Representation of female duality by Victorian author

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How Victorian Authors Represented Feminine Duality

"There'll be girls across the nation that will eat this up./ Babe, I know that it's your soul, but could you bottle it up?" Sarah Bareilles

As women authors of the 19th century struggled to express themselves, they created Characterswho were both what they should be and what they were told was wrong. The female novelist's need to express a darker side of herself led to the creation of madwomen, ghosts, spectres, and murderesses. These villainous characters represent the dark side of all women that part of themselves the authors were taught to hide. In their novels, some Victorian female authors represented female characters as possessing dual, opposing natures. Two characters can be seen as part and counterpart to each other in *Jane Eyre*, and in *Lady Audley's Secret* the duality may be contained within the same woman. By creating these characters, the authors were able to give expression to the repressed part of their selves, and their readers could also subconsciously pick up on small acts of rebellion, getting a secret thrill out of the unconscionable acts committed in these novels. In order to illustrate this duality of good and bad in the female Victorian character, this chapter will look closely at these two novels and discuss the ways in which they represent the dual nature of women in Victorian society. In *Jane Eyre*, we will see the author using two characters to represent the public appearance and private fears of women while *Lady Audley's Secret* shows duality at its extreme, embodied within one woman who tried desperately to become the perfect lady. This chapter will look at the ideas of the woman as the other and subject of the male gaze and the duality in female characters, connecting all these ideas to the characters of Jane Eyre and Lucy Audley. As discussed in the previous chapter, Simone De Beauvoir wrote about the construction of women as the other, while Laura Mulvey related this idea to how women, as the Other, are repressed by the male gaze. Some female Victorian authors, living in a repressive society, react to this yet unarticulated idea of the male gaze in their representations of women. This is why we see such characters as Bertha in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte; while Jane is representative of what the Victorian woman *should* be, Bertha is a manifestation of that part of a woman kept hidden. Similarly, Lady Audley, in *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Braddon, is an example of a woman who is able to manifest herself as the male ideal on the outside while her true nature is the very antithesis of this. In this way, they are each creating characters who exist within the male gaze and yet, underneath the surface, they are rebelling against the patriarchal definition of woman.

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane strives to be the Victorian ideal of the good woman. She struggles,

from an early age, against the impulses of anger and frustration, striving for a calm and peaceful nature. She asks, "Why could I never please?" (Bronte 27), comments "I was like nobody there" (Bronte 28), and tells the readers "All said I was wicked and perhaps I might be so" (Bronte 28). During her time at school, Jane longs to be like the angelic Helen and squelches any dissatisfaction she feels with her life -- all in an attempt to be what she ought to be. This is a constant struggle for Jane. Like many women, she constantly fights against her true self in order to be the Other that male society wants her to be.

Lucy Audley, from *Lady Audley's Secret*, is another example of the Victorian ideal.

Whereas Jane strives to manifest herself as the Victorian ideal in terms of her *character*, Lucy represents the Victorian ideal of *beauty*. With golden curls and a childlike appearance, she is "blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Everyone loved, admired, and praised her" (Braddon 12). Unfortunately, Lucy's lovely exterior conceals a sinister soul, which her husband-to-be seems momentarily aware of when proposing marriage, "Beyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there was an undefined something in her manner which filled the baronet with a vague alarm" (Braddon 16). Sir Michal Audley would have done well to heed this alarm. His wife's hidden nature is selfish, self-serving, and all the more dangerous because of her contradictory appearance. Nonetheless, this character is extraordinarily compelling, both to the fictional characters that surround her and to the real-life readers who follow her every move with salacious fascination.

