Madwomen:
Representations of Madness in Contemporary Women’s Memoirs

Emmely Leemhuis
s2132362
Supervisor: Dr Ann Hoag
29-06-2015
Word count: 14.510

Master’s Dissertation Literary Studies
English Literature and Culture
The first Day's Night had come —
   And grateful that a thing
So terrible — had been endured —
   I told my Soul to sing —

She said her Strings were snaps —
   Her Bow — to Atoms blown —
And so to mend her — gave me work
   Until another Morn —

   And then — a Day as huge —
   As Yesterdays in pairs,
Unrolled its horror in my face —
   Until it blocked my eyes —

   My Brain—begun to laugh —
   I mumbled— like a fool —
And tho' 'tis Years ago — that Day —
   My Brain keeps giggling — still.

   And Something's odd — within —
   That person that I was —
And this One — do not feel the same —
   Could it be Madness — this?

Emily Dickinson
Abstract

This thesis focuses on contemporary women writers who have suffered from women's madness and who have been labelled as “Madwomen”. Specifically, this thesis discusses the novels *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel. The question is whether the fact that these women felt secure enough to write about their experiences with female madness means that the threatening “Madwoman” is now a figure of the past. An even more important question, perhaps, is how “madness” is represented in both novels and whether Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel manage to subvert the stereotype of the “Madwomen” or whether these women confirm the existing stereotypes. These questions will be answered by looking into the historical and literary representation of the “Madwoman”, with a specific focus on the theories that were present in the 19th and 20th century, and by looking at how both Kaysen's and Wurtzel's novels were received by critics. I will argue that, even though both female writers attempt to change some of the stereotypes concerning the “Madwoman”, they are still beholden to the stereotypes that prevailed in 19th and 20th century literature, because female authors and the “Madwoman” have been interconnected for so long. Although both authors take different approaches to describing their “madness”, for example, whereas Kaysen uses humour, Wurtzel's tone is dramatic, both authors are stigmatised by critics due to the way they represent their “madness”. Whereas Kaysen's humorous and relatively emotionless account of her “insanity” has been widely praised, Wurtzel's memoir has been criticised for showing too much emotion and being too much about her. Therefore, women writers are only accepted if they use their “madness” as entertainment and thus it appears that there still is a long way to go before the stereotypical “Madwoman” will be a figure of the past.
Acknowledgements

There are a number of people who I would like to thank for their help and cooperation during the time I wrote this Master’s thesis. First of all, my supervisor Dr Hoag, who has kindly and patiently provided me with ideas, feedback and support and Dr Visser who, as a second reader, has provided me with many useful ideas. Secondly, my friends, who allowed me to occasionally take my mind of “women’s madness”. Of course, my four-legged best friend Elvis who always manages to keep me sane and last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my amazing mum whom I know I can always count on.
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Introduction

“If contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their eighteenth-and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (Gilbert and Gubar 51)

This thesis revolves around women. Throughout history women have been considered inferior to men and this thesis will discuss the theories and arguments historians and philosophers gave for this gender inequality. More specifically, the focus will be on contemporary woman writers who have suffered from society's pressures and expectations and who, through their writings, have fought to free themselves from the chains of oppression. In addition, the women who will be discussed have one thing in common: society has labelled them as “Madwomen”.

As we will see, the literary tradition of the “Madwoman” became well-known due to Charlotte Brönte's Jane Eyre. The character Bertha Mason, also known as “The Madwoman in the Attic”, has been used to illustrate the “beastliness” of women when they lose their minds. In their position as wife, mother, carer and housewife, women were subjected to domination and had restricted access to the outside world. By retracing history we will come across female writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, all of whom suffered from, and wrote about, their madness. At the same time these autobiographical works inform the reader about the workings of society at the time the books were written. This is essential information for the analysis of this thesis’ primary sources: the memoirs Girl, Interrupted by Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel's Prozac Nation.

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These two memoirs are very suitable for this topic, not only because they were written by contemporary woman writers, but also because they discuss the influence of women's madness in terms of society, self-image, gender and personal relationships. A point of discussion is, of course, why these two woman writers felt comfortable enough at this time to publish such personal stories. My research will therefore also focus on the way society has changed and how the novels mentioned above were received by critics. Moreover, the question is whether the fact that these women felt secure enough to write their memoirs means that the threatening “Madwoman” is now a figure of the past. An even more important question, perhaps, is how madness is represented in both novels. Do Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel manage to subvert the stereotype of the “Madwomen” or do these women confirm the existing stereotypes? These are the questions this thesis will answer.

However, the representation of madness in contemporary women’s autobiographical writing is still under-examined. The lack of attention for this topic is significant, because the idea of the “Writing Madwoman” has been pervasive throughout literary history. This thesis therefore adds to the field by researching the status of the representation of madness in contemporary autobiographical works written by women, as well as examining how these works are reviewed. My hypothesis is that woman writers who share their life stories are still under-valued, because women’s autobiographies and memoirs are relatively new as a field of academic interest. Because, according to Sidonie Smith “the criticism of women’s autobiography only came of age around 1980,” I expect that women who are writing about their mental problems will be automatically pushed towards the figure of the “Madwoman” by outsiders, since mental illness and the “Madwoman” have been interconnected for so long (8).

In order to address the problem of the representation of madness in contemporary women’s memoirs I will look at both literary history as well as theories on women’s madness and the figure of the “Madwoman”. Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis discusses theories
about women, women's inferiority and madness developed by well-known philosophers and
writers. Chapter Two will continue to lay the foundation for the discussion of the “Madwo-
man” in contemporary literature by discussing representations of the “Madwoman” in 19th and
early 20th century literature. Moreover, Chapter Two looks at the most important works about
the “Writing Madwoman”, such as the well-known book written by Sandra Gilbert and Susan
Gubar, suitably called *The Madwoman in the Attic*. In addition, this chapter discusses women'-'s
autobiographies and memoirs and the place, or lack of place, of women's autobiographies
and memoirs in history. Particular attention will be paid to women's self-representation in the
20th century, which was when both *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation* were published.

