The idea of " physiognomy, the 'science' of reading the inner self through the outward expressions of the face, formed a flexible and varied discourse which was used in an infinite variety of ways by painters and novelists through the nineteenth century." Braddon, intro page: xxii This is an important thought to note, as during this period a beautiful face was thought to hide no secrets. Dark intentions and evil doing would be manifested in a physical representation which would be represented by a person who is perceived as horrific looking, such as Bertha Mason. It could also be argued that monomania is one thing that the lady suffers, evident through her explicit desire to reach the pinnacle of social class: " Helen Maldon, the abandoned wife, manipulates her own image to become Lucy Graham and then 'Lady Audley' and substitutes another body for her own place in the grave to sustain her social position; it is she who is finally placed in an asylum to protect the upper-class family..." Braddon, pg. xix Whilst physical, emotional and genetic factors can be seen as the main

precipitators, social factors such as poverty can have a detrimental effect on the human psyche.

Lady Audley's first husband George Talboys descends from a wealthy background, but he had to give up this money as his father did not see Helen Maldon as an appropriate fit for someone of his class and lineage. The family struggled for money and leading to George sailing off to Australia in search of an income through the gold mining industry. This left her isolated and vulnerable and under increased levels of stress, which could then trigger further psychological issues. The workings of Brown et al., 1975; Makowsky 1822; Pearlin & Johnson, 1997, (in Deborah Bells: Poverty and Women's Mental Health) states that " although rapid uncontrollable change is one important source of stress, stress also results from persistent undesirable conditions that must be endured daily. Chronic life conditions such as inadequate housing, dangerous neighborhoods, burdensome responsibilities and financial uncertainties can be even more potent stressors than acute crises and events.'<sup>10</sup> We know that Helen Maldon comes from a background of poverty. The love between her and George Talboys should have been enough to raise her through the social rankings, however, the love between the two had a detrimental effect on his inheritance.

Additional stress was apparent as Helen had just given birth. She was left alone to raise their young child. Wolf (1987) stated 'single parent status or an incapacitated husband made wage - earning a crucial component of successful role performance as a mother.'<sup>11</sup> In culmination, the notion of madness is an occurring theme through both Lady Audley's Secret and Jane



Eyre. In the novels, the female characters of Bertha Mason and Lady Audley's exhibit symptoms of madness.

Where the madness differentiates is the way that these two characters are portrayed. Bertha Mason is described to be some form of 'creole' beast, who is locked away in the attic of Thornfield to isolate her from society. Whereas with Lady Audley madness is used to cover up conniving and sinister intentions as a means to improve position within society. I feel both of these women showcase signs of madness and hereditary forms of insanity are the main explanation to the destabilised psyche of these women. Socially there is a gender stereotype regarding the mental health of females, which can be seen by the numerous reasons that a can lead to a woman being placed in an Asylum.

1 (Showalter, 1987) 2 (Gilbert, 1984)3 (Gilbert, 1984)4 (Brönte)5 (Atherton, 2014 )6 (Wellington, 2017 )7 (Pritchard, 1835)8 (NHS, 2016 )9 (Gross, 2000)10 (Bell)11 (Wolf)