

The Transformation of Perception Surrounding Mental Illness to Empower Women

Madison Myers

Mental illness—a way for women to break free from a limiting, patriarchal society.



Historical Approach



Photograph by Jerry Cooke, "Female Patients in Ohio Insane Asylum"

The Psychotic Woman: Men wrote this character, depicting destruction and degradation, upholding systemic patriarchal ideals and overriding women as part of the conversation. Women rewrote, reclaiming and repurposing the role, resetting the ill-shaped mold and adding to the conversation from which they have been systemically excluded.

Mental illness in literature reveals a trend during the 19th Century.



A Law unto Herself by Rebecca Harding Davis

"The Society to which you belong is inexorable in its rules for a woman" (102).

"If my wife is living and wandering insane through the country, it will be necessary to prove my right to claim her" (152).

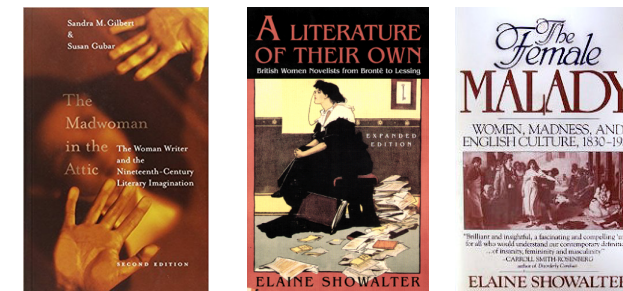
"The only rational way of accounting for her course is that a nervous strain had proven too much for her, and that she was temporarily insane" (169).

"The law, the whole world, were against her" (170).

Davis uses a reflective approach toward insanity in creating new women's spaces.

Critical Approach

Critics analyze mental illness's function in literature: women escape patriarchal constraints and new place emerge where discourse can occur.



*All book cover images taken from Amazon.

The shifting use of mental illness allowed new space for women to create, rather than the common attempt to fit within the already structured system.



When struggle becomes empowerment, possibilities for marginalized voices become available.