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“Madness and Women in Charlotte Perkins
Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper“, Sylvia Plath’s
The Bell Jar, and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*“

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1. Introduction

In the introduction to *Out of her Mind: Women Writing on Madness*, Rebecca Shannonhouse poses the question “So what is “madness”? When is it mental illness? Or when is it the circumstances of a woman’s life driving her “out of her mind”?” (Shannonhouse 2003: xii). This is precisely the question, which is fundamental to my question. In this thesis, I want to highlight the influence of patriarchal society on women’s mental condition and how women are driven “out of their minds”, as represented in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*.

In order to analyze “The Yellow Wallpaper”, *The Bell Jar* and *Surfacing*, some key terms must be established before turning to the individual literary works. My analysis is based on the following terms: femininity, madness and psychiatry. None of these concepts have one single meaning but, rather, are subjects to changing meanings. As a consequence, one stable, unchanging definition cannot be given, but the discourse evolving around each term should be elaborated. The first chapter functions as a theoretical introduction to the aforementioned key terms. First of all, the term “madness”, which is fundamental to all three literary works discussed in this thesis, will be clarified and the relation to psychiatry will be identified. Secondly, “femininity” will be introduced as a parallel construction to “madness”. Feminist attempts of challenging and deconstructing “femininity” and of creating a new female language will be elaborated.

In the second chapter, I will turn to “The Yellow Wallpaper”, a text in which madness is employed as a liberating tool to escape the construction of “traditional femininity” of Victorian society. The plot evolving around a depressed mother and wife, who flees her unsatisfying reality, provides the opportunity to analyze the doctor-patient relationship as well as the husband-wife relationship. Additionally, the distribution of space will be highlighted and a relation between the limiting physical space available to

the narrator and the mental space she claims will be established. In addition, the narrator's altering use of language as the origin of a new feminine language will be discussed.

The third chapter is devoted to *The Bell Jar*, which is set during McCarthyism. The Cold War and the parallels between the Communist enemy and the mad protagonist are central in this chapter. Because the novel is partly set at a psychiatric hospital, the doctor-patient relationship will be elaborated, but also the limiting effects of the "cure" of the protagonist from her madness. Furthermore, I will show how the traditional roles available to women in 1950s America are challenged and the possible careers, which are presented to the protagonist, are questioned.

In the fourth chapter, *Surfacing*, which is set in 1970s Canada, will be analyzed. As I will show, space plays a major role in the novel and the concept of wilderness is presented as a sign for the return to and the redefinition of one's self.

This thesis will prove that madness can be used by patriarchal society as an instrument to suppress women, but that it can also be a device for women to escape this very society.

1.1. Madness/Woman – the Other

Three literary works will be discussed in this thesis, which address the notion of madness and femininity. Patriarchal society captures the female body and inscribes its norms onto it. Women cannot break free from this system with their bodies; however, they can flee patriarchal norms with their minds—by going mad.

Neither femininity nor madness can have one single definition, but they are subjects to continuous change. It is essential to note the parallels and interweavements of femininity, madness and language. All three concepts can be found in the works discussed in this thesis and can be understood as instrument working either for or against women.

Madness can be understood as the tool of patriarchal society to suppress women. However, it can also be regarded as women's device to gain freedom and independence from a society, which does not allow women to leave prescribed norms. Madness is the only option for women who do not want to conform to these societal rules. As a consequence, madness can be a tool either for suppression or liberation.

Additionally, madness is represented in the notion of space: women who leave the allowed patterns of thinking and broaden their mind by recourse to madness, are in return restricted to a certain—limited—space. This space can be a room, a psychiatric institution or the wilderness, as will be shown later in this thesis. As soon as women's minds cannot be limited to a certain way of thinking anymore, their bodies must be restricted within space by patriarchal society. Despite the spatial restriction, some women manage to break free in their minds and conquer patriarchal norms¹.

The question arises as to what function madness serves in some texts. In his book "Gender Identity and Madness in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," Robert Lange shares his belief that

¹ "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Surfacing* give examples of women breaking free from limiting societies, while *The Bell Jar* presents a protagonist who becomes both physically and mentally restricted by patriarchal society. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is able to reject patriarchal rules in spite of physical restriction and thus make space for her new self. The protagonist of *Surfacing*, on the other hand, uses wilderness as her own space to recreate herself.

the language used by many nineteenth-century novelists to discuss and demonstrate gender issues was couched in a vocabulary of insanity, since no other vocabulary seemed adequate to reflect the conflict and turmoil manifest in these personal issues (Lange 1998:1)

This leads to the conclusion that gender and mental issues have something in common. Femininity is always marginalized and constructed as the Other—just like madness. Madness is seen as a passive term that mirrors the normal or sane. In this regard, madness is as necessary to society as femininity is. It is essential in playing the counterpart to the socially accepted behavior. In the essay “Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy,” Shoshana Felman asks the crucial question which can be applied to both women and madness:

How can the woman be thought about outside of the Masculine/Feminine framework, other than as opposed to man, without being subordinated to a primordial masculine model? How can madness, in a similar way, be conceived outside of its dichotomous opposition to sanity, without being subjugated to reason? How can difference as such be thought out as non-subordinate to identity? In other words, how can thought break away from the logic of polar oppositions? (Felman in Belsey and Moore 1995:138)

Felman’s answer is “to examine the ideological effects of the very production of meaning in the language of literature and in its critical exegesis” (Felman in Belsey and Moore 1995:138).

Madness is not only a parallel construction to femininity, but it has always also been linked to women more so than to men and is thus constructed as a natural female trait. This can already be seen by the word “hysteria”, which is derived from the Greek word for ‘uterus’ (Felman in Belsey and Moore 1995:133). This connection between madness and femininity reinforces existing stereotypes of the emotional woman who cannot control herself, mainly because of biological reasons, i.e. her hormones. However, Barta also sees moodiness as something positive. According to her,

the moody woman gains power through her unpredictability. When people do not know what to expect from her, she can manipulate them and keep them in suspense; she can even scare them (Barta 2004:10)

As long as this madness does not interfere with patriarchal society, it can be tolerated and even used as a tool to put women into their seemingly natural place. However, if this madness diverges too much from the norm, women are considered mad. The only consequence then is to overtly exclude them from society and to treat them in patriarchal institutions, such as the psychiatric ward, or by representatives of patriarchal society. However, psychiatrists represent the norms of values of patriarchal society and fulfill the role of the paternal suppressor.

Accordingly, psychiatric asylums work with the means of silencing patients. Just like women are spoken for in patriarchal society, the mad are spoken for as well. Felman calls this an “oppressive gesture of *representation*, by means of which, throughout the history of logos, man has reduced the woman [or the mad] to the status of a silent and subordinate object, to something inherently *spoken for*” (Felman in Belsey and Moore 1995:137). Phyllis Chesler makes women speak for themselves in her book *Women and Madness*. She shows that more women than men are treated in psychiatric institutions and she claims the reason is the uselessness and valueless of women in society. Chesler states that presently women are needed less in their “natural” sphere, namely at home and in their families. However, they are not wanted outside of their homes, either, which makes them “go mad” more overtly than ever before (Chesler 1972:33). According to Chesler, the patients in a psychiatric institution are forced into the role of children. Their sexuality is repressed, which might prove to be disastrous (especially for women) because, often, they have been sexually repressed all of their lives (Chesler 1972:36).

1.2.1. Hysteria – a “typical” and “natural” form of feminine madness?

One particular form of madness should be discussed at this point, namely hysteria, with which most (mad) women were diagnosed in the middle and late nineteenth century. Joy Allison Barta states in her dissertation that

[f]rom its Greek root, we learn why hysteria has always been associated with women. “Hysteria” comes from the word *husterikos*, which means suffering in the womb. This term itself was coined from the root *hustera*, meaning womb. [...] Regardless of the gender of the sufferer, this illness has always been associated with the female, and thus with women. Perhaps the long-held belief that women are somehow “crazier” than men comes from the associations that have followed the word “hysteria” through time (Barta 2004:5)

Therefore, it is not surprising that doctors, such as Silas Weir Mitchell in the late nineteenth century, have diagnosed women suffering from different symptoms with one and the same mental illness and, as a result, condemning them to rest cures. Hysteria cannot be used to explain a specific set of symptoms that are the same for every patient. On the contrary, women with opposing symptoms were diagnosed with the same illness, making the only common feature of this illness the biological sex of its patients. The same symptoms might not have been cause for concern when they occurred in a man. Barta discovers that

[a] woman’s violation of society’s traditional role for her was much more troubling than a man’s, mainly because there were so many more ways that a woman could defy her role. If a woman did not stay home, marry, have children, obey her husband, she was considered abnormal (Barta 2004:8).

One can draw the conclusion that women, who did not conform to the patriarchal norms and rules or did not fulfill the expected set of stereotypes, had to be treated or institutionalized.

Madness, on one hand, leads to an exclusion from patriarchal society and thus can be seen as a liberating step for women because they no longer have to carry out their duties and can break free from suppression. Madness could potentially provide space for women to be themselves. On the other hand, one must not forget that due to the denial of their traditional role women were locked up or treated by representatives of the society from which they were fleeing. These representatives again made sure to provide a substitute for what the women's families or surroundings had done before, that is suppress them and incorporate them into the existing system. Barta even describes "the madhouse" as "dirty, repressive, and abusive," and continues saying that "a woman's madness could be a powerful expression, but it could also place her in a dangerous position" (Barta 2004:4).

Excluding mad women from society leads back to the notion of marginalization, which can be seen in two different ways: Marginalized women can still just be part of the very society which has marginalized them. As a consequence, women at the brink of society are weakened by society. The other option is to regard the women as being part of another—alternative—society already, where they are not weakened anymore. These two different concepts of marginalization lead to different subject positions. Femininity and madness can be marginalized by a society to its outer limits. However, it does not liberate them, but only weakens them. Thus, becoming part of another society might actually provide space for them and proof to be liberating.

Madness does not only share marginalization with femininity, but also faces the same problem when it comes to binary oppositions². Jane M. Ussher sums this problem up with the term "material-discursive divide," where material refers to action and the flesh, while discursive means discourse, signs and signifiers (Ussher 1997:1). She states that sexuality, madness, and reproduction are usually regarded as material, where the

² The following chapter on femininity will show that "woman" forms a binary opposition with "man", where "woman" is always the weak part, which "man" needs to constitute itself. Similarly, "mad" is needed in order to define "sane". "Mad" is turned into the passive term—into the Other—which has to be avoided in order to be a functioning part of patriarchal society.

body stands at the center of the scene (Ussher 1997:2). This makes the body subject to scientific or medical research, which is primarily based on physical examinations.

Similarly, Michel Foucault regards “social structures as determined by dominant ‘discursive practices’”(Barry 2002: 179). “Discourse” includes “the whole ‘mental set’ and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society” (Barry 2002: 176). Chris Barker sums up that Foucault

explores the genealogy of the body as a site of disciplinary practices which bring subjects in to being. Such practices are the consequences of specific historical discourses of crime, punishment, medicine, science and sexuality. Thus, Foucault (1973) analyses statements about madness which give us knowledge about it, the rules which prescribe what is ‘sayable’ or ‘thinkable’ about madness, subjects who personify madness and the practices within institutions which deal with madness [...]. (Barker 2000: 20)

Consequently, every person is a product of history and of historical discourses. “Discursive formation” takes place “[w]here discourses provide ways of talking about a particular topic in similar ways with repeated motifs or clusters of ideas, practices and forms of knowledge across a range of sites of activity” (Barker 2000: 78). In reference to the study of discourses of madness, Foucault’s 1973 study *Madness and Civilization* is useful. Barker enumerates what Foucault included in his research:

- statements about madness which give us knowledge concerning madness;
- the rules which prescribe what is ‘sayable’ or ‘thinkable’ about madness;
- subjects who personify the discourses of madness, i.e. the ‘madman’;
- the processes by which discourses of madness acquire authority and truth at a given historical moment;
- the practices within institutions which deal with madness;
- the idea that different discourses about madness will appear at later historical moments, producing new knowledge and a new discursive formation. (Barker 2000: 78-79)

Consequently, “[d]iscourse constructs, defines and produces the objects of knowledge in an intelligible way while excluding other forms of

reasoning as unintelligible” (Barker 2000: 78). Therefore, madness is a construct of discourse which does not only determine what can be said about this topic, but also “who can speak, when and where” (Barker 2000: 79). Hence, discourse is related to disciplinary power which includes “the ‘sciences,’ which constitute the subject as an object of inquiry,” “‘dividing practices,’ which separate the mad from the sane” and “technologies of the self, whereby individuals turn themselves into subjects” (Barker 2000: 79). Consequently, a “classification of what is sane and mad” has taken place and the “degrees of ‘mental illness’” have been categorized (Barker 2000: 79).³ Thus, the body has functioned “as object and target of power” and has been dominated by disciplinary power since the classical age (Foucault 1979: 136).

1.2.2. Psychiatry – a historical overview

Treatment, which takes into account the patient’s opinion, is desirable; however, oftentimes, especially at the time when the discourse on madness first came up, the patient was merely the subject of experiments designed to test various theories.

All three literary works discussed in this thesis are in one way or another connected to psychiatry. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” psychiatry is represented by the protagonist’s husband, her brother and the absent, yet powerful, S. Weir Mitchell. In *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist sees and encounters several psychiatrists, is placed in a psychiatric ward of a public hospital and later in a private insane asylum. *Surfacing* relies on psychiatry on a more subtle level and does not overtly display representatives or institutions of psychiatry. However, psychiatry is an institutionalized part of the society the protagonist lives in and she—as well as other characters of the novel—must have knowledge of psychiatry, which makes the protagonist an object to psychiatry as well. For these reasons, a quick overview of the technologies of psychiatry should be

³ The ‘Panopticon,’ Foucault’s “metaphor of disciplinary power,” will be introduced in the chapter 2.5. in this thesis (Barker 2000: 79). For further information, please check chapter 3 “Panopticism” in Foucault’s *Discipline & Punish*.

given. I rely on Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, some works discussing *Madness and Civilization* and a book on medical history by Roy Porter, who does not criticize psychiatric developments in the same way as Foucault, but offers important steps in medical science.

In order to understand how psychiatry works, one should bear in mind that the treatment of mentally ill people had not been a branch of its own until the nineteenth century. Instead, general practitioners had to take care of the insane. Jane Louis-Wood explains that Foucault regarded the concept of madness in the Middle Ages as a chaotic natural force outside man, which was derived from Biblical concepts (cf. Louis-Wood n.p.). This perception of madness was followed by two different concepts in the Renaissance. Madness was either regarded as a portal to the terrifying natural powers of night, thus representing a cosmic viewpoint, or as an ironic counterpart to reason, representing human weakness. In the Renaissance, the madmen were kept on the so-called "Ship of Fools," the ultimate symbol for exile and marginalization; however, no strict exclusion of the mad from society existed, which was to come later. Only the second approach, namely madness as unreason or madness as the negative to reason, survived. Madness appeared to be in dialogue with reason, for example in the person of the court jester in the seventeenth century (cf. Protevi n.p.).

The Classical Age represented the age of The Great Confinement. At the end of the eighteenth century, the first private mental asylums were opened in England. However, these asylums did not always involve doctors. At this time, it was still society that would declare people insane and would have them placed under custody with their own families, caretakers, prisons, reformatories, such as the Hôpital Général in France, or possibly (catholic) monasteries, where exorcisms were practiced upon the mad (cf. Porter 2000: 495). People who did not conform to the given social rules, were likely to be stigmatized as insane. One can assume that a society's most powerful figures would decide whether or not someone was mad. Generally speaking, men were more powerful than women,

which turned women into powerless victims of madness accusations, if they did not conform to their preassigned role, for example that of a housewife and mother.

In the nineteenth century, psychiatry was finally developed and institutionalized. Institutions such as madhouses, asylums, and psychiatric wards in hospitals were installed (Porter 2000:496). The Frenchman Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) played a major role in the development of psychiatric institutions, as he was in charge of the Hôpital Bicêtre, the psychiatric ward for men in the Hôpital Général.

The Hôpital Général was founded in 1656 and, according to Michel Foucault, was “not a medical establishment” originally, but “an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:125). Thus, the Hôpital Général was a powerful institution and an instrument of order, which provided confinement and prevented “mendicancy and idleness as the source of all disorders” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:128-129). Unemployed people were taken in who had to trade their individual freedom for food and had to “accept the physical and moral constraint of confinement” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:130). It should be noted that the Hôpital Général served as an institution for the homeless, unemployed, vagabonds and finally the mad. Also, it played a double role by giving work to the confined, thus providing cheap manpower to the state (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:132). The “madmen were included in the proscription of idleness” and were beginning to be confined in the seventeenth century because the madman “crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:136). Thus, the Great Confinement might be seen as an answer to an economic crisis, which demanded cheap labor, and as “a reaction to transgression of the basic structure of Classical thought” (Protevi n.p.).

Philippe Pinel made the psychiatric ward more humane by handling the patients by means of an “ethical treatment,” which meant foregoing the use of chains. In addition, Pinel considered psychological reasons for

madness rather than physical reasons and introduced a more gentle way of treating the insane (Porter 2000: 497). He installed the authority of the alienist and tried to distract the insane by providing them with work (Porter 2000:498). Thus “[t]he values of family and work, all the acknowledged virtues, now reign in the asylum” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:148), which was not unlike the confinement of a marriage for women. Pinel “guarantee[d] bourgeois morality a universality of fact and permit[ted] it to be imposed as a law upon all forms of insanity” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:150). He treated his patients by three principal means—silence, recognition by mirror and perpetual judgment. Silence was installed because

there was no longer any common language between madness and reason; the language of delirium can be answered only by an absence of language, for delirium is not a fragment of dialogue with reason, it is not language at all; it refers, in an ultimately silent awareness, only to transgression (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:152)

Silence was only broken by Freud in the beginning of the twentieth century, when he made “the insane” talk again.

Finally, perpetual judgment regards the asylum as a juridical instance with instruments of punishment, where the madman is watched, judged, and condemned, which should lead to “the birth of remorse in the inmate’s mind” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:156).

The three methods applied in Pinel’s asylum lead to an “apotheosis of the medical personage” and thus “mental disease [...] is made possible” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:158). This new position of the psychiatrist meant that

[the] physician could exercise his absolute authority in the world of the asylum only insofar as, from the beginning, he was Father and Judge, Family and Law – his medical practice being for a long time no more than a complement to the old rites of Order, Authority, and Punishment (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:160-161)

The paternal authority, which determines patriarchal society, also appropriates the asylum and incorporates exactly the same virtues and norms in the asylum. The psychiatrist becomes the exclusive holder of

power, who incorporates “the authority he has borrowed from order, morality, and the family” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:163).

Samuel Tuke (1784-1857) accomplished something similar to Pinel’s asylum in an English Quaker community in York. His charitable institution was called “The Retreat,” which was governed by calmness, encouragement and a supporting familial atmosphere. The insane were treated like undisciplined children and, like Pinel, Tuke used neither chains nor corporal punishment (Porter 2000:499). The standard for “the Retreat” was family life, where the principles of praise/dispraise and punishment/reward were used. Foucault states that “[t]he Retreat would serve as an instrument of segregation: a moral and religious segregation which sought to reconstruct around madness a milieu as much as possible like that of the Community of Quakers.” Religion took over the function of balancing the “violence of madness” because “religion constitutes the concrete form of what cannot go mad” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:143). Tuke aimed at rebuilding self-control and restraint, which did not consider the reasons for madness. Foucault discovered that fear was

addressed to the invalid directly, not by instruments but in speech; there is no question of limiting a liberty that rages beyond its bounds, but of marking out and glorifying a region of simple responsibility where any manifestation of madness will be linked to punishment (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:145)

Therefore, “the madman” is no longer responsible for his/her madness, but he/she is in charge of “everything within him that may disturb morality and society, and must hold no one but himself responsible for the punishment he receives” (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:145). The asylum “organized that guilt” and

by this guilt the madman became an object of punishment always vulnerable to himself and to the other; and, from the acknowledgement of his status as object, from the awareness of his guilt, the madman was to return to his awareness of himself as a free and responsible subject, and consequently to reason. (Foucault in Rabinow 1991:146)

Tuke institutionalized the insane, but he did not believe that medicine had reached anything concerning madness and claimed that madness was not a medical illness. Medical doctors, on the other hand, believed to find the reason for insanity in the brain (cf. Porter 2000:500). Tuke's distrust in medicine is understandable if one considers that medical doctors, such as Thomas Monro, who was in charge of Bethlehem Hospital in London, still chained the insane (cf. Porter 2000:499). Madness was still linked to animality, which triggered the lack of medical treatments (cf. Protevi n.p.). Still, continuously more alienists emerged and from 1845 onwards, every county in Great Britain was forced by law to have one public asylum for the insane.

Modern psychiatry is often regarded as ideal; however, it still reflects bourgeois values and holds the psychiatrist as the higher power. Never before has the psychiatrist had as much power as after Freud. This led to a reevaluation of the position of the psychiatrist, who was almost turned into an omnipotent and beloved savior of the insane.

Modernity was accompanied by various new findings and treatments. John Connolly (1794-1866) linked psychological and social factors and developed the non restraint method, which included socializing the insane and making them work (cf. Porter 2000:501). Other methods of that time were cold baths and gushes, isolation, electroshocks, swivel chairs, laxatives, and bleeding the patient.

Several retreats were opened in the USA, which were modeled after Tuke's "Retreat" in York, for example the Friend's Asylum in Philadelphia (1817), the McClean Hospital in Boston (1818), the Bloomingdale Asylum in New York (1821), or the Retreat in Hartford, Connecticut (1824). In 1812, Benjamin Rush, the founder of U.S. American medicine, wrote a book on madness that offered ethical therapy, physical restraint, fear, and bleeding as solutions to madness. Samuel B. Woodward (1787-1850) and Pliny Earle (1809-1892), both followers of the ethical therapy, founded the Association of American Institutions for the Insane (AMSAI) in 1844. In the same year, the American Journal of Insanity, later called the American

Journal of Psychiatry, was established by Amariah Brigham (cf. Porter 2000:502).

With the development of forensic psychiatry, insane people who had committed a crime were no longer punished. This development took place in England in 1799. It also triggered the fact that from this time on, only psychiatrists were allowed to judge whether or not someone was insane. Therefore, society had to give up its power of deciding who was insane and allow psychiatrists to be their representatives (cf. Porter 2000:504). Only the institution had changed, but the result remained the same. The psychiatrists conformed to the same norms as patriarchal society demands; therefore, they also condemned the people for the same failure to follow the norms.

After 1850, several people, including John Perceval or Dorothea Lix, took action against deficiencies in mental clinics (cf. Porter 2000:505). Roy Porter describes one shocking scandal in his historical review of psychiatry—the case of Louisa Lowe. After having left her husband in 1870, Louisa Lowe was kidnapped by him and brought into a madhouse, where she was held hostage despite her repeated insistence on her sanity and innocence. Despite the discovery that falsified documents brought her into the madhouse, she was not released. She was kept at the madhouse for eighteen months, which led her to found the Lunacy Law Reform Association, a means for protection of victims against their own family members (cf. Porter 2000:506). This scandal depicts how easily psychiatric institutions could have been used as instruments against women who did not follow socially accepted norms.

