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Gender, Class, and the Construction of Female Madness in Victorian Fiction: Brontë and Collins

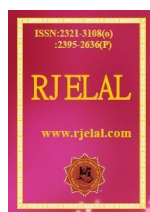
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Abstract

Victorian representations of female mental illness are closely connected with gender, class, social conformity, and institutional authority. This article examines female madness in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60), focusing on female subjectivity, social power, and institutional control. Particular attention is given to Bertha Mason's confinement and Jane's struggle for autonomy, Lucy Snowe's psychological distress and narrative subjectivity, and Anne Catherick's institutional marginalization and contested identity. The study argues that female madness in these novels cannot be understood solely as a medical or psychological condition, but must be considered in relation to patriarchal structures, class relations, and social expectations of femininity. While women's voices are silenced, fragmented, or discredited, the novels also expose the limitations of such classifications. Madness consequently emerges as a contested category through which gender, vulnerability, resistance, and social control intersect.

Keywords: Victorian literature, female madness, gender, class, mental illness, Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins, patriarchy, feminism.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of female mental illness occupies a significant position in Victorian literature. During the nineteenth century, changing medical understandings of insanity existed alongside strong cultural expectations concerning femininity, domesticity, morality, and social respectability.

Consequently, representations of women experiencing psychological distress were rarely separated from broader assumptions about how women were expected to behave. Literary representations of female madness therefore provide an important means of examining the relationship between individual psychological

experience and the social structures within which women lived.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, together with Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, offer particularly productive examples of this relationship. These novels represent female psychological distress through interconnected concerns of gender, class, social marginalization, and institutional authority. Historical scholarship similarly demonstrates that Victorian psychiatry and asylum practices were deeply shaped by gender, while more recent scholarship has emphasized the intersection of gender and class in the diagnosis, treatment, and experience of mental illness. Milne-Smith observes that "more recent scholarship has also focused in on the interrelations between gender and class in the diagnosis, treatment, experience, and outcomes of mental illness" (Milne-Smith 5). Madness should therefore not be understood solely as a medical category but as a condition whose meanings were shaped by the social and institutional structures surrounding the individual.

The three novels present different forms of female psychological marginalization. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason's confinement provides the most explicit representation of female madness, while Jane's struggle for autonomy provides a contrasting representation of a woman negotiating patriarchal and class restrictions. Beattie cautions against reducing Bertha to a purely metaphorical figure, noting that critics have sometimes denied her "agency as an active subject within the narrative" (Beattie 495). In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe's psychological experience is presented through a subjective narrative that complicates the distinction between emotional distress and madness. Bury argues that "Dr John and M. Paul use the male gaze and enforced isolation as tools for reinstating gendered conformity" (Bury 161). In *The Woman in White*, Anne Catherick's experience demonstrates the vulnerability of women when their identities and psychological conditions become subject to

institutional authority. These three figures consequently provide different perspectives on the relationship between female subjectivity and social power.

This article does not attempt to diagnose the fictional characters according to modern psychiatric categories. Such an approach would risk imposing contemporary medical terminology on nineteenth-century literary texts. Instead, the study examines how madness is constructed within the novels and what social meanings are attached to female psychological instability. Particular attention is given to narrative voice, confinement, economic dependence, female agency, and institutional control.

The central argument is that gender and class significantly influence the representation of female madness in these works. Victorian femininity establishes behavioral expectations against which women are judged, while class influences their access to economic independence, social credibility, and institutional authority. Madness consequently becomes more than a representation of individual psychological disturbance. It becomes a category through which social difference can be identified, controlled, and, in some cases, resisted. At the same time, the novels complicate any simple opposition between female victims and patriarchal oppressors by showing how psychological experience is shaped by intersecting conditions of gender, class, social isolation, and institutional power.

Gender, Class, and Female Agency in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents female identity within a social structure shaped by gender hierarchy and class inequality. Jane's position as an economically dependent governess makes her vulnerable to the assumptions attached to both her sex and her social status. Her confrontation with Rochester, however, explicitly challenges the idea that economic or physical difference determines

human worth. When Rochester's impending marriage to Blanche Ingram threatens Jane's position, she refuses to accept the notion that poverty makes her emotionally or spiritually inferior. She declares: "Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?" (*Jane Eyre* 187).

