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Madwomen and Mad Women:
An Analysis of the Use of Female Insanity and Anger in Narrative Fiction,
From Vilification to Validation

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Lay Summary

This project examines the use of the madwoman character in narrative fiction as it changes within the context of different waves of feminism. The figure of the madwoman is characterized by her apparent insanity and extreme emotion; however, the madwoman can further be examined as a character in opposition to the norms and values of a society. As such, female madness as a social and cultural construct can be used to delineate perceived boundaries within society and their implications for women. In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate these boundaries and the usage of the madwoman character in narrative fiction as she rages against them. Broken into two sections, I examine the development of the madwoman trope and its history, as women have long been situated as both threatening and subordinate to men, and then how the implementation of the trope has changed in conjunction with the changing roles of women and definitions of femininity.

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Introduction

Madness is a concept that has long been gendered female in its many forms: insanity, lunacy, hysteria, irrationality, anger, fury. In today's culture, these terms are constantly used to invalidate women, both implicitly and explicitly, as women are regularly villainized, invalidated, and dismissed in their experiences. Women in the workplace are characterized as difficult; ex-girlfriends are characterized as crazy; female sexual assault victims are characterized as lying, seeking attention, and "asking for it." It is this casual and constant dismissal of female experiences that has led to public outcry, to four waves of feminism and movements such as #YesAllWomen, Free the Nipple, #MeToo, the Women's March, and Time's Up.

At the heart of this issue is an ugly history of villainizing women—a narrative showing women as crazed, passionate, or vengeful, as irrational in their emotions, weak in their physiology, and threatening in their existence—leading to the characterization of the "madwoman." Beginning with ancient etiological myths and continuing throughout literature and fiction, this trope is used time and again to villainize and invalidate women, illustrating the place and role of women in society and culture during specific time periods. However, as the roles and definitions of women and femininity have changed, so has the trope of the madwoman and its utilization, moving from a place of vilification to what I argue is a place of validation. Therefore, in this thesis, I will be examining this trope and how it first developed, and then how it has changed over time in relation to feminist movements, specifically the four waves of feminism.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be referring to socially and culturally constructed female madness to demonstrate the bounds of society and its effects on women. While the ideas present in this thesis have significant ramifications for women of all backgrounds, I will

primarily be examining the experiences of white middle-class women in order to begin this conversation, which is very much an on-going process. In this thesis, I will only scratch the surface of what it means to be a woman in society and what the madwoman signifies in testing the bounds of society, with white middle-class norms and values largely dictating what was considered “sane” and “insane” throughout early modern history and even, to an extent, today. It is important to note that lower-class women and women of color, especially, did experience these associations with irrationality and dangerousness to an even greater extent and were even further marginalized. However, in order to begin examining these issues that the madwoman calls to attention, I will primarily be looking at this demographic of white middle-class women who have experienced this marginalization to the least extent, but with this phenomenon still being significant enough to torment them to madness.

In Section I, I will examine the development of women as a threat, as dangerous, and how women came to be associated with irrationality and madness. I will then examine this association as demonstrated in Shakespeare’s Ophelia, who provides an archetype of the madwoman in both medicine and literature, while officially establishing the madwoman as a literary trope. In Section II, I will examine how the trope of the madwoman and its utilization changes throughout the four waves of feminism. I will analyze *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, whom I argue first changes the trope, displaying the feminist undertones that later led to the first wave of feminism. I will then evaluate Charlotte Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a first-wave feminist work, examining the “madwoman” narrator as a sympathetic and male-made female villain. Following this, I will look at *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath as a second-wave feminist work, examining how the female disillusionment under male-defined femininity interacts with the concept of female madness. I will then analyze *Black Swan* dir. Darren

Aronofsky as a work of third-wave feminism to show how the madwoman trope is used to bring attention to male abuse of power and to female oppression. Lastly, I will examine *Midsommar* dir. Ari Aster as a work of fourth-wave feminism to demonstrate how the trope is used to validate the female experience and to empower women.

Section I

Madness: A Social Construct

In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, philosopher Michel Foucault argues that socially constructed madness is separate from mental illness, with madness having served different purposes during different time periods (Little 55). For the purposes of this paper, I will therefore be referring to this socially and culturally constructed “madness” rather than medically diagnosed mental illnesses. I will primarily be examining the use of constructed madness as a tool in regard to what it reveals about a society at a specific moment in time, specifically through its role in literature. In her book *Madness in Literature* Lilian Feder looks at the importance of madness as a motif in literature, writing of “the nature of madness itself as an incorporation of the very values and prohibitions it challenges” (Feder 4). While madness may be a critique on society or, rather, a cautionary tale, madness takes into account all of the norms and values of a society and then rejects them; as such, madness can also be viewed as a product of society and culture, delineating and illustrating the perceived boundaries and what is “other”.

In *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler writes, “What we consider ‘madness,’ whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex role stereotype” (Chesler 56). Although madness is culturally

constructed, it has been constructed as female, to the point of where the default of madness is feminine. There has been a long history of madness as feminine, with women being viewed in closer proximity to irrationality and madness, more susceptible and vulnerable to insanity, melancholia, and hysteria.

In her book *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter defines both femininity and insanity as culturally constructed, describing “the female malady” in contrast to the English malady, writing:

Even when both men and women had similar symptoms of mental disorder, psychiatry differentiated between an English malady, associated with the intellectual and economic pressures of highly civilized men, and a female malady, associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women. (Showalter 7)

When men and women both had similar “symptoms” of madness or mental illness, the male form of this was distinctly “other” than the female manifestations, having largely to do with female nature. Furthermore, Psychiatrist Paul Chodoff examines hysteria as a “culturally induced exaggeration of femininity” arguing that hysteria is a caricature of what it means to be female (Chodoff 549). Chodoff makes the point that while he is not proclaiming femininity as either a biological nature or, as Showalter claimed, a socially constructed stereotype, hysteria is an exaggerated caricature of femininity in either case.

With these two concepts in mind—madness as socially and culturally constructed and madness as a female gendered concept—one can begin to examine how this is reflected literature and the implications of that and what it means for the madwoman. One can then look into the origins of this madwoman trope and how women first came to be associated not only with

madness and irrationality, but with anger and evil—how women came to be viewed as dangerous and as a threat.

The Dangerous Woman

Foucault writes, “The scandal of unreason produced only the contagious example of transgression and immorality; the scandal of madness showed men how close to animality their Fall could bring them,” (Foucault 81). In his studies of madness from the Middle Ages to the birth of the insane asylum in the early 1800s, Foucault examines the change from madness as a heavily religious concept to one of social failure. More recently, the Western world has moved into a society of secularism; however, the influence of religion on society and culture, and therefore madness, prior to The Enlightenment was significant, leaving its marks far onto future understandings of madness.

In the study “Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health,” Tasca and others make the following claim:

We tend to historically identify the two dominant approaches towards mental disorders, the “magic-demonological” and “scientific” views in relation to women: not only is a woman vulnerable to mental disorders, she is weak and easily influenced (by the “supernatural” or by organic degeneration), and she is somehow “guilty” (of sinning or not procreating). (Tasca et al. 1)

As such, when looking at the history of the Western madwoman, one must look deeply into the socio-cultural and religious roots that pervade the origins of connecting women with madness to understand the basis of both the “magic-demonological” and the “scientific” views.

The Western views of women first take shape as reflective of highly patriarchal Near Eastern and Greco-Roman civilizations, heavily influenced by their religious and philosophical ideologies, associating women with irrationality, anger, evil, and madness, as can be seen in their etiological myths and theodicies, “Creation myths, those metaphoric or symbolic stories that explain how people account for their existence, codify their social relationships, and establish order...” (Thompson 2). These myths set the stage for the Western view of the woman, from which all tropes (madwoman, dangerous woman, angry woman) follow, while also forever associating her with evil.

According to Hesiod (c.700BC), the first woman is given to mankind as a punishment for the titan Prometheus’s treachery in giving mankind fire. Pandora is described as “the beautiful evil,” and Hesiod writes of her, “Zeus... made women to be an evil to mortal men, with a nature to do evil” (Hesiod 590). In *Works and Days*, Zeus calls on the gods to give Pandora beauty and grace like that of the immortal goddesses, while also calling on Hermes to give her “a shameless mind and a deceitful nature” (Hesiod 60). When she is finally “gifted” to mankind, Pandora brings with her a jar and unleashes all the evils and plagues of the world. This myth illustrates Tasca and others’ claims of both women as weak (Pandora’s “shameless mind” and inability to curb her curiosity) and women as guilty (Pandora caused evil to enter the world and inflicted it upon men). Furthermore, it links the origin of evil to the origin of women, with one indistinguishable from the other.

In the Judeo-Christian Torah, Eve, the first woman and the wife of Adam, is deceived by the serpent into disobeying God. When God questions Adam, Adam replies, ““The woman whom you gave to be here with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate it,”” giving Eve, and therefore womankind, the same role that was given to Pandora: the scapegoat, the cause for evil

in the world and for the downfall of both mankind and humankind (*English Standard Version Bible*, Gen.3.12). God then curses Eve with the pain of childbirth and to be ruled by her husband. In the book *The Wandering Womb: A Cultural History of Outrageous Beliefs About Women*, Lana Thompson examines how this story frames the Western view of women:

The blame assigned to Eve for tempting Adam with forbidden fruit lies at the core of many assumptions about women's psychological nature. Medical decisions, especially ones related to childbirth, reproduction, and sexuality, have been shaded by this prejudice throughout the ages. (Thompson 2)

Thompson further situates Eve as the "source of all [Adam's] frustrations and temptations," while pointing to the idea of her biological and psychological inferiority, delineating how all of these ideas came to affect historical views of female mental illness, intersecting with Tasca and others' ideas of female weakness, with woman easily influenced by the devil and guilty of bringing sin into the world (2). Furthermore, this myth once again cites the origin of evil in the world in conjunction with the origin of womankind.

These etiological myths of Pandora and Eve permeate both culture and further works of literature and religion, delineating the nature and role of a woman. However, it can be noted that while in the account of Pandora, the first woman was created with a deceitful nature to be a plight on mankind, in the account of Eve, the first woman has free will and makes the decision to disobey. Either way, each woman brings evil into the world by her own actions, and each woman causes man to fall as well. Many attribute Pandora's opening of the jar to her curiosity, or her "shameless [and later-discussed wandering] mind" and her weakness at controlling it, and thus the curiosity and weakness of women (Schmitt and Lahroodi 129). Similarly, it can be noted that Eve, although told otherwise by God, sees that the forbidden fruit was "good for food" and

“desirable for gaining wisdom”—seeming to similarly want to satisfy her own curiosity or attempting to discern for herself, choosing to consider what the serpent said rather than believing God (*English Standard Version Bible*, Gen.3.12).

Eve’s lesser known predecessor Lilith, mentioned in the Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah and passed down in oral traditions, was created at the same time as Adam, from the same dust (Dame et al. xv). Following their creation, Adam and Lilith quarrel, according to the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, “‘She said, ‘I will not lie below,’ and he said, ‘I will not lie below, but above, since you are fit for being below and I for being above.’ She said to him, ‘The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth’” (“Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith”). Neither would listen to the other, so Lilith proclaims God’s Ineffable Name and flees to the Red Sea to reside with demons. It is implied that she procreates with them, even becoming a demon herself, and refuses to return to the garden under pain of one hundred of her demon children dying each day, whom she then avenges by stealing and killing mortal babies. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar write of Lilith, “What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female ‘presumption’—that is, angry revolt against male domination—are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic” (Gilbert and Gubar 35).