Psychiatric institutions became instruments to lock and isolate patients as well as to observe their symptoms and behavior. In medicine, this led to new descriptions and classifications of illnesses; however, the morality of this kind of treatment must be strongly criticized and challenged (cf. Porter 2000:508).

Around 1900, several developments took place, some of which were dangerous. The psychiatrist George Miller Beard (1839-1883) developed

the concept of neurasthenia—a weakness of the nerves because of the pressure of civilization. Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) from Philadelphia enhanced this model and treated it with the famous rest cure, which consisted of bed rest and isolation. Increasing lobbies demanded compulsory measures, sterilization and the deployment of psychiatry at immigration controls (cf. Porter 2000:514). At the end of nineteenth century psychiatry, particularly mesmerism and hypnotism, people became interested in freedom of will, unconscious thinking and the unity of the self (cf. Porter 2000:515). Hypnosis was applied as a diagnostic means to discover hysteria, for example by Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893). His findings proved to be wrong because he triggered hysteric seizures by his own expectations (cf. Porter 2000:516).

Freud regarded hysteric symptoms as symbolic equivalences of unsolved subconscious conflicts (cf. Porter 2000:518). His psychoanalysis laid stress on other forms of therapy than medication. Ugo Cerletti (1877-1963) first used electroshocks in 1938 in order to lessen symptoms of severe depression. Egas Moniz (1874-1955) developed the leucotomy, which had the side effect of altering the personality of some of his patients. Despite his experimentations, he received the Nobel price in 1949 (cf. Porter 2000:522).

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the prescription and use of psychotropic drugs has spread widely. Instead of putting “madmen” and “madwomen” into asylums, insanity is regarded as a societal phenomenon that is omnipresent (cf. Porter 2000:523). Thus a certain kind of deinstitutionalizing of the insane occurred in the 1980s, which was supported by movies, such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), and by researchers such as Thomas Szasz or Michel Foucault (1926-1984) (cf. Porter 2000:524).

Historically speaking, madness became mental illness, which was and is treated and controlled by medical and psychiatric practices. Madness is not, however, natural and unchanging, it depends on the society in which it exists, meaning that it depends on cultural, intellectual and economic

structures. Madness has always been assigned a certain cultural space within society—this could be the Ship of Fools, The Great Confinement, or hopefully a place within society, which does not marginalize, isolate and exclude. Psychiatry incorporates major resources of power. This power has often been abused in the past as an instrument to further careers or medical research and has especially been turned against women, who are marginalized even more. Foucault discovered that the living world of mentally ill people consists of terrifying images, while the healthy people realize their imaginary world artistically. The mentally ill are incapable of such interpretation because their expression is blocked “by a warped social system that prevents some people from acting on their projects” (Protevi n.p.). Therapy should start by conceding enough space to mentally ill people in order that they realize their imaginary world as well. Linda McDowell states that “speaking from the margins provides an alternative, more grounded position from which to challenge conventional assumptions” (McDowell in Eagleton 2003:13). A marginalized position is therefore supposed to procure women or the mad a platform to express themselves. Changes will ultimately only be effective if people also follow them. The works discussed in the following parts of this thesis are one means of expression and of challenging conventional assumptions.

1.2. Femininity

Femininity is one of the key terms of feminism and a constant topic of an ongoing debate. Initially, I want to discuss femininity by giving attention to three major French feminist theorists in particular, namely Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, whose theoretical definitions of “femininity” will be considered the course of this paper.

In the essay “Feminist, Female, Feminine,” Toril Moi takes over Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of femininity by stating that “[f]emininity’ is a cultural construct: one isn’t born a woman, one becomes one” (Moi in Belsey and Moore 1989:122). This is probably the key argument that underlies most consecutive attempts to define “femininity” or “woman”. Toril Moi proceeds by saying that

patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for “femininity” are natural. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labeled both unfeminine and unnatural. It is in the patriarchal interest that these two terms (femininity and femaleness) stay thoroughly confused. (Belsey and Moore 1989:122-123)

Consequently, the terms femaleness as the term for biological sex and femininity as cultural construct have to remain separated. Women do not share certain traits just because they have a similar biological precondition. However, in patriarchal society women are often reduced to their bodies and to their shared bodily experiences, such as menstruating or giving birth. As a result, women are subjects to medical and natural scientific doctrines based on bodily processes. These ostensibly medical facts are used to subordinate women when it comes to work, family, and language (Martin 1987:19). According to Emily Martin, a woman has to become solely her physical body in order to be sexually attractive in patriarchal society. Thus, the body becomes an object, not only for patriarchal society, but also for the woman herself. This leads to a split of the self, where various personae of the woman watch and various

personae are watched (Martin 1987:38-39). Therefore, women fulfill a role that is imposed on them by their bodies, or more precisely by what is inscribed on their bodies. Hence patriarchal society connects feminism to a set of psychological traits, such as naturalness, sweetness, helping, nurturing, etc., which lack biological reasons and are simply stereotypes.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi lists the following eleven major stereotypes of femininity by Mary Ellmann, which were connected to women throughout history: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, the Witch, and the Shrew (Moi 1985:34). These traits do not apply to each and every woman and, therefore, cannot be regarded as natural. However, a relationship between the aforementioned stereotypes and femininity has been established by patriarchal society. As a consequence, stereotypes concerning femininity often are not questioned anymore, but regarded as biologically given and natural.

Furthermore, a specific place is ascribed to women by patriarchal society. Men are supposed to work within the public arena, whereas women must construct “a place of leisured and domestic calm” (McDowell in Eagleton 2003:12). Home, meaning both the house and the homeland, has always been linked to the feminine and to female virtues; despite this fact, the behavior of women at home must still conform to societal norms. Therefore, home only appears to be the sphere of the woman, but it is merely an extension of patriarchal society (McDowell in Eagleton 2003:14). The “domestic ideology of women as angels of the hearth” in the nineteenth century was only another image to suppress women (McDowell in Eagleton 2003:15). The same phenomenon occurs in the function of psychiatric asylums, which will be discussed later.

Women are also suppressed in their sexuality. Since the eighteenth century, the population has been controlled by means of “strategic unities” in enforcing “normal” sexualities: “hystericization of women’s bodies, pedagogization of children’s sex, socialization of procreative behavior, and psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” (Chow in Eagleton 2003:102).

According to the feminine traits mentioned above, Judith Butler calls femininity a “*stylized repetition of acts*” and sees gender as “a constituted

social temporality,” because gender norms can never be fully internalized and embodied (Butler 1990:140&141). Gender is not a fact, rather an idea of it is created by various acts of gender (Butler 1990:139). Thus, an illusion of a “natural sex” or a “real woman” is given and is sought to perpetuate within patriarchal society (Butler 1990:140). Similarly to Butler, Samantha Holland regards feminine behavior as a “task” of imitation which does not incorporate inherent skills or traits, but learnt behavior, and thus makes gender into “something which people ‘do’ rather than what they are” (Holland 2004:35-36). Femininity is performed and differs from performance to performance and from woman to woman. In addition, traditional practices of femininity and actual practices do not necessarily conform. As a consequence, there cannot be one definition of the term femininity but there must be a continuous discourse.

The term “femininity” is always connected to passivity opposed to activity or to lacking opposed to possessing something. Hence, “femininity” is manifested by hierarchical oppositions and is always included in the term which is lacking and over which the other term is defined, thus, always making it the seemingly weaker term, for example active/passive, man/woman. “Man” needs the term “woman”, simultaneously, in order to have a term against which it can be defined. Without “woman”, “man” cannot exist, or as Irigaray puts it, man needs woman as “a mirror to catch his reflection” (Irigaray 1985:11). Woman is “the negative required by the male subject’s ‘specularization’,” which is actually a “reflecting on [one’s] own being” and hence “fundamentally narcissistic” (Moi 1985:132).

However, binary oppositions turn femininity into the other and women become marginalized by this system. Woman is made invisible because woman is solely the “other” of man. Audre Geraldine Lorde even turns the opposition “man/woman” into “man/not man” (Cranny-Frances and Waring 2003:60). As a consequence “woman” disappears as an entity of her own and is only defined as a negative of man. “Woman” therefore “is ignored; we refuse to recognise it” (Cranny-Francis and Waring 2003: 60). Similarly, there is no such opposition as “penis/clitoris,” but only “penis/no penis.” Woman and female sexuality are only regarded as a void and are dominated by the male term (Cranny-Francis and Waring 2003:59). This

can already be found in Freud's writings, in which woman is outside of representation. Thus, Luce Irigaray sees the feminine as "deciphered as forbidden, in between signs, between the realized meanings, between the lines" (Irigaray quoted by Moi 1985:13). Woman is only allowed to be a mirror for man and, therefore, "[t]he pleasure of self-representation, of her desire for the same, is denied woman: she is cut off from any kind of pleasure that might be specific to her" (Moi 1985:135). The loss of eroticism and the woman's submission to male sexuality offers only one remedy to women – namely to renew their ties to their mothers and other women. According to Irigaray, "[o]ne of the lost crossroads of our becoming women lies in the blurring and erasure of our relationships to our mothers and in our obligation to submit to the laws of the world of men-amongst-themselves," which destroys female ancestry (Irigaray 1989:13). In order to make an ethics of sexual difference possible, women must renew the land of female ancestries (Irigaray 1989:18).

Irigaray states that women have two different choices: the first is to "remain silent, producing incomprehensible babble (any utterance that falls outside the logic of the same will by definition be incomprehensible to the male master discourse)," and the second is to "*enact* the specular representation of herself as a lesser male," which would make woman into a mimic, which for Irigaray is a form of hysteria, because "[t]he hysteric mimes her own sexuality in a masculine mode, which is the only way to rescue something of her own desire. The hysteric's dramatization [...] of herself is thus a result of her exclusion from patriarchal discourse" (Moi 1985:135).

The questions "What is woman?" or "What is feminine?" also lead to the question of subjectivity. The issue of subjectivity bears various problems as well, as Irigaray points out when she states that

[w]e can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the "masculine". When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse – by being "female". Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself "as" a masculine subject. A "subject" that would re-search itself as lost (maternal-feminine) "object"? (Irigaray 1985:11)

Irigaray comes to the conclusion that it is impossible for women to obtain subjectivity, and offers two ways to escape for women in history – to be part of mysticism or become a hysteric. Both ways to escape offer women “a real if limited possibility of discovering some aspects of a pleasure that might be specific to their libidinal drives” (Moi 1985:138).

According to Irigaray, femininity so far has only been produced in relation to the logic of the Same, which leads to essentializing women. Therefore, one must not ask “What is woman?,” but instead, the logic of the economy of the logos must be exceeded and disturbed, for example, by means of mimicry of the male discourse (Moi 1985:139). The only existing language is the male discourse. One must read the feminine “in the blank spaces left between the signs and lines of her own mimicry” (Moi 1985:140).

However, Irigaray wants to detect a specific woman’s language connected to a plural femininity, which resembles the female sexual organs in their multiplicity. She calls this language “le parler femme” or “womanspeak.” This language is only used when no man is present and its style is fluid and it has a sense of touch in it (Moi 1985:144-145).

Irigaray finally defines woman in “This sex which is not one”:

‘She’ is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious – not to mention her language in which ‘she’ goes off in all direction and in which ‘he’ is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Contradictory words seem a little crazy to the logic of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance. In her statements – at least when she dares to speak out – woman retouches herself constantly. She just barely separates from herself some chatter, an exclamation, a half-secret, a sentence left in suspense – when she returns to it, it is only to set out again from another point of pleasure or pain. One must listen to her differently in order to hear an *‘other meaning’ which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized.* For when ‘she’ says something, it is already no longer identical to what she means. Moreover, her statements are never identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is one of contiguity. They touch (*upon*). And when they wander too far from this nearness, she stops and begins again from ‘zero’: her body-sex organ.

It is therefore useless to trap women into giving an exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that the meaning will be clear. They are already elsewhere than in the discursive machinery where you claim to take them by surprise. They have turned back within themselves, which does not mean the same thing as 'within yourself'. They do not experience the same interiority that you do and which perhaps you mistakenly presume they share. 'Within themselves' *means in the privacy of this silent, multiple, diffuse tact*. If you ask them insistently what they are thinking about, they can only reply: nothing. Everything. (Irigaray: This sex which is not one 1985:28-29)

Like Irigaray, Hélène Cixous opposes hierarchical oppositions. In her point of view, all oppositions in the binary system are ultimately representations of the hierarchical opposition "man/woman;" this "[o]rganization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man" because man is always the privileged term (Cixous in Belsey and Moore 1995:102). Hence, male writing is manifested as the marked term, which follows the phallogocentric tradition. However, Cixous believes that hierarchical oppositions can be broken down by woman constituting herself as "'impossible' subject" and thus by "breaking the codes that negate her" (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1981:249). This can be achieved by speaking up or writing:

If woman has always functioned 'within' man's discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down or stifles its very different sounds, now it is time for her to displace this 'within', explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her woman's mouth, bite its tongue with her woman's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it. And you will see how easily she will well up, from this 'within' where she was hidden and dormant, to the lips where her foams will overflow (Cixous in Belsey and Moore 1995:114)

Writing comprises women's freedom from patriarchal suppression and, for Cixous, it represents escaping the binary system:

To write – the act that will 'realize' the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her woman-being giving her back access to her own forces; [...] that will tear her out of the superegoed, over-Mosesed structure where the same position of guilt is always reserved for her. [...] Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine imaginary is going to be deployed. Without gold

or black dollars, our naphtha will spread values over the world, unquoted values that will change the rules of the old game (Cixous in Belsey and Moore 1995:116)

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous follows up this argument by stating

that sexual opposition, which has always worked for man’s profit to the point of reducing writing, too, to his laws, is only a historico-cultural limit. There is, there will be more and more rapidly pervasive now, a fiction that produces irreducible effects of femininity (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1981: 253)

Cixous claims that writing is “working (in) the in-between” and calls it the “*other bisexuality*” which she defines as “each one’s location in self (répérage en soi) of the presence” and which “doesn’t annul differences, but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number” (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1980:254). According to Cixous, while a woman embraces this bisexuality and opens up to it, man sticks to phallic monosexuality because of Freud’s proposed fear of being a woman.

For Cixous, a new femininity arises through writing and “[e]verything is yet to be written by women” about this kind of femininity (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1981: 256). She proposes to turn towards the female body, which is seen as lacking by patriarchal society, because

[w]omen must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations, and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence”, the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end” (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1981: 256)

By doing so, women “[sweep] away syntax” (Marks and Courtivron 1980:257). Cixous conjures up a new woman, who will change “intersubjective relation” (Marks and Courtivron 1981:257). For this new woman, body means writing; therefore, Cixous does not regard the female body as lacking, but as a source of power. Whereas other feminists reject a common female experience, Cixous embraces it and wants women to

turn it into their subversive weapon against the patriarchal power symbol of the phallus. The female body must be used to break down the discourse of man because it is “the language of men and their grammar”, which has to be made into woman’s language (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1981: 257). This “écriture féminine” is characterized by its link to the imaginary world; it is “the voice of the Mother, that omnipotent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby” (Moi 1985:114). Therefore, the writing woman “is never far from “mother” [...]. There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (Cixous in Marks and Courtivron 1981:251).

Julia Kristeva uses a similar starting point as Cixous when it comes to femininity – namely language – which is central to defining subjects. Kristeva develops a theory of language and focuses on “speaking beings” that use language and are in return constituted through their use of language. Thus, Kristeva’s theory is strongly connected to a theory of subjectivity (Mcafee 2004:14). Kristeva regards language as a dynamic signifying process which shapes our subjectivity and experience; therefore, “linguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject*” (Kristeva cited by Mcafee 2004:14 -15). Kristeva divides this process into a symbolic and a semiotic pole, where symbolic stands for “an expression of clear and orderly meaning” and semiotic refers to “an evocation of feeling or [...] a discharge of the subject’s energy and drives” (Mcafee 2004:15 – 16). The semiotic is similar to Lacan’s Imaginary and is part of the chora, which is not present anymore in the Symbolic order aside from appearing as

pulsional pressure on symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language. The chora is a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes, in other words, the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory (Moi 1985:162)

The semiotic might vaguely correspond to Cixous’ *écriture féminine* – Cixous’ means of breaking down hierarchical oppositions. However, the

semiotic is part of the pre-Oedipal phase, where “the opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist” (Moi 1985:165). Kristeva opposes a specific female language, as well as a single definition of “woman” as such. For Kristeva, it is still “necessary to campaign in the name of women, [however] it is important to recognize that in this struggle a woman cannot be: she can only exist negatively, as it were, through her refusal of that which is given” (Moi 1985:163). “Woman,” therefore, is “that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies” (Kristeva quoted by Moi 1985:163). Without a definition of femininity or woman, Kristeva’s theory turns into a “theory of marginality, subversion and dissidence” (Moi 1985:163).

The feminists mentioned so far share the notion of femininity as something that is marginalized. Language can be a means of pointing out this marginalization or even a means to break it down; on the other hand, it can also be regarded as an instrument that works for patriarchal society because it assumes that “masculinity” and “femininity” are stable terms (Moi 1964:154). In this thesis, I will show that language functions as an instrument, which can operate as a tool for either suppression or liberation for women.

2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The first literary work to be discussed in this thesis is the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. I will consider "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a forerunner or prototype of the other two works analyzed in this paper. Parallels and differences will be pointed out in the final chapter. Meanwhile, the main concerns of this part will be the question of madness in the short story and the main motifs, such as language, space and the quest for identity.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who underwent Silas Weir Mitchell's famous rest cure during her first marriage to Walter Stetson, came to reject the rest cure and instead sought independence from both her doctor and her husband by leaving for California, where she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1890 (cf. Lane 1990:123-124). Although Gilman never completely conquered her depressions, she saw work – the opposite of Mitchell's advice – as her only option to keep herself sane.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was first published in the *New England Magazine* in 1892 and later reappeared in various magazines and books, for example in the *Golden Book* in 1933, in the *Feminist Press* edition from 1973, in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* from 1980 or in Catherine Golden's *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on "The Yellow Wallpaper"* in 1992. However, these different editions go back to various versions of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and little interest has been shown in the accuracy of the various versions of the used texts.⁴

⁴ I do not want to go into greater detail regarding the different text editions, but I want to refer to Julie Bates Docks' *But One Expects That: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the Shifting Light of Scholarship*, which points out the various misidentifications of the different versions of Gilman's text. In my thesis I only rely on the Bantam Classic edition.

2.1. Historicizing “The Yellow Wallpaper”: History – Herstory – Hystory

2.1.1. Victorian society and the place of women

“The Yellow Wallpaper” was written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1890 at a time when men and women were subjects of a set of limited roles. Women were supposed to be the angels of the house: stay-at-home wives, whose only objective was to take good care of their husbands and children. No other role was socially acceptable, and consequently women who did not follow their prescribed role as happy housewives, were most often than not at the edge of society.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that bourgeois matrons had undergone role changes between the 1840s and the 1890s. By the 1890s, they were expected to be “True Woman” and “Ideal Mother” at the same time, although the concepts were practically contradictory: the “True Woman” was expected to be emotional, dependent and gentle, whereas the “Ideal Mother” had to be strong, self-reliant, protective and an efficient caretaker (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:198-199). Barbara Welter calls middle-class and upper-class women of Gilman’s time “hostages to their homes”, to whom no alternative lifestyle was presented (Welter in Lane 1990:109). Ongoing changes within society, such as getting married later in life or spending less time on food and clothing, gave women more time for themselves; however gender roles did not adjust to this new situation (cf. Smith-Rosenberg 1985:199-200). The notion of femininity was still strongly connected to a woman’s activities and her behavior (cf. Lane 1990:109).

Internal tensions between the expectancies of patriarchal society and women’s own wishes, the tensions between the ideals of the “True Woman” and the “Ideal Mother” as well as isolation and loneliness within women’s own families often triggered a range of psychological diseases. Ann J. Lane regards depression as a rebellion which “damaged the rebel most seriously” (Lane 1990:110). However, Smith-Rosenberg claims that psychological illnesses like hysteria also helped to redefine and

restructure a woman's place within her family (cf. Smith-Rosenberg 1985:200). Mentally ill women were sent away to undergo various cures and even after their return, they were treated with care, which left some of a woman's duties to her husband or to other family members in her home. Ann J. Lane therefore remarks positively on the water cure, which was a common treatment in the mid-1840s.

The water cure was carried out at sanatoriums, which provided a place of rest and removal and additionally a "female supportive community" to exhausted women (Lane 1990:111). The water cure was replaced by several other treatments, such as the "Swedish movements" (a kind of massage), the theory of "galvanism," which is the application of electric currents through the body, and finally the rest cure (cf. Lane 1990:112). The choice of treatment was mainly dependent on social class and on the funds available; all treatments served the same cause: "preparing the patient to return to her place" (Lane 1990:112). The various treatments therefore did not intend to change women's role in society, they simply gave women a break from their daily routines. Smith-Rosenberg states that hysteria⁵ presented a "relief of day-to-day responsibility", because hysterical women ceased to function within the family; instead they dominated their families passive-aggressively (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:208). Thus hysteria provided women with power over their usual suppressors. However, this power was only granted as long as the illness proceeded and a return to the "normal" order was inevitable.

2.1.2. Gilman's encounter with Silas Weir Mitchell and her objective to writing "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman worked her entire life against the stereotype of the woman as the angel of the house. Instead, she wanted to create a picture of (economically) independent women, who did not have to rely on

⁵ In the course of discussing "The Yellow Wallpaper", the term "hysteria" and the term "madness" are used practically exchangeably. Smith-Rosenberg enumerates the varied illnesses, which used to be regarded as mere symptoms of hysteria: "neurasthenia, hypochondriasis, depression, conversion reaction, ambulatory schizophrenia" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:197). Hence hysteria is actually made up by a variety of different mental illnesses. In this thesis, the actual medical diagnosis of a mental illness is secondary to its function. Therefore no further differentiation between hysteria and madness will be made.

men in order to make a living. According to Gilman, motherhood should therefore not be regarded as absolutely necessary for a woman, but she admitted that it could present bliss to a woman if she really wanted a child.⁶

In spite of the relative success of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and her other fiction, Gilman did not only write short stories and novels, but focused more on her theoretical work with topics such as “autonomy, marriage, work, the struggle of enlightenment against restriction” (“Wallpaper” 2006:XV). Gilman did not regard “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a regular fictional text wither, which to her presented “reading for escape” “through projection and identification” with the protagonist, but as “fiction with a purpose” (Hochman 129-130). “The Yellow Wallpaper” was supposed to make a significant change in the treatment of mentally ill women.

