How are Women Portrayed as Mad Throughout Gothic Literature?

Gothic literature uses madness as a female trope to convey how women should act within society. In the gothic genre, "characters are subject to an onslaught of sensational and macabre events"¹ and the trope of madness is a "distinctively female literary tradition."² Throughout this essay, I will be looking at how authors portray these tropes, what circumstances drive the female protagonists to insanity, and how insanity is seen throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. To help me with this study, I have read numerous texts such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's critical analysis of mad women in literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic*³, and also Sigmund Freud's, 'The Uncanny'⁴, as psychoanalysis was influential in the study of the mind and what triggers fear.

Throughout history, women have been represented as hysterical. The etymology of 'hysterical' derives from the word 'hysterectomy'⁵ which is a procedure that women undertake when their uterus has to be removed. As Lisa Appignanesi states in her book, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, "hystera's long and lurid history stretches back to the Egyptians and the Greeks"⁶ where they believed that "the womb, or uterus, was a free-floating entity which could leave its moorings when a woman was dissatisfied and disrupt anything in its passage."⁷ Another reason of why women were seen has hysterical was because "women are generally perceived as unpredictable and unruly victims of our hormones, as neurotic, over-emotional

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⁷ Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, p. 162
beings” because of their bodily functions. It is considered that the female bodily function of menstruation causes women to have mood swings, to become quiet and repressed, or outlandish. Pre-twentieth century, doctors and men within society could not see this pain, it was not tangible, and therefore they considered the women who were going through menstruation as hysterical. The mood swings caused women to "deviate from their expected social role" and this was looked down upon and considered un-feminine. Hysteria in women during the nineteenth century "manifested symptoms such as trances, convulsive fits, tearing of the hair, choking and rapid shifts in mood". Something resembling these symptoms is when Antonia in Matthew Lewis' The Monk, sees her dead Mother's ghosts and continues to have fits until her mental state is deemed 'unstable'. In today's medicinal society, doctors would pronounce that Antonia had gone into a state of shock. However, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, this would be the type of behaviour that "society deems inexplicably mad" and that is also "at variance with the feminine stereotype - that is, on the border between so-called masculine and feminine behaviour."

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Sarah M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, argue that the biggest oppression that women have faced is being called the 'second sex', because they could not "express themselves freely without the fear of censure." so women felt the need to subdue themselves. They didn't voice their opinions, and they made sure that they acted like 'a lady' at all times and never caused friction within society, so when they gained "the opportunity to read and write fiction and poetry" in the early twentieth century

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9 Morris, Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability, p. 194
11 Becker, Through the Looking Glass: Women and Borderline Personality Disorder, p. xii
12 Becker, Through the Looking Glass: Women and Borderline Personality Disorder, p. xii
century, it "had a liberating impact." If a woman did not keep her opinions to herself, and argued back to a man, she would be considered insane because she would be opposing society's views and expectations that were placed on her: as can be seen in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, when they argue back to their male counterparts. Men did not want women to write, as they thought that writing was a male's profession and that the object of 'the pen' resembled a penis, thus by diminishing women's artistic merit, which is an idea that Gerard Manley Hopkins stated, saying that a pen is "the artists most essential quality… which is kind of a male gift, and especially marks off men from women." Gilbert and Gubar also discuss how female nineteenth century gothic literature became a time where "female authorship was no longer… anomalous" and female authors were trying to break out of the "overwhelmingly male-dominated society" to convey to the world their ideas and what it was like to be a woman. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë showed readers that "everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome: oppression… starvation… madness… and coldness." Knowing what attitudes women faced during the nineteenth and twentieth century helps to understand the female protagonists of novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wuthering Heights*. Each female protagonist in these gothic novels had to fight the patriarchal system and the oppression in which they faced. An underlying theme of women in fiction is both literal and figurative imprisonment. The figurative imprisonment is where they feel oppressed by society and by their gender because "deeply embedded in the cultural archetypes of the Western psyche: [is] to be a woman in our society is to be at risk of being labelled mad." Due to their