While Chapter Two concludes the background section, Chapter Three revolves around
Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted*. This chapter includes a section on the author, an
analysis of the memoir, and it analyses several reviews of Kaysen’s memoir. Chapter Four fo-
cuses on the other primary source of this thesis: Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*. As with
Chapter Three, this chapter introduces the author, analyses the memoir and looks at the way
the memoir was received by the press. Moreover, both chapters focus on the way madness is
represented throughout the novels.

Finally, the Conclusion answers the questions asked throughout this thesis and draws
inferences from the analyses of both *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*. By analysing both
novels, I will show how women today experience madness, or mental illness, and if the figure
of the “Madwoman” is still applicable. Moreover, this thesis will give insight into whether
others still use the “Madwomen” to place women writers in an inferior position in society.
Chapter One: Theories on the Madwoman

This chapter will discuss several theories about women's madness that have been developed throughout history. After all, theories about women's madness are certainly not a new phenomenon. As early as in Classical Greece, Plato brought forth the concept that hysteria in women was caused by a “wandering uterus.” He believed that the uterus was an “independent animal which wilfully wandered the woman's body and caused disease” (Adair 153). Although the idea of the “wandering uterus” had been previously employed by Hippocrates, “Plato adjusted the idea by asserting that hysterical misery was actually not caused by a wandering womb, but by a moving psychological force which arises from the womb: 'sexual desire perverted by frustration'” (Adair 154). It is not surprising, therefore, that hysteria was an illness used to diagnose women. According to Woods, “[t]he term [hysteria] is an abstract noun coming from the Greek hysterikos, which means ‘of the womb’. ” It was originally defined as a neurotic condition specific to women and thought to be the psychological manifestation of a disease of the womb” (2). Thus, hysteria may have had a social function. Elaine Showalter, for example, wonders whether “hysteria – the ‘daughter’s disease’ – [was] a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options” (147).

Early philosophers were, however, not the only ones looking at women’s biology as an approach to explain female malady. In the late 19th and early 20th century Sigmund Freud, for example, tried to explain the differences between men and women by looking at men and women’s sexual organs. In his essay “Female Sexuality” Freud asserts that:

> When a little girl has sight of a male genital organ and so discovers her own deficiency, she does not accept the unwelcome knowledge without hesitation and reluctance. As we have seen, she clings obstinately to the expectation of
acquiring a similar organ sometime, and the desire for it survives long after the hope is extinguished...When the universality of this negative character of her sex dawns upon her, womanhood, and with it also her mother, suffers a heavy loss of credit in her eyes. (192)

Freud therefore strongly believes in the physical inferiority of women because they lack a penis. According to Freud, this realisation leads girls to resent women and the prospect of womanhood. In her essay, Howell comments on Freud's essay and claims that according to Freud

[t]he only way to deal with penis envy is to adjust to their social role, have a baby (preferably male) and so gain a substitute penis. Female neurosis is due to jealousy, a result of disappointment. If women reject their role in society they are unfeminine, abnormal, guilty, unreasonable. Normal development, therefore, is dependent on passivity and this smooths the ground for femininity.

(8)

According to this reading of Freud's hypothesis that women are physically inferior, the lack of the male genital also affects a woman's psyche. If a woman is unable or unwilling to adjust to society's demands, they are rejected.

Freud's essay “Female Sexuality” was, however, not his only research into women. Perhaps most well-known is Freud's study into hysteria in women. His case study, Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria is based on the experiences of a young woman, for whom Freud came up with the pseudonym Dora to protect her privacy. Dora was sent to Freud by her father, because she suffered from several symptoms of hysteria, such as coughing attacks that often took away her voice, depression and threatening suicide (17-19). According to Freud, the problem the girl had was based on her secret sexual desire for a friend of her father's, Herr K., who had tried to kiss her when she was fourteen. Instead of feeling aroused,
this situation had made her feel disgusted (22-23).

Additionally, as Toril Moi argues: “Dora claims that her father only sent her to psychiatric treatment because he hoped that she would be “cured” into giving up her opposition to her father's affair with Frau K., accept her role as a victim of the male power game and take Herr K as her lover” (60). Thus, as far as Dora was concerned, she was used as a means of negotiation in the complex relationship of her father and Herr and Frau K. Instead of having Freud's empathy, Freud denied that Dora's symptoms were caused by traumatic events. Rather, Freud “attributed Dora's neurosis to her sexual fantasies. Freud did not acknowledge that Dora's Oedipal fantasies were being reinforced by events that corresponded to reality” (Slipp 163). Freud thus used what he believed was the inferiority of the female body as the reason for Dora’s “madness”. As a result, Dora felt she was not taken seriously and that she could no longer trust Freud. She consequently discontinued their therapy sessions.