During one of her own depressions, Gilman herself had encountered Silas Weir Mitchell, who intended to help her with his famous rest cure, which had been developed to cure hysteria. The rest cure meant extended and total bed rest, isolation from the family and from familiar surroundings, overfeeding, massage and the use of electricity for “muscular excitation” (Lane 1990:116). It is interesting to note that even Sigmund Freud was a staunch supporter of Mitchell’s rest cure.

Hysteria included “virtually every known human ill” and manifested a “hysterical personality” (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:202). Although men could suffer from hysteria as well, it was soon turned into a particularly female illness in practice. Hysteria was ultimately used as a weapon against women who “didn’t function as women were expected to function”, because “the physician who treated them felt threatened both as a professional and as a rejected male” (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:202). Mitchell might have felt similarly, but despite Gilman’s obvious dislike of this very physician, it should be stated that following Smith-Rosenberg, Mitchell actually “sympathize[d] with his [female] patients” and that he believed that they really did suffer and did not only make up their illness (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:204). Lane agrees with Smith-Rosenberg and

⁶ Gilman’s vision of a society, in which women do not have to follow patriarchal norms, is expressed in her utopian novel *Herland*.

grants Mitchell the “major strength of acknowledging the legitimacy and seriousness of his patient’s illness“(Lane 1990:125). However, “hysterics [were] often thought to be idle” and their emotional state of being was believed to be “rooted in woman’s very nature”, turning hysteria into something “peculiarly female and peculiarly sexual” (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:205-206). Smith-Rosenberg calls hysteria a “stark caricature of femininity” when she refers to dependency, fragility, emotionality and narcissism as qualities which the hysteric and the feminine woman share (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:207).

The physician had to act as a judge of a woman’s mental state and “by diagnosing her as ill,” the physician sided with the woman – something a male physician, who was a representative of Victorian values, would otherwise not have done (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:209). As a consequence, “physicians felt that they must dominate the hysteric’s will” in order to reestablish both the female patient and themselves within Victorian society (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:210).

Gilman believed that physicians were not able to help women by prescribing rest cures or “moral medication”, which referred to the return to the work of women: the care of home, husband and child (Lane 1990:117). Gilman criticized the infantilization of women and the enforced acceptance of male authority, which accompanied the rest cure. Lane refers to Mitchell’s rest cure as

an extreme version of the cultural norms that operated outside his sanatorium, just as, ironically, the incapacity of these women patients took the form of an exaggeration of the very qualities they had been taught to value (Lane 1990:117).

Thus, women, who became hysterics, could be characterized by their display of exaggerated stereotypes of femininity. Hysteric women were put into sanatoriums, which, in return, exaggerated the patriarchal norms and values. The more women raged against social constraints, the more they were constrained. Within patriarchal society and within sanatoriums accordingly, women had to succumb to what Jacques Lacan calls the “Law of the Father”. Hence, women had to submit to the rules of

(patriarchic) language in order to enter the Symbolic order and to become a speaking subject and to be accepted in society⁷.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman broke out of the vicious circle presented to her by her own husband and Mitchell and sought independence in California, where she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1890 as a protest to the rest cure. In her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Gilman claims that her short story actually changed Mitchell’s rest cure, which therefore made her life meaningful.

2.1.3. The father of hysteria – Jean-Martin Charcot

For the sake of completeness, another important physician of the nineteenth century and the father of hysteria, Jean-Martin Charcot, ought to be included here. Jean-Martin Charcot determined the picture of the hysterical woman even more so than Silas Weir Mitchell ever did, and unlike Mitchell, he treated his patients more as subjects for display than as human beings. Charcot’s objective was to discover and observe the various symptoms of his patients—their cure was secondary and even neglected. As Showalter observes, he dominated the discourse of hysteria from the end of the 1870s until his death in 1893 (Showalter 1997:49).

Jean-Martin Charcot was “a specialist in the observation and treatment of madness in women” in nineteenth-century Paris (Borgstrom 1998:1-2). He became famous especially because of his open lectures on female hysteria, in which he displayed his patients to “a room full of students, medical colleagues, and various non-medical dignitaries of Paris, including artists, writers, and journalists” (Borgstrom 1998:2). His hand-chosen group of patients, who were often hypnotized, only served the function of medical display, of objects showing the very symptoms, which Charcot wanted to demonstrate in his lectures. For this purpose, “Charcot often used gongs, sound forks, or other percussive instruments during his presentations to reproduce the various states of the hysterical seizure in

⁷ In all three literary works in this thesis, the female protagonists are trying to abandon patriarchal society and simultaneously patriarchal language. Instead, they want to establish their own, feminine language and identity.

his patients” (Borgstrom 1998:6). Charcot regarded hysteria as a physical illness, which was caused by genetic defects or traumatic injuries of the central nervous system and which triggered hysteric seizures (cf. Showalter 1997:49).

Charcot had some favorite patients, who reached some fame on their own, for example Blanche Wittman, Augustine and Geneviève⁸, whose hysterical seizures became notorious.⁹ Henrik Carl Borgstrom notes that these female patients “provided visual representations of the Other, the “Mad,” and thus valorized the established moral codes and ethics which governed “normal” society of his day”. Borgstrom goes on to explain the roles played by Blanche Wittman, Augustine and Geneviève as the following:

By pushing the envelope of what was considered acceptable female propriety in the nineteenth century, Augustine, Geneviève, and Blanche Wittman, however genuine their afflictions were, played a very specific role—as seductresses and titillating objects of desire—for their male spectators. (Borgstrom 1998:34)

Thus, a picture of the mad woman as a monster that should be locked up, was created and everything which opposed the moral codes of society was condemned.

It is not surprising that the number of Charcot’s patients rose to ten hysteric women a day. Hysteria turned into a practically epidemic illness under Charcot. (Showalter 1997:49). Charcot blamed the ovaries for causing the hysteric seizures, thus manifesting hysteria as a female illness and hystericizing the female body (Showalter 1997:33&53).

Hysterics were supposed to be idle and prone to showmanship—a “typical” variety of the female character (Showalter 1997:55). Hysterics therefore were regarded as more feminine than regular women, but were as much ostracized by society as were women who lacked feminine traits.

Charcot’s lectures were accompanied by a “[p]recise documentation in the form of detailed drawings or photographs” and turned Charcot into “the

⁸ Only Augustine and Geneviève’s first names occur in secondary sources, while Blanche Wittman’s full name was conveyed.

⁹ A more detailed account on Charcot’s patients is given in Borgstrom’s *Performing Madness*.

premier analyst of madness in Europe in the nineteenth century” (Borgstrom 1998:3). His lectures resembled plays, in which the patients functioned as actors. Because of Charcot, “madness became a condition which could be clearly identified, classified, and recorded” (Borgstrom 1998:8).

Charcot’s classification of madness was connected to visual traits in his patients. Phrenology became widespread in the nineteenth century with representatives like the Swiss theologian Johann Kasper Lavater, the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso or George Combe from Boston. Ultimately, phrenology became one “scientific” practice the Nazis relied on “in their effort to prove the racial superiority of the Germanic people” (Borgstrom 1998:12). In the nineteenth century, “[a]sylums all over Europe and the United States began to compile catalogues of photographs of criminals and the insane in an effort to identify common physical signs of mental illness and physical anomalies” (Borgstrom 1998:15). This dangerous development cannot solely be blamed on Charcot; however, his medical lectures definitely contributed to this common trend.

In the course of his studies, numerous photographs of “[t]he four main “periods” of the hysterical seizure: epileptic fit, clownism, emotional attitudes, and delirium” were taken (Borgstrom 1998:21). It is proven that these photographs were not taken in the midst of a naturally occurring seizure, but that “in the most cases the seizures were artificially induced by having the patient inhale significant quantities of ether or amyl nitrate” (Borgstrom 1998:26). Hence, both the public display and the photographs documenting cases of hysteria are more part of a theatrical performance than an objective observation.

Charcot’s main objective was to collect medical evidence and to provide a fully explored picture of madness and hysteria and its various symptoms. Unfortunately, instead of trying to provide help for his patients, Charcot seems to have forgotten that he was treating actual human beings and instead pursued his career as “the father of hysteria”.

Both Charcot and Mitchell are representatives of patriarchal society of the nineteenth century. Charcot seems to have created an illness and to

have provided one name to different kinds of mental problems which women suffered in patriarchal society: hysteria. Mitchell, on the other hand, tried to heal these women by means provided by patriarchal society. Neither “creator” nor “healer” really helped women. The solution of the first was to lock up the “mad woman” in La Salpêtrière and to record her symptoms; the solution of the latter was to make the hysteric “function” again and send her back into her prison-like home within patriarchal society. Neither one of the two doctors realized that their ways did not help or cure anyone. The only ones to realize this were the female patients sent to La Salpêtrière or back to their unhappy homes.

Elaine Showalter claims that hysteria is a form of expression for those people, who cannot express their feelings any other way anymore; hence, hysteria is a protolanguage or a code for suppressed feelings (cf. Showalter 1997:17). The epidemic of hysteria symbolizes the deep structures of our society. That hysteria turned into a mass phenomenon proves the disregarded problems within patriarchal society (cf. Showalter 1997:18). Hence, hysteria symbolizes how women are reduced to silence within an institutionalized language and culture (cf. Showalter 1997:86).

2.1.4. Different readings of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

“The Yellow Wallpaper” has not always been regarded as a feminist literary work. In fact, there are various different ways of reading “The Yellow Wallpaper”. As a consequence, many scholars claim that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was solely read as a horror story by Gilman’s contemporaries. This was definitely not intended by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who preferred “fiction ‘with a purpose’”, partly because of “culturally typical anxieties about certain kinds of fiction-reading [, such as] reading for escape, through projection and identification” (Hochman 2005:130,129). Instead, Barbara Hochman claims that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was intended to be a “cautionary tale” about women’s reading (Hochman 2005:131). She sees the relationship between the narrator and

the wallpaper as a parallel construction to the relationship between the nineteenth century reader and fictional texts; thus, reading could lead to the loss of borders and to the reader's sense of reality (Hochman 2005:132). According to Hochman, Gilman's message could be to read critically and to differentiate from one's own experience (Hochman 2005:139).

Jean E. Kennard points out that the interpretations of a text rely heavily on literary conventions – the reading strategies and the associative clusters – of a time (cf. Kennard 1981:72). Kennard claims that Elaine Hedges was the first to read “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a feminist work in 1973. Only at this point in time were a series of conventions available to the readers which were not available to the readers of 1892 (cf. Kennard 1981:74-75). Consequently, it is assumed by Kennard that Hedges was the first scholar to make the connection between insanity and gender instead of reading the short story as “a Poesque tale of chilling horror” (Hedges quoted by Kennard 1981:74).

However, Jonathan Crewe ironically remarks that “The Yellow Wallpaper” has been read “as a work of virtually revolutionary feminism” from 1973 onwards, and scholars like Conrad Shumaker or Julie Bates Dock even contradict the previously mentioned feminist theorists and claim that “The Yellow Wallpaper” was not exclusively misunderstood and isolated (cf. Crewe 1995:276, Shumaker 1985:589, Dock 1996:59). Dock even goes so far to point out that

the story's first readers did recognize its indictments of marriage and the treatment of women, although these discussions do not use modern terminology. Three reviews of the 1899 Small, Maynard edition identify the cause of the narrator's insanity as her husband (Dock 1996:59-60).

Consequently, Dock accuses feminist theorists of victimizing “The Yellow Wallpaper”, because

scholars engaged in enlarging knowledge privilege new interpretations, new facts, new documents. There would be scant pleasure in unearthing a nineteenth-century story if the original audience read it

exactly as twentieth-century readers do. The thrill comes in finding the gem that others have overlooked. Critics must differentiate themselves from earlier readers, not just for self-gratification but also to validate the importance of the find (Dock 1996:60).

Dock's judgment appears to be rather harsh, especially when one considers the rise in popularity "The Yellow Wallpaper" has undergone within the academic community because of feminist theory.¹⁰

However, it is clear that Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself intended "The Yellow Wallpaper" to be critical of the ongoing suppression of women in general, and of the medical treatment of women with psychological problems in particular.

2.2. *The story*

Showalter claims that "The Yellow Wallpaper" reads like one of Freud's medical histories (Showalter 1997:135): A woman—the narrator of the story—and her husband John, a physician, spend the summer in "[a] colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" because of the woman's mental condition ("Wallpaper" 1). The house is supposed to provide the narrator with some rest from her day-to-day activities: the household and her motherly duties towards her newborn child. In addition, John's sister Jennie is present to take over the narrator's responsibilities. Even though the narrator wishes for a room downstairs, she must occupy the nursery upstairs, a room with barred windows and a wallpaper with "[o]ne of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" ("Wallpaper" 3). The narrator's mental condition does not improve despite John's insistence. Instead she gets caught up with the wallpaper and starts to see women behind the strange, bar-like patterns of the wallpaper, with whom she identifies. The narrator rips off the wallpaper and believes that she

¹⁰ Dock's work should not be diminished, especially because in the course of my research I hardly came across any theoretical work which actually questions or criticizes the research carried out in the 1970s and after. Reading similar streams of thought over and over again definitely helps to manifest "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a seminal feminist literary work, however it does not necessarily further academic research in other directions than the ones already given.

frees the women behind the pattern of the wallpaper and herself by doing so. The story ends when John breaks into the locked room, and faints at the sight of his wife, who creeps over him pronouncing that she “got out at last” (“Wallpaper” 18).

2.3. *The characters*

Not many characters are found in “The Yellow Wallpaper” – after all, the narrator is separated from society and kept far away from the next city, far away from excitement and far away from other people. Thus, only the narrator, her husband John and his sister Jennie actively appear in the story. However, many other characters influence the narrator’s life, but are absent in the story: Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell and the narrator’s physician brother determine the narrator’s life despite their absence, just like the narrator’s newly born baby, who is one of the possible reasons for the narrator’s condition. The narrator also reports on the visit of some close relatives on the fourth of July and mentions others, whom she would like to meet again.

The story evolves around the female narrator and her progressing mental illness. The narrator is a prototypical woman of Victorian society, who does not or cannot follow the expected patriarchal rules anymore. In order to signify the universality of the short story, the narrator does not have a name¹¹; anybody, or more precisely, any woman within Victorian society could easily be in the narrator’s place. Although Gilman describes the case of one single woman, this woman is exchangeable with so many other women who suffer from the same suppression everyday. A characterization of the narrator therefore seems to be impossible, especially because of her madness, which determines her character: she is unreliable, emotional, deceiving, but at the same time sincere. The narrator does not only deceive the reader, but also herself, which points at an utmost confusion and discomposure. In comparison to John’s sister

¹¹ Some critics call the narrator “Jane”, the name she either gives herself, John’s sister, or the woman in the wallpaper at the very end of the story. “Jane” is a generic name, c.f. “Jane Doe”, which again points out the interchangeability of the characters.

Jennie, the narrator seems to be a bad mother, a bad wife, and a bad housekeeper. The afore mentioned roles are exactly the ones, which she escapes and conquers by means of her madness.

John's sister Jennie contrasts the narrator; she gladly or helplessly follows the rules of Victorian society and becomes the Angel of the House. Jennie seemingly effortlessly handles the household, the baby, and even her mentally ill sister-in-law. However, Jennie is not only a stark contrast to the narrator, but possibly also her mirror image of the past. Most likely, the narrator was just like Jennie, before turning into a madwoman. By including Jennie in the short story, Gilman, on the one hand, gives the reader a counter-image, against which one can contrast the narrator, and on the other hand, she shows the dangers connected to the role of the apparently perfect Victorian woman.¹²

John is the prototypical Victorian patriarch, who represents reason as a contrast to his wife's or to women's unreason. John combines the function of husband and doctor and therefore has much more power than his subordinated wife and his sister. John is the only representative of patriarchy and is absent for the most part. During John's presence, reason dominates over the narrator's life and she tries to present herself as reasonable and sane; John's absence signifies the takeover of unreason and madness within the short story. Although patriarchal rules still apply in John's absence, the narrator does not need to deceive anyone anymore and can give in to her "unreason", which could be a new form of "femininity". While John is a dominant counterpart to the narrator, he is not unloving; indeed, he tries to help his wife. However, his help solely consists of trying to make her function within his society again, instead of seeking a real solution for his wife, for example, by helping her to break down the rules of patriarchal society.

¹² Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote another short story entitled "Through This", whose narrator Jane is the perfect Angel of the House and might be the "forerunner" of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper". The reader encounters a regular day of the make-believe happy wife and mother and the unsaid, implicit emptiness of her life. Denise D. Night's analysis of "Through This" highlights the issues of a "functioning" Victorian woman.

2.4. Narrative technique and language

2.4.1. How to deal with an unreliable narrator

Gilman's short story would probably never have become so famous if it had not been for her splendid use of narrative technique. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a first-person-narration, which gives the reader insight into the mad woman's perspective. The story consists of a number of journal entries, which are disrupted because the narrator writes secretly.

At the first encounter with the short story, the reader does not immediately recognize the mental state of the narrator, who repeatedly claims to be sane or simply misunderstood. At the same time, she contradicts herself by acknowledging that she is actually sicker than her husband believes her to be: "You see he does not believe I am sick!" ("Wallpaper" 1). Therefore, Barbara A. Suess calls "The Yellow Wallpaper" a "psychologically realistic and impossible text" (Suess 2003:79). Gilman's story is full of traces of the narrator's insanity, which can be easily overlooked at the first reading of the story. The bites in the bedpost or the "funny mark [...] [, a] streak that runs round the room" for example, which the narrator assumes someone else has caused, actually come from the narrator herself ("Wallpaper" 14). Therefore, the reader has to function as a detective, who must question everything the narrator tells him/her and look at everything from a different perspective and fill in blanks presented within the story.

Narratologist Monika Fludernik describes an unreliable narrator as someone whose "behavior deviates from the reader's expected standards of normalcy, objectivity or factual accuracy" and names four different types of unreliable narrators: "picaros, clowns, madmen and naifs" (Fludernik 1999:76). These standards of normalcy are determined by social and moral conditions. Hence, social conformity is supposed to be the basis of a reliable narrator.

Fludernik provides further evidence of the narrator's insanity, which turns her into an unreliable narrator: She keeps on "doing baffling things",

but admits to her unreason and that way tries to reestablish herself as sane; she states that she is “crying all the time”—a sign for depression—; she points at her “inability to argue her case with John” and her “failure of communication”; she watches the wallpaper and believes that the other people in the house do so too, thus transferring an “insane projection of her obsessions on her keepers”; she sees women in the wallpaper and at the end of the story she even creeps around the room and over her husband (cf. Fludernik 1999:80, 81). The narrator’s insistence on her own sanity provides a stark contrast to her actual increasingly non-normative behavior—that is, she is not normal anymore according to the standards of Victorian society. However, because of the narrator’s behavior the reader might also start to question the oppressive standards of patriarchal society itself, instead of immediately blaming the narrator for her condition—as it is done by the people surrounding her in the short story.

Fludernik poses the question of whether or not the narrator has been insane throughout the story, from the beginning on, and whether John has been correct in his diagnosis of his wife’s mental state (cf. Fludernik 1999:84). Clues are given within the story that the narrator has been “creeping around [the room] for some time”, that “she has been tearing at the wallpaper” and “gnawing at the feet of the iron bedstead” – actions for which she blames others (Fludernik 1999:83). It is possible to come to the conclusion that the narrator’s insanity proceeds within the story, because she cannot even hide her insanity from the reader anymore at the end of the story, something she was able to do at the beginning of the story, no matter how insane she had already been. Therefore, the discovery of the narrator’s insanity refers to the actual proceeding of her insanity, which is only detected because of her inability to continuously hide it and because of her failure to appear to be following Victorian norms.

2.4.2. Patriarchal language of suppression and the finding of identity through the use of a new feminine language

Janice Haney-Peritz discovers that by entering the “hereditary estate” (“Wallpaper” 1), the narrator becomes subject to Lacan’s symbolic order and the order of language (cf. Haney-Peritz 1986:117). Language plays an essential role, because it can act as a device to suppress someone, for example by “sentencing” or “diagnosing” a person; on the other hand, language is also a means to break free from standardized codes of patriarchal society, if one creates a new language, such as H el ene Cixous’ concept of * criture f eminine*. This new language is significant in the process of finding and manifesting one’s identity.

At the beginning of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” language is used to diagnose and hence suppress the narrator, while at the same time forbidding her to use language in a genuine, creative or productive way herself. Instead, she is limited to the usage of the “language authorized by patriarchy” and to reading the wallpaper (Treichler 1984: 74). However, at the end of the short story the narrator subverts language and breaks free from her husband’s diagnosis by creating a language of her own. This new language breaks with all existing patriarchal codes and is connected to the narrator’s new identity. Only by changing who she is, is she able to create a language of her own. And only by using a new language, does she have the power to leave patriarchal standards and her inscribed role behind. Language and identity are interlinked and hence cannot be kept apart. Even within this short story it is impossible to point out whether the change in the narrator’s story preceded her changed use of language or vice versa. The two processes go hand in hand with one another, and what is important is mainly the outcome—the newly gained freedom of the narrator.

Almost at the beginning of the short story, more precisely at the end of the narrator’s first journal entry, the reader comes to understand that the narrator writes secretly: “There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word” (“Wallpaper” 4). The reason for this ban

from writing is the narrator's "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" ("Wallpaper" 1). At least this is what John "assures friends and relatives"; in fact, he might suspect a more severe illness in his wife, or else why should he try to keep her away from her friends and family and prohibit her from all kinds of work and writing, if he were not afraid that she might make a fool out of him and herself ("Wallpaper" 1). Consequently, he might not prohibit her from writing for her sake, but for his own sake. John, after all, is a doctor and it might not prove useful for his career if people discovered that his wife is a madwoman.

On the other hand, it was common practice to impose the rest cure on insane women, which was accompanied by practically constraining women to silence and forbidding them to work, write and read. Similarly, the narrator is "absolutely forbidden to "work" until [she is] well again" and must not see "stimulating people", who might engage her into an exhausting conversation ("Wallpaper" 2, 5). Suess claims that women have been "socially, historically and medically constructed as weak and sick," hence John's treatment of the narrator is not surprising (Suess 2003:80). The narrator admits that writing "does exhaust [her] a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" ("Wallpaper" 2). Writing does not itself exhaust the narrator, but the fact that people around her oppose it and want to keep her from continuing to write. The narrator herself believes writing could improve her condition:

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.
But I find I get pretty tired when I try.
It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. ("Wallpaper" 5)

However, the narrator is not the one in charge of the choice of cure she must undergo. Her husband's "selfish desire to maintain the order/Order [(Lacan's symbolic Order)] of his own life" forces him to suppress anything, which he is not in control of—including the narrator's writing (Suess 2003:88). John, a physician, provides the narrator with a diagnosis, which "names reality" and "has power" over her (Treichler 1984:65). A diagnosis translates the body into signs or symptoms; these

signs in return trigger a treatment of the body. Therefore, a medical diagnosis is an “authorized linguistic process”, which “translate[s] realities of the human body into human language and back again” (Treichler 1984:69).