Across many other stories and folktales, Lilith goes on to become the most famous of she-demons, the partner of Samael and the female counterpart to Satan, the mother of demons, monsters, witches, and all evil beings—the Demon Queen. She is most well-known as the demon of the night, stealing children and causing sexual promiscuity and impurity. In contrast to Pandora and Eve, who are dangerous or threatening in their inferiority—weak in mind, body, and spirit, easily influenced and unable to curb their own nature—Lilith is dangerous in her attempt at equality, in her display of traits that, according to historical belief, should only be *masculine*.

In her independence, her refusal to be submissive, her struggle for control, her belligerence, her violence, and her sexuality, Lilith wields power and qualities typically exclusive to men and is punished and demonized for it.

Lilith spawns numerous tropes of the seductress, enchantress, witch, succubus, sorceress, and even tropes such as the evil step-mother or evil queen—the vain, self-important, sexualized, once-beautiful predecessor to the young, pure, subservient, virginal maiden, much as Lilith was the predecessor to Eve. The cautionary tale of Lilith is one that can be seen time and again, with the Lilith character continually being presented as a threat and as the villain of the story. Women are encouraged to be like Eve and not to fall to Lilith’s crimes; however, at the same time, even as Eve, the fate and nature of a woman cannot be thwarted, and she will still be the scapegoat, the one who brought evil into the world and brought the downfall of mankind and humankind.

The myths of Pandora, Eve, and Lilith present the foundation of the Western view of women in literature—with these three archetypes of the dangerous woman being quickly prominent in folktales, fairy tales, etc,—but also of women in medicine and psychiatry; furthermore, they present the conundrum of male-defined femininity, which I will discuss further in the section on “Hysteria, Lunacy, and Fury.” Pandora and Eve are villainized for their “feminine” nature—for being curious, weak, easily influenced, and tempting to men—while Lilith is villainized for not being feminine enough, for being too “masculine” in her independence, dominance, violence, and sexuality. Thus, the male definition of femininity is contradictory, irrational in and of itself, setting the stage for the association of women and irrationality.

The Feminization of Madness: The Irrational Woman

In the previous section, I gave the framework for the threat of the dangerous woman in respect to the world of men; now I will examine this threat further by looking at the male-contrived view of women as an irrationalizing force. In the story of Pandora, there is obvious irrationality in her curiosity and desire to open the jar, at her own inability to resist her nature; she was, after all, blessed [cursed] by the gods—by Aphrodite with grace and “cruel longing and cares that weary the limbs” (Hesiod 60). Aphrodite also gifts her with *Pothos*, “the longing toward the unattainable, the ungraspable, the incomprehensible, that idealization which is attendant on all love and which is always beyond capture” (Thomas 40). Pandora, and therefore womankind, will never be satisfied, irrational in her quest to reach that which is always unreachable. She is blessed with beauty and grace but cursed to wander, desirable, but always desiring—a complex and seemingly irrational enigma.

With these gifts, Pandora is reflective of Aphrodite herself, the most feared among the Greek gods. Monica Cyrino writes that “she inspires that inescapable desire in humans which recognizes the boundaries neither of propriety nor of safety; the erotic longing she causes, and the consequences it brings, are often both disgraceful and dangerous” (Cyrino 219). Aphrodite holds power over lovers, with the ability to force them to any form of irrationality—to force them to lose control over themselves and fall into disaster and death. This was all the more threatening in Greek civilization which valued rationality above all else; with the ideal Greek man as the pinnacle of rationality, the only thing that could make them irrational—that could cause them to lose control—was their own appetites, erotic love, and, by proxy, women.

Aphrodite’s gifts of Grace and *Pothos* to Pandora and womankind blessed women with this ability to drive men to irrationality and madness, as well as the likelihood to fall into

irrationality herself, driven by desire. Furthermore, as this irrationality causes men to lose control of themselves, control is then placed with women, largely threatening the ancient Greek ideal of male superiority. One can see these themes throughout Greek mythology, with Greek heroes continually having to overcome encounters with dangerous women—seductresses, sorceresses, and female monsters. Female monsters like the sirens become indicative of male fears: being seduced by beauty only to be destroyed by the monstrous, losing rationality and control over oneself. With Greek heroes being the rationalizing and civilizing forces, bringing Greek civilization to the barbaric and monstrous other, women are included in this “monstrous other” as a threat to men and as an irrationalizing force.

Women as an irrationalizing force can then be seen in each theodicy in the previous section, bringing evil into the world and seducing men into their downfall. The men, of course, were led to temporary irrationality by the women, lost control of themselves, and afterwards could always blame women for this irrationality and evil in the world. Epimetheus was beguiled by Pandora’s beauty and thus accepted her as a gift; although Prometheus told him to never accept a gift from the gods, Epimetheus was overcome by the “sheer, hopeless snare” and was “glad of heart while [he] embraced [his] own destruction” (Hesiod 54, 83). Similarly, although Adam would not allow Lilith to be dominant during sex, maintaining rationality and control, he would allow himself to be persuaded by Eve to eat the fruit and thus abandon his rationality, later to be cursed by God for listening to his wife. Likewise, men who fell to sexual promiscuity could always blame it on the night demon Lilith, having not been able to control themselves. Women, in their irrationality, desire—whether it be for autonomy, wisdom, or to satisfy their curiosity—and desirability could thereafter be used as scapegoats for society. This idea of the irrational female then perpetuates the male need for female subservience in these ancient patriarchal

civilizations, as women and femininity posed a threat to rationality, morality, and general life on Earth.

The Feminization of Madness: Hysteria, Lunacy, Fury

The words used to describe irrationality and madness are distinctly and etymologically female. *Hysteria* comes from *hystera*, the Greek word for uterus, and means the “wandering womb.” Supported by ancient philosophers and physicians such as Plato, Aristotle, and Melampus (Tasca et al. 110), the term was first used by Hippocrates, with Plato’s definition being:

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty it is distressed and sorely disturbed and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremest anguish, and provokes all manner of diseases besides. [The disturbance continues until the womb is appeased by passion and love.] Such is the nature of women and all that is female. (Plato qtd. in Chodoff 546).

Hippocrates formed much of his medical ideology and humoral theory from his own religion and myths. His theories here seemingly draw back to the story of Pandora who was cursed to desire and to wander—to never be satisfied. This is reflected in Hippocrates’ medicine, and later medieval medicine, with hysteria as something that only occurred within women, thought to result from the female need to be sexually satisfied, with the ancient Greek belief being that, “the uterus is sad and unfortunate when it does not join with the male and does not give rise to a new birth” (Tasca et al. 110).

Chodoff's definition of hysteria as a "culturally induced exaggeration of femininity" pairs significantly with Chesler's claim that the norms for female behavior are determined by men: "A woman is classified as 'healthy,' 'neurotic' or 'psychotic' according to 'a male ethic of mental health' based on the invisible and sometimes explicit assumptions of patriarchal society" (Rich, Chesler qtd. in Rich 1). Hysteria is, by these definitions, the exaggeration of a male-defined femininity. This is the most classic view of female madness, however highly subjective, with women being diagnosed with hysteria due to being either too feminine or not feminine enough. In literature, in regard to the figure of the madwoman, this contradiction is seen time and again. With respect to the madwomen studied in this paper, which will be explored in later sections, many are exemplary of this contradiction, villainized due to both being too feminine and not feminine enough.

The proximity of women with madness is further evident in the etymologies of lunacy and fury. From the Latin word for moon *Luna*, the Roman goddess of the moon, comes the term *lunacy*, which is characterized by being driven mad for intermittent periods, triggered by the moon's cycle. Because of the mystery surrounding a woman's monthly menstrual cycle, the moon has often been associated with women, fertility, and childbirth, while at the same time being a symbol of witches, monsters, and sexuality—going back to Lilith as the night demon. The Greco-Roman deities associated with the moon were all female—Selene, Luna, Juno, Hecate, and Artemis—and they were further associated with childbirth, virginity, fertility, and witchcraft. These associations would come to play a role in 16th and 17th century medicine, as women were thought to "change with the moon" in regard to their moods and behaviors, playing further into ideas of madness (Porter).

The term *fury* comes from Latin *furia* meaning “violent passion, rage, madness” and *furere* meaning “to rage, to be mad.” Furthermore, the “Romans used *Furiae* to translate Greek *Erinyes*, the collective name for the avenging [female] deities sent from Tartarus to punish criminals...Hence, in English, figuratively, ‘an angry woman’” (“Fury”). Mythologically, the Furies themselves were vengeful and angry female deities, reveling in the torture of mortal men. This creates an overlap of madness as insanity and madness as anger, viewed as both in this circumstance, with the surplus of emotion being viewed as irrational. This shows the female experience once again being invalidated, as men labeling this anger as “irrational” do not view their actions, or the particular circumstance, as rightfully deserving of such a strong reaction. Women have long been invalidated on the basis of being too emotional, irrational or weak, of being unable to control emotions and sensitivities—all playing further into the association of women with irrationality. A woman with fury is both too feminine in her weakness and inability to control her emotions and not feminine enough in her violence and anger.

This concept of irrational female fury can be seen time and again throughout early literature. From the traditional perspective, Lilith is not justified in her reaction to Adam insisting his superiority and her subservience; Lilith, in her anger and exasperation, exclaims the most holy of God’s names, and flee the garden. Furthermore, when God sends angels after Lilith, telling Adam that if Lilith refuses to come back, she will have to let one hundred of her demon children die every day, Lilith still refuses, and, as her vengeance for the continual death of her own children, takes revenge by stealing and killing human infants—once again, seemingly irrational and belligerent in her fury (“Alphabet of Sira 78: Lilith”). This trope can also be seen in Greek mythology where both goddesses and mortal women unleash their fury and vengeance. Medea, for example, is driven into fury, past the point of rationality, when her husband Jason

decides to marry another woman; Medea, so overcome with fury, kills her own children as well as Jason's new bride and father-in-law, all to spite Jason. While she struggles with her duality, both loving her children and not wanting to be the barbarian that Jason's people view her as, she ultimately is unable to control herself and gave in to her fury and madness. This can similarly be seen with Clytemnestra giving in to her fury and killing her husband Agamemnon to get revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter.

The Feminization of Madness: The Madwoman in the Middle Ages

Following these foundations of the madwoman in early literature, one can move on into later images of the madwoman, where madness as a culturally and socially constructed phenomenon becomes definitively female. While madness throughout most of ancient history is mainly seen as an affliction from the gods, inflicted upon either male or female, there comes a shift during the Middle Ages in what Carol Thomas Neely dubs "the regendering of madness," occurring due to the infamous witch trials (Neely 6). These witch trials also mark the shift from a demonological madness to a secular madness. According to Foucault, prior to the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment, madness is largely seen as a religious concept, with the perpetrator being plagued by demons or evil spirits; however, in the Middle Ages these views of the demonic or possessed soon became accusations of witchcraft, with Christians hunting down witches.

Already situated as a scapegoat for evil and as lesser beings due to their femininity, not to mention their association with Lilith, the alleged mother of all witches and evil creatures, women were soon largely targeted. Reginald Scot describes in the *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, "And therefore...women are oftener found to be witches than men. For they have such an unbridled

force of fury and concupiscence naturally, that by no means is it possible for them to temper or moderate the same” (Scot qtd. in Williams, 59). Reginald Scot, one of the main advocates against the witch trials, attempts to debunk witchcraft, to claim the accused women have a psychiatric problem instead, pointing to women’s innate lust and “unbridled fury” or irrational, unhinged anger. This serves to outline how not only were women targeted for mental and physical afflictions or deviation from societal norms, they were targeted simply for their nature as women.