Madness was, however, not only a topic of discussion amongst philosophers. During the Victorian era, the idealisation of the Victorian woman, and women who could not live up to that ideal, had an important place in Victorian society. Moreover, during this time the idea that “madness” and writing were interconnected began to take shape. In a paper she read to The Women's Service League, author Virginia Woolf described the ideal Victorian woman as the “Angel in the House”. Although Woolf focused on the place of women as authors in the 19th century society, her paper shows how the high expectations of women affected not only female writers, but all women. According to Woolf, the most important characteristics of the Victorian woman were that “[s]he was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily (...) Above all, I need not say it, she was pure” (The Death 150). The “Angel in
the House,” as described by Woolf, thus set high expectations for the Victorian woman. She therefore proposes that women need to kill the “Angel” in order to free themselves and she claims that killing the “Angel” is the only way women can achieve a creative voice for themselves. In their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, however, argue that not only the “Angel” needs to be killed. They write that “similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa face also kills female creativity” (Gilbert & Gubar 17). They further argue that this opposite

monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies
intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to
alleviate 'his' anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster), and, simultaneously the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained 'place'. (Gilbert and Gubar 28)

For a 19th century woman, both the “Angel” and the “Monster” meant that women were restrained: as an “Angel” women could not live for themselves or have a free mind and as a “Monster” women were considered social outcasts. Virginia Woolf further illustrates this ambivalence by explaining that

as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review a novel without
having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly – tell lies if they are to succeed. (*The Death* 151)

During the 19th and 20th century women therefore had to choose between conformism and accepting the lack of personal and creative freedom or choose relative freedom and be
considered a “Monster”. Moreover, as the discussion of Dora has emphasised, women's madness was automatically connected to the inferiority of the female body. Whereas Freud blamed the fact that women lack a penis, philosophers like Plato emphasised how the uterus caused “madness” in women. Hence, women were never free, because stereotypes in the form of the “Angel” or the “Monster” always haunted them.

According to Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), however, women’s inferior position has still not changed. As a writer, feminist, philosopher and, of course, woman, she describes the differences between men and women in terms of immanence and transcendence. Beauvoir argues that a “woman is absorbed in her sentiments, she is all inwardness; she is dedicated to immanence” (231). Beauvoir believes that the differences between the genders stem from the way boys and girls are raised. She asserts that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (281). Thus, girls are forced into the position of “woman” by society, by constantly depriving her of personal and creative freedom and forcing her into passivity. Moreover, women are taught that their place in society is defined by their position as child bearer and housewife. Men, on the other hand, are taught from an early age on “that more is demanded of boys because of their superiority” (285). She explains the differences between women's immanence and men's transcendence by stating that

what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free an autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego which is essential and sovereign. (lix)

Hence Simone de Beauvoir believes that women are doomed to immanence as a result of their
social position, while men enjoy freedom and independence or, as she calls it, transcendence. Whereas man is the subject, woman is the object, the Other.

In addition, Beauvoir’s theory also takes into account the female body. Beauvoir argues that:

The ideal of feminine beauty is variable; but some requirements remain constant; one of them is that since woman is destined to be possessed, her body has to provide the inert and passive qualities of an object. (221)

This means that not only the woman's mind should be passive, but her body also. Moreover, she says that

This lack of physical power expresses itself as a more general timidity: [a woman] does not believe in a force she has not felt in her body, she does not dare to be enterprising, to revolt, to invent; doomed to docility, to resignation, she can only accept a place that society has already made for her. She accepts the order of things as a given. (405)

Hence, women continue to stay in their inferior position, because nothing else is expected of her. Women do not explore their own strength, because they do not have confidence in their bodies and thus automatically accept their given role.

Beauvoir asserts that this also explains why relatively few women write, or express their creativity through other art forms, even though “[w]oman’s situation inclines her to seek salvation in literature and in art”, because her situation is “a source of sensations and emotions” that could be expressed through art (739). However, Beauvoir argues that

Of the legion of women who toy with arts and letters, very few persevere; and even those who pass this first obstacle will very often continue to be torn between their narcissism and an inferiority complex. Inability to forget themselves is a defect that will weigh more heavily upon them than upon
women in any other career; if their essential aim is the abstract affirmation of self, the formal satisfaction of success, they will not give themselves over to the contemplation of the world: they will be incapable of re-creating it in art.

(741)

What Beauvoir argues is that woman's position in society limits her perspective. Moreover, because women have been taught that they are inferior, not only due to their body, but also because of their position in society, they have trouble positioning themselves as free and assertive beings as well as authorities and authors.

In the final chapter of her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir, however, looks at how society and the place of women in society are changing. She explains that there does seem to be a change in the way men view women: “The fact is that men are beginning to resign themselves to the new status of women; and she, not feeling condemned in advance, has begun to feel more at ease. Today the woman who works is less neglectful of her femininity than formerly, and she does not lose her sexual attractiveness” (720). Thus, men seem to be willing to accept that women are becoming slightly more independent. She does admit that this development also has its drawbacks, because women now “[want] to live at once like a man and like a woman, and in that way she multiplies her tasks and adds to her fatigue” (718).

As a result, Simone de Beauvoir shows that the situation of women in the mid-20th century has only improved slightly from Victorian women’s. Her argument that women are still raised as the inferior gender explains why women are afraid to position themselves as writers, or generally, as creators. In the following chapters we will see whether the women who did dare to write about themselves during the 20th century still faced the same issues as described by Simone de Beauvoir, or whether the situation of women has improved since the publication of *The Second Sex*. 

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As a final point, it is important to note that there are many more theories on women’s madness and the link between madness, writing and the woman's body. For the sake of my argument, I have, however, decided to focus on some of the theories that have been examined during the 19th and 20th century. After all, the novels this thesis researches were published in the late 20th century and therefore the works discussed here are most relevant for the current topic. These theories are examples of the most important ideas and stereotypes of women's madness of the time. Hence, these theories give a clear picture of how society thought about the “Madwoman” at this time in history. As a result, these theories will be used to draw inferences about the position of the “Madwoman” in Girl, Interrupted and Prozac Nation.
Chapter Two: Writing Madwomen: Representations of the Madwoman in Literature and Writing about the Self