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, John plays a double-function of husband and physician and doubly represents the Law of the Father; Karen Ford calls John an “epitome of male discourse” (Ford 1985:310). The “diagnostic language of physician” and the “paternalistic language of husband” are combined within John (Treichler 1984:65). Paula Treichler discovers that the “diagnostic process [is] plac[ed] within an institutionalized frame: medicine, marriage, patriarchy”, which all define and prescribe (Treichler 1984:66).

John’s diagnosis serves various functions: it is a “metaphor for the voice of medicine or science”, it is “powerful and public”, it “represent[s] institutional authority” and it is the “male voice that privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable” (Treichler 1984:65). As a consequence, the narrator finds herself in a situation determined by patriarchal norms. Her situation has actually deteriorated, because in her present condition she is not even allowed to write anymore.

John’s unreasonable treatment is unlikely to help the protagonist because it incorporates even stricter norms than the norms of the society she tries to escape. While Victorian society formerly has not restricted the protagonist from her last means of escape, John deprives his wife of the only refuge left to his wife—writing.

John’s diagnosis serves as a sentence and the narrator must “escape the sentence passed by medicine and patriarchy” (Treichler 1984:70). The “sentence” refers to a linguistic entity and to a judgment and therefore is sign and signified, word and act, declaration and discursive consequence at the same time and is defined by its dual character (Treichler 1984:70). Treichler suggests that “escap[ing] the sentence” means to “move beyond the boundaries of formal syntax” and that this way, the narrator can obtain freedom from the suppressive mechanisms of patriarchal society (Treichler 1984:70). Following Luce Irigaray, Treichler suggests a “female

language”, which the narrator must discover to replace women’s language prescribed by patriarchy (Treichler 1984:72).

Treichler detects an underground narrative, which develops in spite of John’s ban on writing and conversation; this narrative consists of “safe language”, language on “dead paper” (Treichler 1984:61). Although the narrator hides her writing from John and Jennie (“I must not let her find me writing”), the discursive parts of the journal consist of “safe” topics, such as the house, her room or the wallpaper (“Wallpaper” 6, Treichler 1984:62). However, Treichler notes that the language grows intense despite the “safe topics” (Treichler 1984:62):

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream. (Wallpaper 11)

Thus, Treichler sees the wallpaper as a metaphor for women’s language and discourse; the pattern of the wallpaper accords to a “‘pattern’ which underlies sexual inequalities” (Treichler 1984:62). The narrator’s forced alienation from work and from writing complies with the relationship between women and language in general: patriarchal language counters female discourse, which is suppressed.

According to Treichler, the wallpaper can be read as a metaphor for the narrator’s mind, the narrator’s unconscious or the pattern of sociological and economic dependency, whereas the woman in the wallpaper refers to the narrator going mad, the narrator’s unconscious or to all women within patriarchal society (Treichler 1984:64). Although I do not want to exclude any possible way of reading, I advocate Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s reading of the wallpaper as a metaphor for the “oppressive structures of the society” and thus, for patriarchal society, which entraps women in general (Gilbert&Gubar 1979:90). The use of

common names, such as John, Jennie, Mary and Jane, in the short story alludes to the universality of the story. Therefore, I suspect that Gilman's objective was to write a universally valid short story instead of only giving one particular case study. Consequently, the woman behind the wallpaper refers to all women in general and to the narrator of the story in particular. Similarly, the wallpaper itself stands for patriarchal society and hegemonic discourse in general and for John's diagnosis and the rest cure in particular.

In the beginning, the narrator simply questions John's diagnosis and rules on dead paper, which is "not truly subversive" (Treichler 1984:66):

[...] I am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; ("Wallpaper" 2)

The wallpaper makes the narrator bolder and parallel actions between the woman behind the wallpaper and the narrator occur: "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" ("Wallpaper" 10). Similarly, the narrator wants to get out of the house and asks John to take her away from the house:

"[...] I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug, "she shall be as sick as she pleases" But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!" ("Wallpaper" 10)

The narrator wants an ally in John, who refuses to and does not take the narrator seriously. He classifies her talk as children's talk and answers her request with a hug, thus infantilizing the narrator. Because John does not take her seriously, the narrator needs another ally—the woman behind the wallpaper.

Barbara A. Suess claims that the narrator has never constituted herself by entering the Symbolic Order; instead she makes “attempts to create a new order in which she can find social similitude and personal identity” (Suess 2003:84). Because of her madness and because of her gender she is “twice-removed from an understanding of the Symbolic Order” (Suess 2003:89). Suess states that

Because proponents of the patriarchal social order thwart Jane’s [(the narrator’s)] attempts to create her own Symbolic order through writing, they force her to turn elsewhere to find her own Order. And because, over time, the wallpaper gains more and more authority over her, it becomes the recourse to which Jane turns. (Suess 2003:92).

Haney-Peritz follows this argument by stating that the vision of the woman in the wallpaper symbolizes the shift from the symbolic to the imaginary, which for Haney-Peritz signifies the splitting of the narrator’s subject (cf. Haney-Peritz 1986:118).

As the narrator enters this different reality and deals with “‘living paper’, aggressively alive”, the story and the narrator become more subversive (Treichler 1984:67). The narrator’s journal entries falter, but her language becomes bolder. The narrator commits herself to an “alternative reality beneath the repellent surface pattern”, where she finds a woman with whom she completely and irreversibly identifies, thus finally obtaining her own identity, apart from being John’s wife. The wallpaper reflects Lacan’s mirror stage, which “manufactures for the subject [...] the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (Suess 2003:92). Within the realm of the wallpaper, the narrator gains a new self-identity and sense of communality “through her connection with and ultimately her transformation into the women/woman in the wallpaper” (Suess 2003:92).

Upon finding her identity, the narrator makes John believe that her condition is actually improving. The narrator is convinced of her “clarity of perception” and starts to “distinguish ‘me’ from them” (Haney-Peritz 1986:119). She even starts to like the wallpaper and does not want to part from it or share it with the people surrounding her:

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wallpaper—he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. (Wallpaper 13)

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me,—not alive! ("Wallpaper" 16)

The wallpaper comes to have a positive connotation, because the narrator subverts the meaning of the wallpaper. At first, the wallpaper is a sign for the narrator's oppression, but now it provides the narrator with an ally—the woman behind the pattern—an identity of her own and a more aggressive language than the one in her journal. Unlike patriarchal society, the narrator believes she can at least "find out" or conquer the wallpaper, the symbol for patriarchal society. The narrator becomes independent of John and frees herself, which is symbolized by ripping off the wallpaper:

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it to-day! ("Wallpaper" 16)

Parallels can be drawn between the wallpaper as a representative of patriarchal discourse and John. Both John and the Wallpaper lock in and oppress women; both laugh at women: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.", "that awful pattern began to laugh at me" ("Wallpaper" 1, 16).

The ending of the story shows a triumphant narrator:

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jennie. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! ("Wallpaper" 18)

However, the ending is ambiguous. On the one hand, it shows the “dramatic power of her new freedom”, a “transcendent sanity” and a “new mode of speaking”, which “escapes the sentence imposed by patriarchy” (Treichler 1984:67). On the other hand, the narrator believes to have simultaneously conquered the wallpaper and patriarchal society, but she does not realize that her madness, her escape from patriarchal society, will ultimately lead to a “more intense medical treatment” and that her escape is only temporary and compromised (Treichler 1984:67). Because of the wallpaper, the narrator becomes “more and more victim of male diagnosis” (Ford 1985:310). Karen Ford and Carol Thomas Neely regard the development throughout the story as rather negative and state that “the world of the wallpaper is less verbal” (Ford 1985:311) and that the wallpaper is a “symbolic accomplice to the husband’s discourse and diagnosis [...] [,which] elicits [the narrator’s] voluntary compliance with her husband’s prescriptions” (Neely 1985:316). Similarly, Janice Haney-Peritz sees the “turn to the imaginary not as a model of liberation but as a sign of what may happen when a possible operation of the feminine in *language* is repressed” (Haney-Peritz 1986:124). However, Haney-Peritz points out the importance of “The Yellow Wallpaper” by stating that literature as “a really distinctive body which they [feminist critics] seek to liberate through identification [...] destroy[s] the very foundations of patriarchal literature’s ancestral house”, which for her represents patriarchal society in general (Haney-Peritz 1986:123).

The ending of “The Yellow Wallpaper” should be regarded as positive though, because the narrator finally finds her own female language and authors sentences of her own, to which even her husband has to listen. Madness ultimately creates a new discourse and space for women, which are not governed by patriarchal laws. Karen Ford describes this new space as a “space outside language, outside male influence” and links it to Freud’s pre-Oedipal and to Lacan’s Imaginary (Ford 1985:312). Paula Treichler regards the ending of “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a “significant triumph”, because the narrator finally “acts in conformity to her own

diagnosis” and because “her different discourse forces a new diagnosis” (Treichler 1985:327). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call the ending of “The Yellow Wallpaper” a “flight from dis-ease into health” and thus point out that madness, which is regarded as “the Other” and as abnormal within patriarchal society, is actually healthier than the prescribed norm (Gilbert&Gubar 1979:91). Similarly, Jean E. Kennard regards the “narrator’s descent into madness as a way to health, as a rejection of and escape from an insane society”, thus gaining a “higher form of sanity” within madness (Kennard 1981:76,77).

2.5. The Panopticon: confinement and space in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Jonathan Crewe points out that the narrator’s imagination is “permanently at odds with the socially constructed forms that confine it”, which leads to the “‘imaginative’ protagonist’s captivity” (Crewe 1995:273). Hence, the narrator’s captivity is both a psychological and a physical one: she must act according to her husband John’s will and is restrained to the “colonial house”, which includes “a delicious garden” and her upstairs bedroom, which the narrator dislikes (“Wallpaper” 1, 2):

I don’t like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it.

[...] So we took the nursery at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys’ school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life. (“Wallpaper” 2,3)

The narrator is not even allowed to choose her own room for dubious reasons, while in fact, John wants to prevent giving in to his wife, because one change might lead to further changes:

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.

He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

“You know the place is doing you good,” he said, “and really, dear, I don’t care to renovate the house just for a three months’ rental.” (“Wallpaper” 4)

The wallpaper presents imprisonment to the narrator, which John does not want to loosen. Hence, he prohibits changing the other means of suppression, such as the barred windows or the gate. Clearly, the narrator’s bedroom reminds the reader more of a prison than of a playroom or gymnasium. According to Jonathan Crewe, the room is “marked by a history she [the narrator] cannot read”; it reminds of a “scene of disciplinary schooling” and “functions as a prison cell and/or asylum ward” (Crewe 1995:274). The narrator’s comparison of the room to a children’s playroom points at a mere infantilization of the narrator by her husband; however, at a closer look, the room even seems to imprison the narrator and operates as a means of restriction of patriarchal society. The narrator’s spatial confinement is opposed by “open country”, a “place of freedom” (Kennard 1981:75). Her psychological and social confinement is contrasted with John’s latitude to do as he pleases. This contrast forebodes John’s role as a prison guard and the narrator’s role as an inmate.

John S. Bak even compares the narrator’s room and the wallpaper to Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth century Panopticon, which Michel Foucault discussed in his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* (Bak 1994 n.p.). Foucault regards the Panopticon as a “metaphor of disciplinary power”, a “continuous, anonymous, all-pervading power and surveillance operating at all levels of social organization” (Barker 2000:80). Originally, the Panopticon was Jeremy Bentham’s means of controlling prisoners, who were subjects to anonymous observers at all times. The main part of the Panopticon is a watchtower, from which guards or observers can overlook the prisoners everywhere at all times. The observed prisoners, on the

other hand, cannot even see the observers and thus do not know when and if they are being watched. Irreversible, “authoritative power” is being exerted on the inmates, because of their “conscious and permanent visibility” (Bak 1994 n.p.). The subject’s visibility and the unverifiable presence of the observer cause paranoia and “affect the inmate’s psychological health” (Bak 1994 n.p.). Foucault claims that the major effect of the Panopticon is the following:

To induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that its architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault 1979:201)

Bak claims that the same situation occurs in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The narrator is watched by representatives of patriarchal society, such as John and his sister Jennie, who function as her observers; however John’s presence is not absolutely necessary as he is multipresent because of the narrator’s paranoia: The narrator feels monitored by the wallpaper with its “two bulbous eyes”, which “stare at you upside down” (“Wallpaper” 5). Thus, the narrator’s paranoia does not only include John and Jennie, but also the wallpaper. The narrator even states that “John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious” (“Wallpaper” 4); the narrator’s wish for John’s presence—“And you won’t go away?” (“Wallpaper” 10)—and thus for his personal surveillance can be explained with the fact that visible observation does not leave the narrator paranoid. Actual surveillance gives the narrator a reason to be sly about her writing and her progressive fascination with the wallpaper, whereas mere paranoia drives her into madness.

When the narrator identifies with the woman in the wallpaper, who is “trapped inside a Panopticon”, she aspires for the woman’s and her own freedom from surveillance. John S. Bak explains the narrator’s descent

into madness and her obsession with the wallpaper with the statement that the narrator “has to climb into it [the wallpaper], into the central tower of the Panopticon in order not to be watched” (Bak 1994 n.p.). According to Bak, her “breaking free from her internal prison” signifies her release “from the external bars that John uses to restrain her” (Bak 1994 n.p.). Only by denying the “Panopticon’s reality upon her” is the narrator able to “eliminate[...] its control” (Bak 1994 n.p.)

Upon conquering the control of the Panopticon, the narrator gains a new identity: she is the one in charge, she is the observer. The ending of the short story therefore shows the reversed limitations of female space. Instead of being locked in, as in the beginning of the story, the narrator has the power to keep John out of her space. Jean E. Kennard states that the narrator replaces a “You keep me in” with an “I keep you out” (Kennard 1981:81). The ascribed physical space might not have changed for the narrator, but the power relations clearly have: Whereas the narrator acted according to John’s will in the beginning, John has to listen to his wife and do what she orders him to do in the end. Whereas the narrator was irrational in the beginning, John adapts to this role, providing his wife with his former position of the reasonable person:

Why there’s John at the door!
It is no use, young man, you can’t open it!
How he does call and pound!
Now he’s crying for an axe.
It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!
“John dear!” said I in the gentlest voice, “the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!”
That silenced him for a few moments.
Then he said—very quietly indeed, “Open the door, my darling!”
“I can’t,” said I. “The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!”
And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. (“Wallpaper” 18)

By calling John a “young man”, the narrator infantilizes her husband, which reflects the way he treated her before (“Wallpaper” 18). Repeating her statements “very gently and slowly” also hints at a role reversal of the narrator and John (“Wallpaper” 18).

As a consequence, the narrator's quest for space and for an identity of her own is not a quest for physical, horizontal space, but it is a vertical quest, which is found by the narrator by extending her mind and ultimately her power. The narrator's madness is not a limitation of her mind, but an extension of her space; her madness provides the narrator with an identity and "self-fulfillment" (Kennard 1981:82).

2.6. So why did she go insane?

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a crucial documentation of women's lives at the end of the nineteenth century. The major themes in this literary work—patriarchy, madness, search for a female language, space, and the quest for identity—are interlinked and cannot be handled independently. All themes aim at breaking down the old patriarchal order, which suppresses women. However, self-fulfillment could not be reached easily by women in Victorian times. Gilman's work highlights which paths women were not allowed to follow, namely self-determination, an identity independent from the one of their husbands', work and creativity. Instead, women were infantilized and disregarded as subordinate to their husbands. Gilman managed with her story to show the one and only possibility many women had to conquer patriarchy; she showed a way into madness, into freedom.

3. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

The second work chosen for this thesis is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. The novel is set in 1953 and therefore this work functions as a transition between the traditional image of women which can be found in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and a more modern view of women, as that depicted in Atwood's *Surfacing*.

The young heroine of Plath's novel, Esther Greenwood, is torn between the old-fashioned role and the unattainable new role for women. While college education and fancy internships in cities like New York were possible for intelligent women like Esther, the fulfillment of her dreams outside of a traditional family after college was still a "no-go", which would lead to punishment and exclusion from society. Sylvia Plath's novel depicts a society of progression, which solely forgets the advancement of the role of women.

3.1. Cold War America and the role of women in the 1950s

The Bell Jar is set during the time of the Cold War between the USA and the USSR, which plays an important role because of the protagonist's obsession with the execution of the Rosenbergs, alleged Communist spies. Consequently, *The Bell Jar* is already set in a "binary framework": not only do binaries between men and women exist, but also between the U.S. American and the Soviet ideology and culture (Baldwin 2004:24). Kate A. Baldwin calls the U.S. culture "U.S. domestic containment" or "U.S. domestic incarceration" and compares it to "the asylum" (Baldwin 2004:23).

Indeed, McCarthyism with its observation mechanisms reminds us of the image of the Panopticon and accordingly of the means applied at the asylum. J. Edgar Hoover, the leader of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) during this time, mimics the role of the

psychotherapist, who observes the patients, or the citizens, and assigns the respective treatment to them. The American citizens are required to play the standardized roles of working husband and stay-at-home wife. Consequently, “the links between the sexual and the political” roles cannot be overlooked (Baldwin 2004:24). McCarthyism promoted an old-fashioned and outdated role allocation, where men are the heads of their families and women do anything possible to support their husbands.

It is important to note that the USA and the USSR represent completely different attitudes towards women. Communism allowed women to go to work and to be equal work forces to men; additionally, Soviet women had to keep up with the household (cf. Baldwin 2004: 27). Thus, Soviet women had to handle both their jobs and their families, like many women nowadays. This double burden, on the one hand, put additional pressure on women, but, on the other hand, allowed them to find self-fulfillment outside their families and outside the private sphere as well.

The concept of women in the work force was practically unknown and unestablished in the United States during the 1950s as it was in the Soviet Union. Women were still the “angels of the house”, the husband’s support and the caretaker of the children. The American woman’s purpose was to bring up patriotic citizens, who would successfully follow the established norms of McCarthyism, and to be the stronghold and the backbone of American society. Thus, the American society of the 1950s was still clearly divided into a public and a private sphere, whereby access to the public sphere was only granted to men and women were strictly banned from it.

Kate A. Baldwin shows the two different attitudes towards women by means of the “Kitchen Debate”, an exchange between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the American exhibition at Sokolniki Park in Moscow in July 1959 (Baldwin 2004:26). The exhibition was supposed to leave behind an impression of consumerist America and its cultural values; hence, Nixon and Khrushchev’s encounter proceeded in the kitchen of the exhibition’s

single family home, where Nixon explained the role of the American woman as follows: “Americans were interested in making life easier for their women”, placing women into a position behind their husbands, who were responsible for making their wives’ lives easier; Khrushchev’s reply that the Soviet Union “did not have the capitalist attitude towards women” was practically ignored by Nixon’s statement that “this attitude towards women is universal. [...] What we want to do is make easier the lives of our housewives” (Baldwin 2004: 27).

For Nixon, the “housewife” was a synonym of “woman”; he disregarded any possibility that women might not be housewives. Khrushchev’s notion of women, on the other hand, was a completely different one: for him, it was clear that women did not stay at home in order to solely do the housework, but that they also went to work and made their contribution to Communist society. Baldwin notes that

The kitchen in the Soviet context connotes that place in the *communalka*, or communal apartment, where running water may blur conversation so it cannot be overheard; it is the place of the faux-private, a space that reinforces who’s cooking as a matter of ideology. For Khrushchev it is always a political site, and yet Nixon considers this movement to the domestic realm exemplary of democratic liberty, where ideas = goods in the interest of female autonomy and an exceptional idealization of the home as sacred. (Baldwin 2004:27-28)

Nixon’s attempt to show off the progressive treatment of women in the USA appears like a backfiring joke because of the Soviet woman’s unique position in Soviet society. Instead of liberating American women, Nixon clearly locks them in with the help of kitchen aids. The kitchen served as the American woman’s hostile imprisonment, not as the helpful environment Nixon wanted it to be. Despite Nixon’s attempt to be helpful to women and to make their lives in their realm of the kitchen easier, his attitude “by making [it] universal, [...] also compulsorily puts women in a position of captivity” (Baldwin 2004:28). The woman’s place in the kitchen became part of the American ideology.

The two different concepts represent a binary system, where one ideology is marked as the Other. From the American standpoint, the Other is the USSR. It is the passive, feminine counterpart to the USA, which is marginalized and fought against. Because of the Soviet denial to adapt American norms and ideology, Communism was prosecuted and its followers were punished by representatives of the American system. Although the construction of the USSR as the Other was generated similarly to the construction of women as the Other, there were significant differences: first of all, Soviet-style communism did not regard itself as inferior to the USA, but constructed the USA as the inferior Other to itself. Additionally, the USSR had not ultimately been conquered by the USA and instead presented a real threat to American capitalism. Women, on the other hand, had been suppressed for too long a time to still be considered as a threatening Other instead of a passive Other that could be locked in the kitchens of the nation.

The momentary threat of the Other was the ultimate drive behind McCarthyism. The Other was not necessarily an Other, which was outside of the USA, but it was mainly the enemy within, which was feared. According to Linda Anderson, the question of Plath's time was "where to attribute the threat – is it inside or outside" (Anderson 1997: 105). Communists did not stand out of the crowd, as women do, which explains the McCarthyist means of observation and prosecution.

One example of McCarthyist prosecution is the case of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, which starts Sylvia Plath's novel and is a leitmotif throughout the text: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (TBJ 1). The electrocution of the Rosenbergs is presented as a universally known fact, which it undoubtedly was due to widespread and intensive media coverage.¹³ The Rosenbergs demonstrate the paranoia of the 1950s against the enemy within, the

¹³ The Jewish couple Ethel and Julius Rosenberg was accused of espionage for the Soviet Union and was executed in 1953 despite worldwide media coverage and protests. The Rosenberg case stands for the prosecution of Communism in the USA in general and exemplifies the ongoing witch-hunt during McCarthyism.

invisible danger from the inside. As a consequence, the electrocution of the Rosenbergs made an example of what happened to unpatriotic, noncompliant citizens, who were Communists, the abhorred Other. However, the electrocution of Ethel Rosenberg furthermore threatened American women not to follow the example of a woman who was trying to overcome the established American gender ideals. Kate A. Baldwin refers to “Ethel Rosenberg’s status as a bad mother—an image the press went to great pains to construct— [...] as a reminder that [the American women] must conform to the era’s dictates and be a good mother” (Baldwin 2004:25). Additionally, despite their equal “guilt” in the case¹⁴, Julius Rosenberg—unlike his wife—was not the one to be blamed. After all, it was Ethel Rosenberg’s main agenda as a wife and mother to make sure that her family was not morally corrupted. Hence, Ethel’s electrocution was even more legitimate to American society of the 1950s than her husband’s. Although both Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were (falsely) convicted for the same crime—Communist espionage and revelation of nuclear technology to the USSR—Ethel’s betrayal weighed more heavily, because not only was she betraying American society as such, but also was she rejecting her normative role as a woman by her actions.

