

Katherine Kim
Spring 2014: Literary Theory
Exam #1: Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman* → Miley Cyrus

The mention of the name Miley Cyrus receives a large range of different reactions, anywhere from deep admiration to intense disrespect, for being the most popular 21-year-old in the world inevitably subjects a person to much judgment. When Cyrus made her transition from a young Disney Channel starlet to the edgier international singer she is today, many assumed that the still young star simply could not handle the pressure of stardom. However, in the theoretical lens of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, writers of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Cyrus is an artist who consciously makes certain choices for her public image as the result of and as a response to the repressiveness she felt earlier in her career and still feels is placed on women in the modern day.

Because she became very famous at a young age, Cyrus did her growing up in the spotlight, forcing her to be a sort of “passive angel” under the marketing control of the company she worked for and open to judgment from the world that made her famous. When Cyrus took the children’s entertainment world by storm in 2006 as the titular character of *Hannah Montana*, one of the Disney Channel’s most successful TV shows, she achieved her dream of becoming an actress/ singer and became a household name and role model for young people everywhere. For years she maintained her squeaky clean image, even stating in a 2008 interview for Seventeen magazine her refusal of substance use. “My mom's never had a drink in her life because she doesn't like that kind of stuff at all. My dad grew up with an alcoholic mother, and I saw how that really hurt him, so I would never want to put myself in a position where I could hurt someone from the use of alcohol or drugs or whatever, so I'm not really into that kind of thing” (Koday). In addition, on the subject of her romantic relationships, Cyrus presented herself as a happy young woman in

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love with each of her publicized beaux, most notably Liam Hemsworth. In 2010 Cyrus opened up to *Parade* magazine, "All I know is that I am so happy right now. The last thing I was expecting to do was to fall in love. I went [to film *The Last Song*] thinking the summer was about me and getting focused on my career. But I guess God was like, 'Girl, here is this amazing guy'" (Sessums). The young star became known for her frankness, yet it seems that as she grew older, so did the act she later claimed to have been putting on. In the same interview Cyrus also stated, "They say, 'Now this is what we need to do to your makeup, and this is what I want you to wear,' and I'm like, 'Dude, I choose.' When I was 12, that was okay. But I'm older now. I have an opinion. I have my own taste" (Sessums). As she began to mature, the teen star expressed her desire to be freed from the adults around her and make her own choices. Gilbert and Gubar stated in *The Madwoman*, "Whether she is a passive angel or an active monster, the woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the deliberating alternatives her culture offers her." In Cyrus's case, her act as a "passive angel" made her feel increasingly repressed, as every career choice was part of an image she no longer wanted. In the following years, she rid her responsibilities under Disney and created an image that is perhaps the polar opposite of who she used to be.

Leading up to the series finale of *Hannah Montana* in 2011, Cyrus has gained even more media attention with the high amount of coverage of her seemingly scandalous behavior, or her publicizing her rebelling "active monster". According to Gilbert and Gubar, in the nineteenth century "women who asserted their authority as legitimate writers, were considered suspect members of their gender who deserved to be punished for their sin of ambition. To deal with this dilemma, female writers in the nineteenth century engaged in

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complicated subversive strategies...to act out the authors' guilt, rage, and anger." Similarly, in the twenty-first century, Cyrus's entrance into the adult world of the entertainment industry was subject to much negative criticism. Beginning with the 2009 Teen Choice Awards performance of her hit single "Party in the USA", parents of Cyrus's young fans were outraged at her scandalous pseudo-pole dancing atop an ice-cream cart. From then on, the singer's performances included an increasing amount of provocative and controversial elements, as she constantly sought to push the limits of her creative power. Cyrus literally cut off her Hannah Montana days by chopping her long, brown locks for a much edgier short, blonde 'do and completely revamping her music style. The music video releases and performances of the singles "We Can't Stop" and "Wrecking Ball" garnered much international attention, for Cyrus presented herself as a highly sexualized, substance-using punk-rocker through her revealing costumes and promotion of the substance use. Cyrus's current concert tour for her most recent album "Bangerz" is a culmination of perhaps every "bad" or "naughty" thing a person could do or be involved in, with her using human props posing as marijuana joints, touching back-up dancers' genitals, and even her staging sexual acts (Farrow). Although the Disney franchise granted her the fame and fortune that made possible her current and future endeavors, Cyrus has worked hard to rebel from her former "angelic" image and create this new "monster".

Despite her current image as a hedonistic crazy party girl, Cyrus, as well as those around her, has stated that she is, in reality, not nearly as scandalous as she presents herself to be. Like her "angel" days with Disney, this "monster" is an act that she presents to rebel against the two options our culture seems to give women still today. According to

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Gilbert and Gubar, the “angel” is “an ideal representation of feminine-associated attributes like purity, submissiveness, and self-denial” while the “monster” has “traits typically associated with masculine behaviors, like aggressiveness/assertiveness, selfishness/independence, and the lust for fame and fortune.” They believed that women writers were forced to “navigate between or through these depictions of women to re-define what women are—who they really are—before they can be successful at expressing their stories.” Cyrus has also been forced to do exactly that—express herself as an artist by now choosing the monster image over her previous angel. This conscious decision implies the fact that neither the angel nor the monster is who the woman behind the work really is. In a recent interview with W Magazine, Cyrus admitted that her provocative image is calculated as a “response to what she sees as a lack of authenticity in her peer group”. She stated, “I just don’t get what half the girls are wearing. I’m trying to tell girls, like, ‘F*ck that. You don’t have to wear makeup. You don’t have to have long blonde hair and big titties. That’s not what it’s about.” (Farrow). She does not denounce wearing certain styles and makeup but rather the reasons behind wearing them. She finds fault in girls presenting themselves in certain “angelic” ways to fit into society, as she had once been forced to do, and fights the issue by stressing the fact that it is her choice to present herself in the opposite way. In a recent interview with Billboard magazine, Bangerz Tour music director Stacy Jones shared that Cyrus is not the wild party girl the public sees in her videos and performances. “If you walk backstage before the show, it’s Miley hanging out in her room—it’s very tame. There was an after party after the London show last night and I don't even think Miley showed up. I think she went back to her hotel. People's perception of her daily life is very different

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from reality" (Payne). This "monster" Cyrus presents herself as is not her reality but her response to the repressions keeping women from expressing themselves in other ways.

While the internationally famous star continues to make out with dancers dressed as dolls and swing from a giant inflatable hot dog every night of her current concert tour, Miley Cyrus enjoys her freedom to express herself on stage in the ways that she chooses. Instead of accepting fame in terms of being a "passive angel", Cyrus presents the "active monster" version of herself, an embodiment of the madwoman thesis which states that "women were forced to channel their creativity into subversive, devious and perhaps psychologically self-destructive forms because they could not openly express themselves creatively as writers or as artists of other kinds". Although the public, with the exception of her strong fan-base, may still consider her a prime example of how fame can ruin a young person, the singer is in control of her choices and can still say that "she's just being Miley"*.

* quote from Miley Cyrus's single "See You Again", 2007 Hollywood Records.

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-all *Madwoman* quotes were taken from class slides.