Following Scot’s lead, in the sixteenth century many physicians began to argue that a number of the women accused of witchcraft were suffering from mental illness and should be treated as patients instead. One of these physicians was Edward Jorden who, in his treatise *A briefe discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother (1603)*, separates bewitchment from “the distraction caused by the uterine disease, suffocation of the mother, or the wandering womb,” drawing on the newly resurging ancient Greek ideas of hysteria (Neely 48). Neely outlines this separation, distinguishing the “natural” secular human madness from the “supernatural” divine or demonic. She goes on to describe how these witchcraft skeptics, such as Jorden and Scot, were effectively “medicalizing witches’ behavior and producing categories of menarcheal and menopausal melancholy...” (Neely 49). Because the majority of accused witches had been women, and these women were then instead classified as mentally ill, there became a new and direct association of women with madness, definitively situating madness as a female illness. “Eventually ‘mad’ or ‘hysteric’ came to replace the label of ‘witch’” (Little 7). Both witches and madwomen then became rampant throughout art and literature, with literature both influencing medical diagnoses and being influenced by new medical developments.

Shakespeare and the Madwoman

While there has been much research into Shakespeare's classical influences, it is agreed that there are remarkable similarities to the Greek and Roman tragedy and drama in most of his works, notably in the cases of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare gives us some of the most classic archetypes of the madwoman in literature, directly following the shift of madness from demonological to secular, and drawing upon ideas of hysteria, lunacy, and fury. Many researchers point to Shakespeare's utilization of both the natural and the supernatural forms of madness in his works, as outlined previously by Neely, especially as seen in his female characters. Both forms of madness can be seen in *Macbeth*, with Lady Macbeth representative of each in her witchiness (supernatural) and her hysteria (natural). She tempts her husband to both murder and madness, much like Eve and Pandora, and she constantly challenges traditional femininity and patriarchal authority, much like Lilith. Lady Macbeth can be seen as the incarnation of both the dangerous and the irrational woman, the embodiment of hysteria, lunacy, and fury, and as the contradictory feminine in being both too feminine and not feminine enough.

However, it is Shakespeare's Ophelia that is the character who officially established the madwoman as a trope in literature. Since her debut, Ophelia has had multitudes of representations throughout centuries of artwork, literature, theatre, and film. Largely romanticized, but more recently claimed as a feminist phenomenon, Ophelia is representative of the chained feminine. Ophelia, invalidated at every turn, forced to live under the control of the men in her life to the point of madness, is indicative of a common female experience. Ophelia is the classic madwoman archetype, and all future madwoman representations come from her.

Elaine Showalter writes in *The Female Malady*:

Virtually all of these conventions can be traced to the figure of Shakespeare's Ophelia. Laertes calls her a "document in madness," and indeed, as Sander Gilman points out, the changing representations of Ophelia over the centuries do chronicle the shifting definitions of female insanity, from the erotomania of the Elizabethans and the hysteria of the nineteenth century to the unconscious incestuous conflicts of the Freudians and the schizophrenic double bind of the Laingians. (Showalter 10)

However, what makes the character of Ophelia as the madwoman so unique, so fascinating as to spawn hundreds of different representations, each one indicative of the cultural and societal values of their respective time periods, is that she seemingly does everything right by patriarchal standards, and yet she still falls to madness and tragedy. She is the ideal woman—beautiful, gentle, submissive, controlled, fulfilling her feminine duties in life with no thought of rebellion, no hint of reaching for traditionally masculine traits—and Shakespeare has her fall to madness for seemingly nothing but her own femininity.

Demonstrative of *The Female Malady*, "Ophelia's symbolic meanings, moreover, are specifically feminine. Whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps that nature's purest form" (2). Showalter posits the idea that Ophelia's madness is the female nature's purest form, isolated and exaggerated, with her madness epitomizing Chodoff's definition of hysteria as "culturally induced exaggeration of femininity." Ophelia is essentially a blank slate character; she is representative of the feminine, representative of woman, and her nature is madness, as told by Neely, "Ophelia's madness, as the play presents it, begins to be gender-specific...that later representations of Ophelia will exaggerate by associating her with the condition of female hysterics" (Neely 52). This leads to what Showalter describes as our "cultural tradition that

represents ‘women’ *as* madness, and that uses images of the female body...to stand for irrationality in general” (Showalter 4).

Showalter delineates the intertwining of insanity and femininity that make up Ophelia’s character, essentially her only character traits, through one of her representations, following her descent to madness:

The woman with her hair down indicated an offense against decorum, an improper sensuality. Ophelia’s flowers, too, came from the Renaissance iconography of female sexuality; in giving them away, she symbolically ‘deflowers’ herself. Even her death by drowning has associations with the feminine and the irrational, since water is the organic symbol of a woman’s fluidity: blood, milk, tears. (Showalter 11).

When Ophelia does fall to madness, this is characterized by the sexualization of her feminine nature and body, emphasizing the differences between her madness, and Hamlet’s feigned and masculine madness. Some speculate that perhaps her downfall was engaging in premarital sex with Hamlet, disobeying her father and brother, with Hamlet then rejecting her and virtually calling her a whore with the line, “Get thee to a nunnery” (Shakespeare 3.1. 131), which could also be supported by Ophelia’s sexual lyrics and giving away of her flowers; however, many attribute these actions simply to her display of sexualized feminine madness. It is interesting to note that Hamlet follows the above statement with, “wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” (Shakespeare 3.1.150-151), talking to Ophelia but seemingly referring to his mother Gertrude as well, further indicating Ophelia as simply representative of woman, and pointing to the woman as a dangerous and irrationalizing force.

One of Ophelia’s most telling scenes is when she gives out her flowers to the court in a culmination of her madness. Throughout the play and prior to her madness, Ophelia is the picture

of demureness, living under the control of the men in her lives, her father Polonius, her brother Laertes, and her potential future husband Hamlet. Although torn between her loyalties to each of them, she has no agency and or control over her own life; she never displays any aspirations for herself nor any rebellion towards her role—she endures it in silence. However, after becoming a madwoman, Ophelia sings loud bawdy songs and nonsense that gives a clearer insight to the whole of the story and to her tragedy, allowing her to see things more clearly than ever before (or reveal things that she always saw clearly) and to call them out, with each flower representative of the recipient's crimes. Lastly, she leaves a daisy for her own lost innocence and symbolically deflowers herself.

In Ophelia's madness, she achieves clarity where most of the characters are in a web of deceit; furthermore, while seemingly nonsensical, in losing control of herself—taking the figurative lack of control in her life and manifesting a physical and verbal lack of control—she also rips the control away from the men in her life, gaining some agency. However, her final act is ambiguous, with her either committing suicide or accidentally drowning. If she commits suicide, this would be her only action that she does for herself throughout the play, meaning that in her madness, the one act that she could control was the act of her death. If she drowns accidentally, this points to the idea that a woman cannot have any control in a patriarchal world where control is a male-gendered concept; the most she can achieve is no one having any control in her life, including herself. Ophelia's madness is purely female and linked to her body and sexuality, and as such, she became the revolutionary archetype for the madwoman in both literature and in the medical field, later spawning numerous medical and psychological models.

Section II

Sparks of Feminism: *Jane Eyre*

During the Enlightenment, female madness became almost exclusively regarded as secular and scientific. In the sixteenth century, women began to be shut away in madhouses by their husbands, and with the seventeenth century came the advent of special wards in mental asylums for prostitutes and lower-class women (Little 2). By the middle of the nineteenth century, women outnumbered men in insane asylums, which soon became vastly overcrowded (Chesler 321). It was during this time period that middle-class norms and values came to dictate what was sane and what was insane. This, combined with the belief that a woman's biological makeup caused madness, in addition to the lack of women's rights, led to the Victorian predominance of white middle-class women being diagnosed with hysteria. "The whiteness of hysteria... signaled the specifically reproductive and sexual failing of white women" (Shreve). Victorian white middle-class and upper-class women were expected to fit into a specific and rigid role of domesticity, submissiveness, and virtue. While lower-class women and women of color were typically viewed negatively, often demonized and sexualized, they were held to different standards, outside these norms of society, and were rarely diagnosed with hysteria, "Nonwhite women... because they were thought to be more fertile and more physically robust, were thus marked as 'irreconcilably different' from their white counterparts" (Shreve).

This emphasis on white middle-class norms largely stemmed from the strict Victorian concept of gender roles, more starkly defined than at any other time in history, leading to the emphasis on these values which came to shape Victorian society. Previously, women had often helped men in their businesses and work at their homes, but as the economy became more industrialized, men began traveling to their places of work, leaving women at home to oversee

domestic duties (Hughes). Men and women soon came to occupy “separate spheres,” divided by their “natural” inclinations, only to interact at meal times and social events. According to Professor Kathryn Hughes, “Not only was it [a woman’s] job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands labored all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life” (Hughes).

Upper and middle-class women came to have their existence revolve around obtaining a husband, giving him children, and taking care of his home—turning away from any potentially masculine pursuits such as education, intellectuality, or sexuality. It was during this time, in 1842, that Charlotte Brontë crafted her novel *Jane Eyre* in a response to the limited role of the Victorian woman, as evident in her writing:

It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action... Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 121)

Brontë’s work was revolutionary, and rather scandalous for her time. *Jane Eyre* was written just prior to the first wave of feminism; however, as can be seen above, there are clear feminist undertones of female anger and rebellion, with the titular Jane struggling to reconcile her values

and independence with her romance with Mr. Rochester and her role in society, professing much of the disillusionment with Victorian female life that led to the first wave of feminism.

Furthermore, Brontë created the groundbreaking madwoman Bertha Mason, whose character has sparked significant research and debate, and who was a turning point towards a feminist use of the madwoman trope, following its predecessors in characters such as Ophelia. In the novel, Bertha is presented as both the obstacle to Jane's happiness and as a potential avatar of Jane, according to Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*. At face value, Bertha is a villainous madwoman, Mr. Rochester's insane and animalistic wife who is kept locked in the attic, an apparent kindness on Mr. Rochester's part, keeping her from the horrors of the mental asylum. Bertha, once famous for her beauty, had beguiled Mr. Rochester into marriage, he who knew nothing of her family's history of mental illness, and who later claims, "I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her" (Brontë 340). Bertha had subsequently fallen to madness and was then confined to the house, a violent and demonic presence who wreaks havoc on the inhabitants, kept secret by her husband.

While Jane is governess at Thornfield, the strange happenings that occur are actually all Bertha Mason, including strange laughs and noises at night, a fire set in Mr. Rochester's room, and a violent attack on a guest. Furthermore, one of the most telling scenes of Bertha's character and her relationship to Jane is when she sneaks into Jane's room one night, following Jane's engagement, and rips her wedding veil in two (317). At first glance, this can all be attributed to the violent nonsensical outbursts of a villainous madwoman; however, upon closer inspection, Bertha's character is indicative of Jane's own fears of being declared a madwoman by society due to her inner passion, independence, and rebellious nature that she tries to keep at bay

throughout the story, as well as her fears that she will not be able to find her own place or partake in society and romance due to these notions.