One of the most famous depictions of the “Madwoman” can be found in Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*. The image of the locked-up, beastly wife Bertha Mason Rochester has given rise to the phenomenon known as “The Madwoman in the Attic”. The novel, published in 1847, shocked many readers with its portrayal of not only Bertha, but also her protagonist Jane. In a review of the novel, Elizabeth Rigby, for example, wrote that “the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine (..) is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre.*” Moreover, Rigby blamed Charlotte Brönte for making *Jane Eyre* “pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition.” Thus, it seems that the Victorian reader was mainly shocked by Brönte's portrayal of Jane as someone who rebels against the norms and values of the time. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, with *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Brönte “opened her eyes to female realities within her and around her: confinement, orphanhood, starvation, rage even to madness” (336). Therefore, it is fair to say that *Jane Eyre* should be considered a protest against the social circumstances and enslavement of women at the time. After all, during the first half of the 19th century, women were still very much expected to be in service of their husbands. Moreover, at the time Brönte wrote *Jane Eyre*, England was still a religious country where discourses of religion and gender were deeply intertwined (Lamonaca 246). It is therefore not surprising that the readers were shocked by her depiction of Jane and that of Bertha. However, Charlotte Brönte’s description of Bertha’s “madness” has been essential for the eventual characterisation of the “Madwoman” and therefore *Jane Eyre* is crucial as a starting point for the discussion of the “Madwoman” in Literature.

As mentioned, in *Jane Eyre* Bertha is described as animalistic. This is not surprising, because hysteria in women was usually described as “beastly behaviour” and it was said that...
women were “more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control” (Showalter 55). Thus, during this time, the woman's body was blamed for causing insanity in women. Romans and Seeman even argue that, in the case of Bertha, her madness was not just caused by her sexuality, but that “her worst episodes were related to her menstrual cycle” (192). What we see in Brönte's description of Bertha's insanity is that she no longer acts under any type of restraint; she is completely out of control. When Jane first comes into Thornfield Hall she describes the uncontrolled sounds Bertha makes, even though at this time she has no idea where the sounds come from: “As I walked on softly, I hear a most unexpected sound in such a place – a laugh. It was a curious laugh; clear, unnatural, not at all merry” (44). When Jane meets Bertha later on in the novel, Charlotte Brönte paints a very telling picture of what hysteria, or madness, does to a woman:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (107).

This frightening image begs the question why Charlotte Brönte chose to describe a female character in such an inhumane way. One possible reason is mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar, who argue that Bertha Rochester is actually a monitory image for Jane Eyre, thus warning Jane for the dangers of rebelling against society's rules for women (361). As Adrienne Rich puts it: “Just as [Jane's] instinct for self-preservation saves her from earlier temptations, so it must save her from becoming this woman by curbing her imagination at the limits of what is bearable for a powerless woman in the England of the 1840s” (qtd. in Gilbert & Gubar 361).

Clearly, not everyone was happy with Charlotte Brönte's portrayal of Bertha. Jean
Rhys even decided to dedicate an entire novel to the image of Bertha to adjust the image of the “Madwoman”. In this novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, Rhys describes the history of Bertha Rochester Mason, giving her the voice she lacks in *Jane Eyre*. According to Mericle, “Rhys gives a voice to the otherwise silent character of Bertha Rochester or Antoinette as she is called in the novel. In doing so, *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes a representation of the unvoiced women throughout history” (237). Moreover, Mericle comments on the changes Rhys made to the character of Rochester, which she considers to be “an important feminist statement” and she comments that “[i]n the novel, Rochester is manipulative and controlling, and forms an opposite to Bertha’s free and unrestricted nature” (Mericle 237). Consequently, Rhys tries to explain the reasons behind Antoinette's eventual madness. She does this by adding a layer that is left unexplored in *Jane Eyre*: Antoinette's race. Rhys describes Antoinette as having “[l]ong, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (67). Therefore, Antoinette does not fit in anywhere. According to Mericle, “Antoinette will not classify herself, so Rochester takes it upon himself to contain and categorize her, literally and figuratively” (238). What Mericle means by this is that it is Rochester who changes Antoinette's name to Bertha, because he finds out Antoinette was her mother's name (Rhys 56). It is due to Rochester's dominant character, Mericle argues, that Antoinette becomes “trapped in a character and fate that is not her own. Rochester then takes her to England and locks her up until she has lost any semblance of the free will that she once had” (238). Although initially Rhys' depiction of Antoinette is of a much stronger and sane character than in *Jane Eyre*, the physical aspect of her madness draws a clear likeness to Brönte's animalistic portrayal of Bertha:

When I saw her I was too shocked to speak. Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen. Her feet were bare. However when she spoke her voice was
Thus, although Rhys's account of Antoinette's madness is much more elaborate than the depiction in *Jane Eyre* and the reader sees her descent into madness, the representation of madness itself has not changed much, even though these novels were written over a century apart. Rhys even adds an extra dimension to Antoinette’s madness by showing she became alienated from society due to her race. It must, however, be remembered that the social circumstances had changed for women since Charlotte Brönte published *Jane Eyre*. Women were given more freedom as a result of, for example, the first wave of feminism and the suffrage movements that started in the mid-19th century. These movements were important for women, not just because “it gave women political rights and power, but also because it was seen as bringing an end to the domestic subordination and the narrow outlook of women” (Caine 538). According to Woods, the suffrage movements achieved great results after the First World War. Examples of these achievement are “[t]he Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote in the United States was ratified in 1920 and in the UK women were given partial voting privileges in 1918 and by 1928 had secured equal voting rights to men” (Woods). However, she argues that despite this success “the feminist movement did not experience a 'second wave' until the 1960’s and 1970’s” and that it had less “ideological cohesion” when it re-emerged. Nevertheless, thanks to the suffrage movement’s women during the mid-20th century enjoyed more independence. Interestingly, despite these differences, the depiction of women's madness as an illness that is caused by the woman's body has not changed much in in the description of Brönte's and Rhys's novels.