Bertha Mason's representation must, however, be approached with historical caution. Amy Milne-Smith observes that Bertha has become an important feminist symbol, particularly through later interpretations that transform her into a figure of patriarchal oppression, but she also emphasizes the danger of allowing later representations to replace the historical specificity of Brontë's original text. This distinction is important because *Jane Eyre* itself provides Bertha with very limited narrative agency. Rochester's description of her as "mad" becomes the dominant explanation of her condition, while the reader receives almost no account of her psychological experience from her own perspective.

Jane's statement is important to the present argument because it links class inequality directly with female subjectivity. Her poverty and lack of conventional beauty do not, in her view, diminish her capacity for feeling or judgment. More significantly, she refuses to allow Rochester's superior social and economic position to determine the value of her identity. Her assertion that she possesses "as much soul" and "full as much heart" (*Jane Eyre* 187), as Rochester establishes an alternative conception of equality that challenges the social hierarchy governing their relationship.

Jane's resistance is also significant because Victorian femininity often demanded emotional restraint and obedience. Brontë makes this restraint visible earlier in the novel when Rochester observes that Jane's Lowood education has taught her to control her expressions and movements. He describes her as a "vivid, restless, resolute captive" behind "close-set bars," suggesting that her apparently

controlled exterior conceals a powerful interior self. (*Jane Eyre* 105). The metaphor is especially useful for understanding the novel's treatment of female psychological experience: Jane is not naturally passive, but has learned to regulate her behavior within institutions that restrict female expression.

The distinction between psychological distress and social repression becomes particularly important when Bertha Mason is introduced. Unlike Jane, Bertha has no sustained narrative voice through which she can explain her condition. Her identity is largely constructed through Rochester's account. During the interrupted wedding ceremony, Rochester publicly reveals Bertha's identity and explains the terms through which she has been represented to the outside world:

You say you never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at the house up yonder, Wood; but I daresay you have many a time inclined your ear to gossip about the mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward. Some have whispered to you that she is my bastard half-sister: some, my cast-off mistress. I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago, —Bertha Mason by name. Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations. Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard! —as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. (*Jane Eyre* 215)

Rochester's account is significant because it defines Bertha through the language of madness, heredity, and confinement rather than allowing her to speak for herself. The description of her as a "mysterious lunatic" kept "under watch and ward" establishes her confinement as part of her social identity, while

the repeated emphasis on hereditary madness presents her condition as predetermined by her family history. His assertion that Bertha "copied" her mother's supposed madness further removes individual agency from her behavior. Bertha is consequently represented not as a woman capable of explaining her own psychological experience but as an object of interpretation whose identity is controlled by her husband. The passage therefore illustrates how the representation of female madness can become intertwined with patriarchal authority: Rochester does not merely describe Bertha's condition; he determines how others are expected to understand her.

However, the novel simultaneously complicates Rochester's authority by revealing the material circumstances surrounding the marriage. Rochester explains that his father wanted him to make a wealthy marriage and that the Mason family could provide a fortune of thirty thousand pounds. This detail is crucial for a reading based on class and power. Bertha's marriage is not presented simply as a private emotional relationship; it is embedded in economic calculation and family interests. Rochester himself describes how his father's concern with inheritance led to the arrangement.

The economic dimension does not invalidate Rochester's description of Bertha's psychological condition, but it demonstrates that her identity is constructed within a marriage shaped by wealth, inheritance, patriarchal decision-making, and social status. The question of madness therefore cannot be separated entirely from the material conditions surrounding the marriage.

Rochester's subsequent description of Bertha is also heavily evaluative. He characterizes her behavior through terms associated with moral as well as psychological failure, describing her as possessing a "violent and unreasonable temper" and emphasizing what he regards as her sexual and moral

transgressions. This conflation of psychological instability with moral judgment is particularly significant. Bertha is not simply represented as mentally disturbed; her identity is constructed through a series of judgments about what constitutes acceptable female behavior.

Consequently, *Jane Eyre* presents two contrasting forms of female difference. Jane experiences strong emotion and resists patriarchal authority, but she retains narrative control over her own experience. Bertha, by contrast, is deprived of such control and becomes an object of description, confinement, and interpretation. Jane's resistance remains socially and narratively legible, whereas Bertha's resistance is transformed into evidence of disorder.

This distinction becomes especially clear when Jane asserts her independence. When Rochester attempts to prevent her departure, she rejects the idea that she can be possessed or controlled, declaring: "I am a free human being with an independent will" (*Jane Eyre* 187).

The statement is central to the novel's treatment of female autonomy. Jane's assertion of an "independent will" contrasts sharply with Bertha's physical confinement and lack of narrative agency. Brontë therefore places two forms of female resistance beside one another: Jane's resistance is articulated through language and self-definition, while Bertha's is represented through physical disruption and is subsequently classified as madness.