The story of Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre and their relationship hearkens back to the traditional story of Lilith and Eve, displaying the common tropes and components of many previous works of literature, fairy tales, and myths, but with a slight twist. Bertha Mason presents a Lilith-like character, once known for her beauty and sensuality, tempting Mr. Rochester to marriage, but quickly devolving into violence and monstrosity in a demonized villain, acting out in irrational bouts of fury. Jane presents an Eve-like character, the younger, pure, and virtuous heroine come to replace Bertha as Mr. Rochester's wife. However, as within all women, there is the potential to become Lilith, within Jane there is the potential to become Bertha, as can be seen through Jane's struggles from an early age.

In the beginning of the novel, Jane is just an orphaned child at Gateshead Hall, living under the guardianship of her aunt, and there is an incident in which she defends herself from her cruel cousin John Reed, violent and impassioned in her resistance. In response to Jane's outburst, her aunt and the maids exclaim, shocked, that they have never seen "such a picture of passion," with Miss Abbott shaming her, proclaiming, "What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress's son! Your young master," to which Jane indignantly responds, "Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?" (6-7). In this exchange, Jane deliberately questions and rebels against her societal role of female subservience and passivity. It is clearly unfair that her cousin has attacked her and treated her with cruelty, and yet she is expected to maintain control over herself and her emotions, to accept her place in her gender role. There is an underlying anger at the injustice of this occurrence, which becomes a theme throughout the novel, evident in Jane's thoughts, "Unjust!—unjust!' said my reason, forced by

the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power; and Resolve, equally wrought up, instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression” (11). Furthermore, these scenes display Jane’s capacity for anger and violence, her potential for fury, paralleling Bertha’s actions later, when Bertha attacks her brother and Mr. Rochester.

Another parallel to Bertha’s madness and her incarceration in the attic by Mr. Rochester, guarded by Grace Poole, is Jane’s own forced confinement as punishment for her actions, for what can be seen almost as temporary madness, guarded by the maids. This is indicative of female incarceration within male-defined femininity, which is then further perpetuated and policed by other women and the rest of society, with Mrs. Reed telling Jane, “it is only on condition of perfect submission and stillness that I shall liberate you” (13). Furthermore, Brontë again plays with madness, in a similar vein to Bertha’s later madness, as Jane spirals in the red-room, locked in the room where her uncle died, terrified that it might be haunted, seemingly set on course by her earlier outburst and now experiencing a full break down:

Prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I uttered a wild, involuntary cry; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort. (13)

Brontë demonstrates Jane’s potential for madness to which she could succumb if she does not reign in her emotions and behaviors, framing Jane’s struggle with her societal role and embodying this struggle in that of Bertha’s character. Gilbert and Gubar discuss such a phenomenon in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, with Bertha as Jane’s avatar writing, “Bertha ...is

Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane had been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead" (Gilbert and Gubar 360).

Therefore, Bertha becomes both Jane's cautionary figure, whom she knows to be monstrous and whom she should avoid becoming, while also fulfilling Jane's secret desires throughout the story. When Jane represses actions and anger towards Rochester, Bertha, by proxy, lashes out. When Jane has anxieties and reservations about marrying Rochester, Bertha manifests and tears her wedding veil in two. When Jane perceives Rochester as becoming too much like a master, like her cousin John Reed in the beginning of the story, Bertha later burns down Thornfield, the symbol of his dominance and of her domesticity. Bertha's physical struggles against Rochester and Thornfield are reflective of Jane's figurative struggles with both. Jane does not want to lose her independence and be confined in her role as Rochester's wife or in her domestic role in society. Furthermore, at pivotal points in the story, Jane remembers or dreams about the red-room, indicative of this battle with her potentiality for madness and her inner self as her one true obstacle. Gilbert and Gubar thus declare, "It is only fitting then that the existence of this criminal self imprisoned in Thornfield's attic is the ultimate legal impediment to Jane's and Rochester's marriage, and that its existence is, paradoxically, an impediment raised by Jane as well as by Rochester" (360).

Jane's duality can further be noted in her fears of becoming a monster, in the eyes of both society and Rochester, as Rochester repeatedly claims Bertha to be monstrous in her madness, to which Jane replies, "'you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate—with vindictive apathy. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad.'" Jane's fears become evident in their following exchange, with Rochester asking, "'If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?'" and Jane's reply, "'I do indeed, sir'" (Brontë 335). Jane knows that her innermost self

will be rejected from society, not fitting in with its norms, and she fears, too, that she will be rejected from Rochester as Bertha was. However, on the other hand, she fears that in adhering to norms, either with society or Rochester, she will lose her independence and her values, as can be examined in her exchange with Rochester's when Jane attempts to leave with Rochester saying, "This—this is wicked. It would not be wicked to love me," and Jane's response, "It would to obey you" (352). Therefore, Jane cannot allow herself to live in inequality and subservience to Rochester and so, cannot let go of her inner self. Rochester even recognizes this inner self at Jane's stubborn determination, declaring, "Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern triumph. Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage beautiful creature!" (353). Rochester's descriptive language, while speaking figuratively, connotes Bertha's physical presence: wild, defiant, savage, and beautiful.

Bertha, in her monstrosity and madness, is further representative of Jane's both figurative and literal "darkest double" not fitting in with the white, middle class norms, as Bertha is demonized as a woman of color and labeled as a monstrous "other." While there has been much debate as to whether Bertha actually was a woman of color or if Brontë used such language in order to further "other" her, as both a foil to Jane and a cautionary figure, the descriptions used characterize her as a woman of color, whether literally or figuratively. Bertha as a character is both exoticized for her race with Rochester first saying about her, "I found her a fine woman...tall, dark, and majestic...I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited," and then demonized her in her heritage, with Rochester saying, "What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me!" (340-341).

Jane voices similar sentiments relating Bertha's race to her monstrosity, describing the image she caught of Bertha wearing Jane's wedding veil in the mirror as:

Fearful and ghastly to me—oh sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments... This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. (315-316)

This also juxtaposes and recalls the scene in the beginning of the novel when Jane catches her own image in a mirror in the red-room, describing:

I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit...(10).

This childhood scene is notable because Jane's experience with the looking glass causes her to have to confront herself and her own reflection; she declares that the looking glass causes everything to look darker, reflecting herself as monstrous in her childhood madness. This memory then resurfaces with Bertha's appearance in Jane's mirror, wearing Jane's own veil, as Jane is forced to confront her inner, "darker" self. Following each of these experiences, Jane is overwhelmed, stating, "I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life—only the second time—I became insensible from terror" (316). These moments are linked together as the height of Jane's potential madness: when she first questions and rebels against her passive feminine role, splitting herself and repressing the "mad" aspect of herself, and later, when she is forced to

confront this “dark” self in Bertha Mason’s reflection and her own duality—whether she should attempt to adhere to her expected role or reject it completely and become a monster.

Once Jane leaves Rochester and Thornfield, she is only able to reunite with Rochester once both Bertha Mason and Thornfield have been destroyed. Bertha, in her madness and fury, burns down Thornfield and throws herself off its roof, committing suicide, while Rochester is maimed in his attempts to save her. This scene is reflective of Jane’s earlier dream in which Thornfield is in ruins and Jane attempts to reach Rochester, but she is held back by a child in her arms who nearly strangles her, and both she and the child then fall off the wall. As Jane’s dreams throughout the story seem to be symbolic and almost premonition-like, this dream is fulfilled in Bertha’s death and the destruction of Thornfield. However, this also has symbolic meaning in Gilbert and Gubar’s notion of Bertha as both “the angry aspect of the orphan child [and] the ferocious secret self” (Gilbert and Gubar 360). Therefore, when Bertha falls to her death in reality, in the dream, so do both Jane and the orphan child she had been holding, indicative of the two aspects of Jane that Bertha represents, both of which kept her from being with Rochester. This dream child, representing Jane’s lingering feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness, and lack of belonging, was further dispelled in reality with Jane gaining an inheritance and therefore her independence and equality in regard to Rochester. Free of all these burdens, Jane can then reunite with Rochester at Ferndean, isolated from the rest of the world. However, it is interesting to note that Jane can only reunite with Rochester once he has been physically maimed and she has gained a fortune, making them equals, only able to find happiness outside the bounds and constraints of society, having burned down Thornfield and Jane’s domestic role.

In *Jane Eyre*, while it seems as though Brontë has crafted a straightforward Lilith-like villain in Bertha Mason’s madwoman, her utilization of Bertha to both foil and reflect Jane is a

move that had significant feminist undertones and impacts. Furthermore, in contrast to the previous male-crafted incarnation of the madwoman in Ophelia, delicate, genteel, and docile, Bertha was characterized by her violence, passion, and anger—by her erring on the side of masculinity and veering too far from the preconceived notions of femininity, while at the same time succumbing to her irrational female fury, illustrating the conundrum of the male-defined feminine. Although characterized as a villain, Bertha Mason changed the trope of madwoman, introducing the idea that women could be defined as mad even in their reasonable and justifiable anger, that their “fury” might not be so irrational, showing Jane’s potential for socially constructed madness in Bertha’s apparent violent mental illness.

1st Wave Madwoman: “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The first wave of feminism was defined by the push for women’s political and property rights. Previously, women lacked voting rights and equal citizenship. This was especially relevant in the context of madness as women were often forcibly treated or institutionalized by their husbands or by male doctors, or confined within their own homes, and had little to no say in the matter as they had no rights of their own. It was within this context that Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote and published “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1892, as one of the earliest and most influential pieces of feminist writing, centering the entirety of a work on the “madwoman” rather than just featuring her as a villain or side character. Maggie O’Farrell writes in an introduction to the story:

The mad woman has been used as a trope for centuries by writers, but more often as a walk-on part: we are allowed short, horrifying glimpses of the mad Ophelia and the hallucinating Lady Macbeth, before they are hurried to their deaths; Bertha Rochester

escapes her attic prison to cause fires and havoc, and is then put back before she, too, is sent to death. What “The Yellow Wallpaper” does is give the mad woman pen and paper, and ultimately a voice of her own. We hear from her directly and in detail. (O’Farrell).

Drawing mainly from her own experience with ill-practiced “rest cure,” Gilman is also thought to have drawn ideas from Brontë’s work and the madwoman character of Bertha Mason and writes the madwoman as a more sympathetic character, at the whims of the men around her, whose descent to madness isn’t fully realized until the end of the story (Crowder). Gilman’s story significantly impacted women and society, bringing to focus their plight, and pushing male physicians to reconsider their treatments. Through this story, in giving a voice to the madwoman, Gilman was ultimately able to give a voice to women who had long been oppressed and suffered significantly, prior to the first wave of feminism.

Gilman’s unnamed narrator tells the story of how she moves to a new house at the instruction of her physician husband, due to her illness following the birth of their child. He recommends rest and fresh air for her, not truly believing her to be sick, and forbids her from working or writing; the narrator, does not object to the treatment, although she disagrees with his diagnosis writing, “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?” (Gilman 2-3). This points to the lack of women’s legal rights; women virtually had no say in their autonomy and personhood, existing at the whims of their husbands. Furthermore, women were discouraged from intellectual or creative pursuits as they traditionally fell under the “public sphere” of men, which is why her husband attempts to prevent her from taking part in such things, convinced that they are the problem. Although she disagrees with her husband’s treatment and diagnosis, she has no rights and is

unable to legally able to oppose her husband in any way. Prior to the first wave of feminism, this was the case, with women having no voice, domineered as the property of their husbands. This becomes more evident as the narrator continues to describe her husband's control, noting how, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" and that "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (6). Gilman seems to be setting up dramatic irony, with readers able to perceive that these obviously aren't loving actions or an egalitarian marriage, with John in a complete position of control over his wife and further in authority and power due to his being her doctor.