Ethel Rosenberg was transformed into the Russian woman by her betrayal and role-rejection; she deliberately chose to be a more dreaded Other than the role of a woman within American society would let her be. As a communist, Ethel could become less passive and more powerful than American women in most other permitted female role. Ethel’s execution demonstrated what would happen to women who did not want to conform to gender stereotypes and therefore her case functioned as a means of deterrence.

¹⁴ Nowadays, one can assume that Ethel Rosenberg merely knew about her husband’s spying, but did not participate in the espionage herself. As a consequence, “Ethel was guilty only ‘of being Julius’s wife’” (Linder: INTERNET). However, this fact does not influence my argument, because of Ethel’s lack of performing according to the permitted gender roles of the McCarthy era.

3.2. Plath's (lost) battle with depression: Esther as Plath's alter ego

Many literary critics and more so the public are in favor of reading *The Bell Jar* as Sylvia Plath's unofficial biography. The reasons for this undertaking are quite simple:

First of all, it is a widely known fact that Sylvia Plath herself suffered from depression, spent time at a psychiatric hospital and ultimately committed suicide. Her life greatly resembles the life of Esther Greenwood—with the only exception that Esther is still alive at the end of the novel.

Secondly, Sylvia Plath's published journals almost read like a first manuscript of *The Bell Jar*¹⁵: Not only does Plath report of her internship at a women's magazine, but she also refers to the Rosenbergs and repeats a comment a fellow-intern made about them:

The tall beautiful catlike girl who wore an original hat to work every day rose to one elbow from where she had been napping on the divan in the conference room, yawned and said with beautiful bored nastiness: "I'm so glad they are going to die." She gazed vaguely and very smugly around the room, closed her enormous green eyes, and went back to sleep. (Sylvia Plath quoted in MacPherson 1991:35)

The very same situation is presented in *The Bell Jar*, and is reported in almost the same words as in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*:

'I'm so glad they are going to die.'

Hilda arched her cat-limbs in a yawn, buried her head in her arms on the conference table and went back to sleep. A wisp of bilious green straw perched on her brow like a tropical bird. (*The Bell Jar* 95)

Finally, the publishing history of *The Bell Jar* appears like an attempt to prevent her mother and the other people who are written about in the novel from damage. Why else should *The Bell Jar* not have been published under Sylvia Plath's real name, but under the

¹⁵ Sylvia Plath: *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*

pseudonym Victoria Lucas? Only in 1966, three years after the novel's first publication in England—coincidentally one month before Plath's death—, did the novel appear under Plath's own name. Aurelia Plath's—Sylvia Plath's mother's—struggle against the novel's publication in the USA also conforms to the assumption of many critics that *The Bell Jar* is indeed an autobiography. When the novel was published in the U.S. in 1971, many were “reading the novel as if it were simply ‘true’” (Anderson 1997:114).

Despite the many undeniable parallels, *The Bell Jar* is not synonymous with Sylvia Plath's journals, but remains a piece of literary art. Unlike her journals, the novel was written at a much later point in time, with more distance to her experiences during her college years. A differentiation between Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood is essential to any study of *The Bell Jar*. For this paper, it is secondary whether or not Sylvia Plath regarded Esther Greenwood as her alter ego and whether or not writing about her experiences helped her personally.¹⁶

3.3. The story

The Bell Jar can roughly be divided into three major parts: Esther Greenwood's stay in New York City working for a women's magazine, the protagonist's return to her hometown including her suicide attempt at her mother's house, and her time at psychiatric institutions, which ultimately lead to her apparent recovery.

In the first part, the reader finds out that Esther has won an internship at a women's magazine in New York City and therefore is provided with the opportunity to experience the life of a professional magazine editor or writer, two of Esther's longed for occupations.

¹⁶ Linda Anderson's *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century* discloses further highly interesting parallels between Sylvia Plath and Esther Greenwood.

Additionally, New York is the site where Esther could have experiences with men other than her former boyfriend Buddy Willard.

However, Esther's life in New York is marked by her aimlessness: thus, she wants to copy the bubbly, cheerful lives of the other twelve girls, headed by Doreen, who have also "won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories" (*The Bell Jar* 1963:3). In her pursuit to fit in, Esther even adapts her name to Elly Higginbottom and invents a whole identity, which makes her feel safer around men. Although her friend Doreen tries to set her up with friends of her latest boyfriend's, Esther's adventures with men end unsuccessfully, either with a rejection by a man, or worse, with attempted rape. These experiences with men are matched by her unsatisfying experiences with Buddy Willard, whom Esther believes to be a "hypocrite", whom she "would never marry [...] if he were the last man on earth" (*The Bell Jar* 1963:43).

Despite her attempts to impress her boss at the magazine, Jay Cee, Esther also fails to accomplish this goal and has a breakdown at the final photo shoot of the magazine. No matter how hard Esther tries to find her role in society, she can neither fulfill her role at the magazine and in professional life, nor can she establish her femininity in private life. Esther's only hope remains the summer writing class, which she is sure to be accepted to and which would provide her with a certain sense of self.

The second part of the novel is set in Esther's hometown near Boston, where Esther finds out that she has not been accepted to the summer writing class. Instead of taking other summer classes, Esther decides to spend her summer with her mother. Since her professional career either as an editor or as a writer has not been launched, Esther is searching for another identity, possibly the one she has always rejected: an identity like her mother's or her neighbor Dodo Conway's as a housewife and mother. Suffering from sleeplessness and sinking into a state of depression, Esther consults the family doctor, her aunt's sister-in-law Teresa, who sends Esther to Doctor Gordon, a

psychiatrist. Esther dislikes him from the beginning on and after a shock treatment quits seeing him and ultimately undertakes various suicide attempts.

The third part is set in various hospitals and psychiatric institutions: first at the hospital of her hometown, where Esther regains consciousness after her last suicide attempt, then at the psychiatric ward of the city hospital, and upon the help of her benefactress Philomena Guinea at a private hospital. This private hospital is subdivided into different parts, according to the severity of the case. Esther first arrives at a “gloomy brick building called Caplan”, where she encounters Doctor Nolan, her new, female psychiatrist (*The Bell Jar* 179). Contrary to her fear of being moved to Wymark, the building for more severe cases, Esther is quickly moved “to the front of the house [with] lots more sun”, where she reencounters Joan, Buddy Willard’s other former girlfriend, who is also a patient (*The Bell Jar* 1963:185).

Esther accepts and respects Doctor Nolan as her psychiatrist and even moves to Belsize, where the less severe cases reside. However, Esther has to undergo electroshock therapy, but unlike before, she actually improves. With Doctor Nolan’s help, Esther has a fitting for a diaphragm in order to avoid pregnancy, something she is very scared of. Subsequently she has a sexual encounter with an older professor, Irwin. Esther loses her virginity, but almost hemorrhages to death. With Joan’s help, Esther undergoes medical treatment and survives. Joan however commits suicide and Esther attends her funeral. The novel ends with the hearing for Esther’s dismissal from the psychiatric clinic.

3.4. Identity

Susan Coyle sums up the novel, stating that “[e]ssentially, the novel chronicles Esther’s quest for identity, for authenticity, in a world that seems hostile to everything she wants” (Coyle 2000:162). Indeed,

Esther Greenwood is a young college student, who, according to the patterns of American society of the 1950s, should be enjoying her life, dating men and finding her own Mr. Perfect to settle down with, have a family and fulfill the gender stereotype of the time. Instead, she rejects Buddy Willard, the all-American guy she has been dating, for nobody or nothing else in particular. Esther wants to exchange a life with Buddy for a career and an identity, which are simply unattainable in the U.S. of the 1950s, because “she cannot quite fit herself into the patterns that she sees as available to her” (Coyle 2000: 162). The only respectable role for a woman in the 1950s was “wifedom in terms of service as a kitchen mat [...], a utilitarian object, easily repaired or replaced, [...] a metaphor for a woman” (Bonds 1990:54).

Diane S. Bonds claims that Esther is threatened with “the loss of self” and substantiates it with “the pervasive imagery of dismemberment [which] suggests Esther’s alienation and fragmentation as well as a thwarted longing for relatedness with others and for a reconnection of dismembered part to whole” (Bond 1990:50). In fact, Esther’s disillusionment with a sought-after identity of her own directs her towards the attempt to copy some of the possible roles presented to her by the women around her: for example the roles of the girls working at the women’s magazine, the identity of the editor of the magazine, Jay Cee, her mother’s identity, or later, her psychiatrist’s identity.

Esther’s experiments with the different possible identities at first resemble a teenager, who is trying out different clothes to see what suits her, especially because Esther picks the least suitable roles first. Instead of searching inside herself what is important to her, she prefers rejecting every detail of her own self in favor of someone else’s identity.

The first role Esther tries to embrace is her friend Doreen’s: Doreen’s main interest lies in men and Esther wants to measure up to Doreen’s experiences by discharging her old identity and adopting another one, which resembles Doreen’s. Esther’s decision to “kill” the old Esther Greenwood leads to the process of “dissociation from

herself” and to a rebirth by giving herself a new name and identity — Elly Higginbottom (Coyle 2000:169):

‘My name’s Elly Higginbottom,’ I said. ‘I come from Chicago.’ After that I felt safer. I didn’t want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston. (*The Bell Jar* 11)

Esther’s belief that she has to give up everything connected to her old self in order to find a new identity even turns her into a liar: not only does she lie to the people surrounding her, but also to herself by believing that Doreen’s identity could satisfy her. She realizes that her former dreams and hopes would never be fulfilled by being Elly Higginbottom, but another solution is not presented to her. Doreen and the men immediately come to terms with Esther’s new identity, while Esther is unsteady: “Listen, Elly, do me a favour.’ She seemed to think Elly was who I really was by now” (*The Bell Jar* 14). Unlike the others, Esther does not recognize or accept herself as Elly.

Instead, Esther’s abandonment of her former self only produces a state of impurity upon Esther’s realizing that adapting one’s name does not equal changing one’s identity. Esther has the urge to cleanse herself from the identity of Elly Higginbottom and go back to being a baby – a clean, pure, empty body, which can still be replenished with a completely new identity and does not have to conform to society’s pressures:

I never feel so much myself as when I’m in a hot bath.

I lay in that tub on the seventeenth floor of this hotel for-women-only, high up over the jazz and push of New York, for near on to an hour, and I felt myself growing pure again. I don’t believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water.

I said to myself: ‘Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter any more. I don’t know them, I have never known them and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure.’

The longer I lay there in the clear hot water the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft, white, hotel bath towels I felt as pure and sweet as a new baby. (*The Bell Jar* 19)

In the bathtub, Esther feels clean and unwritten upon; the scene reminds the reader of a religious ritual, a rebirth. For Esther, it is not necessarily a rebirth, more so the desertion of the used-up and blemished identity of Elly Higginbottom. Despite the abandonment of Elly Higginbottom, Esther does not gain her own self. She does not recognize the name of Elly Higginbottom anymore, but at the same time she also disregards her real name:

I didn't pay any attention at first, because the person knocking kept saying 'Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in', and I didn't know any Elly. (*The Bell Jar* 19)

'Elly, Elly, Elly,' the first voice mumbled, while the other voice went on hissing 'Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood, Miss Greenwood', as if I had a split personality or something. (*The Bell Jar* 20)

Both voices, Doreen's, which calls Esther "Elly", and the night maid's, which refers to Esther as "Miss Greenwood", are hostile voices to the sleeping Esther. She does not want to identify with either one, which ultimately results in a split self and a refusal of either possible self.

Esther's indifference to and ignorance of her former identity as Elly Higginbottom turns into repulsion when Doreen throws up in front of her room:

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart. (*The Bell Jar* 21)

Upon discharging her identity as Elly Higginbottom, Esther immediately compares herself to Betsy, making up a new identity.

Esther's immature behavior includes adopting one identity after the other until she has found her new, perfect self.

When she comes to realize that she cannot be one of the girls, she even wants to be an editor like her boss Jay Cee:

I sat quietly in my swivel chair for a few minutes and thought about Jay Cee. I tried to imagine what it would be like if I were Ee Gee, the famous editor, in an office full of pitted rubber plants and African violets my secretary had to water each morning. I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I'd know what to do. (*The Bell Jar* 36)

The endeavor to be like Jay Cee fails because of Esther's indecision and lack of knowledge of other languages:

[...] 'What do you have in mind after you graduate?'

[...]

'I don't really know.'

'You'll never get anywhere like that.' Jay Cee paused. 'What languages do you have?'

'Oh, I can read a bit of French, I guess, and I've always wanted to learn German.' I'd been telling people I'd always wanted to learn German for about five years. [...] What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam.

'I've always thought I'd like to go into publishing.' I tried to recover a thread that might lead me back to my old, bright salesmanship. 'I guess what I'll do is apply at some publishing house.'

'You ought to read French and German,' Jay Cee said mercilessly, 'and probably several other languages as well, Spanish and Italian – better still, Russian. [...]' (*The Bell Jar* 30-31)

Esther's former methods of concealing her aimlessness do not function any longer and Esther is forced to face reality: American society does not provide her with a suitable identity or space. Consequently, she has a nervous breakdown at the photo shoot of the magazine:

When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn't know.

'Oh, sure you know,' the photographer said.

'She wants,' said Jay Cee wittily, 'to be everything.'

I said I wanted to be a poet. (*The Bell Jar* 97)

Esther chooses yet another identity on the spot, but nevertheless feels helpless and cannot prevent breaking into tears at the photo shoot. Still, she decides to be a writer like her college mentor and sponsor Philomena Guinea, starting with a summer writing class she applied to:

[...] After my month on the magazine I'd applied for a summer school course with a famous writer where you sent in the manuscript of a story and he read it and said whether you were good enough to be admitted into his class.

Of course, it was a very small class, and I had sent in my story a long time ago and hadn't heard from the writer yet, but I was sure I'd find the letter of acceptance waiting on the mail table at home. (*The Bell Jar* 99)

Esther's doubtlessness to be admitted to the summer class makes her even bolder in her assumptions about her future:

I decided I'd surprise Jay Cee and send in a couple of the stories I wrote in this class under a pseudonym. Then one day the Fiction Editor would come in to Jay Cee personally and plop the stories down on her desk and say, 'Here's something a cut above the usual,' and Jay Cee would agree and accept them and ask the author to lunch and it would be me. (*The Bell Jar* 99)

Again, Esther's newly-sought-after identity vanishes into thin air, when she is rejected by the summer writing class of her college. The only role left for her is her mother's, an identity Esther had formerly always rejected. Diane S. Bonds explains that Esther "is torn apart by the intolerable conflict between her wish to avoid domesticity, marriage and motherhood, on the one hand, and her inability to conceive of a viable future in which she avoids that fate, on the other" (Bonds 1990:54). Consequently, Esther's decision to spend her summer at her mother's house is only a half-hearted attempt to fit into 1950s suburbia, while in fact, she justifies her being there with her wish to write a novel based on her own life. Kate A. Baldwin explains that

Esther's search for selfhood through the dramatically opposed lives of poetry and motherhood offers us a character who throws herself against the limited options available to her like a furious pinball, aiming for and then bouncing away from discrete targets of female identity. (Baldwin 2004: 24-25)

Esther's attempt to write a novel cannot succeed, because she does not have anything to write about. However, Esther's return does not only signify her despair, but also her refusal of society. Esther's isolation has a negative connotation, but it is a wanted one. Isolation includes a different perspective to society and to Esther it provides a space for refusal.

Esther cannot use her newly-gained space because she is haunted by the images of her neighbor Dodo Conway and her snoring mother, the images of two mothers, who—unlike Esther—are willing to give up their own identities and lives for their children. The suburb is “Esther's prison”, to which she “is sentenced [...] because she failed her college achievement test” (MacPherson 1994: 44). In addition, Esther knows that after college she will be “moving ‘back’ into second-class citizenship and second-hand achievement”, if she chooses the same path as her mother (MacPherson 1994: 45). Pat MacPherson sees Esther's objections to her mother's life and to marriage as due “to her own apparently irrevocable reduction into domestic drudge” and “to other women's apparent willingness to undergo this metamorphosis called marriage” (MacPherson 1994: 47).

Esther, the ungrateful daughter, refuses to follow her mother's path, or to even learn shorthand, which, according to her mother, would be a useful tool for Esther on the working market. Society wants Esther to follow in her mother's footsteps and to give herself up for her husband and children, just like her mother before, who in return has given up her own identity in order to grant her daughter a fulfilled future. On the one hand, Esther's mother feels betrayed by Esther's lack of interest in her life because of society's expectations of a “good” daughter, but, on the other hand, the role of the mother is an ungrateful one, which the mother does not want for her daughter. Pat MacPherson sums up the mother's sacrifices by saying that

[d]aughterly careerism pays back the mother for her own lost career – but it also betrays motherhood, rejecting and devaluing it. Daughterly maternalism sacrifices all the mother's sacrifices but passes the culturally approved loyalty test of femininity-as-motherly-sacrifice – daughters learning martyrdom at their mothers' already bent knees. (MacPherson 1994:53)

Despite Esther's or her mother's possible wishes, the only "forms of womanhood [are] offered to [Esther] by the very stereotypes she has sought to elude" (Bonds 1990:55). Hence, "in the attempt to avoid dismemberment, disfiguration or mutilation of the self, the heroine undergoes a process of self-dismemberment", which climaxes in Esther's repeated suicide attempts (Bonds 1990:55). The suicide attempts are Esther's only option out of the suburbs. Hence, "[s]uicidal breakdown delivers Esther from 'mother's clutch' into the hands of experts, the men in charge" (MacPherson 1994:53).

Esther's encounter with Doctor Gordon, a prototypical male representative of patriarchal society, leaves Esther speechless and numb. Doctor Gordon holds high patriarchal values, which include a family—a wife who takes care of the children and supports the husband, and a husband, who is the head of this family. These values are summed up in the photo on Doctor Gordon's desk, which shows his happy family—an immediate threat to Esther's identity, to all her hopes and dreams of escaping from the patriarchal system of suppression. Esther inherently knows that Doctor Gordon cannot be of any help to her and that his sole purpose is to refer Esther to the position she rejects and to punish her in case of a refusal of this role. Doctor Gordon leaves Esther speechless; she even loses the ability to write or read. The loss of speech and the implied loss of power of women is the final aim of patriarchal society. However, Esther only loses the ability to use language, a sign of masculinity, which puts her into the traditional position of women. But Esther is not able to reinvent a female language to regain her power and ultimately slips further and further into the space of madness, which becomes the only means for

her to resist male power. Esther's lack of improvement is an attack on Doctor Gordon's values and on the society he represents. Hence, Esther has to be punished through electroshock therapy. Marilyn Boyer discovers that

Esther's shock treatments [...] debilitate her even further since they are administered in a barbaric fashion, akin to electrocution. The shocked body is an even deeper representation of the minimalization of language in *Esther Greenwood*. (Boyer 2004: 214)

Esther's reaction to this therapy is not the one anticipated: she does not get better, but only realizes that her behavior will continuously be punished by Doctor Gordon and by society at large, leading to an "erasure of language" and leaving her without any power at all (Boyer 2004: 215). Similarly to "The Yellow Wallpaper", language is used as a tool of power: Doctor Gordon has the power to entirely remove language from Esther's reach by means of continuous shock treatments. Esther's "involuntary institutionalization" signifies the "ultimate feminine subjection to male control over knowledge and technology", over language and power (MacPherson 1994:56).

Esther wants to flee future punishment and slips into the role of Elly Higginbottom one last time. However, Elly Higginbottom does not really provide an alternative life, because it would only mean to leave behind her identity in favor of another traditional female role. Esther cannot live in refusal anymore and wants to flee from patriarchal society for good. Esther's last, and almost successful suicide attempt shows her complete disillusionment with society. In addition, her suicide attempt is an affront to Doctor Gordon and his beliefs. Pat MacPherson regards Esther's suicide attempt "as her critique, as a refusal, as Dr. Gordon's failure to adjust her" (MacPherson 1994: 41). A successful suicide attempt would have proven Esther's final escape from the Law of the Father; however, Esther is saved and has to readjust to society.

After her last suicide attempt, Esther's self is split: she does not even recognize herself in the mirror anymore. Esther does not recognize her old self, who revolted against society; she wants to destroy this old, non-conforming self and the consequences she has to bear for her past behavior. Ultimately, Esther destroys the mirror, which reflects the old picture of her self.

Esther is not reborn though, but stands at a new starting point of her life. This new starting point is also signified by her destruction of the mirror, which indicates that Esther has to undergo the mirror stage again and has to learn to recognize and establish her self. The new start includes Esther's stay at several psychiatric institutions, where Esther again is subject to psychiatrists, who have been coined by patriarchic values. Although Esther's doctor turns out to be a woman, Doctor Nolan, she is no more than a representative of patriarchal society. Hence, Esther has to conform to patriarchal society of the 1950s in order to be declared healthy and "normal". The refusal to participate in her therapy would again be countered by the threat of electroshock therapy and the move to an institution for more severe cases. Thus, the refusal to participate in therapy signifies the refusal to be part of patriarchal society in general, which must be punished in 1950s society to suppress a possible Other. Only the acceptance of the traditional role of femininity and the values of patriarchal society prevents Esther from punishment through electroshock therapy or exclusion of society as such.

Unlike before, Esther wants to change. Doctor Nolan, like Jay Cee or Philomena Guinea before, gives Esther a new perspective of the role of women: apparently it is possible for a woman after all to be part of patriarchal society and to have a professional career. Diane S. Bonds warns that

Dr. Nolan appears to play a special role in Esther's "cure," but several reservations about that role ought to be made. Combining the attributes of patriarchally-defined femininity and professional accomplishment, Dr. Nolan is set forth by some readers as an ideal role model for Esther, but the last thirty years have taught us to question this sort of image which can merely compound the

oppression of women by leading them to assume expectations traditionally held of men as well as those held of women: Plath herself provides a highly visible example of the tragic consequences of uncritically embracing this model which encourages the belief that women can “have it all”. (Bonds 1990: 60-61)

However, Doctor Nolan does not destroy Esther’s dreams of a career, as Jay Cee or the rejection from the writing class did, and thus provides Esther with an alternative identity to being a wife and mother. However deceptive this image might be, Esther accepts it and wants to participate in society again. Esther’s attempts to impress Doctor Nolan display Esther’s trust in this doctor, which does not even decline when electroshock therapy is applied. Instead, Esther trusts Doctor Nolan’s promise that electroshock therapy does not hurt when it is applied correctly, but that it helps Esther improve.

I curled up in the far corner of the alcove with the blanket over my head. It wasn’t the shock treatment that struck me, so much as the bare-faced treachery of Doctor Nolan. I liked Doctor Nolan, I loved her, I had given her my trust on a platter and told her everything, and she had promised, faithfully, to warn me ahead of time if ever I had to have another shock treatment.

[...]

Doctor Nolan put her arm around me and hugged me like a mother.

‘You said you’d *tell* me!’ I shouted at her through the disheveled blanket.

