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Madwoman in the attic summary and analysis

Women and Tradition: Conversations in Context In the second chapter of their book, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the relationship between female writers and literary tradition. Their central argument posits that female writers experience the “anxiety of authorship,” distress that stems from the lack of female precursors in the literary tradition for contemporary female writers to relate to for inspiration in their writing (Gilbert and Gubar 49). This disenfranchisement of female authorship is rooted in a literary tradition dominated by men, a patriarchal system that conforms female characters in literature to masculine desires, such as the poet’s muse. Enclosing women in such stereotypes make them feel isolated from literary creation, and it diminishes their sense of self-hood and creativity. The main battle for the female writer is against the reception of her from the male-dominated literary culture. Her fight is a “revisionary struggle,” engaging an old text with a new critical perspective and explicating its meaning in a different literary direction (Gilbert and Gubar 49). This critical concept will be analyzed through J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Foe* (1986). The book retells the story of Robinson Crusoe through the perspective of Susan Barton, a female castaway who ends up on Cruso’s island. After being rescued, she seeks out Daniel Foe, an author who Barton hopes will tell her story faithfully. Gilbert and Gubar’s notions of Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. Print. Background Information[] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were teaching English literature together in the 1970’s and began to notice trends in 19th century writings by women that seemed to be more than isolated trends but to represent a definite pattern for all women writers in this period. These observations eventually became *The Madwoman in the Attic*, originally published in 1979, a time when feminist ideology was up front and center not only in literary criticism but also in the politics of the United States as well as in other Western countries. Though following in the footsteps of some other powerful feminist literary texts, notably Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women* and Elaine Showalters’ *A Literature of Their Own*, soon after being published *The Madwoman in the Attic* became thought of as a seminal text in the field of feminist literary criticism. The introduction to the second edition, published in 2000, provides interesting insights about the background of both authors and specific responses to criticism of the book after its initial debut twenty years earlier. Readers get a glimpse into their family life as well as their teaching profession in the backdrop of a rapidly changing nation of the late 20th century. Overview[] *The Madwoman in the Attic* uses the story of the female author throughout the 19th century as a metaphor to guide readers throughout its more than 700 pages of material. Gilbert and Gubar begin their book with a three-chapter introduction discussing feminist poetics then proceed to examine 19th century female authors, beginning with Jane Austen. *Mary Shelley* and *Emily Bronte* comprise the next section in which Milton’s effects on authors throughout the centuries are considered. The book proceeds with an examination of *Charlotte Brontë*’s four main novels, with the proliferation of enclosure and escape playing an integral part of the analysis. The last two sections discuss *George Eliot* and *Emily Dickinson*. According to their metaphor, in the beginning the woman artist tried to write like an angel in the house of fiction, masking her own truth behind a decorous and ladylike façade, scattering her real desires to the winds (shown by *Austen*’s work). As her cave-prison became more restricted, she fell into the gothic-Satanic mode (proven by the texts of *Shelley* and *E. Brontë*), and later planned mad or monstrous escapes (verified by *C. Brontë*’s novels). Then she dizzily withdrew from those open spaces where the histering presence of the patriarchal sun emphasized her susceptibility (confirmed by *Eliot* and *Dickinson*’s work) (101-102). *Sandra Gilbert Methodology*[] *The authors of The Madwoman in the Attic* use feminist literary theory to read these selected texts from the 19th century, looking for “hidden meanings” beneath the plain text, finding lots of doubles within the literature of this period via both close-reading and comparison with many other texts, both those more recent and those written before the 19th century. Instead of relying heavily on *Harold Bloom*’s “anxiety of influence,” which they see as distinct to male authorship, Gilbert and Gubar introduce the idea of “anxiety of authorship” because a female writer can never become a “precursor” since the act of writing will either isolate or destroy her (49). In chapter 6, the authors also thoroughly examine *John Milton*’s bogey, which is ultimately his powerful rendering of the culture myth that most literary women sensed at the center of Western literary patriarchy, as presented in *Paradise Lost*, which Gilbert and Gubar see as heavily influencing both men and women authors for centuries after being written. Both *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights* are analyzed in relation to *Milton*’s bogey in the subsequent two chapters of the book. Its place in history[] Much research went into this work, and the authors pulled ideas from numerous other writers, scholars and theorists, including *Sylvia Plath*, *Virginia Woolf*, *Harold Bloom*, *Freud*, among many others. Critics associated with new historicism, queer theory, and post colonialism and African-American studies have pointed out that Gilbert and Gubar chose canonical works that were written by white, heterosexual, upper- or middle-class women, excluding many other potential perspectives, claiming to provide an inclusive panorama of the 19th century literary landscape but leaving out many participants. There also only is a cursory acknowledgement of the female writers that came before these writers of the 19th century, such as *Aphra Behn* and many other notable women authors who may have provided a greater precedence of an empowered female author for these 19th century authors than was portrayed in this text. Perhaps they were excluded because these authors were outside the scope of this project; another possibility could be that these earlier writers may not have been well known to Gilbert and Gubar at the time of writing (see *Virginia Woolf*’s *A Room of One’s Own*). Analysis[] *The authors of The Madwoman in the Attic* analyze different 19th century authors in regards to different arguments, but a reoccurring theme in this book is that female authors in the 19th century created female characters to be “angels” or “monsters” within their texts because of the strong force of the patriarchal literary tradition that tended to portray women as these two extremes and nothing in between. The authorial motives behind exposing this trend in 19th century literature seem to be to criticize the patriarchal society of the 19th century at the same time as showing the great literary depth of numerous female authors in this time period. Gilbert and Gubar are very successful in illustrating this pattern when discussing *Charlotte Brontë*’s work, especially *Jane Eyre*, which helped provide the title of their book, referring to *Bertha Mason*, *Rochester*’s insane wife in *Thornfield*’s attic. However, some of the arguments from other sections are not proved as conclusively and the logic seems stretched at times. The three introductory chapters and the section on *Charlotte Brontë* seem the best developed and most cohesive; perhaps the other chapters of this admittedly behemoth work should have been saved for a separate book, being compiled into an independent, more unified work. *Susan Gubar Who should read this book*[] People who are interested in 19th century literature, feminist theory, literature by women, and specifically any of the particular authors analyzed in this work should all consider reading this text. The language used to write *The Madwoman in the Attic* is easily understood even if you are not an expert in literary theory, allowing a wide audience to contemplate the ideas of this book. Though there is justification to support the argument of this being an oversimplified reading of the 19th century, there also is justification for the usefulness of this text. It provides a good starting point in terms of learning about canonical Western literature and the influence of patriarchy and misogynistic tendencies on female authors in the 19th century. To provide a wider range of perspective and scope, it would be a good idea to not stop investigating the 19th century after reading this book, but explore other perspectives after this book has given you some of the basics. You are viewing the table of contents You do not have access to this book on JSTOR. Try logging in through your institution for access. Log in to your personal account or through your institution.

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