



THE FAILED EXPECTATIONS OF BERTHA MASON
AND MISS HAVISHAM:
REPRESSION AND MADNESS IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between madness and femininity in the Victorian Era as depicted in the novels, *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*. In nineteenth century Britain, any sign of deviance from societal norms by women was received as an indication of insanity. Changes in the female hormone cycle were misconceived as manifestations of insanity and consequently, many restrictions were imposed on feminine expression in Victorian society. Miss Havisham's and Bertha Mason's characters in *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre* respectively, are representations of the intertwined elements of madness and femininity. They reflect the repression that women had to endure under the sociocultural context of the time. This can be observed through their unsuccessful marriage prospects and their symbolic confinement to limited spaces. The imagery associated with these characters is also suggestive of the fear and destruction that was linked with deviant women. "Deviant", here, refers to those who deviated from feminine ideals of the Victorian era. The study of these characters allows a glimpse of the constraining social norms that were a regular part of women's lives in the Victorian era.

Keywords: *deviance, femininity, insanity, social norms*



Introduction

It may be argued that one of the most distinctive elements of Victorian fiction is the prevalence of the ‘madwoman’. Found in many notable works of fiction, the madwoman has an ominous presence that often eludes readers. While some novels include themes of madness through subtle depictions of hysteria, others present more deliberately fashioned insane female characters. Both such manifestations of femininity and madness can be observed in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Dickens’ character, Miss Havisham, is a wealthy recluse who refuses to change out of her wedding dress since the day she was jilted at the altar. Miss Havisham’s only satisfaction seems to come from humiliating young boys which she does vicariously through her ward, Estella. In the novel *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is the infamous madwoman, who is of Creole origins and the wife of Mr. Rochester. Discussions of insanity in nineteenth century novels would likely be incomplete without mentions of Bertha. Having been born in the West Indies, Bertha’s ethnicity is another source of her otherization. The darkness of her skin is highlighted numerous times in the novel and her racial identity is seen as a contributor to her dangerous and threatening behavior. Throughout the novel, Bertha remains locked up on the third floor of Rochester’s house, Thornfield Hall. He asserts that this is a necessary measure since insanity runs in Bertha’s family, as is reflected through her violent outbursts.

Extensive analysis of these characters allows for several commonalities to emerge that help develop an understanding of portrayals of insanity in Victorian fiction. Though outwardly quite dissimilar, both characters exemplify the societal limitations surrounding the female role in the nineteenth century. Examining these characters from a critical lens reveals deeper insights into the systematic subjugation of Victorian women. This paper endeavors to examine how the characters of these madwomen—Bertha Mason and Miss Havisham—represent patriarchal forces of repression in Victorian society through their failed marriages, physical confinement, and their destructive nature. Each of these aspects will be analyzed subsequent to creating an understanding of female insanity in the Victorian era. In the analysis of these characters, madness is perceived as deviance from socially accepted ideals of femininity which manifests in tandem with the repression they suffer.

Female Insanity in the Victorian Era

In order to fully understand these characters, it is crucial to first contextualize the system that mandated their existence as madwomen. In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter (1985) details how cultural attitudes towards the female identity impacted ideas about insanity. She highlights that Victorian asylums housed a vast majority of female patients, whereas, almost all the superintendents charged with the care and treatment of these women were males (Showalter, 1985). The psychiatric profession was dominated by male practitioners who attributed this disparity to women's anatomy. It was believed that the female reproductive system predisposed women to mental catastrophe and insanity was "an unfortunate product of women's nature" (Showalter, 1985, p. 59). Showalter draws attention to the gaps in psychiatric discourse of that time. There is a gaping absence of the female voice from the perspectives of doctors as well as patients (Showalter, 1985). To bridge this gap, she suggests turning to novels and women's diaries which offer much richer and more resourceful narratives as opposed to the accounts of male professionals. Women's accounts present female insanity in the context of prevailing social conditions and identify it as a consequence of the constrictions imposed upon Victorian women (Showalter, 1985). Showalter suggests that, rather than the reproductive system, "mental atrophy and moral starvation" were the actual causes of hormonal behavior, that was misconstrued as insanity (1985, p. 62). It is, hence, a warranted assumption that madwomen appear so frequently in Victorian fiction because authors were greatly influenced by the societal perceptions of female insanity of the time. Their work reflects the effects of these ideas on women's lives.