‘But I *am* telling you,’ Doctor Nolan said. ‘I’ve come specially early to tell you, and I’m taking you over myself.’

I peered at her through my swollen lids. ‘Why didn’t you tell me last night?’

‘I only thought it would keep you awake. If I’d known...’

‘You *said* you’d tell me.’

‘Listen, Esther,’ Doctor Nolan said. ‘I’m going over with you, I’ll be there the whole time, so everything will happen right, the way I promised. I’ll be there when you wake up, and I’ll bring you back again.’

I looked at her. She seemed very upset.

I waited a minute. Then I said, ‘Promise you’ll be there.’

‘I promise.’ (*The Bell Jar* 203-204)

Feeling numb after the therapy might have frightened the old, rebellious Esther, but gives comfort to the new Esther and is even a sign of improvement to her:

All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air. (*The Bell Jar* 206)

Moving Esther to the part of the psychiatric clinic for less severe cases rewards Esther for her improvements, although it also means Esther gives up her defense against the patriarchal system. Esther no longer fights a system, which only provides opponents with two other solutions, namely psychiatry or death, and instead tries to use the system and to impress with her impeccable exemplariness—just like she used to in her college classes by getting straight As and earning scholarships. Esther is the good girl again, who believes that the patriarchal system will reward her and find a place and a career for an intelligent young woman like her after all. Esther's industrious behavior has one cause—Doctor Nolan, a fellow woman who has a career and a place in society. Esther is deceived by this new image of women and forgets that even Doctor Nolan—despite being a woman—functions as a representative of patriarchal society.

In order to form her new self, Esther needs an Other to define herself against and to undergo the mirror stage again. This Other is her old friend, Joan, another ex-girlfriend of Buddy Willard's. Joan represents Esther's double image: at first, she is the one Esther looks up to, because Joan seems to be normal and functioning and misplaced in the psychiatric institution. After Esther finds out about Joan's homosexual encounter with DeeDee, the image of the good twin shifts to an image of a bad double and Esther can look down on Joan, make her into a negative Other, in whose reflection she can shine. Pat MacPherson states that "homosexuality as disease is the necessary Other in the organic medical model of mental health"

(MacPherson 1991: 81). This model is reflected in Esther's behavior towards Joan:

As my vision cleared, I saw a shape rise from the bed. Then somebody gave a low giggle. The shape adjusted its hair, and two pale, pebble eyes regarded me through the gloom. DeeDee lay back on the pillows, bare-legged under her green wool dressing-gown, and watched me with a little mocking smile. A cigarette glowed between the fingers of her right hand.

'I just wanted ...' I said.

'I know,' said DeeDee. 'The music.'

'Hello, Esther,' Joan said then, and her cornhusk voice made me want to puke. 'Wait for me, Esther, I'll come play the bottom part with you.'

Now Joan said stoutly, 'I never really liked Buddy Willard. He thought he knew everything. He thought he knew everything about women ...'

I looked at Joan. In spite of the creepy feeling, and in spite of my old, ingrained dislike, Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad. 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.

Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on her own separate but similar crisis under my nose. (*The Bell Jar* 209-210)

Esther's turn to the "positive" and Joan's turn to the "negative" part is accompanied by Joan's decline and Esther's simultaneous improvement.¹⁷ However, the exchanged roles do not change Esther and Joan's part in reference to men: in the binary opposition with men, both Esther and Joan still fulfill the passive part at all times, no matter how hard they try to be good and fulfill the role. The image of women in patriarchal society of the 1950s can only be challenged through recourse to madness, homosexuality and suicide, the very way Esther has given up and Joan is pursuing. According to Pat MacPherson, Joan offers a choice to Esther—"the choice of the 'third sex'", which

¹⁷ The terms "positive" and "negative" refer to a binary model accepted by patriarchal society. Esther no longer questions the role assigned to her by patriarchal society, whereas Joan's behavior becomes more and more subversive.

does not include celibacy or subordination (MacPherson 1994: 84). However, Esther fearfully and hatefully rejects this choice.

With giving up her old self, Esther's behavior becomes hypocritical and even crueler than men's behavior towards women. Esther rejects her old role and at the same time pushes down Joan, who is the double of her old self. Esther even finds a new ally, whom she formerly rejected as a hypocrite—Buddy Willard. She forgives him and even reinforces his belief in his own innocence when she claims that he has nothing to do with her condition or Joan's suicide.

Esther apparently has the impression that she is an exception in society and that she never has to follow into her mother's or Buddy's mother's footsteps, because she branded herself through her past madness. With this self-deceit, Esther disregards that she turns into the very model woman who she never wanted to be, but who is fit for patriarchal society. Esther's final rebirth is marked by Joan's suicide and burial, which signifies Esther's "burying her own dark side, seduced by death in the person of Joan" (Coyle 2000:173). However, burying her old rebellious self is not a long-term solution to her problems. Diane S. Bonds notes that

Esther's recovery involves a reinstatement of the problems that led to her breakdown. [...] The recovery process of this heroine merely extends the series of separations from or rejections of others which seems to have played an important part in bringing about her breakdown. (Bonds 1990: 57)

Consequently, it only seems to be a matter of time until Esther's next breakdown. Still, Esther's fitness is tested at the end of her stay at the psychiatric clinic when she has to appear in front of an assembly of representatives of patriarchal society who judge whether or not Esther fulfills her role well enough to return to society. Pat MacPherson compares the "tribunal evaluating her normalcy" to the tribunals held against Communists in the United States such as the tribunal against the Rosenbergs (MacPherson 1994:83). Esther feels confident about the hearing because she has changed everything about herself and has turned herself into the prototypical model of femininity. Although

this metamorphosis was a necessity for Esther to grant her survival, it represents a step backwards—back into the catch of patriarchy.

3.5. Mrs. Greenwood versus Doctor Nolan

The Bell Jar includes a number of opposing female doppelgangers: the good girl, Betsy, and the bad girl, Doreen, the experienced and the inexperienced, the successful and the unsuccessful, and, of course, the sane and the insane. In *The Bell Jar*, two additional opposing female roles are presented: the role of the mother, who is always a bad mother to the daughter, and the role of the career woman, who has the connotation of the good mother.

Esther's mother, Mrs. Greenwood, takes on the part of the bad mother: she has given up her life and identity for Esther, whom she wants to have a better life, but at the same time she regards Esther as ungrateful. Thus, she is ignorant to Esther's hopes for her future and only wants to keep up appearances.

After Esther's return to her hometown, her mother seems to be oblivious to Esther's disappointment upon her rejection from the summer writing course: "I think I should tell you right away,' she said, and I could see bad news in the set of her neck, 'you didn't make that writing course'" (TBJ 110). To Mrs. Greenwood, the writing course is just "that writing course"—one of many writing classes, which are interchangeable and unimportant—while Esther's world falls apart:

The air punched out of my stomach.

All through June the writing course had stretched before me like a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer. Now I saw it totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap. (*The Bell Jar* 110)

Esther's rejection from the writing class gives Mrs. Greenwood the opportunity to convince Esther of learning something useful for life: Finally, Esther can learn shorthand, a skill Mrs. Greenwood has perfected.

By the end of supper my mother had convinced me I should study shorthand in the evenings. Then I would be killing two birds with one stone, writing a novel and learning something practical as well. I would also be saving a whole lot of money.

That same evening, my mother unearthed an old blackboard from the cellar and set it up on the breezeway. Then she stood at the blackboard and scribbled little curlicues in white chalk while I sat in a chair and watched.

At first I felt hopeful.

I thought I might learn shorthand in no time, and when the freckled lady in the Scholarships Office asked me why I hadn't worked to earn money in July and August, the way you were supposed to if you were a scholarship girl, I could tell her I had taken a free shorthand course instead, so I could support myself right after college.

The only thing was, when I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand, my mind went bland. There wasn't one job I felt like doing where you used shorthand. And, as I sat there and watched, the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness. (*The Bell Jar* 117)

Mrs. Greenwood's practicality opposes Esther's higher hopes for her own future. Shorthand becomes the tool of ordinariness, homeliness, and artlessness. Esther does not want to gain either quality and even loses the ability to see and read the signs of this language of patriarchy. By refusing her mother's skill to provide her with a future, Esther also refuses her mother's identity and does not acknowledge her sacrifices. Mrs. Greenwood sacrificed herself and her future in order to provide her daughter with a better life at the cost of understanding her daughter.

Mrs. Greenwood and Esther literally speak—and write—a different language. Mrs. Greenwood masters shorthand, which for Esther symbolizes patriarchy, whereas Esther tries to acquire her own female writing, an *écriture féminine*, in her novel. Esther's attempt to write a novel fails, because she cannot acquire a new language, and simultaneously, she loses the ability to use patriarchal language.

Mrs. Greenwood does not understand or even recognize Esther's severe state of mind, even when Esther cannot sleep anymore:

My mother told me I must have slept, it was impossible not to sleep in all that time, but if I slept, it was with my eyes wide open, for I had followed the green, luminous course of the second hand and the minute hand and the hour hand of the bedside clock through their circles and semi-circles, every night for seven nights, without missing a second, or a minute, or an hour. (*The Bell Jar* 122)

In Esther's view, Mrs. Greenwood becomes the ally of the male psychiatrist, Doctor Gordon, and allows for Esther to undergo electroshock therapy at Doctor Gordon's private hospital. Esther disregards the fact that her mother has to pay for her therapy—another sacrifice she makes for her daughter's well being.

Upon Esther's electroshock treatment, her mother is relieved when Esther decides that she does not need any more treatments:

'I'm through with that Doctor Gordon,' I said, after we had left Dodo and her black wagon behind the pines. 'You can call him up and tell him I'm not coming back next week.'

My mother smiled. 'I knew my baby wasn't like that.'

I looked at her. 'Like what?'

'Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital.' She paused. 'I knew you'd decide to be all right again.'
(*The Bell Jar* 140)

Esther's mother regards Esther's state of mind as a pure stubbornness of her daughter's—something she just has to consciously decide against. On the other hand, Mrs. Greenwood's wish for normalcy also shows that she is happy not to be Doctor Gordon's ally anymore, but to regain her daughter, through whom she can possibly live out her own dreams. Mrs. Greenwood does not have the capacity to understand that fulfillment is not within Esther's reach in patriarchal society—mainly, because Mrs. Greenwood herself is part of this very society.

At the psychiatric clinic Esther encounters her newest role model, Doctor Nolan. As I have mentioned before, Doctor Nolan is everything Esther has always dreamed of: she is a professional woman, who has

found space for a career within society, someone, who has not mastered shorthand, but her sexuality:

When I enrolled in the main building of the hospital, a slim young woman had come up and introduced herself. 'My name is Doctor Nolan. I am to be Esther's doctor.'

I was surprised to have a woman. I didn't think they had woman psychiatrists. This woman was a cross between Myrna Loy and my mother. She wore a white blouse and a full skirt gathered at the waist by a wide leather belt, and stylish, crescent-shaped spectacles. (*The Bell Jar* 179)

Doctor Nolan promises Esther the same future by providing her with a fitting for a diaphragm at a gynecologist. Hence, Doctor Nolan turns Esther into a sexual woman, although Esther does not seem to be ready for sex—even though she regards almost hemorrhaging to death as a suitable first experience with sex. In order to gain her new self, Esther turns against her own mother and is backed by Doctor Nolan:

'I hate her,' I said, and waited for the blow to fall.

But Doctor Nolan only smiled at me as if something had pleased her very, very much, and said, 'I suppose you do.' (*The Bell Jar* 195)

Doctor Nolan weakens Esther's bond with her mother. While her mother wants Esther to have a better future than her, Doctor Nolan, as the representative of patriarchal society, wants Esther to turn into her mother, which includes rejecting her mother and destroying the bond of female ancestry at the same time. Doctor Nolan turns into the mother figure Esther always wanted to have. According to Pat MacPherson,

Esther 'escapes' through the enabling therapy provided by the good mother, a professional mother, a professional woman who is *not* a mother, *not* ruled by duty and self-denying service. (MacPherson 1994:71)

However, Doctor Nolan also misleads Esther by guiding her back into society; Doctor Nolan cannot show Esther an alternative to

patriarchal society, because she herself is also a crucial, functioning part of it. Although she works at the brink of society, she is the firmest member of patriarchal society, because she guards the border of society and makes sure that nobody leaves it. Additionally, although Doctor Nolan is Esther's psychiatrist, she is not the one to make decisions. Even right in the beginning of Esther's stay at the psychiatric institution, it is not Doctor Nolan who comes to see Esther, but "a whole lot of strange men" (*The Bell Jar* 179).

Esther's new mother and another one of her former mother ideals, Philomena Guinea, persuade her to return to society. Esther sees the possibility of gaining sexual experiences and returning to society if only she does not get pregnant. With Philomena Guinea's money and Doctor Nolan's connections to a gynecologist, Esther can make sure that her fear of having a baby will not be fulfilled:

The five dollars was part of what Philomena Guinea had sent me as a sort of get well present. I wondered what she would think if she knew to what use her money was being put.

Whether she knew it or not, Philomena Guinea was buying my freedom.

'What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb,' I had told Doctor Nolan. '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.'

'Would you act differently if you didn't have to worry about a baby?' (*The Bell Jar* 212)

The baby is the bait Doctor Nolan can offer Esther; however, it is only the bait until Esther returns to society. Then she might still reconcile with Buddy Willard or find another man to settle down with and fulfill her predestined role as wife and mother. Before entering the clinic, a baby has always been an immediate threat to Esther and to her future, also in her relationship with Buddy Willard:

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 any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went dumb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (*The Bell Jar* 81)

Instead of being “brainwashed” by a husband and children, Esther undergoes this change with Doctor Nolan’s help. No longer does she write poetry, but starts turning into the perfect woman. After her first sexual encounter with Irwin, Esther is glad that “Irwin’s voice had meant nothing” to her when she calls him up (*The Bell Jar* 231). Despite Esther’s belief the reader expects her to find a man, who might mean something to her; consequently Esther’s former nightmares might turn into her everyday reality:

And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs Willard’s kitchen mat. (*The Bell Jar* 80)

Although Esther regards her diaphragm as newly gained sexual freedom, it actually only leads her back to men, back to patriarchy and back to the role she is supposed to fulfill. Instead of freeing Esther, Doctor Nolan builds a new prison for her.

Pat MacPherson perfectly sums up the dilemma and rivalry between Esther’s two different role models—between her mother and Doctor Nolan:

To find and hear the voice of the woman *behind* the mother is [...] the daughter’s crucial adolescent task. To know the woman before and beyond the mother enables the daughter to realize that self is not vaporized when Motherhood moves in and seems to Take Over in body-snatcher fashion.

[...]

Struggling to take on the mother’s point of view is abandoned in favour of simple transference in both Esther’s and Sylvia Plath’s therapy. They cling to the earlier and easier task of finding the therapist a welcome replacement for the mother.

When the bad mother and the good mother act the parts in Esther’s struggle for identity, the one wears the frown of self-denial and the other the smile of self-fulfillment. (MacPherson 1994: 72)

Both “mothers” only present a façade to Esther, both of them wear a mask. Esther recognizes her mother’s mask, but fails to do so with Doctor Nolan.

3.6. *The psychiatric clinic*

In *The Bell Jar* the reader is confronted with Esther’s stereotypes concerning psychiatry: Esther expects a doppelgänger of Sigmund Freud, the “Übervater” of modern psychiatry, who would immediately understand and heal her. Instead she encounters Doctor Gordon, who “wasn’t like that at all. He was young and good-looking, and [...] conceited” (*The Bell Jar* 124). Doctor Gordon’s office is full of icons of patriarchy, for example the “certificates from different medical schools, with Doctor Gordon’s name in Latin”, in a language of another patriarchal society (*The Bell Jar* 122). Another distracting patriarchal icon is the picture of Doctor Gordon’s perfect family with his wife, whom Esther will never even come close to matching. The picture is a threatening promise to Esther that Doctor Gordon’s attempts are only attempts to lead her back into the heart of patriarchal family instead of helping her find her own place in society. In addition to the threat of not being the perfect housewife, Esther also feels threatened by Doctor Gordon’s perfect children:

Doctor Gordon had a photograph on his desk, in a silver frame, that half faced him and half faced my leather chair. It was a family photograph, and it showed a beautiful dark-haired woman, who could have been Doctor Gordon’s sister, smiling out over the heads of two blond children.

I think one child was a boy and one was a girl, but it may have been that both children were boys or that both were girls, it is hard to tell when children are so small. I think there was also a dog in the picture, towards the bottom – a kind of airedale or a golden retriever – but it may have only been the pattern in the woman’s skirt.

For some reason the photograph made me furious.

I didn’t see why it should be turned half towards me unless Doctor Gordon was trying to show me right away that he was

married to some glamorous woman and I'd better not get any funny ideas. (*The Bell Jar* 124)

Esther enviously acknowledges the fact that at an early age girls might be mistaken as boys, thus, they might still belong to the favorable sex of society instead of being damned to serving a man.

Doctor Gordon's family appears to be even more perfect than the Willards, because Doctor Gordon—at least according to Esther's perception—has one son and one daughter, whereas the Willards still lack a daughter for their completion. Esther was supposed to fill out the position of the daughter, and thus is threatened by the picture's proposal of resurrection of the completed Willard family.

On the other hand, Esther believes that the picture is turned towards her to show her that she cannot get Doctor Gordon or a man like Doctor Gordon. In order to deserve someone as perfect as Doctor Gordon, one must be a perfect woman like his wife. Thus, Esther suggests a competition with Doctor Gordon's wife, instead of looking at her as an ally to bond with. Doctor Gordon's smiling wife immediately turns into the hated enemy, whom Esther never wants to become. Esther overlooks the fact that Doctor Gordon's wife after all is a victim of patriarchal society just like her and that the woman might hide her own forlorn hopes and dreams behind a smile and a façade of perfection—a trap Esther almost fell into herself when Buddy Willard proposed to her.

Interestingly, Esther feels safe at Doctor Gordon's office, because "there were no windows" (*The Bell Jar* 122). Because of the missing windows, Esther feels fully removed from patriarchal society until she meets Doctor Gordon and realizes that she is not removed from society after all, but is in a microcosm or a miniature model of the same society. This miniature model of patriarchal society again has measures of punishment, such as electroshock therapy, which Esther has to undergo because of her lack of improvement.

For the shock treatment Esther is sent to Doctor Gordon's private hospital in Walton:

Doctor Gordon's private hospital crowned a grassy rise at the end of a long, secluded drive that had been whitened with broken quahog shells. The yellow clapboard walls of the large house, with its encircling veranda, gleamed in the sun, but no people strolled on the green dome of the lawn.

[...]

What bothered me was that everything about the house seemed normal, although I knew it must be chock-full of crazy people. There were no bars at the windows that I could see, and no wild or disquieting noises. Sunlight measured itself out in regular oblongs on the shabby, but soft red carpets, and a whiff of fresh-cut grass sweetened the air.

I paused in the doorway of the living-room.

For a minute I thought it was the replica of a lounge in a guest house I visited once on an island off the coast of Maine. The French doors let in a dazzle of white light, a grand piano filled the far corner of the room, and people in summer clothes were sitting about at card tables and in the lopsided wicker armchairs one so often finds at down-to-heel seaside resorts.

Then I realized that none of the people were moving. (*The Bell Jar* 135-136)

Doctor Gordon's private hospital is used for more severe cases, which need additional treatments, such as electroshock therapy. While his regular office is easy to reach, the private hospital is at a greater distance to and further removed from the center of society. The spatial removal of the hospital from the center of society stands in stark contrast to proximity of norms represented at the hospital: Esther is surprised by the "normalcy" of the hospital and by the omnipresent silence. Because of its physical distance, Esther expects the hospital to be different from patriarchal society and provide an Other space. Instead, the hospital follows societal norms even more so than patriarchal society itself, enforcing silence and normalcy onto the impotent patients, who have been tranquillized by means of shock treatments or medication. Despite one's expectations to find people running around wildly and screaming, a powerful silence forbids the mad to enact their madness, to express themselves or to speak up against patriarchal authority. Hence, language as a tool of power is denied to "the mad". Esther also loses her ability to speak at the hospital when she wants to inquire what the shock treatment would be like.

Spatial removal from patriarchal society does not provide Esther with an alternative option as long as a change in norms and values does not accompany this removal. She also realizes that the hospital restrains mad people from the last option available to them—suicide:

As the woman was dragged by, waving her arms and struggling in the grip of the nurse, she was saying, 'I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window.'

Dumpy and muscular in her smudge-fronted uniform, the wall-eyed nurse wore such thick spectacles that four eyes peered out at me from behind the round, twin panes of glass. I was trying to tell which eyes were the real eyes and which the false eyes, and which of the real eyes was the wall-eye and which the straight eye, when she brought her face up to mine with a large, conspiratorial grin and hissed, as if to reassure me, 'She thinks she's going to jump out the window but she can't jump out the window because they're all barred!'

And as Doctor Gordon led me into a bare room at the back of the house, I saw that the windows in that part were indeed barred, and that the room door and the closet door and the drawers of the bureau and everything that opened and shut was fitted with a keyhole so it could be locked up. (*The Bell Jar* 137)

Upon realization that the hospital does not provide solutions or cures for mad people, but instead forces them to partake of a system they want to flee, Esther decides to flee the system before she does not have the power to do so anymore. Esther's suicide attempts can be regarded as a rejection of Doctor Gordon and his cures and of patriarchal society at large.

After Esther's last suicide attempt, she wakes up at a regular hospital, where she is looked at like "some exciting new zoo animal" (*The Bell Jar* 167). Her suicide attempt has branded Esther and now people can also see in her appearance that she is an outsider of society, an Other. Because she is a visible Other now, Esther has to be moved to a special ward in another hospital in the city, where her roommate insists on a curtain wall between herself and Esther because of Esther's otherness. Before her suicide attempt, Esther wanted to detach herself from society, now the members of society do

not want to be associated with Esther. As long as Esther appeared to be a normal, functioning member of society, society did not want to let her exclude herself, but wanted her to fulfill her purpose as a woman. After having altered her appearance and after having made her otherness visible, Esther cannot function normally anymore and is excluded by society.

At the private hospital, which Mrs. Guinea pays like Esther's scholarship, Esther has her "own room again" (*The Bell Jar* 178):

It reminded me of the room in Doctor Gordon's hospital – a bed, a bureau, a closet, a table and a chair. A window with a screen, but no bars. My room was on the first floor, and the window, a short distance above the pine-needle-padded ground, overlooked a wooded yard ringed by a red brick wall. If I jumped I wouldn't even bruise my knees. The inner surface of the tall wall seemed smooth as glass. (*The Bell Jar* 178-179).

Although Esther's room is not barred, suicide attempts are reduced to a minimum because of the composition of the institution. Normalcy is simulated, but the simulation is an inconsistent one because of the red brick wall, which is the reminder of the exclusion from society. Esther first stays at a "gloomy brick building called Caplan", where all sorts of amusements, such as golf or badminton, are offered to Esther (*The Bell Jar* 179). The appearance of a healthy society is held up, despite the apparent exclusion of the inhabitants from society.