Like Charlotte’s Brönte’s portrayal of Bertha, Jean Rhys’s depiction of Antoinette illustrates how women were dominated by men. Both Bertha and Antoinette lack physical and mental freedom and this lack of control is an important aspect in the description of the “Madwoman”, as the following novels will demonstrate. Moreover, the novels that will be
discussed next also bring in an extra layer to the description and discussion of madness, because these works are no longer works of fiction, but written by real-life Bertha Rochester Masons who have all suffered from “madness” and written about their experiences.

In the last decade of the 19th century, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”. In this story, the female speaker readily admits that she is sick. She has been diagnosed by her husband John, who is a physician, with a “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency” (10). Yet, she admits that she does not believe this is a correct diagnosis. Nevertheless, similar to Bertha Mason Rochester, John’s treatment of his wife's illness consists of confinement: she is not allowed to partake in social conversations and forbidden to write. The consequence of John's lax attitude towards his wife illness results in what Treichler calls “an artificial feminine self” (61). Because John does not take her seriously, the female narrator establishes herself as the perfect wife and patient, who does everything John says by speaking in “a very quiet voice, [she] refrains from crying in his presence, and hides the fact that she is keeping a journal” (Treichler 61). The consequence of this artificial self is that the protagonist’s descent into madness goes unnoticed. In the article Perkins Gilman published in 1913, titled “Why I wrote The Yellow Wallpaper”, she explains that she herself suffered from what she calls “melancholia”, but that her physician claimed “nothing much was wrong” with her. Moreover, she claims that the prescribed rest cure almost made her go mad.

Thus, in essence, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a protest against the (lack of) treatment of women with a nervous breakdown or depression. At this time, at the end of the 19th century, the prescribed treatment for women who suffered from mental illness was a rest cure. Perkins Gilman’s experience with the rest cure as a treatment for her madness made her realise the lack of control women have over their own minds and bodies: their opinion about a treatment is never asked; a treatment is simply prescribed to them. Writing “The Yellow Wallpaper”
therefore was Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s way of showing the result of men’s domination of women and the doctor’s domination of the patient. In fact, “The Yellow Wallpaper” was very successful as a method protest. In “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper” Perkins Gilman writes that she

wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it... But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’. It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.

Therefore, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is not only a successful protest against the (lack of) treatment of women’s madness, but also an example for other women that writing about their own experiences with madness can be of help and improve the situation of other women in society. As we have seen, Elaine Showalter has already argued that hysteria had a social function and that it was “a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options” (147). By writing “The Yellow Wallpaper” Perkins Gilman has turned the table and, instead of hysteria, used language as a method of protest to object to the treatment of women and their place in society.

As mentioned, in addition to works of fiction, madness in women has often been described in autobiographies and memoirs. Although there is a large selection of works in this category, only a few works that are most relevant to the current research will be discussed. Although Virginia Woolf was mostly known for her novels, I have chosen to focus on her autobiographical writings to show her own experience with, and description of, madness. According to Stewart, “Virginia Woolf has been represented as the origin of the feminist
author and scholar” (147). Still, in addition to her position as feminist, writer and scholar, Woolf also suffered from bouts of madness. In an article she wrote for Newsweek about her great-aunt, Emma Woolf explains how “[f]rom 1913 to 1915, [Virginia Woolf] made several suicide attempts, including trying to jump from a window and overdosing on a powerful sedative.” Moreover, the letters and diaries she found of her great-aunt prove that “[a]s the 'madness' took hold, she stopped eating or sleeping, and at times she hallucinated—Bell records that she once heard 'the birds singing in Greek and [imagined] that King Edward VII lurked in the azaleas using the foulest possible language.’” Unfortunately, for Virginia Woolf the struggle with “madness” was too much for her to bear and she committed suicide in 1941. As Chapter Two, however, demonstrated, Woolf has successfully analysed the difficult position of women and mainly women writers in society. Instead of the “Angel of the House”, Woolf’s position as a woman writer pushed her towards the figure of the “Monster”. Although her progressive statements indicate that she embraced this stereotyping, it did position her as a social outcast. For, as she wrote in The Death of The Moth, it is impossible to write without having a mind of your own, which meant the “Angel in the House” had to be killed. However, according to Woolf’s description of the “Angel”, women were supposed to unselfish, pure and sacrifice herself daily. Her opposition to these ideals could be seen as possible causes for Woolf’s descent into “madness”.

Virginia Woolf was not the only female writer suffering from “madness”. Concerning memoirs, it is fair to say that Sylvia Plath's novel The Bell Jar is a prime example of a “Madwoman's” memoir. At first glance this novel appears to be a story of fiction, as the main character is named Esther and she does not seem to have a direct link to Sylvia Plath. Moreover, Plath initially chose to publish the novel under a pseudonym, Victoria Lucas. However, because the book reflects Plath's own life, it seems only logical to categorise The Bell Jar as a memoir. The novel takes place in the 1950s and is a reflection of the patriarchal
society of the time and one woman's struggle to escape from the chains of conformism. *The Bell Jar* accurately describes the pressure women felt during this time to conform to social standards of women as wife and mother, but by this time women also started working outside the house and thus experienced extra pressure to also be successful as a student and employee. Although Esther seems to be looking forward to a bright future – she has won a scholarship to a college and an internship with a fashion magazine in New York – she only feels lost in the world. In order to cope with the world around her, she has come up with a strategy for survival, which consists of “adopting one identity after the other until she has found her new, perfect self” (Brandner 67). This “perfect self” is, however, never satisfactory to Esther, because she feels that, eventually, she will have to be part of the patriarchal society she fears so much:

> 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)