The contrast does not make Jane simply the "sane" alternative to Bertha. Rather, it demonstrates how social structures determine which forms of female resistance can be recognized as legitimate. Jane's ability to articulate her position gives her a degree of agency that Bertha is denied. The distinction between the two women therefore has as much to do with voice, social recognition, and institutional power as with psychology.

The novel thus supports the central argument of this research: female madness is represented within a broader system of gender and class relations rather than as an isolated medical phenomenon. The uploaded research synopsis similarly identifies Bertha's confinement as connected with patriarchal fears surrounding female autonomy and emphasizes the need to examine madness through intersecting forces of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and institutional control.

3. Psychological Distress, Female Subjectivity, and Class in *Villette*

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* presents female psychological experience in a form substantially different from the externalized confinement of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Lucy Snowe is not simply described by other characters as mentally unstable; instead, the reader encounters her psychological condition through her own narration. This narrative perspective makes *Villette* particularly significant for examining how female distress can become internalized, concealed, and difficult to distinguish from ordinary emotional experience. Lucy's psychological experience is further shaped by her social isolation, economic position, and encounters with forms of male and medical authority.

Lucy Snowe's psychological distress is closely connected with her experience of isolation. Hannah Bury identifies a reciprocal relationship between Lucy's madness and isolation, arguing that enforced isolation and voluntary solitude shape Lucy's experience of psychological distress. Bury further argues that Dr John and M. Paul use "the male gaze and enforced isolation as tools for reinstating gendered conformity" (Bury 162). This interpretation is particularly relevant to Lucy's own account of social interaction, where she describes the psychological and physical exhaustion produced by unfamiliar company:

I liked to visit the picture-galleries, and
I dearly liked to be left there alone. In

company, a wretched idiosyncrasy forbade me to see much or to feel anything. In unfamiliar company, where it was necessary to maintain a flow of talk on the subjects in presence, half an hour would knock me up, with a combined pressure of physical lassitude and entire mental incapacity. I never yet saw the well-reared child, much less the educated adult, who could not put me to shame, by the sustained intelligence of its demeanour under the ordeal of a conversable, sociable visitation of pictures, historical sites or buildings, or any lions of public interest. (*Villette* 129)

Lucy then contrasts this social exhaustion with the solitude she experiences at the galleries, where she is "happy" while she is able to examine, question, and form her own conclusions. Her distress is therefore not presented simply as a clearly defined medical disorder. Rather, her account suggests that social interaction itself can become psychologically overwhelming, while solitude provides a temporary space in which she can recover intellectual and emotional control. Bury's distinction between enforced and voluntary isolation is particularly useful here: Lucy's chosen solitude can provide relief, whereas isolation imposed by others becomes a mechanism of surveillance and control.

Lucy initially presents herself as emotionally controlled and socially restrained. Yet her narration repeatedly reveals the psychological cost of this self-control. Her preference for solitude, however, does not necessarily indicate madness. She explains that she is happiest when she can remain alone in the galleries, where she can examine, question, and form her own conclusions without the pressure of social performance. Her solitude therefore has an ambivalent meaning. It can indicate isolation, but it can also provide a space in which she can exercise intellectual independence. Bury's analysis is useful here

because it shows that Lucy's voluntary withdrawal into solitude can function as a respite from social expectations, even while enforced isolation contributes to her psychological suffering.

This distinction is important for understanding the representation of female psychological distress. Victorian social expectations could make female withdrawal appear abnormal, particularly when women were expected to be sociable, emotionally accommodating, and domestically oriented. Lucy's discomfort with social performance can therefore be read not simply as an individual psychological weakness but as a response to the demands placed upon her. Her desire for solitude becomes particularly significant because it offers a limited means of resisting these expectations.

The novel also reveals the economic circumstances underlying Lucy's independence. She continues teaching despite its difficulties because employment provides both financial security and freedom from dependence. When asked why she continues the profession, Lucy explains:

Chiefly, I fear, for the sake of the money ... for the roof of shelter I am thus enabled to keep over my head; and for the comfort of mind, it gives me to think that while I can work for myself, I am spared the pain of being a burden to anybody." (*Villette* 188).

Her explanation makes clear that employment is not simply a professional choice but a condition of independence. Lucy explicitly associates work with shelter, financial self-sufficiency, and freedom from dependence. Economic independence therefore becomes an important part of her negotiation with the restrictive expectations placed upon Victorian women. Her employment gives her a degree of control over her life even while her social position remains precarious.

