The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination

By Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert
Published in 1979, during the movement of second-wave feminism
Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were some of the first feminist literary critics to delve into the female writing of the 19th century
Gilbert and Gubar analyzed the works of 19th century female writers such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot.
Who is the madwoman in the attic?

The title is inspired by a character from the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte. The character, Bertha Mason, is described as mentally ill, and is locked in the attic by her husband because of it. She is depicted as wild and insane, and is viewed as the titular character’s counterpart. She could also be reflective of Bronte’s feelings of suppression as a woman during this time period.
"Reading the writing of women from Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë to Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath, we were surprised by the coherence of theme and imagery that we encountered in the works of writers who were often geographically, historically, and psychologically distant from each other. Indeed, even when we studied women’s achievements in radically different genres, we found what began to seem a distinctively female literary tradition, a tradition that had been approached and appreciated by many women readers and writers but which no one had yet defined in its entirety."

**Angel vs Monster**

- Angel is pure and delicate
- Monster is volatile, disorderly, and unhinged
- This trope is common throughout 19th century writings, as women in stories were displayed as either the Angel or Monster, or both
- Gilbert and Gubar explain that this “tradition”, when used by female writers, was a way to add complexity and realism to otherwise shallow and unrealistic female characters written by men
The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is an example of the Angel vs Monster, as the story begins with a woman suffering from what her physician husband calls “temporary nervous depression.” The woman starts out as the Angel, as she is a gentle and obedient wife. Near the end she transforms into the Monster, becoming obsessive, hysterical and outspoken—basically a completely different person.

“I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?”
*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was written after a physician prescribed the “rest cure” as a treatment for her depression, much like the character in the story. She uses the character of the Monster to confront the stigma against mental illness, especially against women, and how society’s treatment of women could drive them to these points.
The Rest Cure

According to branchcollective.org, some cases of the rest cure consisted of a “regimen of enforced bed rest, isolation, force-feeding, and massage.” Charlotte Perkins Gilman, when seeking treatment for depression after the birth of her child, was treated with the rest cure. After a month of treatment she was told by her physician to “live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. . . . Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live.”
Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic* after analyzing many works written by female authors during the 19th century. They pointed out that the literary community was largely male dominated, and felt that because of this men had a literary history and influence to look back on, while women were still building theirs. Gilbert and Gubar asked the question, “What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse, and what is its sex?” This, and the superficial representation of women characters in writing, led many women authors to embrace their stereotypical image in a way that transformed it. Gilbert and Gubar exemplified this in a quote from Virginia Woolf in which she says that female writers must “kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art.”
Discussion Questions

1. What are some stories we’ve read in class that use the “Angel vs Monster” theme previously discussed?

2. Can you think of any modern media where something similar to this theme is used?