Although centuries would pass before Laura Mulvey wrote her essay about cinema, it is as if Braddon and Bronte were writing in agreement with her argument. When discussing women's appearance and ideals of beauty, Mulvey states that reducing women down to "one part of a fragmented body" is stifling and "destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative"; therefore, it creates not a woman, but a rather a caricature: "it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen" (Mulvey 1176). In this way, what you see on the screen is not an accurate representation of a woman. Braddon and Bronte seem to acknowledge this same idea, realizing that they cannot create a complete woman in a heroine to adheres to society's standards, and therefore create a double who will embody all that has been left out. It is as Gilbert and Gubar state in their essay on *Jane Eyre,* "In the nineteenth century, woman authors were hiding something in their writing" (Gilbert and Gubar 1534). What was hidden in characters such as Bertha and Lucy was the darker side of femininity, the side that did not always want to do what was right, the side that struggled against the confines of society. Each madwoman or murderess is not simply a villain but instead a double, representing women's own repressed frustration, and "an image of her own anxiety and rage" (Gilbert and Gubar 1536).

This doubleness of personality, represented through the two characters of Bertha and Jane in *Jane Eyre*, and housed inside the insane Lucy Audley in Braddon's novel, are perfect examples for illustrating the anger and frustration felt by the repressed Victorian women. These female characters were not the male ideal that was forced upon the Victorian audience, but rather complicated and contradictory women, with thoughts, impulses, and ideas of their own. These women do not act in the way that they are *encouraged* to act -- soft spoken and agreeable --rather they act as they *must,* and express their hidden desires. As these desires are at odds with society, however, the creators of these stories used doubleness and duality in order to represent these "odd" sides of women.

In her article, "Double Gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette,*" Robyn Warhol addressed the idea of doubleness, an idea that embraces "binary oppositions without resting comfortably in either of the

two terms being opposed" (857). In order to look more closely at this idea, Warhol focuses on Charlotte Bronte''s books *Jane Eyre* and *Villette,* and also looks at the analytic method of feminist narratology in order to explain the "impact gender can have upon narrative structures" (Warhol 858). She posits that the Victorian woman novelist "exploits the possibility for doubleness that narratology''s categories can bring into the foreground" (Warhol 858). Warhol believes that Bronte has created this doubleness in her characters in order to subvert society''s ideals about women at that time. This subversion, according to Warhol, is accomplished by the Bronte''s refusal to create a character that fits into one specific category, a refusal to create a woman who is "either a narrator or a character…linked to a subversive impulse against a Victorian insistence on being either masculine or feminine, either male-identified or female-identified in life and in writing" (Warhol 871).

Warhol's essay addresses the idea that women authors were consciously attempting to fight off the categories imposed upon them by an oppressive society. The idea of doubleness takes this argument even further by addressing not only the different categories one woman inhabits in a novel but also the ways in which two separate characters could be used to demonstrate the two sides of the Victorian woman''s personality - both the outward mask she presents to the world and the parts of herself she must keep hidden.

Jane'sdoubleness begins early in the novel. Much critical attention has been given to the scene in the red-room and its effects on Jane, for it is to this experience that Jane returns in times of fear. It was here that she first felt terror and anxiety, here that she learned she must not rely on others but on herself. Most importantly, this scene can be marked as the beginning of Jane's duality. When she is first forced into the room, Jane tells us, "I was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself" (Bronte 24). Her terror overwhelms her, to the point where she comes outside of herself. When she later re-awakens to consciousness, Jane has changed, something else has been born of her and she is able to stand up to the vile Mrs. Reed, again feeling as if part of herself is existing outside of the body. Jane tells us, "Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand" (Bronte 48) and, after she unleashes this expansion of her soul on Mrs. Reed, she is told, "You've got quite a new way of talking" (Bronte 50). Therefore, it is early in the novel that Jane''s duality is established. From this point forward, she is constantly at odds with herself and that part of Jane that left her body in the red-room will later be manifested in the physical form of Bertha. Furthermore, it is in this scene of the novel that Jane begins to express the idea that her soul may be able to separate from the body - an idea that will become even more important in the twentieth century.

