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**Literary Theories**

## Madness, Monstrosity, and the Neurotypical Gaze: Deconstructing the Madonna-Whore Complex in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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**Abstract:** The Freudian psychoanalytic idea of the Madonna-Whore complex is rooted in the unconscious desire to idealize and degrade. The naked form of humanity is antithetical to fantasy, which leads to the construction of binaries. The patriarchal polarization and confinement of women to the role of saintly Madonna or the promiscuous Whore reinforces male dominance. The Madwoman, who embodies the “fallen” woman, is rarely located on the cognitive spectrum. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) establishes Madwoman as a subversive figure who deviates from a normative baseline determined by the patriarchal society. The concept of Neurodiversity attempts to empathize with the Madwoman. The term Neurodivergent points towards a social category of people with cognitive differences who do not think the way a Neurotypical or “normal” person does. This does not translate into an inherently good or bad thing: it is simply different. This research examines the friction between Victorian femininity and the neurotypical gaze to elucidate how patriarchal and neurotypical standards jointly alienate non-conforming women. It uses *Jane Eyre* as a case study to explore dual constructions of the “Madonna” and “Whore” archetype and their intersection with the colonial gaze by juxtaposing Jane and Bertha Mason.

**Keywords:** *Jane Eyre*, Madonna-Whore complex, Bertha Mason, Neurodivergence, Victorian femininity, colonial gaze, feminist psychoanalysis.



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## Introduction

Human consciousness is steeped in the urge to judge, dissect, and exile. The most natural human instinct is the need to understand ourselves. For women, this process is laborious and exhaustive, as the cultural representations of their conditions are deeply flawed. The theorisation of the Feminine as subordinate underlies every established institution. The patriarchal society has retained control over the treatment of the “Madwoman.” This research evaluates the idea of female madness in conjunction with the feminist discourse and postulates how the perception of female madness is directly linked with the patriarchal gaze. This conceptualisation is internalised by both men and women alike. To deconstruct the indoctrinated ideas fed to one through patriarchal discourse, one must identify the dichotomous representations of women, which reflect societal anxieties about female autonomy and morality, like the Madonna-Whore Complex. This study thus investigates the Victorian Gothic novel *Jane Eyre* through the lenses of feminist psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, and the double discrimination of women through the male and neurotypical gaze as inscribed onto bodies, woven into spaces, and wielded as punishment.

## Victorian Femininity and the Neurotypical Gaze

The mechanism of the neurotypical gaze inflicts exclusion and stigmatisation upon its non-conformers. Simone de Beauvoir's idea of "the Other" problematises patriarchal constructs that define and subordinate women to men. Just as the patriarchal gaze objectifies and reduces women to male subjugation, the neurotypical gaze reduces neurodivergent individuals to objects of diagnosis, surveillance, and discipline. Any deviators from normative cognitive and behavioural patterns are segregated and banished to the margins.

This disciplinary function of both gazes is deeply imbued in the Victorian era's emerging male-dominated sciences of phrenology and psychiatry. The scientific endeavours to objectively assess mental health were institutionally embedded in cultural narratives of morality and deviance. Victorian medical discourses identify diagnoses like James Cowles Prichard's conception of “moral insanity,” a term formulated to define a “derangement of those mental faculties that presided over man's emotive framework as well as his moral faculty.” (Augstein 311)

The Victorian period was a time of rigid morality and sharp dichotomies. The ideal Victorian heroine played into the "angel in the house" trope, who mimicked neurotypical standards of emotional composure and self-restraint.