Again, Esther is threatened with shock treatments or the transfer to Wymark, "a building for worse people" (*The Bell Jar* 185). However, the psychiatric institution also works with awarding good behavior, for example the relocation of good patients to Belsize, where no shock treatments are conducted:

I felt the nurse had been instructed to show me my alternatives. Either I got better, or I fell, down, down, like a burning, then burnt-out star, from Belsize, to Caplan, to Wymark and finally, after Doctor Nolan and Mrs Guinea had given me up, to the state place next-door. (*The Bell Jar* 200)

The structure of society is mirrored by the structure of the asylum. Both work with reward and punishment, in which reward always means an acceptance by society for the right behavior. Living at the edge of society reinforces societal norms and values. Especially at the edge, values are held high like the red brick wall, which cannot be crossed. The mental state of the patients is reflected by the different buildings and the different rights they possess, for example to play games or to take walks, but in neither place mental space, namely space for alternative views, an alternative language or an alternative society, is given. As soon as alternatives are being created by the patients, they are punished with electroshock therapy or relocation by representatives of the normative patriarchal system.

3.7. Esther's return to society: a "happy" ending or self-betrayal?

Although *The Bell Jar* has always been part of the feminist literary canon, Esther's return to patriarchal society does not point at a real solution, but at her self-betrayal and her powerlessness to find a new way within the existing system. Esther does not find space for her thoughts, her language, or a new self. Instead she is forced into repeating the patterns of the women surrounding her and into fulfilling society's expectations of a young, intelligent woman.

While the main character of "The Yellow Wallpaper" might have chosen insanity for good, Esther chooses self-betrayal for the moment, until she possibly collapses again under the pressures of society. Even though suicide is not a typically "good" ending to a novel, it provides a symbolic alternative outside of patriarchal society and thus points out the disillusionment and hopelessness of a generation of young women.

In reality, Sylvia Plath accomplished what her heroine Esther could not achieve: to free herself from a suppressing society at the cost of a brilliant writer.

4. Margaret Atwood: *Surfacing*

The last work to be discussed in this thesis is Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. The novel concludes the development from women as child-bearers as presented in "The Yellow Wallpaper", to educated women, like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, who have the option of getting contraception, but who are still expected to be the safeguards of their families, and finally to more modern women, whose option of abortion provides them with a new freedom, but also with new problems. *Surfacing* additionally advocates the return to one's family and to one's own past instead of the renouncement one's ancestors.

Although *Surfacing* was first published in 1972, only nine years after the first publication of *The Bell Jar*, major changes – however, not only positive ones – in the attitude towards women can be perceived. This development can already be seen in the main character, who is not a typical mad housewife, nor an insecure college girl who feels forced into marriage, but a grown, unmarried woman, who has both a career and sex. In this respect, the heroine of *Surfacing* is much more modern than either one of the previous two protagonists and mirrors more precisely the "madness" of contemporary women.

4.1. *The story*

Unlike "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Bell Jar*, *Surfacing* is not set in the USA, but in Canada. The protagonist is a woman, who is in her late twenties or in her thirties. She is unmarried, but has a lover, Joe. Joe and two of their mutual friends, the couple Anna and David, accompany the narrator into the Canadian wilderness, the protagonist's childhood home. The reason for her return is the disappearance of her father, whom she has not seen for a long time. Her father is a scientist, who apparently discovered some old cave drawings and has vanished. The narrator does not believe in her

father's death and instead tries to find him herself. The search leads her from a remote village in the francophone Canada, deeper into the wilderness to her family's little house, and finally onto the circumjacent lakes. However, soon the search for her father turns into a search for her self and the narrator has to face her past and the guilt connected to it: her absence from her mother's funeral and the abortion she had nine years before, the result of an affair with a married man. The narrator represses the abortion and instead only remembers it as her failed marriage. In fact, the narrator has never been married, but needs this lie in order to cope with her past. However, the reality of the abortion haunts the narrator in the wilderness. The first part of the novel describes the protagonist's return, the confrontation with her past and the split of her self. The second part depicts the narrator's illumination, her healing of the two parts of herself and her moving into her psyche, which also includes a conflict with her past, and finally the realization of the death of her father, whom she finds dead. In the third part, the possibility of the narrator's return to community and the restoration of her self are central. The novel ends at the point when the narrator decides whether or not she wants to return to society, personified by her boyfriend Joe.

4.2. Characters

Surfacing focuses on the protagonist, who is influenced by her past. However, her parents, her lover Joe and her friends Anna and David influence her and give a more detailed view of the narrator's situation.

The protagonist is a young, modern woman who has everything Sylvia Plath's main character Esther Greenwood always wanted to achieve: she has a career as an artist and is financially independent. She has a lover, but does not want to become pregnant and refuses marriage, and she has abandoned her parents, who do not interfere with her life. Regardless of all these advantages, the narrator is

unfulfilled and unhappy: the voluntary loss of both her parents and her aborted baby haunt her. Although she is a modern woman, she cannot just leave behind her past, the tradition of her family and a child she possibly should have had.

Her friend Anna, by contrast, fulfills a rather traditional role of women: she is married to David and acts according to all his wishes and demands. For him she tries to become like the centerfold of American men's magazines wearing tons of make-up and trying to be the sex object he wants at all times. Anna is caught in the mirror, which the narrator seeks to escape. Although Anna oftentimes has arguments with David, she never puts her foot down, but always gives in because of her fear of losing David's love.

David dominates Anna and ignores her wishes and feelings, treating her like an object instead of like a human being. It becomes clear that David sees all women as mere objects. His selfish attitude becomes visible when he wants to have sex with the protagonist, disregarding her relationship with Joe or her expectations from their friendship. Thus David is the perfect example of a violator, a person who victimizes everything and everyone around him. He is a representative of patriarchal society, from whom the protagonist wants to escape.

The protagonist's lover, Joe, although also a man, is not regarded as a violator by the narrator. He is a potter and is described as a clumsy person full of weaknesses. His weakness makes him more feminine and thus more lovable for the protagonist. However, he is coined by society aspiring institutionalized love and marriage. Consequently, he does not know how to handle the protagonist's refusal to admit her love outspokenly and her reservations against marriage. Still, Joe is the reason why the narrator does not give up hope and still believes that society is not only made up of people who take advantage of nature and women. Hence, Joe's character presents an opposition to both David's misogynist attitude and the tourists who exploit Canadian wilderness.

Although the protagonist's parents are dead, they are her link to childhood. Her father, a scientist, represents patriarchal society; he is the reasonable part in the narrator's life and appears to be godlike. Although the narrator loves her father, it becomes obvious that she has reservations towards his rational approach towards life.

Her mother stands for nature, she is a "natural woman", who is interested in the weather and birds. She is the only female role model the narrator has—other than women like Anna. Ultimately, her mother incorporates the kind of woman the narrator wants to be: someone who refuses to victimize others, but who has creative potential to empower other people. Her mother also presents the lost part of the protagonist's identity: Because of the protagonist's rejection to attend her mother's funeral and because of her general dismissal of her mother's way of life, the protagonist has lost her roots and the connection to her female ancestry. Only by reviving the memory of her mother can the narrator come to terms with her past and use her mother's strength to redefine her new self.

4.3. Space

4.3.1. The setting: the dichotomy between the USA and Canada

Unlike the two other works of literature discussed before, *Surfacing* is set in Canada. Margaret Atwood constructs a binary opposition between two countries – a dichotomy that reminds of Plath's binary construction of the USA and the USSR. However, there is a difference: in *Surfacing* the binary pairs are the USA and Canada.

Whereas the binary opposition between the USA and the USSR in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* can be regarded as an opposition between two equally powerful countries, which pose a threat to one another, the binary opposition between the USA and Canada provides a parallel between another existing binary pair, namely male and female or men

and women. The USA is connoted as the prominent and powerful part of the pair, like male/men, while Canada has the connotation of female/women appearing powerless and weak in comparison with the USA. The ignorance of the active/powerful part of the binary pairs towards the passive/powerless part leads to a one-sided problem: men, or respectively the USA, are ignorant to the issues the prominence of their privileged position cause, while women, or Canada, are trying to escape from this unfair power system.

Thus, Atwood involves a twofold dichotomy in her novel which provides the reader with plentiful parallels between Canada's situation towards the USA and women's situation towards men. The protagonist is both female and Canadian which makes her passive and powerless in more than one dichotomy. Men interfere with her mind and set limits when it comes to the narrator's psyche, while representatives of the USA exceed the physical borders of Canada, and thus curtail the narrator's space: her refuge into wilderness is challenged by the presence of another dominant power system—male Americans, who are privileged in two ways, namely because of their origin and because of their gender. Erinç Özdemir comes to the conclusion that

[i]n *Surfacing* the national and gender dimensions of the issue of victimhood converge in the female Canadian identity of the protagonist. Both Canada as a geo-political body embodying the Canadian nation, and woman as the female body emerge as entities to be taken possession of from within by resisting colonialization by power structures that threaten them with engulfment and amputation. (Özdemir 2003: 62)

Another dichotomy appears within Canada itself between the English-speaking and the French-speaking parts of Canada. The narrator returns from the English-speaking part of Canada, which could be interpreted as the male world, into the French-speaking part of Canada, possibly the female world. This dichotomy relies heavily on language: the narrator hardly remembers the language surrounding her in her childhood—she has forgotten the female language. A total understanding between the narrator and her old acquaintances only

seems possible through the narrator's final rejection of English as male language.¹⁸

4.3.2. Wilderness

According to Erinç Özdemir, wilderness has various functions: first of all, it is the "setting of the protagonist's childhood"; secondly, wilderness is outside the "urban way of life" and thus functions as a contrast to the protagonist's regular surroundings; thirdly wilderness represents victimized nature, which corresponds to the protagonist, who has also been victimized (Özdemir 2003: 60). Accordingly, wilderness has a function of isolating the protagonist and of providing space to her past and her thoughts which transcend patriarchal society.

Arno Heller's article "Literarischer Öko-Feminismus: Margaret Atwoods *Surfacing*"¹⁹ points at an understanding of wilderness as the actual victim in the novel. Heller regards the protagonist and women in general as a metaphor for (Canadian) wilderness, which is being victimized. Thus, he conducts a shift from reading *Surfacing* as a feminist work to reading it as a work that offers ecological criticism.

Although Heller's position has some valid points, I prefer an interpretation of wilderness as a parallel structure to femininity. Both wilderness and women are exploited and pushed towards the border of civilization and patriarchal society. While wilderness has to recline physically because of mankind, women have to retreat psychically because of men. The protagonist's transformation into a place points at the similarities between nature and women.

¹⁸ The relationship between Canada and the USA is essential to an understanding of *Surfacing*. However, I have opted for a different valuation in this thesis and thus, I only wanted to mention the similarities between Canada versus the USA and women versus men. The additional dichotomy within Canada itself appears as a much more complex opposition in the novel. My attempt at marking French as female language and English as male language should only provide a starting point for further reflection—not an unchangeable, definite thesis.

¹⁹ Cf. Heller, Arno: "Literarischer Öko-Feminismus: Margaret Atwoods *Surfacing*." In: AAA – Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik. 9 (1984), 1. Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen.

4.4. The quest for her self

Arno Heller sums up the narrator's quest for her self as her "interior journey" in four parts, namely "return, exploration, catharsis, and restart" (Heller²⁰ 1984: 40).

Early in the novel, the reader comes to realize that the narrator has not resolved her past and is now overcome by childhood memories and consequently is haunted by her past. Heller claims that "the rehabilitation of old traumata, the exposure of the suppressed are necessary, if the physical return should be accompanied by a psychic one (cf. Heller 1984: 40). Unresolved mysteries result in the narrator's lack of distinction between past and present: "That's where the rockets are,' I say. *Were*. I don't correct it" (*Surfacing* 3). Similarly, the narrator cannot make up her mind, whether the area she is returning to is her home or not: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (*Surfacing* 5). Hence, the narrator is split between her old, childhood self and her new self, which has left behind her past. Returning to her past is a painful process for the protagonist, especially when she realizes that despite the many similarities, things have changed:

Nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more. I slide my tongue around the ice cream, trying to concentrate on it, they put seaweed in it now, but I'm starting to shake, why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it, I want to turn around and go back to the city and never find out what happened to him. I'll start crying, that would be horrible, none of them would know what to do and neither would I. I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm all right. (*Surfacing* 6-7)

The narrator blames her father for the changes which have taken place: she thinks that she cannot find her way back home because of him, although she was the one who left. The narrator points out the technique she uses to get over her pain—anaesthesia. She uses anaesthesia to forget her abortion, her mother's death and her past.

²⁰ Heller's article "Literarischer Ökofeminismus: Margaret Atwoods *Surfacing*" is in German. Therefore, I will use my own translations in all citations of his article.

However, anesthesia does not only make her forget the pain, but also who she is. Coming back home triggers a process within the narrator to remember her childhood, her home, her parents, herself as a part of her family, and later even the traumatic experience of having an abortion: “That won’t work, I can’t call them ‘they’ as if they were somebody else’s family: I have to keep myself from telling that story” (*Surfacing* 8).

Although the protagonist accepts being part of her family, she thinks returning must be connected with physical pain. The narrator wants to be punished for her escape from and her abandonment of home and wants to pay for her redemption instead of experiencing a painless return, which points at her feelings of guilt:

But they’ve cheated, we’re here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can’t really get here unless I’ve suffered; as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit. (*Surfacing* 9)

Josie P. Campbell draws a comparison between the protagonist of *Surfacing* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, because both main characters have a “fragmented self, which appears as a ghost” (Campbell 2002:18). In the case of the narrator of *Surfacing*, the ghost could either be her dead father, her aborted baby or her split self. Similarly to Hamlet, “the hero[ine] pushes to the outer limits of her existence in order to discover the self” (Campbell 2002:18). Thus, the protagonist has to come to terms with the abortion.

The narrator had to reject her family and her old identity because of the abortion, which ultimately led to the fragmentation of her self. The reader finds out that the protagonist was involved with a married man, got pregnant and was practically forced into having an abortion. Erinç Özdemir explains that “she worshipped him (142), and [...] he wounded her to the core of her femininity by persuading her to take an abortion” and that “[h]e controlled and suppressed her reproductive urge and power, thus damaging her self-identity (Özdemir 2003: 64).

However, it is important to note that Margaret Atwood's "heroines are never totally innocent or helpless victims in the hands of male oppressors", but that they have the "option to say no to domination" and the ability to "maintain a certain mental distance towards men's views of sexual relationships and women" (Özdemir 2003: 63). As a consequence, the protagonist feels like an accomplice to her overpowering former lover and has put guilt upon herself, which leads to her loss of self and her loss of emotions. She became part of the victimization of her unborn baby, although she could have resisted her former lover's demand.

In *Surfacing*, destructive power, similar to the power her former lover had over the protagonist or the power the protagonist had over the baby, is symbolized by the presence of Americans in the story. However, a person does not have to be an American citizen in order to be an American, but is simply a person who holds power over another person or thing. In the novel a metaphor for victimization is given in the image of the dead heron:

I said "It's a heron. You can't eat them." I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with a stick. This would be a good place for herons, they would come to fish in the shallow water, standing on one leg and striking with the long spear bill. They must have got it before it had time to rise.

[...]

I saw a beetle on it, blueblack and oval; when the camera whirred it burrowed in under the feathers. Carrion beetle, death beetle. Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices; horned and fanged heads sawed off and mounted on the billiard room wall, stuffed fish, trophies. It must have been the Americans; they were in there now, we would meet them. (*Surfacing* 110-111).

The people whom the protagonist believes to be Americans have willfully killed the heron for no reason other than to show their power. Later, the protagonist finds out that the people are actually Canadians as well, who in return mistake her and her friends for Americans.

But they'd killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. Like the late show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you dispossessing your brain, their eyes blank eggshells behind the dark glasses. If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do. (*Surfacing* 123).

The protagonist realizes that being American has nothing to do with citizenship, but with power relations: if one uses power to have power over someone or something and thus victimizes instead of empowering others, one is an American. The protagonist feels guilty looking at the dead heron, while in fact her feelings are aroused because of her aborted baby, which could be seen as the heron she murdered.

I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human. (*Surfacing* 124)

Everyone, even the narrator, could be an "American". Because of her abortion, the protagonist turned herself from being innocent into a violator, into an "American", as well. Now she is split between her guilt and her lost innocence.

Traveling back home into wilderness symbolizes the narrator's journey to her old self, which is constituted by a fatherly and a motherly part of herself which she has both lost: her mother has died in a hospital and the protagonist did not even attend her funeral, while her father went missing and the protagonist still believes she can find him. Thus the protagonist makes the "discovery of her own fragmentation and self-estrangement" (Heller 1984: 40). Although the protagonist's father has died, she can still find him as a part of herself. Thus, her

father, a scientist, is represented by her head, while her mother is symbolized by her body. Thus, the narrator is composed of the heritage of her parents: Her father's traces can be detected in the narrator's dominating logical approach to thinking, while her mother's legacy can be found in the narrator's (physical) relationship to nature and her renewed, powerful femininity.

Erinç Özdemir explains R.D. Laing's phenomenological-existential perspective of schizophrenia²¹ by stating that "the wholeness of the self depends on the individual's sense of 'embodiment', or unity between her/his body and mind" (Özdemir 2003: 67). Thus, the protagonist is able to regain her self through merging the paternal and maternal parts with the help of nature and its innate gods:

The protagonist finds the alternative to Christianity that she has been seeking in the native gods of the region a result of a spiritual process involving her search for her father (140). Until then she feels that her mind and body are split apart due to the emotional paralysis she experiences. The healing power of the nature gods helps her to start feeling again, joining her head to her body. (Özdemir 2003: 65).

The logic and reason of her father also dominate patriarchal society; therefore, the protagonist has to distance herself from the logos, but is only able to do so when "she comes across the dead body of her father, which triggers her cathartic journey of madness" (Özdemir 2003: 68). Josie P. Campbell states that "under the water is her drowned father, but it is also her 'drowned past', the 'break' in the self (Campbell 2002: 23). The protagonist's rebellion against patriarchy including her father's logic and reason leads to a "psychic journey to the borderline of the Symbolic" into madness (Özdemir 2003: 66). Madness represents a "desire for a wholeness that is impossible within the boundaries of the Symbolic" (Özdemir 2003: 69).

The protagonist sees her father's body and thus is confronted with death when she is diving in the lake, looking for the cave paintings:

²¹ For a more detailed presentation of Laing's work, please check R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*.

On the next try I thought I saw it, a blotch, a shadow, just as I turned to go up. I was dizzy, my vision was beginning to cloud, while I rested my ribs panted, I ought to pause, half an hour at least; but I was elated, it was down there, I would find it. Reckless I balanced and plunged.

Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened, in it pinprick lights flicked and darted, red and blue, yellow and white, and I saw they were fish, the chasm-dwellers, fins lined with phosphorescent sparks, teeth neon. It was wonderful that I was down so far, I watched the fish, they swam like patterns on closed eyes, my legs and arms were weightless, free-floating; I almost forgot to look for the cliff and the shape.

It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. (*Surfacing* 136)

According to Heller, the plunging into the lake symbolizes a "plunging in the dark side of the unconscious" and points at an "end of repression and projection" opening an "emotional part of her personality" (Heller 1984: 45). The protagonist consequently makes the connection between the dead thing and the abortion she has had:

I lay on the bottom of the canoe and closed my eyes; I wanted him not to be there. It formed again in my head: at first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before I was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned after all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it: it wasn't my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise.

I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it. (*Surfacing* 137)

Upon seeing the body of her dead father, the protagonist has an epiphany, realizing that together with the aborted baby, she also killed part of herself. Thus, the epiphany can be seen in relation to her dead father, the aborted baby or herself, as Erinç Özdemir shows:

The protagonist's memory of her mother saving her brother from drowning when he was little and her memory of the foetus taken out of her womb, triggered by the sight of her father's drowned body in the lake, are signs of her fear of her own self being drowned. She has to dive into the lake and confront the reality of death – her father's and by association her foetus's – before she can be saved from 'drowning' and 'surface again. [...] Hence she can finally discard the false sanity which she has been trying to preserve by means of logic, and plunge into madness. (Özdemir 2003: 69)

Meera T. Clark equates the regaining of the narrator's "inner, feeling self" with Özdemir's "plunge into madness" (Clark 1983:7, Özdemir 2003: 69):

As she dives and dives again into the lake which mirrors her own sternly repressed, unconscious self, she at last finds what she has come to find: the power of the gods which resides with the dead, and the power which resides in the unconscious. As she surfaces from the lake, her lost and buried self also surfaces to her consciousness, and she finally confronts the image of her aborted baby. She finds, or rather, recovers that power when she confronts death—both emotional and physical. She faces up to her father's death and her own emotional death. For her inner, feeling self had died in the process of repressing her pain over her aborted child. (Clark 1983: 7)

The protagonist reenters the realm of "the pre-Oedipal, where there are no dualities but only wholeness" (Özdemir 2003:69). As a consequence, the protagonist does not only have a connection with her father, but also reconnects with her mother's sphere. Finally she finds the "gift from her mother" in a drawing from her own childhood, namely the knowledge that "what she must do is to get pregnant and give birth to an animal-god (156)", which would finally mean redemption for the aborted baby and would make her whole again, because the overcoming of death is only possible through the creation of new life" (Heller 1984: 45). Therefore, the protagonist has sex with Joe:

Teeth grinding, he's holding back, he wants it to be like the city, baroque scrollwork, intricate as a computer, but I'm impatient,

pleasure is redundant, the animals don't have pleasure. I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry.

He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, its sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone, or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (Surfacing 155-156)

The protagonist wants to return fully into the realm of nature in order to finish the "cathartic process of individuation" by leaving behind the city and all its attributes including language (Heller 1984: 46). She wants her god-child to be conceived in a natural way: Instead of having cultured, urbane sex with Joe, she wants to procreate like animals. Additionally, she wants her child to be spared from the power relations inherent in language. Since language distinguishes humans from animals, the protagonist chooses to return to being an animal herself, thus making "a voyage from the ego to the self", where "the totality that embraces both consciousness and the unconscious" can be found (Özdemir 2003: 70).

Josie P. Campbell discovers that with the act of impregnation "stereotypical sexual roles have been reversed; the protagonist uses the male for her own purposes" and that a rebirth of both the dead baby and the protagonist takes place: "as the 'lost' child is to be born again, so too is the narrator" (Campbell 2002: 25). To Erinç Özdemir "the half-animal, half-god child to which she imagines she will give birth at the end of the novel signals the archetypal rebirth of the protagonist's self beyond the boundaries of the ego" (Özdemir 2003: 70).