Lucy's economic position further complicates the relationship between female respectability, psychological distress, and autonomy. Although her decision to work is viewed by others with a degree of pity, Lucy herself understands employment primarily as a means of securing independence. When questioned about why she continues teaching, she explains that she does so "for the sake of the money" and, more significantly, for "the roof of shelter" and the "comfort of mind" that employment provides. She emphasizes that working for herself enables her to avoid "the pain of being a burden to anybody" (*Villette* 188). Mr Home's response further complicates this exchange. Although Lucy's independence initially attracts pity, he ultimately recognizes her decision to work as an appropriate response to the "uncertain nature of this world's goods," expressing the wish that Polly might similarly learn "to work for herself" rather than depend upon others (*Villette* 188). The passage therefore presents employment as more than a professional obligation: it provides Lucy with material security, dignity, and a measure of personal autonomy. At the same time, the contrasting responses of pity and approval reveal the class dimension of female independence, since Lucy's ability to preserve her autonomy depends partly upon her capacity to support herself financially.

This economic dimension is important to Lucy's psychological experience because financial dependence would further restrict her already limited social freedom. Her employment gives her a measure of control over her circumstances, allowing her to avoid dependence upon relatives or male benefactors. The novel therefore presents work as both an economic necessity and a means through which a woman can negotiate the expectations of respectable femininity. Lucy's position demonstrates that female autonomy is not simply a matter of psychological determination; it is also dependent upon material conditions.

The relationship between psychological distress and institutional authority becomes more explicit in Lucy's encounters with Dr John. As a physician, Dr John possesses a form of authority that Lucy cannot easily challenge, and his interpretation of her experiences competes with her own understanding of them. When he attributes her experience of the nun to "optical illusion—nervous malady, and so on," Lucy rejects his explanation, admitting, "Not one bit did I believe him; but I dared not contradict: doctors are so self-opinionated, so immovable in their dry, materialist views" (*Villette* 173). The significance of this exchange lies in the contrast between Lucy's subjective knowledge and Dr John's professional authority. Lucy knows that his explanation does not correspond with her experience, yet she feels unable to challenge him openly.

Bury's analysis helps clarify this imbalance between personal experience and medical authority. She describes Lucy's position as an example of the "powerlessness of the individual against 'expert' medical opinion," emphasizing the authority exercised by Dr John in interpreting Lucy's psychological experiences (Bury 163). Lucy's refusal to accept his explanation nevertheless preserves a degree of interpretive autonomy. Although she cannot easily challenge the physician's authority publicly, her narration allows her to question the diagnosis privately. Brontë therefore creates a distinction between being medically interpreted and possessing one's own understanding of one's experience.

The contrast between these two episodes is significant. Lucy's employment provides her with material independence, while her narration provides her with a degree of psychological and interpretive independence. In both cases, however, her autonomy remains constrained by structures of authority. Economic circumstances determine the extent to which she can support herself, while medical authority determines how her psychological experiences can be interpreted by others. *Villette*

thus presents female autonomy as partial and negotiated rather than absolute.

The relationship between medical authority and isolation is particularly significant. Lucy's confinement is intended to restore her health, yet the experience itself produces further psychological pressure. Bury explicitly connects Lucy's confinement with the fact that she is "racked and oppressed in mind" through isolation (Bury 104). Brontë gives the reader a much fuller account of this psychological experience:

Some fearful hours went over me: indescribably was I torn, racked and oppressed in mind. Amidst the horrors of that dream, I think the worst lay here. Methought the well-loved dead, who had loved me well in life, met me elsewhere, alienated: galled was my inmost spirit with an unutterable sense of despair about the future. Motive there was none why I should try to recover or wish to live; and yet quite unendurable was the pitiless and haughty voice in which Death challenged me to engage his unknown terrors. (*Villette* 109)

The passage makes psychological distress inseparable from isolation. Lucy's suffering is expressed through the language of physical oppression, alienation, despair, and the apparent loss of any motive to continue living. Significantly, this experience is presented through Lucy's own consciousness rather than through an external medical diagnosis. The narrative therefore gives psychological distress an interior dimension that medical authority cannot fully capture. The apparent contradiction is important: an institutional response intended to treat psychological distress can itself intensify the isolation through which that distress is experienced.