Women who deviated from these norms were doubly marginalised as failures of femininity and as anomalies of rationality. Her lack of subjectivity entailed estrangement to a liminal space and prohibition from integrating into the collective feminine consciousness. Beauvoir reflects on this idea of Othering:

From the origins of humanity, their biological privilege enabled men to affirm themselves alone as sovereign subjects; they never abdicated this privilege; they alienated part of their existence in Nature and in Woman; but they won it back afterwards; condemned to play the role of the Other, woman was thus condemned to possess no more than precarious power: slave or idol, she was never the one who chose her lot. (Beauvoir 111)

The othered women did not occupy a liberated space that allowed mobility. Their identities were symbolically erased, and they became victims of the cultural anxieties of their time. They were used as cautionary tales and kept as concealed secrets to warn women to conform to the cultural norms set by the patriarchal neurotypical gaze. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester institutionally acquires this gaze and delineates Bertha Rochester as an unfortunate omen of madness and deformity. He calls Jane's attention to her "purple face," "bloated features," and "goblin laugh," thus constructing Bertha as a deviant supernatural figure devoid of humanity.

### **The Madonna-Whore Binary in *Jane Eyre***

Sigmund Freud's Madonna-Whore Complex is a psychoanalytic concept that upholds a dichotomous perception of women as either virtuous and pure ("Madonna") or sensual and debased ("Whore"). Freud's bipartite view of women exposed hidden patriarchal anxieties that reduced female identity to phallogentric archetypes and impeded the nuanced understanding of the neurodivergent female. The Madonna-Whore complex lingers in *Jane Eyre*, where it dictates the portrayal of femininity and the roles that women can occupy within society. Jane's natural propensity for humility and chastity aligns her character with the Madonna archetype. Rochester idealizes Jane as his moral compass and declares:

You are my sympathy—my better self—my good  
angel—I am bound to you with a strong attachment.

(Brontë 269)

He places her on a pedestal of utmost purity and proclaims her as the precursor to his redemption. She manages to chasten Rochester by the end and sets him on the right path, which aligns with the Victorian expectation of women to possess infectious goodness and righteousness. She must embody all that is good in Rochester's life. However, her ability to embody this role is contingent on her adherence to neurotypical norms. Unlike Bertha, Jane's calculated conformity allows her to navigate societal expectations without being ostracised. Rochester, at once, casts Bertha as the Whore, a figure of deviance and danger:

Bertha Mason,—the true daughter of an infamous mother,—  
dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must  
attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste. (Brontë 261)

Bertha's life before marrying Rochester is one of indulgence for a hot-tempered, hedonistic woman with many prospects. Rochester's initial interest in Bertha subsides when confronted with her "wholly alien" nature and her "absurd, contradictory, exacting" requests. Rochester's deep hatred for Bertha reveals his discomfort with his intrinsic moral duality, a dichotomy the narrative dissects by projecting his conflicting qualities onto Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre.

Rochester is both angelic and devilish; he is a compassionate partner to Jane and yet a manipulative figure who confines Bertha. Bertha and Jane are positioned at opposite ends of a moral and cognitive spectrum, which negates the possibility of a cognitively diverse or morally ambiguous woman. Rochester's male privilege allows him to exist as an ill-tempered man with debilitating trepidations along with a penchant for redemptive actions, a privilege that the narrative denies its female characters.

### **Bertha Mason: Madness and Monstrosity**

The treatment of Bertha Rochester as a monstrous figure reflects the intersection of the neurotypical patriarchal gaze with postcolonial theory. As a Creole woman, Bertha's deviant identity affirms Jane's moral and cultural superiority. Jane is white, British, Christian, and neurotypical, which situates her within the Eurocentric "Madonna" archetype. Unlike Jane's "plain" and "little" physicality, Bertha is described as a "big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband", with a "virile force" that equates Rochester in his beastly potential. Bertha's sexually transgressive and racially problematic presentation reinforces colonial perceptions that exoticised Creole women, while categorising them as hypersexual and morally corrupt creatures, to justify their exclusion from the heteronormative idea of the ideal woman. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar articulate the colonial agenda:

Missionary in its rhetoric, the marriage making and soul making celebrated by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* and by *The Madwoman in the Attic* in its interpretation of the novel are therefore 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

European female subjectivity.