The narrator is soon put in the "nursery" at the top of the house, indicative of her role as a child bearer and perhaps figuratively infantilizing her, as she has been robbed of her autonomy by her husband. The room has barred windows, rings in the walls, a bed fastened to the floor, and gouges on the floor along with a hideous yellow wallpaper that she quickly hates. This description alone connotes incarceration with the barred windows, hearkening back to Bertha Mason in the attic as well as the image of an insane asylum. Furthermore, the yellow wallpaper may represent domesticity in its use for beautifying a home but in this case, presents a more nefarious image, described as revolting, odorous, and "strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" (8). This further presents the role of a woman in this era; she is meant to be beautiful and ornamental, but this expectation rots her from the inside-out.

Her husband is soon absent, spending most days working, and she is left without companionship, socially isolated, left to study the wallpaper for hours upon hours, writing about how it is ripped in places, presumably by the children who had once lived there. She is trapped in this pastime, much as women are trapped in their restrictive domestic roles. She examines the pattern, disgusted and unnerved by how she seems to see eyes and body parts within it, and

occasionally a “strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that sill and conspicuous front design” (18). As the narrator’s condition worsens, she spends most of her time lying in the room, which she now claims to be fond of, as she both mentally and emotionally deteriorates, thinking about the wallpaper constantly and fixating upon it. She still writes, although she doesn’t really want to or feel able to, stating, “But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief” (25). The narrator yearns for any sort of outlet, anything that makes her feel human, and can only find it in her writing.

She writes of how she cries constantly and begs her husband to let her leave, but that he denies her at every turn insisting that it is for her own good. However, the more her husband denies and disregards her, and the more she feels trapped, the clearer the figures behind the wallpaper seem to become, and the narrator becomes convinced that pattern on the wallpaper is actually bars, while the figure behind it is a woman whom she must free. It is here that a correlation begins to form between the narrator and the woman in the wallpaper as each are confined and seemingly trapped behind bars, with the narrator becoming more and more trapped within her marriage and within male-defined femininity.

The narrator soon comes to the conclusion that there may be multiple women trapped behind the bars, with the one woman creeping around and shaking the bars and trying to get free. At the same time, her husband and sister-in-law Jennie seem to be treating her more strangely, with Jennie noting the “yellow smooches” on the narrator’s clothing, with the narrator writing that the smell of the wallpaper seems to now creep all over the house, following her wherever she goes (37). She also notes a long streak or smooch along the wall, going all the way around the room, writing, “I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and

round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!” (41). The repetition implies that the narrator is going around the room herself and making herself dizzy, that she is the one who did this, hence the yellow smooches on her clothes and the smell following her around. Her lack of self-awareness points to her madness and deteriorating mental health. Furthermore, it points to how this role of domesticity and femininity follows her around, poisoning her, causing her to fall into madness.

The narrator soon has the idea that the woman in the wallpaper gets out in the daytime, and that she has seen her hiding and creeping about, which the narrator proclaims as normal, writing, “I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can’t do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once” (45). This is the first instance in the story of the narrator referring to herself as creeping, further likening herself to the woman in the wallpaper, while also corroborating the idea that she had been the one going in circles around the room. Furthermore, the narrator writes that she tries to see the woman out of all the windows in her room, turning as fast as she can, but she can only see the woman out of one window, seeming to point to the idea that she is seeing her own reflection in the window, going in circles trying to see the woman, who is, in fact, herself.

At the end of the story, the narrator’s mental state has drastically deteriorated; however, she seems almost happier in her madness. On her last day at the house, she is determined to rip the paper off the wall and free the woman at last, ripping off long sheets of wallpaper. She then notes, like she did in the beginning, that the children really did a number on the nursery room, tearing the wallpaper (which she had just done) and gnawing at the bedstead. Her writing and thoughts become more disjointed and frantic, or manic perhaps, as she grabs a rope to tie the woman in the wallpaper (in case she gets out) and attempts to move the bolted bed. In her

frustration and anger, she bites off a piece of the bed at the corner, gnawing the bed as the “children” had done before her, but pointing instead to the idea that either she had previously done this, or that other women had been trapped here in the same experience, attempting the same things.

The narrator progressively gets angrier, wishing to jump out of the window, but unable to do so as it is barred. She oddly notes that she doesn’t like to look out of the windows, seeing so many of the creeping women and thinking, “I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (52). It is at this point that the narrator merges with the woman in the wallpaper, claiming to be fastened by her own rope, and that she will have to go back behind the pattern when it becomes nighttime. She creeps along the floor, with her shoulder fitting in the smooch along the wall, declaring to her husband when he enters the room, “I’ve got out at last...in spite of you and Jane? And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (55). Her husband promptly faints, feminizing himself and letting go of the masculine control he had wielded over her throughout the story, while she continues to creep around the room.

The enigmatic conclusion of the story suggests a number of interpretations. If the room with its wallpaper is representative of the domestic cage of femininity, and all of the women have been similarly locked up with the narrator, they are then free once they have rejected the norms of society in their madness and are out of society’s reach. Furthermore, when the narrator exclaims to her husband that she has gotten out at last, “in spite of you and Jane,” it seems as though the narrator and the woman in the wallpaper have not just merged, but that the narrator is now *only* the woman in the wallpaper, leaving her former, chained, self behind and presumably separating from her, whom she now refers to in the third person as Jane. If Gilman draws inspiration from *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Mason’s madwoman in the attic, her Jane has this dual

self and at the end gives into her dark side, rejecting her role and societal norms, becoming Bertha, the madwoman in the attic or the woman in the wallpaper and leaving the chained image of Jane behind.

Unlike Bertha Mason, presented as a villain, and Ophelia, presented as a side character, the narrator of Gilman's story is presented as the protagonist, slowly losing her mind due to her oppression and isolation by her husband. While traditional storytelling sets the narrator up to be the villain by the end of the story, which perhaps she is, the audience can't help but feel sympathy for her in her plight. Similarly, her husband is set up to be the victim of the story, but the audience can't help but feel disdain for his actions, his pride, and his continued dismissal of his wife. This sets up an interesting dynamic because, were it written by a man or in the husband's perspective, this would no doubt be the story, very straightforward as the husband tries his best to help his wife and his wife goes crazy and feral. However, because Gilman writes from the woman's perspective, the audience is given insight into her descent to madness, which is clearly perpetuated and exacerbated by her controlling husband. This then begs the question of how many other stories are similar to this—how many stories have a female villain and a male hero/victim due to their male writer or the male lens? Are all these women actually villains, and have they been created as such by men? Gilman's narrator therefore reinvents the madwoman trope, turning it on its head by giving us the story from her perspective instead. Furthermore, she reframes past villainous women and madwomen, pushing us to consider their stories from another perspective, to listen to the voices of women for once rather than just accepting the stories of men.

2nd Wave Madwoman: *The Bell Jar*

Following the insurgence of women's rights with the first wave of feminism, gaining property rights and then the right to vote with the 19th Amendment, there was a step backward from women's rights in the 1930s with the Great Depression. While women were allowed to be in the workforce, they were viewed as taking jobs away from men who had a greater right to them because of their place as the providers for their families (Moran). However, WWII brought about significant changes, creating a high labor demand for both unmarried and married women, with the U.S. workforce being nearly forty percent female by 1945, with women working in both military and civilian jobs (McEuen). Married women, who were traditionally kept out of the workforce, were then expected to also fulfill their domestic duties following the workday. However, this was largely viewed as unnatural, and following the war, men returned to reclaim their jobs, pushing many women back into a domestic sphere that no longer contented them.

The 1950s held an even stronger call for women to fit into their traditional gender roles in the midst of the Cold War, where there was a governmental campaign to show that the family was what made Americans superior to the communists, "In contrast to the 'evils' of Communism, an image was promoted of American women, with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, tending to the hearth and home as they enjoyed the fruits of capitalism, democracy, and freedom." ("Mrs. America"). As family, and therefore marriage, was the key to patriotism and moral superiority, women were situated with marriage as their end goal, pushed to get married right out of high school or to attend college only to find a husband and then end all intellectual pursuits after becoming his housewife. It was such expectations that lead to the general disillusionment of the American woman, as detailed in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, which is significantly credited with starting the second wave of

feminism. During that same year, Sylvia Plath published her semi-autobiographical book *The Bell Jar*, drawing from her own experience during the 1950s by telling the story of Esther Greenwood, an intelligent college student who is discontented with her situation in life and the potential paths ahead of her, and so is driven to madness and institutionalized due to her desire for something else.

Throughout the novel, Esther's struggles epitomize those of the 1950s middle-class American white woman, experiencing the Friedan "problem that has no name," in which American women are "haunted by the feeling that something is wrong but their inability to explain the problem makes them more restless" (Ghandeharion et al. 64). Furthermore, this idea of *The Feminine Mystique* seems to not only harken back to the ancient Greek concept of *Pothos*, that women are unsatisfied and always longing for something that they cannot reach, but, moreover, it explores the previously unidentified reason for this female restlessness and longing in society, for the discontentment and loss of identity that occurs when women are trapped within the narrow domestic sphere. This is illustrated in Esther's struggles throughout the novel, in her dual self grappling with being forced into a singular life, especially within the contradictory male-defined feminine and the constraints of the titular bell jar. Plath's story, through Esther, sparked radical ideas of feminism, spurring women to pursue equal rights in the workplace, Title IX, and reproductive rights, in efforts to close the gap between inequality, to escape this female disillusionment.

The beginning of the novel sets up the main conflicts within Esther's life. She experiences the feminine mystique, a distinct dissatisfaction with her life when she should be enjoying her entrance into society and womanhood, living the fantasy of so many other girls her age, having earned a college scholarship and an all-expenses paid job in New York. However, in

contrast to the other girls there with her, she experiences disillusionment, noting the emptiness and the frivolity of her life:

I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. (I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.). (Plath 18)

Nearing the end of college, Esther is on the cusp of womanhood; she is holding on to the last moments of her adolescence for as long as she can before she is fully pushed into becoming an adult woman, along with the implications of that and with the choices set out in front of her. She observes the girls that are with her, noting what type of women they will become and comparing herself to them. She attempts to be like Doreen, a cynical, rebellious girl, liberal in her sexuality, but she concludes that she is at heart more like Betsy, an innocent girl who abides by society; however, she doesn't seem to fully fit in with her either. With each girl representing her options, to either fully adhere to society or go against it, she can't bring herself to commit to either life, bringing her to stagnancy and restlessness, "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired" (39-40).

At the core of this issue, and within Esther's life, is her own duality. She desires to do and be more than the two options set out in front of her, from which she will have to choose; furthermore, each of these options shows further options and further commitment to them down the road. This dilemma was that of the 1950s American woman: she could either adhere to the

norms of society, of what was considered feminine, and become the picturesque American housewife, with a husband and children, or she could completely rebel against the norms of society and opt instead to have her career and creative outlet, something traditionally viewed as masculine. The choice between these two options is laid out before Esther time and again, and yet she cannot bring herself to choose either, afraid of surrendering her autonomy and intellectuality, but at the same time, afraid to miss out on being the American feminine ideal:

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (84)

Esther views marriage and childbirth as the end of her aspirations and creative pursuits. Much like the first wave and pre-feminism women before her, she believes that she will no longer want to write her poems after marriage, similarly to Gilman's narrator being prevented from writing by her husband.