The novel also uses the language of madness in ways that complicate its meaning. Rather than presenting "insanity" exclusively as

a medical condition, Brontë allows Lucy to use the vocabulary of madness to describe an overwhelming emotional experience. After receiving a letter that gives her an unexpected sense of happiness, Lucy reflects:

I experienced a happy feeling—a glad emotion which went warm to my heart, and ran lively through all my veins. For once a hope was realized. I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures, and on which humanity starves but cannot live; not a mess of that manna I drearly eulogized a while ago—which, indeed, at first melts on the lips with an unspeakable and preternatural sweetness, but which, in the end, our souls full surely loathe; longing deliriously for natural and earth-grown food, wildly praying Heaven's Spirits to reclaim their own spirit-dew and essence—an aliment divine, but for mortals deadly. It was neither sweet hail nor small coriander-seed—neither slight wafer, nor luscious honey, I had lighted on; it was the wild, savoury mess of the hunter, nourishing and salubrious meat, forest-fed or desert-reared, fresh, healthful, and life-sustaining. It was what the old dying patriarch demanded of his son Esau, promising in requital the blessing of his last breath. It was a godsend; and I inwardly thanked the God who had vouchsafed it. (*Villette* 104)

Lucy then describes this state as “Strange, sweet insanity!” (Brontë 156). Here, “insanity” does not function as a clinical diagnosis but as a metaphor for an emotional state that exceeds ordinary restraint. The episode demonstrates how the language of madness in *Villette* can move between medical, psychological, and metaphorical meanings. Madness is therefore not always represented as a fixed medical category; it can also describe experiences of

emotional intensity that cannot easily be contained within conventional language.

This becomes particularly significant because Lucy's psychological life is considerably more intense than her outward behavior suggests. Her social identity is controlled and reserved, while her interior consciousness contains strong emotional fluctuations. When she later reflects upon a moment of emotional crisis, she explicitly acknowledges the difficulty of reconstructing such experiences:

Certain junctures of our lives must always be difficult of recall to memory. Certain points, crises, certain feelings, joys, griefs, and amazements, when reviewed, must strike us as things wildered and whirling, dim as a wheel fast spun. I can no more remember the thoughts or the words of the ten minutes succeeding this disclosure, than I can retrace the experience of my earliest year of life: and yet the first thing distinct to me is the consciousness that I was speaking very fast, repeating over and over again: — “Did you do this, M. Paul? Is this your house? Did you furnish it? Did you get these papers printed? Do you mean me? Am I the directress? Is there another Lucy Snowe? Tell me: say something.” (*Villette* 321)

The statement introduces an important element of narrative uncertainty. Lucy does not claim complete mastery over her own psychological history; instead, memory becomes indistinct at moments of intense emotional experience. This instability should not automatically be interpreted as madness. Rather, Brontë uses the limitations of memory to demonstrate that subjective experience cannot always be translated into a completely coherent chronological account. Lucy's narrative consequently occupies an uncertain space between psychological testimony and retrospective reconstruction. Unlike Bertha Mason, however, Lucy retains the ability to

narrate her own experience and to question the interpretations imposed upon her.

The novel's representation of Lucy's identity is further complicated by the male gaze. Bury argues that the male gaze functions as a method of surveillance through which Dr John and M. Paul exercise patriarchal authority over Lucy. Lucy herself recognizes the importance of observation and attempts to protect her interior life from Dr John's scrutiny. She observes: "I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through" (*Villette* 162)

Bury explains that Lucy's position as observer is complicated when Dr John returns her gaze and thereby exposes her to objectification. Observation therefore becomes a form of social power: the woman who is watched is simultaneously interpreted and judged. Lucy's attempts to control what others are permitted to see represent a limited form of resistance to this process.

Class remains central to this psychological and social struggle. Lucy's employment provides her with a degree of independence, while her later financial security significantly changes her psychological circumstances. After receiving greater material security, she reflects:

The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart. The spring which moved my energies lay far away beyond seas, in an Indian isle. At parting, I had been left a legacy; such a thought for the present, such a hope for the future, such a motive for a persevering, a laborious, an enterprising, a patient and a brave course—I could not flag. Few things shook me now; few things had importance to vex, intimidate, or depress me: most things pleased—mere trifles had a charm. Do not think that

this genial flame sustained itself, or lived wholly on a bequeathed hope or a parting promise. A generous provider supplied bounteous fuel. I was spared all chill, all stint; I was not suffered to fear penury; I was not tried with suspense. (*Villette* 326)

The change does not suggest that economic security automatically eliminates psychological suffering, but it demonstrates the extent to which material circumstances influence Lucy's ability to exercise control over her life. Her psychological stability is presented alongside freedom from the fear of poverty, making class an important part of Brontë's representation of female autonomy.