Lucy'sdoubleness also begins early on. As she begins to mature, Lucy becomes aware of her beauty and realizes that it is a tool she could use. She tells Robert, "As I grew older I was told that I was pretty - beautiful - lovely - bewitching…and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful in the world's great lottery than my companions" (Braddon 345). The secret of her life that Lucy refers to is her mother's insanity and the strains of it that she believes live in her own body. By constructing a perfect outer shell, Lucy has set up the parameters of her dual nature at a young age, contrasting the insanity in her blood with the beauty on her face. She makes the choice at a young age to disguise herself, to pretend to be what she is not. Robert contemplates Lucy's choices, "But how terribly that narrow pathway had widened out into the broad high-road of sin" (Braddon 294). The narrator, Robert, wonders if Lucy would have been able to have a different life had she not chosen to be selfish and self-serving. For Lucy, and perhaps for the readers, however, this was not a choice she could actually have

made. Society forced its will upon Lucy, and her actions were a result of her attempt to fit within the mold set for her by others. As Mary Wollstonecraft had warned in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Lucy's attempt to conform to the male ideal has kept her from her potential and made her like the human creature Wollstonecraft speaks of who has become "weak and depraved" and "an irrational monster" due to the wearing a way of true virtue and intelligence (Wollstonecraft 279).

In her essay, "Plain Jana's Progress," which later became a chapter of *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra Gilbert talks about dual nature and the female character's constant struggle against herself as she attempts to hide her anger and frustration. Speaking of Jane, Gilbert writes that "despite Miss Temple's training, the „bad animal" who was first locked up in the red-room is, we sense, still lurking somewhere, behind a dark door, waiting for a chance to get free"

(Gilbert 483). No matter how valiantly Jane struggles to be obedient, there is always something in her that wants to be free and fight against the roles imposed on her. This can be dangerous if unchecked, as illustrated by Bertha's actions when Jane's wedding approached. As if acting out Jane's fears regarding her union with Rochester, Bertha appears to destroy the wedding veil symbolizing the marriage. Gilbert writes about this scene and its connection to the split in Jane's personality:

On the morning of her wedding: she turns toward the mirror and sees „a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger" reminding us of the moment in the red-room when all had „seemed colder and darker in that visionary hollow of the looking glass than in reality". In view of this frightening series of separations within the self - Jane Eyre splitting off from Jane Rochester, the child Jane weirdly separating from the body of Jane

-it is not surprising that another and most mysterious spectre, a sort of „vampire" should appear in the middle of the night to rend and trample the wedding veil for that unknown person Jane Rochester. (491-92)

Here, Bertha has acted on Jane's fears regarding her impending marriage but also notable is the similarity that Gilbert and Gubar note between this scene and the scene in the red-room. In each of these two passages, Jane experiences a split in herself. In the red-room, the split was between body and soul, and in this scene it would seem that the part of Jane that left her body found a new home in Bertha.

While "Plain Jane's Progress" mainly discusses Jane's separation and desire for escape from herself throughout the novel, the author's findings can also be applied to Lucy:

Escape through flight or escape through starvation: the alternatives will recur throughout *Jane Eyre* and indeed throughout much other Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century literature by women. However, there is a "third, even more terrifying alternative: Escape through madness." (477)

This alternative is one that was also taken by our other „double character, Lucy Audley. Lucy'soutward beauty and compliance with the Victorian ideals of womanhood disguise her true nature. By her own confession, Lucy is insane. She tells Robert, "You have conquered a madwoman!" and then later attributes her murderous nature to her insanity; "I killed him because I am mad!" (Braddon 340-41). Lucy's double nature is dangerous and, too long hidden, ready to lash out at any male who comes too close.

Both Lucy and Bertha are dangerous, especially towards the male characters. Their

Violence, however, is not the violence of men. Rather, they manifest terror and fear in ways that often seem ominous and unearthly. They are referred to as specters and fiends. In this way, we can see that the double nature of women was often represented through sinister and otherworldly imagery. This leads us to a discussion of one of the most compelling characteristics of the Victorian novel: paranormal occurrences

and the character of the ghost. Not all nineteenth-century ghost stories concerned the supernatural in a literal way, but instead, "the supernatural is frequently the natural in masquerade" (Fick 82). Jane'sspecter turns out to be all too real a person, making Bertha an example of this type of literary tool, and, as Fick argues, she is a way for the reader to see Jane's repressed desires and emotions. Bertha appears at the times when Jane is the most frightened or conflicted.