Her struggle with these two options is further illustrated by her view of the adult women around her, of Mrs. Willard and her own mother, seemingly broken by their domestic lives, versus her boss, Jay Cee, and her benefactress, famous novelist Philomena Guinea, alone with their ambitions and apparent androgyny or even masculinity. Esther admires the life and character of Jay Cee, although she views her in opposition to femininity, noting her ugly looks and failure to adhere to the typical superficialities of women, which she claims doesn't matter due to Jay Cee's having brains—something Esther once again views in contrast to femininity:

I liked her a lot...She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter...I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it. (20-21)

Esther cannot imagine Jay Cee as having a husband or domestic life as Jay Cee is so successful and ambitious in her job, displaying the schism between intellectuality and domesticity in Esther's mind. Furthermore, much later when Philomena Guinea pays for Esther's private hospitalization, she specifically asks if there was a boy involved, as she will not have anything to do with Esther's case if there was, seemingly pushing the idea that Philomena Guinea also views romance and (by proxy) domesticity to be at odds with writing. On the other hand, Esther views Mrs. Willard, as well as her own mother, as what she would become if she marries:

This seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's, but I knew that's what marriage was like, because cook and clean and wash was just what Buddy Willard's mother did from morning till night, and she was the wife of a university professor and had been a private school teacher herself. (83)

Even though Mrs. Willard had had a life filled with intellectual pursuits, that had ended with marriage, and there was no time left for anything outside of being a housewife, of being a mat beneath her husband's feet, and Esther despises the idea that her own life might end up wasted like that. As such, she is unable to choose between either, or make a commitment to anything else, frozen to stagnancy amidst her options, unable to pick a future:

One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor...I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I

would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77-78)

Amidst all the women in her life, Esther cannot fully identify with any of them; she wants to be all of them but at the same time none of them; she wants the option to choose who and what she can be. This is further illustrated by Jay Cee's response when Esther answers a photographer that she doesn't know what she wants to be, "She wants...to be everything" (98). However, according to the constraints in her life as the 1950s American woman, she has to fit into the singular role created for women in her society: one must be either this or that; one cannot be both.

Similarly to the women before her, observed in *Jane Eyre* and Gilman's narrator, Esther struggles with fitting into the singular role created for women in her society. Esther has difficulty reconciling the idea that men are allowed to have double lives, that nothing is mutually exclusive for them and that they are unhindered by society's standards: they can have it all. Following Esther's experiences with Buddy Willard's hypocrisy, expecting her to be a virgin when he was not, as well as Eric's viewing all women as either pure virgins or animalistic whores, Esther decides that she wants to have sex, declaring, "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not" (81). Esther becomes fixated on the idea of losing her virginity, almost as if this will put her on more equal grounds with men—if they lead double lives, she can too; if they can have all the metaphorical figs, maybe she can too. This is further illustrated by Esther's rejection of Mrs. Willard's teachings, "What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security...what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is the place the arrow

shoots off from,” (73) to which Esther later thinks to herself, “The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (82). Esther wants the freedom that a man has, able to have his family and a domestic life as a base but then free to go from there and do what he wants. She wants both things, which are mutually exclusive to her as a woman, but are feasible for a man. This is the framework for her eventual breakdown, pushed by society into madness, as she tells Buddy, “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days” (92).

Esther is spurred into her breakdown by Marco’s rape attempt, after which she takes the clothes and belongings that hold no meaning for her and throws them off the roof, one by one, demonstrative of her last attempt to reconcile herself with either option: romance or a career. She then takes a train back to her hometown, with Marco’s blood still smeared across her face. With Esther being on the cusp of societal womanhood, having drawn out her studies as long as she could, and now having to choose between pursuing a career or pursuing life in the domestic sphere, it seems as though this blood can signify menstruation and her entrance into another option for womanhood entirely, outside the bounds of society, beginning her descent to madness.

Once Esther gets home, she discovers that she didn’t get into her expected writing course, sinking her further into despair, as it seems like both of the options she’d had laid out before her had shriveled up like the figs she’d imagined. She attempts to imagine numerous things she could do over the summer, or for the rest of her life, and yet they all seem to get away from her, “I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three...nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangles into

space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth" (116). Unable to imagine anything in her future, Esther becomes more and more detached, soon unable to sleep, read, or write, and ends up being treated by a male psychiatrist Doctor Gordon, which continues to worsen her condition, as she attempts to kill herself multiple times, dismaying at her failure, "I thought I would swim out until I was too tired to swim back . As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears. I am I am I am" (146).

Esther is soon able to go to a new facility where she meets the young, stylish Doctor Nolan, who comes to signify to Esther that a woman can have both her career and more "feminine" pursuits. Doctor Nolan presents a successful, intelligent, kind female figure, whom Esther likens to both a mother and an old friend (190), illustrating that there are options for Esther's future other than ending up like her mother or one of her peers. Doctor Nolan also instructs Esther to get birth control after Esther declares, "'What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb...A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick to keep me in line'" (198). Esther views this birth control as her freedom as she climbs onto the examination table:

'I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless...' (199)

Furthermore, after this, Esther declares, "I was my own woman" (199), allowing her to finally have the belief that she is in control of her own future, rather than just at the whims of society and male-defined femininity, further indicative of the second-wave feminist fight for equality

and reproductive rights. Following this, she is soon able to have sex and lose her virginity that she felt was holding her back as a woman.

Additionally, it is at this facility that Esther reconnects with Joan, a girl from her hometown, who had also tried to kill herself, with Esther coming to view her as a reflection of herself, “Joan was the beaming double of my old best self, specifically designed to follow and torment me” (184). Esther comes to see this parallelism more and more, with both having dated Buddy Willard and having had similar experiences, “Joan fascinated me...Her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own” (196). While both appear to get better, with Joan progressing faster and even going back to the real world for a while, Joan soon commits suicide. Joan appears to be a mirror for Esther in her struggles and eventual fate, what would have happened to Esther. However, at Joan’s funeral, Esther seems glad to be alive, “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am” (216). This quote obviously hearkens back to the “dull motor” of Esther’s heartbeat when she was suicidal, reminding her that she was still alive and still suffering, monotonous and unbreaking; however, now, Esther seems to have a new appreciation for life, with her heart boasting that she still lives, breaking between each beat as if to savor it and showing how time has slowed down, no longer propelling her to be forced into a life that she doesn’t want.

The Bell Jar once again redefines the trope of the madwoman, sparking women to radical feminism in their pursuit of equal rights, spurred on by the ideas of Friedan and Plath delineating that women can and should have more than the singular narrow role laid out in front of them. Similar to Gilman’s narrator and Jane Eyre, Esther is also trapped into fitting into the contradictory male-defined femininity; however, while the former characters were only given a

choice of fitting into the singular role of femininity, Esther is also given the choice earned by the first wave of feminism: to pursue her career and ambitions, as is her right as a person. However, this either/or social dichotomy proves to be oppressive and unequal, as men are able to have both/and/all. Esther therein descends to the madness of a mental breakdown, which she is only able to recover from once she recognizes her ability to have a life that isn't ruled by men, gaining freedom both over her life and sexuality. Furthermore, Esther is presented as a heroine, who has a somewhat happy or hopeful ending, unlike the madwomen in this paper before her, signaling that a woman affected by mental illness or madness has become such for a reason and is deserving of a happy ending.

3rd Wave Madwoman: *Black Swan*

There is significant debate over whether the two most recent waves of feminism are two separate movements or if the fourth is just an extension of the third. Unlike the previous waves before them, the third and fourth waves both lack a centralized cohesive movement. Both are centered on the empowerment of women, spreading awareness, the validation of female experiences, personal narratives, and inclusivity. For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss each separately, with respect to a "madwoman" from each of their supposed time periods; however, I will not be taking a position on whether they are separate movements or not.

In contrast to the first two waves of feminism, the third wave, taking place from the 1990s to the early 2010s, was sprung out of the misconception that equality between men and women had already been achieved. The beginning of the third wave is largely attributed to the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas amidst disregarded accusations of sexual assault from his employee, Anita Hill. In response to this, Rebecca Walker famously

wrote, “Let Thomas’ confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman’s experience move you to anger...I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave” (Quinn 196). As such, the third wave was mainly centered upon validating the experiences of women in their oppression and sharing personal narratives, bringing into focus other layers of oppression with its ideas of inclusivity and intersectionality, while also spreading awareness for the still-present male dominion.

Furthermore, the third wave was focused on female empowerment, on stripping the male-defined roles from the narrative and allowing women to define things for themselves, to expand what it meant to be a woman and to reclaim ideas of sexuality or femininity, on their own terms, that may have inhibited them in the past. This concept of a female-defined femininity was especially significant as the previous male definitions had pushed women into singular roles without much room for autonomy or expression. The third wave expanded upon femininity, allowing for multiple definitions and for women to contain multitudes. Furthermore, the third wave enabled and encouraged the idea of female sexual expression, not punishing women for things that brought them pleasure.

In 2010, near the supposed end of the third wave, the film *Black Swan* directed by Darren Aronofsky was released, telling the story of Nina Sayers, a chaste and perfectionistic ballerina on the cusp of fame, ruled by her attempts to please those around her, including both her overbearing mother and her lustful male director. With little experience in the real world outside of her profession, having been trapped and infantilized by her narcissistic mother, Nina struggles with her own rigidity and inexperience, as well as with the need to please those around her and to be absolutely perfect. Furthermore, this need is heightened when she earns the dual role of the Swan Queen, as she is perfect in the role of the docile and innocent White Swan, but fails to

perform as the dark and sensuous Black Swan; this is especially compounded with the arrival of Lily, a new dancer and professional rival who appears to be her competition for the role of the Black Swan.

Throughout the film, Nina's struggles with embodying the Black Swan are paralleled with her own struggles to express her sexuality, gain her independence, and ultimately to grow into a woman. Nina is characterized by her representation of the White Swan in her childlike purity and fragility. Although she is a 28-year-old woman, she still lives with her mother, Erica, and has a little girl's bedroom that is frilly, pink, and filled with stuffed animals. Erica obsesses over Nina, her career, and sexuality, micromanaging her and preventing her from having a social or romantic life, keeping her in perpetual girlhood. As such, Nina starts out the film with extremely childlike qualities, speaking in a baby voice and dressed in colors such as pink and white, emotionally dependent on her mother, and looking to her mother for all guidance. The perpetual girlhood of her character is reflected in her name, with Nina as shorthand for Russian Annina, meaning "little girl" and derived from the Greek Anna meaning "flower." Furthermore, her mother's role is also set up with her name Erica, being the female version of the Norse masculine name Eric, meaning sole ruler, monarch, and powerful ("Nina", "Erica"). This name therefore sets Erica up to be the female representation of man; with this duality in her name, she can be representative of the female incarceration within male-defined femininity, perpetuated and policed by other women, as she keeps Nina within her virginity and her girlhood. Erica also presents herself as a cautionary figure to Nina, having, herself, gotten pregnant with Nina, ending her own ballerina career, and so, she warns Nina away from involvement with men and from growing up in general, telling her, "When you start getting older, there's all this ridiculous pressure. God knows I understand." (*Black Swan* 18:19-18:25).