Esther's fear of being “brainwashed” can be explained by Freud's theory that women can only be defined by their capacity to reproduce. After all, Freud asserted that the only way for women to deal with their physical inferiority was to adjust their social role by having a baby, preferably male, and so gain a substitute penis. However, Esther's fear alienates her from the rest of the world and, essentially, this refusal to conform to society's expectations of a young woman is what leads her to “madness”: she can no longer sleep or write and is lethargic. Even when Esther seeks help with Doctor Gordon, her inferiority is emphasised, because he takes language away from her. This is due to the fact that shock treatment is prescribed to Esther; she does not get a say in her own treatment. Moreover, as MacPherson writes: “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” (qtd. in Brandner 71). Thus, the shock treatments themselves also incapacitate Esther. Essentially, this again emphasises the idea that women are irrational beings and that the language of science and reason is more important than the opinion of a “Madwoman”. As a result, men's superiority over women is highlighted. By writing *The Bell Jar* Plath has, however, taken back language and this time used it as a tool of power herself. However, when Esther is released from the hospital it is not because society has accepted her the way she is, but “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” (Brandner 76-77). Thus at the end, Esther surrenders to the one thing she has resisted her entire life: a society in which women are considered inferior beings. Hence, as opposed to *The Bell Jar*'s author, its protagonist did conform to the expectation of the patriarchal society.

It is, however, important to note that novels such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Bell Jar* gave rise to something even larger than the novels themselves: they created the woman writer. As has been discussed in Chapter One, theories about women and women’s madness have made it very difficult for women to rise up from their position as inferior and “insane” housewives. One can therefore only imagine how much of a challenge it must have been for these women to write about their own “madness”. Susanne Dow describes how not just writing, but writing about madness in particular was a source of conflict for women. She says that madness

> [o]n the one hand presents itself to the woman writer as a rich source for metaphoricity, a figure for the otherness that forms the constitutive constraint of her own art of creativity. On the other, it is the allegation that threatens con-
stantly to suppress her act of writing, which must be deflected, repressed and banished to the 'attic' if ever she is to 'take up the pen'. (187)

The woman writer therefore never knew whether her work would earn her the respect of others or whether it would classify her as the stereotypical “Madwoman” whom society would want to lock up. Using the figure of the “Madwoman” could therefore be beneficial to the woman writer or it could even widen the gap between herself and society. For example, Moelders argues that

The figure of the Madwoman functions as a symptom of women's symbolic and social disempowerment and has become a device of feminist strategies of intervention into patriarchal systems of representation that works toward an authorization of feminine selfrepresentations. (310)

In this sense, women can use the figure of the “Madwoman” as a tool to distance themselves from their place in society and works towards creating a separate field for the woman writer. On the other hand, in previous centuries “[w]omen who did not apologize for their literary efforts were defined as mad and monstrous: freakish because unsexed' or freakish because sexually 'fallen’” (Gilbert and Gubar 63). For women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath the question therefore was how their writings would be received. As Moelders has argued, these woman writers have contributed to creating a literary field for woman writers from which, as we shall see, contemporary writers such as Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel have reaped the fruits.

Moreover, as the works of these women writers show, there are several similar elements in each of the works that have been discussed. Clearly, society’s expectations were of great importance for women in the 19th and 20th century. The role of women as mothers and wives prove to have been a heavy burden for many women. Moreover, the fact that they were to accept their position as inferior from men is also a common aspect in the books that have

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been discussed. When women went “mad”, this seems to have strengthened the idea that women were inferior. This also becomes evident from the way these women were treated. As we have seen, many treatments consisted of prohibiting the female patient from speaking or writing, thus leaving her unable to express herself. The novels discussed here, therefore, give many examples of how women were “put away”, either in the attic, a house or mental hospital, or even their own minds.

Hence, these works provide a template for discussions of women, madness and the connection to the woman's body and the writers that have been mentioned have been constrained by the prevailing stereotypes about women's madness. The most important question now is whether contemporary authors such as Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel have been able to break away from the standards that have been set by these writers or whether they have been constrained by the examples these authors have set.

Next to representations of women's madness in literature, it is also important to look at the history of women's autobiographical writing as well as women's self-representation in autobiographical writings published in the 20th century.

First, it is useful to note that even though there is a clear difference between a memoir and an autobiography, this thesis will not distinguish between the two. The reason for this is that both genres involve an author writing about his or her own life, which is of major importance for this chapter. Therefore, both the term “autobiography” and “memoir” will both simply be used to refer to an author writing about him- or herself.

The two memoirs this thesis will discuss, Girl, Interrupted and Prozac Nation are examples of the rise in autobiographies written by women in the 20th century and the different style and self-representation of women during this time. Sidonie Smith even argues that “[t]his interest in women’s autobiographical practices as both an articulation of women’s life
experience and a source for articulating feminist theory has grown over several decades and was acknowledged as a field around 1980” (5). It has therefore taken an enormous amount of time for women's autobiographies to become an acknowledged field. According to Leah White, “[t]hrough autobiographical texts, women are able to offer their own interpretations and re-evaluations of the power structures that seek to control and silence them” (6).

Therefore, women’s writing about themselves is a method of control and therefore has a clear function. Moreover, White claims that “[t]he study of autobiography allows feminist scholars to celebrate women's lives and experiences” and that women's autobiographical writings have two main strengths: “they challenge notions of a universal subject, and function as tools for resistance” (6). Thus women's autobiographical writing should not only be considered the result of women's resistance to gender inequality and society's demands of women, but a tool to reach equality and adjust society's demands of women. In addition to functioning as a tool of resistance, Helen Buss argues that writing about women’s life-writing has another important function for women: Contemporary women memoirists are performing their selves as they write their texts; their performances are speech acts in a way similar to (yet different from) Freud’s “talking cure”: a therapeutic process that reshapes the self through language (49). Buss therefore considers writing about one's own life as a form of therapy. This is, as we will see, also very relevant for both novels that will be discussed. The result of these contemporary women who write so openly about their lives and emotions is that women distinguish themselves from men. By writing about the difficulties they face in life they essentially reclaim the space they were previously denied.