Thus, *Villette* extends the argument established through *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's assertion of an "independent will" challenges the intersection of gender and class. In *Villette*, Lucy demonstrates that such independence requires material security as well as psychological strength. Her employment provides a limited form of autonomy, while later financial stability enables a fuller expression of that autonomy.

Lucy Snowe therefore represents a form of female psychological experience that is neither simply madness nor simple sanity. Her distress emerges through solitude, emotional repression, economic insecurity, social expectations, and the difficulty of articulating inner experience. Brontë's narrative technique makes these tensions visible by allowing the reader to experience psychological instability from within rather than merely observing it from outside.

This makes *Villette* an important counterpart to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha is largely defined by others, while Lucy possesses the narrative authority to describe and question her own experience. Yet Lucy's authority is not absolute: her psychological state is interpreted by male and medical authority, and her economic position limits her

independence. Together, the two novels demonstrate that female psychological experience is shaped not only by individual consciousness but also by the social structures that determine who may speak, who may be believed, and who has the authority to define madness.

4. Institutional Power, Female Madness, and Credibility in *The Woman in White*

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* extends the discussion of female madness from the psychological and domestic spheres into the institutional sphere. While *Jane Eyre* associates female madness with Bertha Mason's confinement and *Villette* explores psychological distress through Lucy Snowe's subjective consciousness, Collins focuses more explicitly on the power of institutions to define, confine, and silence women. Anne Catherick is central to this representation because her supposed mental illness becomes inseparable from the question of who has the authority to determine her identity and sanity. Her wrongful incarceration consequently becomes an important example of the intersection between gender and institutional authority.

Anne's situation becomes particularly disturbing because the novel eventually reveals that the category of madness can be manipulated for purposes that have little to do with medical care. Sir Percival openly discusses having Anne confined in an asylum. In his conversation with Count Fosco, he explains:

No, she was the best-behaved patient they had—and, like fools, they trusted her. She's just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large—if you understand that?" (*The Woman in White* 200).

Sir Percival's statement exposes the strategic use of madness as a means of controlling Anne. The phrase "just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me" is particularly significant because it reveals that

Anne's confinement is valuable to Sir Percival precisely because her freedom threatens to expose his secret. Madness consequently functions not simply as a medical condition but as a category through which a woman's freedom and credibility can be restricted. Collins thereby connects female psychological marginalization with patriarchal and institutional power, showing how the authority to classify a woman as mad can become a means of silencing her.

This representation can be placed within the broader Victorian literary treatment of madness. Allan Beveridge and Edward Renvoize identify wrongful confinement in an asylum as a significant element of *The Woman in White* and discuss Anne Catherick as a figure through whom Victorian concerns about madness and institutional control are represented. Their observation is important because Anne's condition is not presented independently of the institutional structures that interpret and manage it. The question of whether she is mentally ill is consequently connected with the more immediate question of who possesses the authority to confine her.

Collins further exposes the institutional consequences of this manipulation when Laura Glyde is subsequently placed in the asylum under Anne's identity. The narrative describes the consequences of her confinement and the systematic destruction of her identity:

These were the only recollections—all of them uncertain, and some of them contradictory—which could be extracted from Lady Glyde by careful questioning on the journey to Cumberland. Miss Halcombe abstained from pressing her with any inquiries relating to events in the Asylum—her mind being but too evidently unfit to bear the trial of reverting to them. It was known, by the voluntary admission of the owner of the mad-house, that she was received there on the twenty-seventh of July. From that date until the

fifteenth of October (the day of her rescue) she had been under restraint, her identity with Anne Catherick systematically asserted, and her sanity, from first to last, practically denied. Faculties less delicately balanced, constitutions less tenderly organized, must have suffered under such an ordeal as this. No man could have gone through it and come out of it unchanged. (*The Woman in White* 262)

The passage is particularly important because Collins explicitly connects psychological disturbance with the experience of institutional confinement. Laura's recollections are described as "uncertain" and "contradictory," but the narrative does not treat this uncertainty as proof of an original mental illness. Instead, it places her fragmented memory after months of restraint, identity manipulation, and the systematic denial of her sanity. The asylum consequently becomes a space in which institutional treatment can itself produce psychological consequences. Collins thus complicates the distinction between pre-existing mental illness and psychological disturbance produced by institutional abuse.