Dickens was influenced by his visit to St. Luke's Hospital where he was astonished by the number of female patients. He provides vivid accounts of his interactions with the female inmates in *A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree* (Showalter, 1985). Similarly, Brontë abhorred the effects of solitary confinement she witnessed during her visits to asylums and prisons. Her experiences are likely to have shaped her ideas regarding perceptions of female insanity that are represented in works like *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* (Showalter, 1985). Having established the position of women in the Victorian era, during which these novels were written, a more comprehensive analysis of the madwomen characters becomes possible.

Failed Marriages

For both of these characters, much like most Victorian women, marriage is a focal point in their narratives. Miss Havisham is described to love Compeyson with “all the susceptibility she possessed” (Dickens, 2002, p. 179). It is clear that her feelings for Compeyson have brought her to her most vulnerable state and this has given him exercisable power over her. When she is abandoned at the altar, it becomes clear that Compeyson only valued her for her financial status. Miss Havisham’s identity is closely tied with her inheritance for most of her life. Herbert, her nephew, confirms this when he proclaims, “Miss Havisham was now an heiress and... looked after as a great match” (Dickens, 2002, p. 178). Especially from a marital perspective, Miss Havisham is merely an object in a marketplace, who is regarded for her monetary value. It can be conjectured that Miss Havisham’s trauma stems, in part, from the realization that her worth and identity are contrived from something as superficial as her wealth. Regarding wealth as identity for Victorian women, Raphael, in her paper *A Re-Vision of Miss Havisham: Her Expectations and Our Responses* (1989), comments, “the system... limits the ability of those not powerful enough to find a secure niche... subordinate to their profit and exchange value” (p. 403). Moreover, as an upper-class woman who has never had to be concerned with finances due to her inheritance, Miss Havisham is pampered and unprepared to face the practicalities of life (Raphael, 1989). Her failed alliance with Compeyson comes with the startling realization that her self-worth is limited to her financial status alone and this continues to haunt her for the rest of her life. The passions and desire Miss Havisham had prior to this event remain unsatiated and transform into rage. She spends the remainder of her life repressing her unmet desires. For Miss Havisham, a fall from grace coincided with a broken marriage and consequently, the stain of scandal inhibits her qualification for the female ideal. Perhaps Showalter’s (1985) analysis holds true for Miss Havisham when she remarks, “women who reject sexuality and marriage (the two were synonymous for Victorian women) are muted or even driven mad by social disapproval” (p. 63).

Bertha Mason’s marriage poses a similar predicament. In agreement with his family’s wishes, Rochester seeks only wealth from his alliance with Bertha, thus ascribing to her a monetary value, just as was done to Miss Havisham. Additionally, prior to the marriage, Rochester objectifies Bertha and refers to her beauty as if, it is the sole reason behind his desire to marry her. Throughout

Rochester's account of Bertha, her wealth and beauty are all that define her identity. Brontë demonstrates how the woman is seen to be of no additional value above her superficial attributes. Once the marriage is complete and Rochester has acquired the much-coveted wealth, Bertha gradually becomes undesirable to him. He cites her Creole origins and her expression of sexuality as a cause of revulsion. From being the "boast of Spanish Town," Bertha is soon transformed into an "impure, depraved" creature of "pigmy intellect" (Brontë, 2000, p. 261). Her racial difference and her lasciviousness do not conform to the pure Victorian female ideal. Bertha fails to live up to the traditional feminine role and is immediately ostracized by Rochester. Valerie Beattie, author of "The Mystery at Thornfield: Representations of Madness in *Jane Eyre*" states that through Bertha, "the problematic conventions of Victorian romantic courtship and the misogynist prison-like conditions of patriarchal marriages" are exposed (1996, p. 499). Glimpses into the courtships of both Bertha and Miss Havisham disclose their subjugated position in these relationships as well as the many norms of acceptability and desirability that they must meet. Any mark of deviance in either character results in severe consequences, otherization and perhaps the onset of "madness".