Moreover, in addition to being a therapeutical outlet, women's madness narratives, by virtue of their autobiographical content, have an undeniably political function (Hubert 138). This means that women’s memoir writing can be considered an act of resistance.
Unfortunately, as we have seen, throughout history “the status of psychiatrists as rational scientists with expert knowledge allows their experiences and interpretations to be privileged over those of women mental patients” (Hubert 139). Hence, space needs to be created for female voices and these voices need to be taken seriously. For this current research an important question is whether the female authors that will be discussed, Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel, have been able to create a voice for themselves and whether, for example, have taken these women writers seriously.
Chapter Three: Sometimes the Only Way to Stay Sane is to go a Little Crazy: An Analysis of Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*

By writing *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen has shown that the perception of the “Madwoman” can be changed. Kaysen manages to subvert the stereotypes that exist concerning the Madwoman, but she does this at a cost. For Kaysen, her main coping mechanism is her sense of humour and sarcasm to describe her “madness”. However, what follows is that she loses a sense of authenticity, because she undermines herself. After all, by not recognising that emotions are inextricably linked to her experiences as a mental patient, her narrative becomes incomplete. Nevertheless, at the same time Kaysen's sarcastic representation of the “Madwoman” plays into the existing stereotypes, which shows that she recognises the absurdity of these stereotypes.

Kaysen's memoir, published in 1993, recounts the author's experiences in McLean's psychiatric hospital where she stayed for almost two years, although initially the intention was to stay for only a few weeks. In order to help her write her memoir she obtained her hospital file with the help of a lawyer. Several of these files have been added to the memoir in order to give the reader an insight in Kaysen’s psychiatric history and progress throughout the autobiographical novel.

The title of the book, *Girl, Interrupted*, may need some explanation, which Kaysen gives in the final chapter of her novel. She describes a visit to the Frick museum in New York where she sees a portrait by Vermeer she then realises she has seen before, called *Girl, Interrupted at her Music*. She explains how fitting the painting is to her experiences: “Interrupted at her music: as my life had been, interrupted in the music of being seventeen, as her life had been, snatched and fixed on canvas (..) What life can recover from that?” (167). Yet, as opposed to the girl in Vermeer's painting, who is stuck on the canvas forever, Kaysen
was able to move on from the temporary interruption of insanity.

The book opens with an explanation of the circumstances through which Kaysen ended up in McLean. She relates the suddenness of her admission to the hospital after a brief evaluation by a psychiatrist she did not even know. The psychiatrist's referral, which has been enclosed in the memoir, explains that the decision to refer Kaysen to the psychiatric hospital was based on four points:

1. The chaotic and unplanned life of the patient at present with progressive decompensation and reversal of sleep cycle.
2. Severe depression and hopelessness and suicidal ideas.
3. History of suicidal attempts.
4. No therapy and no plan at present. Immersion in fantasy, progressive withdrawal and isolation. (13)

According to another case file, Kaysen's stay in McLean was not the first time she was hospitalised. The file also mentions a stay in Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge in 1965, where she was taken after she had tried to commit suicide (37). Additionally, the data indicate that Kaysen had been diagnosed with Borderline Personality disorder at this time already. She was therefore not new to psychiatric problems.

The narrative through which Kaysen relates her story is an intimate, first person narrative which allows the reader an insight into the problems or “madness” she faces, but also into the workings of society and the system that diagnosed her. This is emphasised through her description of the other patients in the ward who, like her, are considered crazy. The description of Polly, another female patient, is a case in point. Polly has set herself on fire by using gasoline and has severe burns on her neck and cheeks. Yet, this desperate action gives Polly a certain status in McLean, because the girls admire her for what she did to herself. Susanna, for example, asks herself: “Who had the courage to burn herself” (17, italics
This surprising view is explained by Susanna when she says that scar tissue “is like a slipcover. It shields and disguises what's beneath. That's why we grow it, we have something to hide” (16). Susanna hence feels a sense of jealousy towards Polly, because her scars are so visible, whereas her own are inside herself, invisible for others to see. However, when the seemingly happy Polly finally breaks down, the patients realise the gravity of what Polly has done to herself. In her analysis of H.D.’s HERmione, Sarah Wood Anderson argues that the main character “finds herself struggling to manage the outward expression of an inward trauma” (37). For Polly, apparently the only way to express her inward trauma was to make her trauma visible from the outside by burning herself. Hence, Kaysen's portrayal of herself, Polly and other minor characters in the novel help to illustrate that “madness” can occur in anyone. The fact that many of these female patients, like Kaysen, have been leading a normal life before they became “insane” shows that anyone can go “mad”.

When *Girl, Interrupted* was published in 1993 the book was reviewed by several critics. As we will see, although individual opinions differed slightly, Susanna Kaysen generally received praise for her writing style, description of McLean and its patients and her use of humour despite the gravity of her subject. In *The Women's Review of Books*, Maso, for example, says that by writing *Girl, Interrupted*, Kaysen has performed “an act of both bravery and surrender” (7). In his review, Gary Percesepe also applauds Kaysen's portrayal of insanity by writing that “Raymond Carver died in 1988, but he might have had this book in mind when he said, of writing: 'The words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes.' Kaysen hits all the notes” (175-176). Susan Cheever of *The New York Times* describes how the memoir also accurately describes the mentality of the 1960s:

In the 1960's, when I applied to college, the really glamorous places, the
institutions where the most interesting girls went, were not the Ivy League's sister colleges, like Smith, Wellesley, Radcliffe and Mount Holyoke, but the institutions in another sort of Ivy League, places that also had tree-lined campuses with tennis courts and high tuitions -- Austen Riggs in Stockbridge, Mass., and McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass.