The asylum becomes a space in which identity can be imposed rather than discovered. The authorities repeatedly call Laura "Anne Catherick," while Laura's own claim to be Lady Glyde is rejected. The nurse directs attention to the name marked on her clothing as evidence of the identity assigned to her. Clothing, institutional naming, and medical authority consequently work together to construct an identity that contradicts the woman's own testimony. Once Laura has been classified as Anne Catherick, her assertion of her actual identity can itself be interpreted as evidence of insanity. The classification therefore becomes self-reinforcing: she is considered mad because she claims to be someone whom the institution says she is not, while the institution's claim is treated as proof of her supposed madness.

This is one of the strongest examples in the novel of the relationship between madness and credibility. Collins demonstrates that the institutional label does not merely describe a woman's psychological condition; it can determine whether her testimony will be believed. The denial of Laura's identity is therefore also a denial of her capacity to speak authoritatively about herself. The asylum possesses the power to name, classify, and confine, but Collins shows that this authority can be manipulated by individuals with social and economic interests.

The financial dimension of Anne's persecution further strengthens this argument. Count Fosco later explains the relationship between the exchange of identities and financial gain:

The statement of this curious fact—intended merely to assist me in identifying the person of whom we were in search—when coupled with the additional information that Anne Catherick had escaped from a mad-house, started the first immense conception in my mind, which subsequently led to such amazing results. That conception involved nothing less than the complete transformation of two separate identities. Lady Glyde and Anne Catherick were to change names, places, and destinies, the one with the other—the prodigious consequences contemplated by the change being the gain of thirty thousand pounds, and the eternal preservation of Sir Percival's secret (*The Woman in White* 368).

The monetary figure is significant because it reveals that female identity and mental illness have become entangled with property and inheritance. The transformation of Anne and Laura is not motivated only by personal hostility; it is part of a scheme with a substantial financial objective. Laura's fortune

becomes an important motivation for Sir Percival's actions, while Anne becomes dangerous because she possesses knowledge capable of threatening his financial position. Madness is therefore connected with class and property, not merely with gender. Gender creates the conditions under which women's voices can be dismissed, but class and property determine the material stakes of that dismissal.

The novel also provides an important contrast between Anne's own behavior and the descriptions imposed upon her. When Anne meets Laura at the boat-house, she is frightened because she believes that someone has been secretly watching them. Laura, however, cannot initially determine whether Anne's perception is the result of psychological disturbance or whether a third person is actually present. The narrative records Laura's uncertainty:

I waited for a moment to consider. Was this third person, supposed to have been secretly present at the interview, a reality, or the creature of Anne Catherick's excited fancy? It was impossible to determine. The one thing certain was, that we had failed again on the very brink of discovery—failed utterly and irretrievably, unless Anne Catherick kept her appointment at the boat-house for the next day (*The Woman in White* 169).

This moment introduces genuine uncertainty into the narrative. Collins does not simply establish that Anne is completely sane and that every perception she has is accurate. Instead, psychological uncertainty exists alongside a very real conspiracy. Laura's inability to determine whether the third person is "a reality" or "the creature of Anne Catherick's excited fancy" is particularly significant because Anne's previous classification as mentally unstable makes her perceptions vulnerable to dismissal. Yet the narrative does not allow the reader to dismiss her fears entirely. The existence of an actual

conspiracy means that what appears to be psychological disturbance may also be an accurate perception of danger. Collins therefore creates an important problem of interpretation: when a woman has been classified as mad, how can her warnings be distinguished from symptoms? By allowing Anne's apparently irrational fears to contain an element of truth, Collins challenges the assumption that female psychological instability necessarily makes a woman an unreliable witness.

The contrast between Anne's perspective and Sir Percival's actions further reveals the problem of female credibility. Sir Percival has a personal interest in silencing Anne because her knowledge could expose his secret. The label of madness therefore serves both to restrict her freedom and to undermine her testimony. Marian Halcombe, however, does not simply dismiss Anne's statements as irrational but considers them in relation to the circumstances surrounding her.

Anne's experience also shows that institutional control continues beyond physical confinement. Even after escaping the asylum, the fear of being discovered and confined again shapes her behavior. Her physical illness further increases her vulnerability, making her dependent upon others while her supposed mental illness provides a justification for controlling her.

Thus, *The Woman in White* connects female madness with institutional and economic power. Anne's supposed insanity becomes a means of discrediting her voice, restricting her movement, and suppressing her knowledge. Collins therefore shows that madness can function not only as a condition attributed to women but also as a social category through which their identity and freedom can be controlled.