The protagonist's new self rejects everything connected to society and thus she does not return to civilization with her friends, but disposes of everything that reminds her of civilization: she makes due without her brush, without clothes, without food, which cannot be found

in nature, and turns around the mirror in the cabin, in order to make “complete reintegration possible” (Heller 1984: 46):

But when I pick up the brush there is a surge of fear in my hand, the power is there again in a different form, it must have seeped up through the ground during the lightning. I know that the brush is forbidden, I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face: eyes lightblue in dark red skin, hair standing tangled out from my head, reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna's soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken. (*Surfacing* 169)

The reversing of the mirror shows the break between the narrator and her friend Anna: Anna resembles the other tourists, who exploit nature; thus, she belongs to the patriarchal system the narrator rejects. The narrator wants to overcome her past, the part she plays in the patriarchal system and thus does not want to turn into Anna, the only role for women in civilization the protagonist knows. Josie P. Campbell discovers that

[a]s she steps 'out of the self' and her world envisioned in the mirror, so she steps out of her own time and into that of her parents, running the double risk of madness and death. Atwood reveals the protagonist's passage from one time into another through a ritual bathing in the lake. (Campbell 2002: 26)

Bathing includes a process of repurification, similar to the one Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* tries to undergo in New York City; additionally, undressing is compared by Atwood to peeling off wallpaper, a metaphor used in “The Yellow Wallpaper” for the narrator's attempts to escape the patriarchal system:

I untie my feet from the shoes and walk down to the shore; the earth is damp, cold, pockmarked with raindrops. I pile the blanket on the rock and step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper. They sway beside me, inflated, the sleeves bladders of air.

My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the

water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes.

Inshore a loon; it lowers its head, then lifts it again and calls. It sees me but it ignores me, accepts me as part of the land.

When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock. (*Surfacing* 171-172)

The bathing ritual indicates the protagonist's release of her former self and her becoming part of nature. The protagonist makes space for her new self outside of civilization and outside the realm of the logical and rational, turning into part of nature, identifying as nature's language and objects, and even leaving behind her own time in order to enter her parents' time and timelessness.

To Heller "the total cancellation of differentiation in an annulment of separate identity within biosphere" represents "the last phase of the process of regression" (Heller 1984: 46). Similarly, Özdemir comes to the conclusion that "she must isolate herself totally from human society in order to go through the ritualistic process of healing necessary for her to regain her sanity" (Özdemir 2003: 65). By rejecting patriarchal language and civilization, the protagonist has provided space for her new self to develop or to relearn a language, which does not exert power, but empowers. She is within a space of unity, instead of being within a society of dichotomies; hence she leaves behind patriarchal society and, instead, is everything surrounding her and becomes "a place" (*Surfacing* 175):

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (*Surfacing* 175)

The narrator's identity as "a place" signifies the break with her old, exploited and exploiting self. Being "a place" is a state of unity/madness, in which the protagonist encounters her ancestors: she meets the ghost of her mother and consoles with her: her mother died in a hospital instead of dying within nature. Now "her mother can be released to death [...] in nature itself" (Campbell 2002: 26):

Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another one on her shoulder.

[...]

I go up to where she was. The jays are there in the trees, cawing at me; there are a few scraps on the feeding tray still, they've knocked some to the ground. I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is; they hop, twitch their feathers, turn their heads, fixing me first with one eye, then the other. (*Surfacing* 176)

The protagonist's mother becomes a nurturing goddess of nature, while she encounters her father as a "dormant, immortal, indifferent spirit of nature" (Heller 1984: 46):

He is standing near the fence with his back to me, looking in at the garden. The late afternoon sunlight falls obliquely between the tree trunks on the hill, down on him, clouding him in an orange haze, he wavers as if through water.

He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the paces his mind cleared: reparation.

I say Father.

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone.

I'm not frightened, it's too dangerous for me to be frightened of it; it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent as the eyes of animals seen at night in the car headlights. Reflectors. It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself.

Then its head swings away with an awkward, almost crippled motion: I do not interest it, I am part of the landscape, I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.

I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead. (*Surfacing* 180-181)

The encounter with the ghosts of her mother and her father has a healing, therapeutic function on the protagonist: "It causes an annulment and merging of the oppositions – father and mother, male and female principle, rationality and emotion, mind and body, conscious and unconscious" (Heller 1984: 47). The protagonist realizes that both her mother and her father have become a part of nature and that she can now regain an ego and return to civilization as a whole being. Madness does not prescribe her set rules anymore: "The rules are over. I can go anywhere now, into the cabin, into the garden, I can walk on the paths. I am the only one left alive on the island" (*Surfacing* 182).

Consolidating with her past, with her aborted baby, and with her parents empowers the protagonist to reemerge from her healing madness. Although she is scared of the Americans who want to find her, she can finally return, because "[s]he knows that the alternative is death or the mental hospital" (Özdemir 2003: 71). The protagonist even has an optimistic view regarding civilization and believes that she is strong enough not to become an oppressing part of patriarchal society, but to stay true to her new self:

I could take the canoe that's roped up in the swamp and paddle the ten miles to the village, now, tomorrow, when I've eaten and I'm strong enough. Then back to the city and the pervasive menace, the Americans. They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied. (*Surfacing* 183)

The protagonist has to come to terms with the image she has of her mother and father as unfailing and god-like and must realize that they are humans who make mistakes—just like her:

No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull, is it the same place. They'll never appear to me again, I can't afford it; from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining

them by their absence; and love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciation. I regret them; but they give only one kind of truth, one hand.

No total salvation, resurrection, Our father, Our mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. Something I never gave them credit for; but their totalitarian innocence was my own. (*Surfacing* 183-184)

According to Josie P. Campbell, “[t]o accept their humanness is to accept her own with all her frailties and subsequent guilt” (Campbell 2002: 26). As a consequence, the protagonist understands that she has to abandon madness for her new ego, because she owes it to her parents to prefer life to death and to psychiatry (cf. *Surfacing* 182):

That is the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo, where we are put, species and individual, when we can no longer cope. They would never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature, they thing of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centrefold. (*Surfacing* 184)

The protagonist abandons madness for “a new, life-affirming, separate and still holistic identity as ‘natural woman’” (Heller 1984: 47). Hence, she follows her mother's path, who has also been a ‘natural woman’, strengthening the connection to her female predecessors.

With her new identity as a ‘natural woman’, the protagonist is strong enough “to refuse to be a victim” (*Surfacing* 185):

Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of if nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (*Surfacing* 185)

The protagonist's quest for self ends with her refusal to become an oppressing part of patriarchal society and to have power over people. Instead she chooses a path of empowerment, staying true to her ties to her ancestors and nature.

A reconciliation with society can be seen in the protagonist's attitude towards Joe, who has come back to find her:

He calls my name, then pauses, "Are you here?" Echo: here, here?

He must have been waiting in the village, the searchers must have told him they'd seen me, perhaps he was with them. He stayed behind when David and Anna went away in their car, or he drove to the city with them and then hitched back, walked back, what's important is that he's here, a mediator, an ambassador, offering me something: captivity in any of its forms, a new freedom?

I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or a possibility. If I go with him we will have to talk, wooden houses are obsolete, we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin. For us it's necessary, the intercession of words; and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That's normal, it's the way it happens now and I don't know whether it's worth it or even if I can depend on him, he may have been sent as a trick. But he isn't an American, I can see that now; he isn't anything, he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him. (*Surfacing* 186)

Because of Joe, the protagonist discovers that not all people outside of the innocent wilderness are oppressing representatives of patriarchy and that there is still hope. However, her hope is tainted and she believes that sooner or later they will fail. The importance is that the protagonist is willing to try and to return to society, strengthened by her spiritual, mythic encounter with her parents and nature. Özdemir states that the reader can discover "signs of empowerment resulting from her spiritual journey into inner space and time" within the protagonist, which helps her accept human failure (Özdemir 2003: 76). Still, the ending of the novel is left open, because the narrator – although about to go back – has yet to take the step back to society: "To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (*Surfacing* 186).

At the end of the novel and the protagonist's quest for her self, "nature is once more a neutral place, indifferent to all human struggle", because "once the protagonist re-enters the Symbolic, the realm of nature is no longer a source of power and nurture" (Özdemir 2003: 76): "The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing"

(Surfacing 186). It is significant that the novel ends with reference to nature, again pointing at the parallels between women and nature as objects of patriarchal victimization.

4.5. Language

The narrator's return to the environment of her childhood coincides with the confrontation of English and French. The narrator and her friends use English to communicate; in the novel English is connected to the narrator's life in the city and her flight from her family. Although she also used English with her parents, English used to be a sign of isolation in her childhood, because the people surrounding her spoke French. Thus, English only gained a negative meaning throughout the narrator's life, turning this language into a patriarchal tool to hold power over others. In her childhood, French represented civilization and was a means of excluding the protagonist, whose French was deficient. Thus, French has the same connotation as an instrument of patriarchal power. Upon her return, the narrator is not able to understand much French anymore, which might also prove that she does not understand patriarchal civilization anymore. Meera T. Clark suggests that

[h]er statement that her throat constrict when she hears words that mean nothing can be interpreted in two ways. First, it is possible that she refers to the French spoken by the natives of Quebec. She is English, and she is uncomfortable with a foreign language. Or she could be saying that meaningless words, conventional phrases devoid of content, make her acutely uncomfortable. She does not trust words and would rather deal with 'hand alphabets,' i.e., alphabets as written pictures, not spoken sounds. (Clark 1983: 6)

Clark is convinced of Margaret Atwood's "profound distrust of language as a means of communication between people, proposing, instead, a non-verbal or meta-language as infinitely superior" (Clark 1983: 3). This attitude can be seen when the narrator additionally

distances herself from English as the language of patriarchal society throughout the novel. The (English) language makes less and less sense to her and although she understands single words, she cannot make meaning of what has been said to her and she cannot use it anymore:

It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimoes had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love. (*Surfacing* 100)

According to Arno Heller, “words like ‘love’ are meaningless to her, because they have become imprecise” and because “language threatens to freeze into a totalitarian system, which reduces the world to mere objects” (Heller 1984: 41). As a consequence “language is misapplied as a tool of repression and suppression of others” (Heller 1984: 41). The reader is confronted with patriarchal language as a means of suppression in the shape of Anna and David. Özdemir notes that

[s]exual power politics emerges in the novel as a matter of power-over, and is enacted by David and Anna in its most destructive form. Their superficial intimacy, consisting mostly of verbal power games, is a show they put on for the audience – in this case for the protagonist and Joe. What really sustains their relationship is the asymmetric balance of power and the maintenance of which Anna must constantly strive lest she lose David. (Özdemir 2003:64)

Özdemir shows that language does not consist of more than of power-over for David and Anna. Although Joe and the protagonist do not participate in verbal power games, the protagonist recognizes herself in David, because “like him she has forgot to meaningfully communicate with other people – verbally and nonverbally” (Heller 1984: 42).

Özdemir states that “[I]anguage as a register of the Law-of-the-Father excludes any legitimate space for the Mother and the feminine” (Özdemir 2003: 68). Özdemir’s statement is supported by Meera T.

Clark's argument that "[w]ords and language based on logic can only do the same—confine, fence off, evade and lie" (Clark 1983: 7). Therefore it is not surprising that the narrator only regains a connection to her mother and to the alternative image of women as "natural women" after abandoning patriarchal language, which includes the narrator's loss of her name:

Joe comes up the steps, shouting; Anna shouts too, shrill, like a train whistle before departure, my name. It's too late, I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending. (*Surfacing* 162)

Clark recognizes in "her refusal to answer" "the ultimate refusal to acknowledge her human identity, an identity which separates her from the rest of nature" (Clark 1983: 7). The protagonist conducts a "search for another language, one that would allow non-destructive relationships with others and nature", a language which does not signify power over others, but which gives power to them and therefore is empowering (Özdemir 2003:58).

The language the narrator seeks is similar to the legacy her parents left behind. Neither mother nor father left her words, but tokens: "But even though they did not leave her any words as a legacy, they did leave her with something which proves much more important—images, visual ones" (Clark 1983: 6).

The retrieval of a new, feminine language is accompanied by a change in the style used in *Surfacing*: although the novel's style has a disrupted character from beginning on, language becomes more and more fragmented; words and punctuation signs are left out, grammar is not the supreme category anymore. The interior change of the protagonist is thus reflected by her narrative voice:

The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of sunlight frozen; the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment.

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am a thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (*Surfacing* 175)

From the lake a fish jumps

An idea of a fish jumps (*Surfacing* 181)

Her speaking voice has turned into the sounds of animals: “I laugh, and a noise comes out like something being killed: a mouse, a bird?” (*Surfacing* 184). Clark believes that

[h]er words no longer ‘sanely’ represent reality. They remake reality in the image of her won power like God [...]. Her liberated imagination is creating the primal scene—forest, boulders evolving out of the first element—water, even as her unborn baby is growing in her amniotic fluid. In this vision, there are as yet no distinguishing nouns—only active verbs, creating. (Clark 1983: 11)

After the reconciliation of the maternal and the paternal parts of her split self,

[a]fter having railed against [language], after having destroyed its logic, after breaking its rules, she arrives at the possibility of a new language. [...] It is a language not bound by reason, not enervated by logic. It is a visionary language, able to express an unmediated vision. It is the old language, cleansed and reinvented, endowed with power by herself. (Clark 1983: 12)

At the end of the novel the protagonist regains her name and understands human language again: “He calls my name, then pauses, ‘Are you here?’ Echo: here, here?” (*Surfacing* 186).

4.6. A new woman with new responsibilities

Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* efficiently shows problems connected to the new image of women in the 1970s. Being able to pursue a

career, to use contraception or have abortions does not mean equality. Thus, the perfect image of Doctor Nolan in *The Bell Jar* is ultimately and irrevocably destroyed. Despite some newly gained rights, women oftentimes are still the victims of patriarchy and of men, which cannot solely be countervailed with a career of one's own.

The novel relates the experiences of a young woman who has become the ally of her married lover, who forces her into having an abortion. However, it also shows that women have the option to say no and to refuse to be a victim. Unfortunately this option oftentimes is not being exercised – because of internalized patriarchal values and concepts of morality or because of fear of losing the person one loves.

The lesson to be learned from the novel is to stop being a victim, to stop victimizing others and to finally take over responsibility, which everyone—men and women equally—has:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old believe that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (*Surfacing* 185)

5. Conclusion

Although the three heroines discussed in this thesis are different characters and live in different social situations, their choice to flee patriarchal society by means of madness remains the same.

The narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" disobeys the rules of her husband and Victorian society and chooses madness over an unfulfilled life as a wife and mother. The consequences for her are crucial: She is robbed of the possibility of writing and expressing herself and is condemned to a house and later to a room far away from the center of society. However, the narrator manages to subvert her situation and instead of being locked in a small space under the control of her husband—a representative of patriarchal society—she finds her own space in her mind, where she can be herself. Madness becomes her means to defy the role assigned to her by Victorian society. Consequently, madness can be regarded as a positive tool for finding one's identity.

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, finds herself in a similar position as the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper:" She feels obliged to play the role patriarchal society expects, namely the role of a wife and mother. Although it is possible for women in the United States of the 1950s to work and to have a career in certain fields, the choices are limited and Esther is robbed of one choice after the other. Ultimately, Esther's disillusionment leads to her madness and her suicide attempts. Esther fails at withdrawing herself completely from society and consequently, she is treated in psychiatric institutions by representatives of patriarchal society. At the psychiatric institutions, madness is punished by electroshocks and the withdrawal of privileges; consequently, no other way but punished madness and suicide presents itself to Esther. By choosing life, Esther surrenders and abandons madness as a solution. Instead, she becomes part of patriarchal society again. Unlike the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Esther has not been empowered by her madness

and has not learned how to use it to create her own space and her own identity.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* presents a protagonist who uses madness to liberate herself from the ties of patriarchal society, to create a new identity and who—possibly—returns with new strength to society where she can live an alternative life. For the constitution of this new self, the protagonist relies on nature—the Canadian wilderness—and her ancestral bonds to her dead parents, especially to her mother. The return to her past and to nature is linked to abandoning every symbol of patriarchal society, such as clothes or language. In the wilderness, the protagonist undergoes a necessary change to survive in patriarchal society without becoming a representative of this very society: The protagonist learns to value and empower other people and nature instead of holding power over them. Empowering others leads to an addition of power in the protagonist as well.

Gilman's and Atwood's heroines follow the same pattern: They enter madness, abandon everything connected to patriarchal society—including language—and constitute a new, stronger self using a new, feminine language.

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" stays in this state of empowerment until the end of the story, whereas the protagonist of *Surfacing* (almost) manages to reappear in patriarchal society without giving up her newly found identity.

Plath's heroine Esther Greenwood does not undergo this process of empowerment, because she is deceived by her female psychiatrist Doctor Nolan, whose role she wants to copy. Esther does not recognize that Doctor Nolan is only a representative of patriarchal society, who cannot offer Esther real freedom in patriarchal society.

Despite all kinds of measures to gender equality, many women in the 21st century are still mere objects to patriarchal power and do not

have other means to escape this power than the protagonists in the literary works discussed in this thesis, namely madness. Hence, society's discourse on madness ought to change: Instead of excluding people who are considered "mad", categories should be abolished, providing space for alternatives to the power structures of patriarchal society.

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Appendix 1 – German Summary

Diese Diplomarbeit befasst sich mit drei literarischen Werken, die Wahnsinn thematisieren, nämlich „The Yellow Wallpaper“ von Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Bell Jar* von Sylvia Plath und *Surfacing* von Margaret Atwood.

Zuerst werden die Begriffe Wahnsinn und Weiblichkeit als Ergebnisse eines historischen Diskurses erklärt und in den Zusammenhang mit einer feministischen Literaturtheorie gesetzt; zusätzlich wird ein historischer Abriss der Psychiatrie gegeben. Daraus geht hervor, dass Wahnsinn und Weiblichkeit parallele Konstruktionen sind, die von der patriarchalen Gesellschaft gebraucht werden, um festzustellen was „normal“ ist. So werden die Termini „wahnsinnig“ und „weiblich“ immer negativ gesehen und mit „normal“ und „männlich“ kontrastiert. Diese binäre Opposition ist jedoch nur ein Konstrukt von historischen Diskursen, die von den jeweilig mächtigen Institutionen dominiert werden. Folglich wird in dieser Diplomarbeit versucht, das Konzept des „Wahnsinns“ zu dekonstruieren und die negative Konnotation dieses Terminus durch eine mögliche positive Deutung zu ersetzen.

Charlotte Perkins Gilmans Kurzgeschichte „The Yellow Wallpaper“, das 1892 entstanden ist, wird in dieser Diplomarbeit als Vorläufer für die beiden anderen Werke behandelt. Der Prozess des Verrücktwerdens wird als Befreiungsprozess einer Frau gesehen, die keinen anderen Ausweg aus ihrer Lage als unterdrückte Ehefrau und Mutter hat als den Wahnsinn. Besonderer Augenmerk wird dabei auf die Aufteilung von Fläche gerichtet: Die Protagonistin hat immer weniger physischen Platz zur Verfügung und verflüchtigt sich deshalb in den psychischen Raum, den ihr der Wahnsinn bietet. Weiters ist die Verwendung der Sprache zentral, da sich das Sprachvermögen der Protagonistin gemeinsam mit ihrem psychischen Zustand verändert; die unterdrückende Sprache der patriarchalen Gesellschaft wird für eine neue, weibliche Sprache aufgegeben.

Sylvia Plaths *The Bell Jar* aus dem Jahre 1963 handelt von den Selbstmordversuchen der Protagonistin Esther Greenwood, die als

Hilferuf, aber auch als Versuch der Flucht aus der patriarchalen Gesellschaft der 1950er und dem dort vertretenen Rollenbild der Frau als Ehefrau und Mutter gesehen werden. In der Folge spielt neben Raum und Sprache auch die Psychiatrie als Abbild der patriarchalen Gesellschaft eine entscheidende Rolle. Die Psychiatrie versucht den Wahnsinn so weit zu unterdrücken, indem Bestrafung in Form von Elektroschocks oder Entzug diverser Privilegien eingesetzt wird, dass die Patienten wieder als „normale“ Mitglieder der Gesellschaft „funktionieren“. Esthers Zustand „normalisiert“ sich, weil sie sich von dem (trügerischen) Vorbild ihrer Ärztin dazu verleiten lässt anzunehmen, dass es für eine Frau im Amerika der 1950er Jahre andere Rollen gibt als die der Ehefrau und Mutter.

Als letztes literarisches Zeugnis des Wahnsinns wird Margaret Atwoods *Surfacing* betrachtet. *Surfacing* spielt in der kanadischen Wildnis der 1970er Jahre. Die Protagonistin muss eine vorhergegangene Abtreibung verarbeiten und flüchtet sich dabei in den Wahnsinn, indem sie Teil der Natur wird, die Sprache der Gesellschaft aufgibt und zu ihren Wurzeln als „natürliche Frau“ zurückkehrt. Der hier präsentierte Wahnsinn befähigt die Protagonistin ihre Vergangenheit zu bewältigen und neue Kraft für das Leben in einer unterdrückenden Gesellschaft zu erlangen. Die Protagonistin lernt im Wahnsinn, dass sie sich nicht in die Opferrolle drängen lassen darf, aber auch keine Macht über andere Menschen und über die Natur ausüben soll, sondern ihre Umwelt bemächtigen soll. Somit gehen zusätzlich gewonnene Rechte der Frauen mit einer neuen Selbstverantwortung überein, die die Protagonistin erkennt.

Die beschriebenen Werke spannen einen historischen Bogen von der Viktorianischen Gesellschaft, mit der eine völlige Unterdrückung der Frauen einhergeht, über die 1950er Jahre, in denen Frauen nach wie vor als Stütze der Männer gesehen wurden, bis in die 1970er, wo Frauen sexuell und wirtschaftlich unabhängiger waren, jedoch auch mit herkömmlichen Frauenbildern konfrontiert wurden. Allen drei Protagonistinnen bietet der Wahnsinn eine Zuflucht von ihrer „normalen“ Rolle als Frau. Wahnsinn kann dafür genutzt werden, traditionelle Rollenbilder zu untergraben, wie zum Beispiel in „The Yellow Wallpaper“, oder, wie in *Surfacing*, um neue Kraft zu schöpfen und einen anderen

Umgang in der Gesellschaft zu lernen. *The Bell Jar* zeigt, dass Wahnsinn jedoch nicht nur positiv wirken kann, sondern einer Frau auch ihre letzten Rechte der Selbstbestimmung nehmen kann. Wahnsinn ist somit einerseits ein Instrument der patriarchalen Gesellschaft, mit dem andere Handelnde ausgeschlossen werden; andererseits kann Wahnsinn bewusst als subversives Werkzeug genutzt werden, um eine neue Identität außerhalb der Gesellschaft zu konstituieren.

Appendix 2 – Curriculum Vitae

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Persönliche Daten

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Studium	2002 2008	Universität Wien Lehramtsstudium Unterrichtsfach Englisch und Unterrichtsfach Deutsch

Berufspraxis

Sommer 1998,99	Metropolis Reisen: Bürokraft
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