Physical Confinement

Another common point between Miss Havisham and Bertha is their confinement to a single space, throughout the novels. Miss Havisham's abode, Satis House, was "dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up... all the lower were rustily barred... a court-yard in front, and that was barred" (Dickens, 2002, p. 54). Dickens' description of Satis House matching a prison could imply the state of its resident being similar to that of a prisoner. Unquestionably, Miss Havisham spends her life like one. The significance of this is twofold. Literally, Miss Havisham is shutting herself in and disconnecting from the rest of the world. Metaphorically, this could represent both her otherization from society and her state of mind. By being confined to a single space, Miss Havisham is excluded from society. Raphael (1989) suggests that if Miss Havisham did not exercise financial independence, she would have been cast into an asylum. Such a fate is not surprising for Victorian women who behave as Miss Havisham does. Moreover, isolating herself on her own volition indicates that Miss Havisham is mentally trapped. Her wedding gown and the remnants of the wedding feast that

she does not part with, force her to experience her trauma in a repeated, cyclical manner. She is stuck in her past and cannot escape that one life-altering event—her broken engagement. Clearly, the humiliation she experienced has changed the course of her life permanently. Her confinement, likewise, reflects her exclusion from society, that Victorian women would have experienced in consequence of any scandal in their courtships.

On the other hand, Bertha experiences a much different form of confinement. She resides in a room on the third floor, locked away. Her confinement, unlike Miss Havisham's, is not self-imposed. She is cast away by her husband on account of her insanity. Whether Bertha's insanity was pre-existing or is a consequence of this abuse is unclear and leaves room for various interpretations. Regardless, the conditions in which she is kept are wretched and inhumane. She is left to the care of Grace Poole of Grimsby retreat—an asylum—whose habit of excessive drinking demonstrates her inadequacy for the role. Quite like Miss Havisham, Bertha is as good as an institutionalized patient while residing in her own home. Only, Bertha does not choose this fate for herself, it is decided by society. Whether they voluntarily opt for confinement or not, confinement seems to be the ultimate end for the aberrant Victorian woman. However, interestingly, Bertha breaks free from her confinement on numerous occasions. Beattie believes this carries metaphorical significance and is an analogy for society's view of rebellious women, "at once active and passive, dangerous and containable, meaningful and meaningless" (1996, p. 496). She also remarks that in this way, Brontë protests the practice of disciplining women through confinement (Beattie, 1996, p. 495). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar (2000) suggest that the third floor symbolizes the parts of the world that shut women out, "Heavily enigmatic, ancestral relics wall her in; inexplicable locked rooms guard a secret which may have something to do with her; distant vistas promise an inaccessible but enviable life" (p. 348). Analysis of Miss Havisham's and Bertha Mason's characters provides a nuanced view of the limitations imposed upon women in the nineteenth century. Their diminished participation in society and physical entrapment indicate how the forces of a patriarchal society have worked against them.