(Gilbert and Gubar, Introduction, *The Madwoman in the Attic*)

However, Brontë disrupts this narrative by granting Bertha moments of agency. Bertha exerts her autonomy by setting Thornfield ablaze, often interpreted as an extreme act of madness. Freed from the weight of inhibitions, she can afford to reclaim her fractured narrative with nothing left to lose; she becomes a force to be reckoned with. While traditional readings interpret her outbursts as protests against her confinement, such views risk oversimplifying the dynamics of identity politics.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Bertha's character arc lacks coherent interiority, denying her the narrative space to navigate and negotiate her identity. The absence of subconscious exploration for Bertha exposes the systems that render her subjectivity inaccessible or invalid. Her outbursts are not just acts of resistance, but also symptoms of a systematic erasure of the ability to assert or negotiate her identity within the narrative. Her identity is mediated exclusively through the neurotypical gaze, which gives an invisible upper hand to her oppressors.

The erasure of Bertha's cognitive diversity begs the question: Is resistance enough to constitute agency? Without a space for Bertha to navigate her claim, a narrative not entirely shaped by her oppressors, her acts of defiance risk being seen as mere hysterical reactions with no validation of her self-awareness. This critique exists beyond the scope of Brontë's text, thus problematizing the enforcement of the hegemony of the neurotypical gaze.

### **Jane Eyre: Negotiating the Neurotypical Binary**

Neurotypical binaries within patriarchal institutions can be deconstructed through Judith Butler's concept of Gender Performativity. Butler asserts that gender is performative, even for heterosexuals, and what we recognise as naturally masculine or feminine is a result of culturally constructed binaries through performance. The parallels between the patriarchal and neurotypical gaze rely on essentialist binaries. The power structures ultimately benefit through the construction of archetypes like the Madonna or the Whore.

Similarly, the neurotypical gaze flattens the complexity of neurodivergent experiences by labelling women as either mad or ideal, thus preventing political organization. As a woman who cannot perform neurotypical restraint or conform to gender roles, Bertha is locked away in the attic. This punishment echoes Butler's understanding of the collective cultural construction of Gender:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (Butler 178)

Jane's demure composition indicates a disciplined performance of emotional restraint and moral clarity, which allows her to align with neurotypical norms and patriarchal ideals. Her radical assertions that “women feel just as men feel” and “need exercise for their faculties” (Brontë, p. 93) challenge the rigidity of these roles. Yet the narrative rewards her conformity and calculated defiance while it punishes Bertha's uninhibited resistance. This reinforces Butler's argument that gender cannot be a stable identity, and is actually a series of performances demanded by cultural frameworks. Jane negotiates her identity within the boundaries of acceptable femininity and cultural expectations.

Bertha's animal-like behaviour as a “clothed hyena” strategically invites potential sympathy for Rochester's burden. When Rochester positions Jane behind him, she witnesses Bertha's violent attack. After witnessing the assault, Jane's fear of Bertha Mason becomes apparent as she compares her likeness to “the foul German spectre—the Vampyre.” Elaine Showalter reveals in *The Female Malady* that 1850s women constituted the major chunk of the population in insane asylums. Showalter's observation provides an insight into the cultural anxieties amongst women trying to grasp the idea of the widespread invalidation of their mental health. She empathizes with Bertha's helplessness and attempts to distance herself from a similar fate. The concept of the anxiety of authorship outlined by Gilbert and Gubar can be linked to Jane's empathy for Bertha by understanding Jane's internalization of societal expectations and how it shapes her perception of Bertha, as well as Brontë's envisioning of the women of *Jane Eyre*.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, *Jane Eyre* is not merely a narrative of personal triumph or tragic confinement but a cultural symposium of the myths surrounding confrontation with the self. Bertha Mason is a critique of the narrative itself as her silenced subjectivity and explosive rebellion expose the hypocrisy of Victorian moral and cognitive hierarchies. The neurotypical gaze, which frames her as monstrous and hysterical, is precariously and ultimately undermined by the very excesses it seeks to suppress. In the flames that consume Thornfield, the text offers no resolution, only an unspoken question: Is conformity the only path to survival, or can chaotic resistance be a reimagining of agency?

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