

Literary Theory and Criticism-II

UNIT - II

1. The Madwoman in the Attic
- Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar

In 1979, Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert published "The Madwoman in the Attic": The Woman writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, a hallmark of second wave feminist criticism.

Over 700 pages long, The Madwoman in the Attic presents an analysis of a trope found in 19th-century literature.

Gilbert and Gubar's ~~powerful~~ proposed that all female characters in male-authored novels can be categorised as either an angel or a monster; women in fiction were either pure and submissive or sensual, rebellious, and uncontrollable (very undesirable qualities in a Victorian daughter / mother / wife).

In their book, Gilbert and Gubar discuss the angel / monster trope in novels written by women, covering the works of Jane Austen, Mary Shelley,

George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and the Brontës. They claim that 19th-century female writers carried a lot of rage and frustration about the misogynistic world they lived in and the predominantly male literary tradition they tried to enter, and that this gender-specific frustration influenced these writers' creative output.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, their rage was often shown through the figure of the mad woman. They conclude by urging female writers to break out of this patriarchal dichotomy and not to let themselves be limited by its impositions.

The title of the book is derived from Jane Eyre's Bertha Mason, who is locked away by her husband Mr. Rochester in the attic of Thornfield Hall.

Bertha is an ominous character, full of uncontrollable passion, violence, sensuality, and madness, almost bestial in her behaviour.

"In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours, it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face."

Bertha acts as a foil for Jane's pure, calm, and controlled nature. However, one could argue that the lines between angel and monster are blurred and that Bertha is not Jane's opposite, but her double.

The two women are more similar than initially meets the eye: Jane possesses ~~some~~ some of

Bertha's passion and rebelliousness, acting out as a child and refusing to submit to a position of inferiority to the men in her life.

The *Madwoman in the Attic* was revolutionary because Gilbert and Gubar showed that literature written by women is not an anomaly, but that there is, in fact, a distinct female literary tradition to be found.

After the book's publication, there was a new wave of appreciation for works by female writers, and, consequently, works that had faded away into oblivion were once again being read and their significance recognised.

It has since been criticised more and more in recent years, (at times rightly so, but keep in mind that it was written in the seventies!), but there is no denying that this is a foundational work, not only for feminism, but for all of literary theory.

2.

Woman as Other

- from Simone De Beauvoir's
"The Second Sex"

Simone de Beauvoir - "Woman" as Other

Simone de Beauvoir is recognized as a theorist close to the beginning of the second wave in the development of feminist theory. De Beauvoir authored the text, The Second Sex in 1949, and the reader will recognize that much of the writing remains relevant in the twenty-second century.

This is an examination of the third chapter of that text in which de Beauvoir identifies the myths regarding women, and how these myths have been made manifest in the lives of men.

The author adopts the title of "Other" for women based on the dominance of men over women throughout history. This dominance has been demonstrated in the powerless state that women have experienced due to a lack of physical, financial, and intellectual independence that

have been set up solidified through
"the codes of law (that) have been
set up against her".

Lacking these liberties, woman
became dependent on man, and
at the time of de Beauvoir's writing,
was rarely recognized by man
as an equal.

Early in the chapter, de Beauvoir
claims that woman is

"The wished-for intermediary between
~~nature~~ nature, the stranger to man,
and the fellow being who is too
closely identical. She opposes him
with neither the hostile silence
of nature nor the hard
requirement of reciprocal relations;
through a unique privilege she
is a conscious being and yet
it seems possible to possess
her in the flesh". (301).

The "Other" is one who fills what
is lacking in the dominant being
without the threat a person of
equal stature would possess.

De Beauvoir argues that all
creation myths support this position

of dominance over women.

The author goes on to state that "Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being," and goes on to ~~the~~ point out the disregard man has displayed toward nature as the model of the treatment of women.

The Other, according to de Beauvoir, is desired by man "not only to possess her but also to be ratified by her" (312).

The woman has been groomed to remain loyal to the values of the man. De Beauvoir asserts that

"the ideal of the average Western man is a woman who freely accepts his domination, who does not accept his ideas without discussion, but who yields to his arguments, who resists him intelligently and ends by being convinced" (313)

The woman, the Other, is the supreme validating force of the dominate one. She is his "treasure, prey, sport and danger, nurse, guide, judge, mediatrix, mirror" (315).

De Beauvoir completes this section of the book by describing what being the Other means for the woman (323)

She is other than herself, other than what is expected of her. Being all (for the man) she is never quite this which she would be; she is everlasting deception, the very deception of that existence which is never successfully attained nor fully reconciled with the totality of existence.

By succumbing to the role of Other, woman is less than.