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16 Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 3  
17 Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. xi  
18 Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. xi  
24 Morris, *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability*, p. 194
hormones and bodily functions, "the social construction of madness is also about the policing and control of ... women... who do not conform," which can be seen in Jane Eyre when the eponymous character shouts and hits her cousin because of how he treats her. However, in the conclusion of the fight, Jane is the one who is seen out of order because of the societal rule that women should behave proper, should sit still and take whatever form of abuse is thrown at them and because of this "women are driven mad in disproportionate numbers by the stressful oppression imposed on them by a patriarchal society." The literal imprisonment happens frequently throughout gothic literature. The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman tells the story of a woman who is going through "nervous depression." To help her recover from this, she is locked in a room which is part of a 'rest cure'. As the narrator's stay in the room prolongs, she starts to see the wallpaper of the room move and - over time - reveal a woman behind the wallpaper. The high stress level that has caused Gilman's narrator to go 'mad' is not due to societal norms of the patriarch but due to literal imprisonment. The cloistered environment also acts as a metaphor for her own mind; her anxieties have been imprisoned as she has not been given the opportunity to set her anxieties and stress free. Being locked up with mental illness causes oneself to start to believe that they are mad.

As the Victorian era progressed, the interest in psychological studies grew and "scholars were considering new ideas about human nature;" this change of interest became apparent within gothic literature. The Victorian era was "a golden age of belief in supernatural forces and energies, ghost stories, weird transmissions and spooky phenomena" and saw the interest in Spiritualism grow and the interest in the supernatural phenomenon was popular within particular circles during the nineteenth century. As the

25 Morris, Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability, p. 196
26 Becker, Through the Looking Glass: Women and Borderline Personality Disorder, p. xv
interest in the supernatural grew, the theories behind the supernatural and also how the supernatural made us think and feel began to also develop. The beginning of this world of psychology emerged in the late Victorian era with Eduard von Hartmann's *The Philosophy of the Unconscious*. This paper created the foundations which lead to Freud's development of psychoanalysis. When discussing the analysis behind fear, Freud presents the idea that understanding the familiar is comforting whilst the unfamiliar creates fear; it is the fear of the unknown. In his essay, 'The Uncanny', Freud states that "there is no doubt that [the uncanny] belongs to the realm of frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" and that "the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" which - in gothic literature - could be ghosts of family members that have passed, or the hauntings of your passed mistakes. In the eyes of Freud, this is your subconscious sending you a message and that the "frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns." The premise of his essay implies that the supernatural and madness are directly related. Freud suggests that experiences of supernatural phenomena is the work of a underlying psychological problem and in turn, this 'problem' takes the form of supernatural projection. Freud outlines that the inclusion of ghosts, unexplainable sounds and haunting apparitions complete the image of hallucinations, paranoia, fear and, anxiety in gothic texts.

In gothic literature such as *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Monk* or *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the fear of death of life or death of reputation is part of the supernatural uncanny that can be found within these texts. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Prince Manfred fears that the family line will not continue, in his brutal and disturbing actions to try and continue his lineage, he suffers from hallucinations and hauntings.

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30 Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 123
31 Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 124
32 Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 147
which is his subconscious telling him that he is making incorrect decisions and trying to make him stop and it is the "unconscious wish… represented in disguised and distorted form."\(^{36}\) In The Monk, Alphonso gives in to lust and because of the fear of death, he succumbs to the devil, it is the fear of the unknown that drives him to death. Finally, in The Fall of the House of Usher, it is Roderick's twin sister that comes back to haunt him. He hears wailing in the night and this is his subconscious telling him that something is not right with how they buried Madeleine. Through psychoanalysis, and understanding that "people differ greatly in their sensitivity"\(^{37}\) towards the uncanny, also helps understand madness in gothic literature and what happenings in women's lives cause them to go mad.

From this study, I have learned that women are not born mad. The representation of women can be culturally, historically and socially linked to their position within a patriarchal society; they are positioned as the 'other' to men. "Feminist research has highlighted the way we have inherited a male-defined culture of normality and deviance that defines women as mad by virtue of our gender"\(^{38}\) and that women become mad due to their figurative and literal imprisonment in society. They are subconsciously haunted by freedom and the 'what ifs?', they are haunted by stress, anxiety and oppression and they are haunted by the same four walls enclosing them day in and day out.

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2,187 words


\(^{37}\) Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 124

\(^{38}\) Morris, *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability*, p. 194
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It is through this female Gothic language that Brontë creates a heroine whose autobiographical mode... The older Jane consciously portrays the younger Jane as the mad Bertha, and describes Bertha in terms of the "other" to define her older self. From being the mad cat to the ethereal "malicious elf", like a "linnet" she has to project herself as being devoid of sexuality. Rochester compares Jane's clear eyes to the red balls wishing to see in Jane what Helen Moglen ("Creation of a Feminist Myth") calls, the angelic woman purged of all sensuality.