An example of this can be found when Jane contemplates the nature of women and the difficulties she has in following society's dictates for her sex, saying "women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel" (Bronte 116). She is frustrated by her inability to be what she ought to be, and it is, therefore, significant that it is at that moment when Jane switches her discussion to the ghostly sounds in the house: "I not infrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me" (Bronte 117). It is also significant that the laugh of Bertha (though Jane does not yet know it is her) thrills Jane. "Jane first hears the „distinct formal mirthless laugh" of mad Bertha, Rochester's secret wife and in a sense her own secret self" (Gilbert and Gubar 482). She hears the sound of her double, that part of herself that is struggling to vocalize itself. Fick would agree that it is noteworthy that Jane hears Bertha when she is considering her own position as a woman. He states a story like this is "paradigmatic of a number of nineteenth-century women's ghost stories because it points to the problematic relationship between body and soul for nineteenth-century women writers, and to significant tensions in Victorian American thinking about gender relations and social action" (Fick 83).

Although Fick seems to be speaking about Americans, this tension between gender and social action can be applied to *Lady Audley's Secret*. There is not a ghostly apparition in this novel, and yet Lucy herself seems to be a spectral character. This is illustrated by the painting of Lucy, described in great detail by Braddon. Lucy's portrait, "so like and yet so unlike" her, depicts her as a type of evil specter (Braddon 72). She has "a strange, sinister light" in her eyes and her pretty mouth has a "hard and wicked look" so that overall she has "the aspect of a beautiful fiend" (Braddon 72). Alicia comments, "We have never seen my lady look as she does in that picture: but I think that she *could* look so" (Braddon 73). Through this description more than anywhere else in the novel, Braddon has created a separate self for Lucy. The portrait is her true mirror, where her soul has been captured, and, through it, she has become separate from her body. Therefore, Lucy embodies Fick's statement that "the veiled ladies of the authentic ghost story are their own exhibitors, playing bodily force as if it were disembodied" (Fick 84).

Lucy is a sinister character whose dual nature has been formed through tragic circumstances. Always shadowed by her insane mother, Lucy is abandoned by her husband, left to care for a child she does not love, and at the mercy of her shiftless father. In response to this, Lucy chooses to adopt a dual nature. Though this is not a ghost story, Fick's argument about the spectral character can be applied to Lucy"s hidden nature. "The authentic ghost story renders in dramatic terms the nineteenth-century woman reader's desire - if not always her ability - to act forcefully in the realm of the body politic" (Fick 95). Although there is no ghost, Lucy has created this sinister part of herself in response to the circumstances forced upon her by society. She cannot operate happily within society's boundaries, and so she steps outside them. This was a step required not only of the female characters but also of the authors who created them.

Creating characters with dual natures caused these female authors to appear at odds with society and, "to many critics and scholars, some of these literary women look like isolated eccentrics" (Gilbert and Gubar

1533). Their work, however, achieved a higher goal. "Publicly presenting acceptable facades for private and dangerous visions, women writers have long used a wide range of tactics to obscure but not obliterate their most subversive impulses" (Gilbert and Gubar 1534). Through their work, they were smashing "the mirror that has so long reflected what every woman was supposed to be" (Gilbert and Gubar 1536). These dual characters were the start of a movement that continues on through today.

As Ruth Salvaggio argues in "Theory and Space, Space and Woman," women authors have begun to renegotiate the spaces of the female body within literature, rewriting themselves as "at once „here‟ and „elsewhere‟" (Salvaggio 275). In today‟s literature (as will be discussed), women are at once in the body as well as out of it, and it was the Victorian authoress who began this process where women authors write themselves as existing both within and without their bodies. If not for writers such as Charlotte Bronte and Mary Braddon, we would not have arrived at this place in literary history. These female authors reacted to the strict boundaries forced upon them and were brave enough to begin the processes of expressing the true nature of women. Through the use of specters, fiends, and murderesses, these women expressed the hidden desires and frustrations of their sex. It is through the writing of women such as these that females first began to express their own voice and to take their first tentative steps towards the celebration of their duality and differences.

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