Erica presents one of Nina's main obstacles both in becoming a woman and in embodying the Black Swan. Erica's psychological abuse seems to manifest in Nina's need to be perfect, both in her role as Erica's daughter and in her role at the ballet, seeking to please her mother along with any other authority figure in her life, including Thomas, the director, who is known for having relationships with those in the company, especially the former prima ballerina Beth. This seems indicative of issues addressed by third wave feminism, and even the shift to fourth, as he is representative of both sexual harassment and unprofessionalism in the workplace as well as male abuse of power in a position of authority. Thomas tells Nina, in her attempts to become the Swan Queen that all he sees in her is the White Swan, "beautiful, fearful, and fragile," that she cannot embody the Black Swan and she cannot achieve perfection because it's not just about control, but it's about letting go, losing herself, and transcending, which Nina cannot do in her own sexual inexperience and with no autonomy of her own (20:40-20:45). Thus, the film depicts Nina's descent to madness, where she slowly loses herself in her pursuit of perfection but at the same time, gaining her independence while in pursuit of her own sexual and creative growth.

Throughout the film, the more Nina loses herself, pursuing her freedom and sexual growth, while losing her White Swan persona, the more she begins to hallucinate herself becoming the Black Swan. At the beginning, after failing her first audition for the role of Swan Queen, Nina dresses up, wearing bright red lipstick that she stole from Beth, and goes to visit Thomas in an attempt to persuade him to give her the role, appearing to emulate the pupil that had once caught his eye. Seeing Nina's appearance, Thomas assumes that she means to seduce him for the role and kisses her; surprised, she bites him, after which, he gives her the role. That night, Nina discovers blood and scratches on her shoulder blades for the first time, having

scratched herself. Throughout the film, Nina goes on to injure herself again and again, some injuries being real and some imagined, demonstrating the psychological emergence of her sexuality and the manifestation of the Black Swan taking over. The blood of her injuries throughout the film, starting with this instance, is metaphorically related to menstrual blood, as Nina attempts to leave her innocent and childlike White Swan self behind to move into womanhood and the Black Swan. However, these injuries being self-inflicted is both representative of women killing off their childhood personas in order to move into maturity, while also, paradoxically, hurting themselves to please men and to fit into specific male-defined roles.

Later in the film, Erica is undressing Nina and notices these scratches. Nina, for the first time, tries to take a stand against her, attempting to keep Erica from undressing her and demonstrating her newly developing desire for independence and autonomy in tandem with her sexual growth and metaphoric puberty. However, Erica berates her for this “disgusting habit,” alluding to Nina having done this in the past, and forcibly cuts Nina’s nails to prevent her from scratching herself again (38:30-38:32). As her scratches appear at the same time that Nina is coming into her sexuality, this can further be examined as a physical manifestation of her figurative masturbation, scratching herself, which can be likened to touching herself, as her mother attempts to put a stop to it like she has done in the past. This idea is driven home by the fact that in the morning, Nina attempts to masturbate at the instruction of Thomas, and stops, startled, after realizing that her mother is in the room with her, asleep in the chair, seemingly keeping watch to keep Nina from doing exactly this. This further links Nina’s attempts to express her sexuality with her self-harming or metamorphosis into the Black Swan, as her mother puts a physical and psychological stop to both. Later in the film, as Nina’s psychosis becomes more

evident, but also as she comes more into her sexuality and independence, she hallucinates herself physically becoming the Black Swan.

The film displays a significant motif in Nina's reflected self and her duality. As her psyche unravels, she begins to hallucinate a dark projection of herself, both in mirrors and in other people, especially within the new ballerina Lily. Nina begins to notice Lily as a disruption in her life, coming in late and ruining her audition, laughing loudly during the announcement of Nina's role as Swan Queen at the gala, and attracting Thomas's eye for the role of the Black Swan. Thomas tells Nina to observe Lily in her confidence, sensuality, and freedom, telling Nina, "She's not faking it." (29:25-29:27). Although Lily looks remarkably similar to Nina, she seems to be her opposite in behavior and attitude, completely effortless in everything she does, passionate, and embracing of her sexuality. Nina begins to see her dark double within Lily, seemingly mocking her, as if taunting Nina to become like her; however, it is interesting to note that while Nina admires and envies Lily, she fears the dark projection of herself that she visualizes within Lily. Lily is the representation of this alternate version of herself, of Nina's dual femininity and sexuality, which Nina subconsciously fears. This is further illustrated in their similar names, with Lily also being a flower, but having symbolic meanings of femininity, love, passion, and confidence—seeming to point to the idea that "Nina" as a little girl and flower, must grow into the confident and sensual "Lily" who symbolically represents all of these things. This duality of their names further situates each as an aspect of the other, making up the dual aspects of the Swan Queen.

Nina and Lily grow closer, but Nina continues to see and fear her own projection within Lily. Furthermore, Nina's dark projection appears as Beth and her mother, both of whom Nina may subconsciously fear becoming, once again indicative of this narrow scope of options for a

female character. If Nina is to stay in her role as prima ballerina, and become the lover of Thomas, she will end up like Beth, used and discarded by Thomas, forced into retirement in favor of someone younger, more beautiful, and more talented. Nina is well on her way to this fate of becoming Beth, as she has already stolen Beth's lead role, Beth's lipstick, and Beth's lover. On the other hand, Nina could also end up like her mother, getting pregnant by someone in the industry (Thomas) and then losing out on her dreams, forced to live vicariously through her daughter, hoping she won't make the same mistakes. In either scenario, both of which are extremely possible, even probable, Nina appears to lose. This also appears to mimic the predicament of her character of the White Swan in the play, trapped as a swan and yearning to be free of her role to be a maiden once more. This theme is mirrored in the film, with Nina trapped into her feminine role and life, without a way to break free. The independence and autonomy of the Black Swan attempts to give this freedom to Nina, but at the same time, Nina fears it, unsure if she wants to become something she fears.

This psychological tension in the film appears to come to a head as Nina hallucinates a sexual encounter with Lily, which actually proves to be Nina's dark projection, and thus Nina has sex with herself. Furthermore, this dark projection refers to Nina mockingly as "sweet girl," a name that Erica had always called her, seeming to point to the idea that Erica's efforts were futile, and Nina has lost her girlhood (1:10:10-1:10:13). The next day, Nina throws away all of her stuffed animals and childish things, and she no longer wears her signature pinks and whites, instead opting for greys and blacks, demonstrating her maturation. At rehearsal, Lily is made Nina's alternate for the ballet, and Nina hallucinates seeing Lily have sex with Thomas; however, this once again morphs into Nina's dark double, while Thomas morphs into the villain of the ballet, Rothbart, identifying Thomas as the true villain of this story—forcing Nina into her

specific and narrow role at the cost of her mental health, while exploiting and pitting the women, Nina, Lily, and Beth, all of which seem to be his victims, against each other.

Nina then has confrontations with each of the women. She first visits Beth in the hospital, who stepped into oncoming traffic following Thomas' casual dismissal of her. Nina tells Beth that she stole her belongings and her role, just wanting to be perfect like Beth, as Nina seeks to fit perfectly into the contrived role of a woman. However, Beth shatters this dream, telling her that she is nothing, made nothing by Thomas, indicative of the contradictory feminine. Nina then confronts her mother, shattering their relationship, tearing down her mother's portraits of her, physically lashing out against her. The combination of these instances appears to spur the full physical emergence of the Black Swan, with Nina's disillusionment, in the shattering of this female dream. Viewing the predicaments of both her mother and Beth and destroying her idealized view of them, as well as her potential future as one of them, finally brings out the Black Swan in her.

Although her mother attempts to stop her, Nina goes on to perform as the Swan Queen. Thomas has already given her part to Lily, but Nina displays a new confidence and sureness of herself, even a ruthlessness about her, that Thomas is impressed with, and he allows her to perform. Thomas tells her that the only person standing in her way is herself and that it's time to let her go. Nina performs as the White Swan; however, she messes up and falls, something she has never done in this role before, indicating that she can no longer perform the White Swan as she is no longer the innocent and docile character. After the performance, when she goes back to the dressing room, Nina is confronted by Lily, once again hallucinating her dark projection onto her, and they end up having a physical altercation, breaking a mirror, and Nina stabs her, saying "It's my turn" over and over again (1:33:33-1:33:42). Nina then fully morphs into the Black

Swan while dancing, performing it perfectly, after which she goes and kisses Thomas. However, when she returns to the dressing room to change back into her White Swan costume, she discovers that she did not actually stab Lily and instead stabbed herself—having fully become the Black Swan and killed off the White Swan. She then does her last performance as the White Swan, taking one last look at her mother and the other at Thomas, mirroring her gaze to Rothbart and the prince, and then, like the Swan Queen, accepts her fate, jumping to her death. When she lands, a crowd surrounds her, and blood blooms outward from her stomach wound, giving the imagery of menstrual blood, as Nina has fully transitioned into womanhood. Thomas calls her “my little princess,” a name he had always reserved for Beth, and asks, “What did you do?” to which she responds, “Perfect, I was perfect.” (1:42:13-1:42:44).

Black Swan appears to be a third-wave feminist work in that it doesn't seem to have one centralized theme to it, instead containing multiple intersecting themes. The madwoman character of Nina attempts to please everyone and is constantly reaching for an unattainable perfection, to fit into a contradictory male-defined feminine. The environment that she is in stresses this idea—with all the women around her competing for the same role and striving for the same high standards. Each of the female characters is exploited by men, specifically men in positions of power, and harms herself to fit into male patriarchal standards and roles. Throughout the film, Nina loses her innocence and girlhood, instead transitioning into womanhood, while policed by Erica, pushed by Thomas, and held back by herself in her own fear. This further demonstrates the struggle of third-wave feminists to redefine femininity, as Nina destroys herself in her attempts to fit into the potential roles of femininity laid out before her.

4th Wave Madwoman: *Midsommar*

Many question whether the fourth wave of feminism is a movement in and of itself, characterized specifically by its online influence, critiques of systems of power, addressing of institutional biases, and attention on holding powerful men accountable, or if it is simply an extension of the third wave in its lack of a centralized movement and its focus on inclusivity and awareness. Theoretically beginning around 2012 or 2013, with an insurgence of online feminist movements, and continuing into the present, the fourth wave of feminism, like the third wave, is largely focused on the empowerment of women and inclusivity, especially focusing on and validating personal experiences and narratives (Aitken 7). A significant supposed difference between the third and fourth waves is the utilization of social media and internet tools for a more widespread and globalized impact. While this “fourth wave” hasn’t exactly been agreed upon by academics, it is widely used by activists and in the media. Movements such as #YesAllWomen, Free the Nipple, #MeToo, the Women’s March, and Time’s Up are representative of this fourth wave of feminism, examining the still-present gender inequality, critiquing systems of power and institutional biases, calling out men, and empowering and empathizing with women.

In 2019, director Ari Aster released his folk horror film *Midsommar*, and since then, he has largely characterized the film as a breakup movie and even as a dark sort of fairy tale, inverting numerous tropes. The film itself revolves around the dissolution of a toxic relationship of a couple while traveling with their friends to a rural commune in Sweden to take part in the midsummer festival. However, in addition to this centralized storyline, there are also peripheral characters and motivations at work in the background: themes of dealing with grief and catharsis, necessity for female empathy and the shared female experience, as well as a critique of modern modes of thought.