Destructive Imagery

Analyzing the use of imagery in the novels will help us further

understand their representation of madness. Beattie (1996) explains that in Victorian times, appearance and physiognomy was taken as an extension of a person's character. These beliefs also permeate the representations of fictional characters and provide insight into the characters' natures. In light of this, it is evident that imagery used to describe both Bertha's and Miss Havisham's physical appearances do not emanate positive characteristics. Miss Havisham is "corpse-like" and deemed similar to "waxwork and skeleton" (Dickens, 2002, p. 57). Her appearance seems to have withered quite like her yellowed wedding ensemble. Not only is Miss Havisham dehumanized through her physical description, but Pip as the narrator as well as the critic deems her the villain. In his first encounter with Miss Havisham, Pip remarks that the sight of her makes him want to cry (Dickens, 2002). Even after she has sought his forgiveness for her cruelty, he catches himself morbidly fantasizing that she might die "hanging to the beam" (Dickens, 2002, p. 396). Her vindictive streak in raising Estella to humiliate men, perhaps, makes her quite culpable. Yet, taking this act of vengeance at face-value is an insensitive reading of Miss Havisham; it ignores Miss Havisham's plight as a woman suffering from trauma. Her entire life is structured around one event and her actions are entirely dictated by it. Her mad rage evokes no sympathy and only earns her the title of villain. In fact, Raphael (1989) posits that her rationale for seeking vengeance is that "it is only through dehumanizing and often brutal deceit and abuse that desire can be satisfied" (p. 410). It is unclear whether Dickens intends for Miss Havisham to be seen as a sinister figure or means to draw attention to society's unforgiving judgement of her. In either case, it is unjust to reach a verdict without paying heed to her condition.

When it comes to Bertha, the descriptions of her appearance are far more grotesque. She is a "vampire," (p. 242) "a beast," (p. 250) and a "hyena," (p. 250), capable of sucking blood and draining the heart. It is almost unfathomable that a woman known for her beauty so rapidly

takes on these unhuman forms. Rochester admits to desiring her as long as she was a docile, unmarried woman. However, as soon as they are married, he is revolted by her “unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders” (p. 261). When Rochester discovers her self-willed nature, he no longer sees Bertha as the beautiful woman that he coveted. She deviates from the feminine ideal and this causes her to immediately be labelled an animal. Moreover, there is repeated emphasis on the darkness of her features and how that adds to her monstrous appearance. This goes to show that her race is also a contributing aspect in her dehumanization. It is also worth noting that Bertha, despite her madness and monstrosity, does not harm Jane, the governess of Thornfield Hall and the love interest of Mr. Rochester. Her violence is always directed at Rochester and her brother Mason. Though she is painted as a threat, Bertha’s offences only target those who have had a hand in her oppression. Similar to Miss Havisham, Bertha’s oppression and suffering is overlooked. According to Gilbert and Gubar (2000), Bertha’s rage and aggression is also symbolic of the way women writers felt about the patriarchal nature of society and the male-dominated literary tradition.

In terms of imagery, another important aspect to consider is the use of fire as a symbol in the novels. The use of flames carries connotations of rage, intensity, passion and danger. In *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, fire imagery is associated with Miss Havisham and Bertha Mason, specifically in how their deaths unfold. Immediately after she has sought forgiveness from Pip and reclaimed herself as a character, Miss Havisham’s dress catches fire, which ultimately leads to her death. In a similar manner, Bertha’s life ends as she plummets to her death amidst a smoldering Thornfield Hall. As characters whose lives were colored with passion, repression and rebellion, such a spectacle of their deaths is suggestive of a highly tragic but symbolic end. Perhaps, it represents the fate of the deviant Victorian woman—the flame of rebellion at last put out and the menace subdued. Thus, the symbolism associated with

the madwoman conveys how nonconformity in women is received as a threat or danger to society and necessitates being tamed.

Conclusion

It seems that from an outward perspective Miss Havisham and Bertha Mason are worlds apart. Yet, the experiences of both these women are quite alike in a number of ways. They are both victims of a system that is meant to operate entirely against them. Their passion and rage stem from the disadvantage of their womanhood. Inevitably, this raises questions about the link between femininity and hysteria or madness. It is evident that this is a cultural construct. Victorian women who deviate from the norm, show self-will and ambition, are denounced in society. Miss Havisham and Bertha offer us insight into the meaning of this otherization in the lives of women. Their presence is symbolic of the injustices in the system and the outrage brewing within women who recognize their secondary place in society. Deviance and rebellion in women, it appears, had no place but in the asylum, in Victorian society.

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