5. Comparative Discussion: Madness, Voice, and Social Power

A comparative reading of *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *The Woman in White* reveals that

female madness is represented through different narrative and institutional structures, yet all three novels connect psychological experience with social power. The most significant difference lies in the relationship between madness and female voice. Bertha Mason is largely denied the opportunity to explain herself, as her condition is defined primarily through Rochester's account. His declaration, "Bertha Mason is mad" (*Jane Eyre* 445), reduces her identity to a category imposed by male authority. Her confinement is therefore both physical and narrative: she is restricted within Thornfield and denied an independent account of her own experience.

Lucy Snowe occupies a different position because she retains narrative authority. Although her psychological experience is sometimes uncertain and fragmented, she is able to describe and interpret her own condition. Her acknowledgement that certain experiences are "difficult of recall to memory" (*Villette* 321) demonstrates that *Villette* presents female subjectivity as complex rather than completely coherent. Unlike Bertha, Lucy can question the interpretations placed upon her, although her experience remains subject to social and medical authority.

Anne Catherick occupies an intermediate position. She possesses a voice, but institutional power threatens to invalidate it. Sir Percival's description of her as "just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large" (*The Woman in White* 200), demonstrates how madness can become an instrument of control. Anne's supposed insanity weakens her credibility while her knowledge makes her threatening to those who seek to silence her. The three women therefore represent different forms of marginalization: Bertha is silenced, Lucy is psychologically uncertain but narratively articulate, and Anne is institutionally discredited.

Class further complicates this comparison Jane challenges the social hierarchy based on

class and appearance when she declares, "Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?" (*Jane Eyre* 182). Lucy similarly regards employment as essential to her independence, while *The Woman in White* makes the relationship between female identity and economic power particularly explicit through the manipulation of Anne and Laura's identities for financial purposes. These representations demonstrate that gender cannot be separated from material conditions. Access to employment, money, property, and social credibility influences the degree of independence available to women and their vulnerability to external control.

The forms of authority operating in the three novels also differ. In *Jane Eyre*, madness is primarily associated with domestic and patriarchal authority, as Bertha's confinement takes place within Rochester's household. In *Villette*, Lucy encounters social and medical forms of authority that attempt to interpret and regulate her psychological experience. In *The Woman in White*, legal, medical, and institutional authority directly determines female identity and freedom. Madness therefore operates at several interconnected levels: as an individual psychological experience, a social judgment, and an institutional category.

Yet the novels do not present madness exclusively as female weakness. Jane asserts her "independent will" (*Jane Eyre* 386), Lucy struggles to preserve economic and psychological independence, and Anne becomes threatening to those who control her because she possesses knowledge that can expose them. Madness consequently has a double function: it can be used to regulate women, but its representation can also expose the structures that produce their marginalization. The category of madness thus becomes a site where social control and female resistance intersect.

Narrative technique strengthens this argument. Brontë uses Gothic confinement and

limited access to Bertha's voice in *Jane Eyre*, psychological interiority and uncertainty in *Villette*, and multiple perspectives, identity substitution, and institutional structures in *The Woman in White*. These different techniques prevent female psychological experience from being reduced to a single, objective definition. Taken together, the novels therefore shift the central question from whether these women are "mad" to who possesses the authority to define them as mad and what consequences follow from that definition. Bertha's confinement, Lucy's self-narration, and Anne's institutional vulnerability demonstrate that madness in Victorian fiction is inseparable from questions of gender, class, credibility, and power.

6. CONCLUSION

The representation of female mental illness in *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *The Woman in White* shows that Victorian literary madness is closely connected with gender, class, and social power. Rather than presenting psychological distress as an isolated medical condition, the novels reveal how women's behavior and identities are shaped by patriarchal and institutional structures.

Bertha Mason is silenced and confined, Lucy Snowe retains a narrative voice but experiences psychological uncertainty, and Anne Catherick is threatened by institutional authority. Despite these differences, all three demonstrate how female identity and psychological experience can be controlled by those with the power to define acceptable behavior. Class further shapes this vulnerability through Jane's poverty, Lucy's dependence on employment, and the financial interests surrounding Anne and Laura.

The comparison therefore shows that madness functions both as a means of regulation and as a way of exposing social inequality. Brontë and Collins question who has the authority to define a woman as mad and reveal the consequences of such classifications. Female madness consequently emerges as a contested

category through which gender, vulnerability, resistance, identity, and social control intersect.

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