First and foremost, *Midsommar* is a breakup movie and a “dark fairytale” about the main character Dani Ardor and her boyfriend Christian Hughes (Aster). In the beginning of the movie, Dani and Christian have been dating for four years, and Christian talks to his friends about wanting out of the relationship; however, he is unable to break up with Dani just in case he later decides that he wants her back, but there is clearly an emotional disconnect and detachment. On the other hand, Dani worries that she is too emotionally dependent on Christian in all of her family drama and that she has scared him off. In the first couple scenes of the movie, it is winter, and Dani receives a cryptic and alarming message from her bipolar sister Terri reading, “I can’t anymore – everything’s black – mom and dad are coming too. Goodbye.” (*Midsommar* 3:03-3:08). Dani contacts her multiple times with no response, so, clearly distraught, she calls Christian, seeking assurance and support, while at the same time fearing the worst. However, Christian tells her that her sister does this all the time, blaming Dani for enabling her by going “straight to crisis mode” (5:11-5:13). He continues to tell her that it’s a ploy for attention, despite Dani’s protests that this email seems different. Dani then gives in, confirming and assuring Christian that he’s right, thanking him, and telling him that she loves him. This beginning scene already sets up Christian as invalidating both Dani’s and her sister’s experiences as women. He questions both of their judgement and invalidates Terri’s mental illness, claiming she is just doing this for attention, and he convinces Dani to lean on his judgement instead. Dani takes Christian’s advice and does nothing, while her sister commits suicide and kills her parents as well. Dani is absolutely devastated and traumatized by these events, leading her to lean on Christian even more, making Christian further unable to break up with her.

Later, in the springtime, Dani still hasn’t recovered from these events, and goes through the motions of her daily life numbly. Christian still doesn’t know what to do with her, wanting to

be independent but trapped in this relationship. He tries to make plans to go to a party without her, but Dani, attempting to be a good girlfriend or maybe just not wanting to be alone, decides to go with him, much to his chagrin. While at the party, Christian's friends talk about a trip to Sweden that they've been planning, intent on leaving in two weeks. Dani is caught unawares, while Christian fumbles to claim that they had just been thinking and talking about it, saying, "I mean, if we even go. I'm probably not gonna go, but... Yeah, we were talking about it" (14:40-14:47). When they get back to their apartment, Christian is extremely defensive as Dani tells him that the interaction was weird and that she wishes he would have told her he was going. He then attempts to make Dani doubt herself by making claims that he had told her he'd wanted to go to Sweden before, making her out to be the villain by policing him and trying to keep him from going (which she wasn't doing at all). After a series of questions, it's clear that he has been lying to her and hiding the trip from her, for which he insincerely apologizes, but Dani claims that she doesn't need an apology, she just wants to talk about it. Feeling attacked, he attempts to leave, while Dani scrambles to apologize and begs him to stay, saying "Well then I'm sorry. I just got confused. I'm sorry...It just felt really weird, okay, but I'm fine. I think it's great that you're going to Sweden, I do, I think it's amazing" (17:27-17:47). In this scene, it is clear that Christian is being emotionally abusive and manipulative towards Dani, gaslighting her into apologizing and begging him to stay when he was the one in the wrong. In the summer, as Christian reluctantly takes Dani on the trip with his friends, Josh and Mark, to visit their friend Pelle's ancestral home of the Hårga, their relationship continues to deteriorate.

In addition to the breakdown of this relationship and Dani's oppression by Christian, throughout the film, there are themes of grief and catharsis, and the necessity for female relationships with other women and the emotional empathy that is necessary for women. From

the beginning of the film, Dani is having to deal with this immense trauma and grief completely by herself. Dani fears that her relationship is falling apart and that Christian will leave her, making her alone in the world, with all of her family already having left her behind. However, Christian has already significantly distanced himself from her in the relationship, leaving her to deal with her grief alone, without giving her the emotional support and empathy that she needs. Furthermore, having disregarded and dismissed Dani's judgement in her concern for her family, as well as Terri's experience in her mental illness, Christian is partly to blame for her family's death. Dani's family was shown as alive and still breathing at the beginning of the film when she calls Christian, and if he had believed or validated her, she might have immediately called the police in her concern, saving their lives. This may be something that Dani subconsciously holds onto throughout the film, or maybe it is simply that she does not get the emotional support from him that she needs, leading her to deal with her trauma and grief alone. Every time Dani is triggered or starts to think about her family and grief, she removes herself to go deal with it in solitude, exiting the apartment when Pelle apologizes for her loss, excusing herself to the bathroom on the plane, running to an outhouse when they are on psychedelics, and running away again after the *Ättestupa* scene. Dani may also retreat to grieve as she doesn't want to ruin Christian's trip and that she feels invalid in her emotions, like Christian will tell her that this is an incorrect response to her trauma.

Scenes of Christian's abuse and manipulation continue to happen throughout the movie. When they arrive at the commune, Christian forgets how long they have been dating when they are asked by another visiting couple, Simon and Connie. Furthermore, Christian forgets her birthday and goes chasing after Maja, one of the Hårga girls who has been flirting with him. Observing, Dani tells Pelle that Christian forgot her birthday; however, she then makes excuses

for him, telling Pelle, “No, I forgot to remind him, and it’s not his fault. Nevermind, it’s okay” (43:04-43:12). This is a larger pattern for Dani, as she makes excuses for Christian and blames herself, absolving him of any responsibility. Pelle notifies Christian, who tries to play it off to Dani as if he hadn’t forgotten, to which Dani replies “It’s fine, I’m not upset. It’s okay.” This further indicates that Christian only makes an effort when he is worried that he is going to get in trouble with Dani; but once again, she ends up as the one reassuring him. Following the *Ättestupa* or ritualistic suicide, Dani needs to leave to deal with her grief, and instead of consoling her or empathizing with her, Christian runs off to tell his friend Josh that he will also be researching the Hårga for his thesis, stealing Josh’s project, more concerned with his academics and ambitions than he is with Dani’s pain and grief. Christian continues to only be concerned with himself and not Dani’s wellbeing, disregarding her concern at the fact that Simon apparently left without Connie. Dani’s anger subtly begins to manifest as she tells Christian, “I could see you possibly doing that” (1:28:37-1:28:40). All of these scenes demonstrate Dani’s oppression by Christian becomes as he exploits her, disregards her, and invalidates her constantly, leading to her eventual anger towards him, which culminates at the end of the film after finding him cheating on her.

When Dani discovers Christian having sex with Maja, she immediately tries to run away, to deal with her grief and emotion on her own, holding it inside as it suffocates her. However, she is soon surrounded by the young Hårga women who start to breathe and moan in sync with her until she is finally able to wail and scream, as they wail and scream with her, giving her the empathy that she has so desired, that she has observed in this communal “family” throughout the film. This scene especially encapsulates the fourth wave’s focus on female empowerment and validation, with women sharing pain and empathizing with the experiences of other women in

their oppression. This female empathy and shared female experience is present in other aspects of the film as well, with all of the women participating in raising the children and communal chores. Furthermore, this empathy is seen in Christian's and Maja's sex ceremony in which they are surrounded by elder Hårga women who empathize with Maja, moaning and experiencing in conjunction with her. Therefore, the Hårga appear to be matriarchal, with this emphasis on the feminine, empathy and emotion, but also in their associations with flowers and nature, as well as with their reproduction and seasons of life rituals. Throughout the film, rebirth seems to be especially significant, with new children being given the names of the elders who died in the *Ättestupa* so that they can be reborn. The Hårga then stuffs their bodies with plants and flowers, returning them to nature. Furthermore, with the matriarchal Hårga, there is more of an emphasis on women in their importance, as being the givers of life, with men being more expendable and being brought in from the outside purely for reproductive purposes. In the end, this idea of males being expendable is further demonstrated in the nine people chosen to die in the sacrificial ceremony, with only two being women—one an outsider and one from the *Ättestupa*.

At the end, Dani's catharsis and freedom from her oppression at the hands of Christian comes to a head when she, as May Queen, is given the choice of whether to sacrifice Christian as the last remaining outsider, or to sacrifice a member of the Hårga. Dani, having found a place with the matriarchal Hårga, and in her grief and anger, chooses to sacrifice Christian, who is sewn into a bear and then burned alive within the temple. As he burns, one of the elders, dressed as *Vioarr*, the god of vengeance, proclaims in Swedish, "Mighty and dreadful beast. With you, we purge our most unholy affekts. We banish you now to the deepest recesses, where you may reflect on your wickedness" (2:17:24-2:17:44). While the bear is symbolic of the Hårga's worst aspects, so is Christian representative of Dani's. Dani has held a subconscious anger towards

Christian for the death of her family, for his constant dismissal of her, for her own oppression. She has been afraid of being alone, but he had left her more alone than ever in their relationship, and she is finally able to start a new life with the Hårga who support her and empathize with her, where she will never again be alone. Furthermore, when the bear is opened to put Christian inside, the imagery is of a vagina, seeming to invert the Hårga trope of rebirth, as Christian is put inside and sewn up, putting a symbolic end to the patriarchal system of abuse which he represents. When the Hårga set fire to the temple, Dani observes, in shock, as the Hårga begin to scream and thrash in tandem and in empathy with the sacrifices burning inside the temple. Dani wails and sobs, unable to catch her breath, observing the madness around her. As the temple burns to the ground, Dani finally smiles, with the script reading, “She has surrendered to a joy known only by the insane. She has lost herself completely, and she is finally free. It is horrible and it is beautiful” (Aster 117).

Ari Aster describes his film as a “dark fairytale” or a wish fulfillment fantasy, and it can be viewed as such, with a somewhat twisted “happy ending” that leaves the audience both satisfied, but also questioning if they really should be (Aster). While the plot of the film itself is certainly problematic in many respects, and does not necessarily give Dani the happiest of endings with her shifting from one codependent relationship to another (and this one with a murderous cult), it does serve to demonstrate various aspects of fourth wave feminism, bringing attention to female oppression and male dominance that is still present today, with female empathy empowering Dani to take action against her abuser, both literally and symbolically burning him away in a catharsis necessary for many female victims. In this figure of the madwoman, the female experience reaches a place of validation, demonstrating to women that

they are not alone. Dani is able to let go of these hardships, of her past trauma, grief, and oppression, in her madness, burning them away in this “purge of most unholy affekts.”

Conclusion

Each of the above works of narrative fiction demonstrates how female madness in fiction is used to test the boundaries of society and culture, outlining the ways in which women have been limited, villainized, and invalidated. While the trope of the madwoman finds its origins in deeply patriarchal modes of thought and literature, within the last couple centuries, in conjunction with waves of feminism, this trope has been reclaimed and used to validate women in their experiences, in their emotions, in their sexuality, and in their femininity. As such, the use of the madwoman trope has ultimately been situated as a means of critiquing society and its views and limits on women.

Charlotte Brontë uses the character of the madwoman to demonstrate the justification for female anger—that female fury is not “irrational” in its extremity, that any woman could fall to “madness” simply in their anger at their role in society. Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses her narrator to provide a female account of a woman’s descent to madness, giving the madwoman a voice and demonstrating her sympathetically, pointing to the male-defined narrative that pains women as villains but men as heroes or victims. Sylvia Plath uses her own story with second-wave feminism, showing her disillusionment with male-defined femininity and the apparent singular role of women in society. *Black Swan* utilizes the madwoman trope to bring attention to the male abuse of power and male-defined roles that continue to oppress women, demonstrative of third-wave attempts to reclaim and redefine femininity. *Midsommar* uses the trope of female

madness to validate the female experience and empower women and victims, while bringing awareness to the still present male-dominance and female oppression.

Each of these storytellers recognized a fault or critique of society, of the female existence limited within society under male-defined roles and norms. They recognized narrative fiction as more than just a reflection of society, as something that could interact with society and feed back into it. As such, they created stories to bring attention and awareness to issues that were long dismissed, as demonstrated in the use of the madwoman trope as a means of addressing female oppression and villainization. In doing so, they were able to spark movements, to change laws, to fight against patriarchal systems of power that limited and abused, that labeled this righteous discontent as madness. In doing so, they have paved the way for future storytellers, a means for voices to be heard to further precipitate change.

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