According to Cheever, admission to a psychiatric hospital such as McLean was no longer a way of ridding society of the “Madwoman”, as we have seen was the case with the “Madwoman in the Attic”, but by this time these institutions gave a person a certain status in society. However, it should not be denied that it is also possible that these women simply felt trapped in society and that these institutions were their safe havens.

In addition to the novel's acclaim, there were some critical comments on Kaysen's memoir as well. Even though Maso writes that “[t]he reader gets real insights into [Kaysen's] confusion and pain”, she questions her portrayal of the patients on the ward: “The 'lunatics' come off as lovable and zany and irreverent, if difficult-comprehensible, portable, ownable like pets, easy, like having a foster child in some faraway country” (8). The depiction of madness in the novel is also questioned by Christian Perring in Metapsychology, who says that “while [Kaysen] was [at McLean], she was clearly going through troubles, and yet the seriousness of them still seems to escape her.” Susan Cheever even said the novel was “a triumphantly funny story”, seemingly forgetting about the novel’s grave subject. Katherine Stanton from The Bookbag gives a possible reason for this response in her review, saying that “There’s suicides, yes, ‘crazy’ moments, yes, but it’s all described with such emotional detachment that these events have little or no effect on the reader.” Interestingly, the novel seems to be praised due to use its humour and emotional detachment concerning the description of madness, while other reviewers consider this to be the novel’s greatest weakness.
Maso, amongst others, questions, in my opinion justly, the superficiality of Kaysen’s memoir. She believes that “there is a parallel book here. One that is more brooding and complicated, less willing to please, less easy. Too painful maybe to write” (8). She ends her review with a very telling image from the novel, when she says that “Girl, Interrupted reads as if those nurses, now aspects of the trained psyche, are still coming in to make their checks, click, swish, keeping the writer from her illicit and dangerous task” (8). Hence, so Maso and Stanton believe, Girl, Interrupted is not a complete and honest account of Kaysen's mental state at the time and of her description of McLean. Instead, Maso argues that Kaysen was still influenced by something, perhaps her painful memories, when she wrote the book which prevents her from fully exploring all aspects of her period of “madness”.

Girl, Interrupted’s popularity shows that women’s madness was still a topic of interest in the 1990s. Yet, clearly the times have changed and the description and symptoms of the “Madwoman” have changed with it. However, despite the gap in time between Girl, Interrupted and the works that have been discussed previously, it is interesting to see that references to old ideas about “madness” are still present. For example, in the nurse's report of Kaysen's admission, Kaysen is described as having “outward signs of excess nervousness” (69). As has been discussed in Chapter Two concerning “The Yellow Wallpaper,” nervousness was considered one of the tell-tale signs of “madness” in women. Moreover, like the protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Kaysen admits she had a “problem with patterns” (40-41). When going back even further in theories about “Madwomen”, we even come across a reference to Plato. In her novel, Kaysen says that “[t]he hospital is the womb” (122). The depiction of the hospital as a womb is interesting because, as has been discussed, Plato amongst others argued that hysteria was caused by a moving psychological force which arises from the womb. Yet, of course, the hospital in the novel is supposed to be a place where
madness can be cured, not where it is born. Yet, when looking at Kaysen's description of the hospital this is not a wholly inaccurate description. After all, there are several patients who do not seem to get better, or even deteriorate, during their stay in McLean. Polly, who eventually commits suicide, exemplifies this. Therefore, one reason Kaysen has described the hospital in this way may be to show that a psychiatric hospital alone cannot cure insanity.

In addition to references to ideas about women’s madness, Kaysen's writing style also reflects her position as a “Madwoman”. Her memoir has been written in a non-chronological order, using short chapters generally consisting of no more than a few pages. Moreover, each of the chapters relate a single incident or thought-process of the author, thus giving the reader insight into Kaysen's confused state of mind at the time. This fragmented style can be explained by looking at Kaysen's diagnosis. As we learn early on in the novel, Kaysen has been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. One of the hallmarks of this disorder is described as “a pervasive pattern of instability of self-image, interpersonal relationships, and mood” (147). Hence, Kaysen's writing style seems to not only live up to the stereotype of the “Madwoman”, but also that of the woman writer in general. I will get back to this particular aspect later in this chapter.

First, it is important to look at another aspect of Kaysen's writing style: her use of humour and sarcasm despite the gravity of the topic she is discussing. An example of her use of sarcasm and humour can be found on page 48-49, where she describes an outing of patients and nurses to an ice cream parlor by saying that “The group had an atomic structure: a nucleus of nuts surrounded by darting, nervous nurse-electrons charged with our protection. Or with protecting the residents of Belmont from us.” This type of word choice occurs throughout the novel: the patients, including herself, are referred to as “lunatics”, or “bananas”, and the hospital is referred to as a “loony-bin” (45, 47, 101). I would like to argue that this use of sarcasm and humour has a clear function, because by using his type of language the memoir...
became less confrontational for Kaysen to write. Sarcasm and humour thus allow Kaysen to
distance herself from the “Madwoman” she was during her time at McLean. As Maso and
Stanton have written in their reviews of *Girl, Interrupted*, the consequence of this distance
between Kaysen as an author and her position as a patient of McLean is that there is little use
of emotion in her novel. At the same time it seems as if she is ridiculing her own position as
woman and mental patient by using these types of words to describe her life as a patient.
Essentially, Kaysen's writing style thus leads her to undermine her own authority as a woman,
woman writer and mental patient.

However, it must be recognised that Kaysen's use of humour and sarcasm could serve
another purpose as well. As mentioned, Kaysen clearly ridicules the position of herself and
the other female patients on the ward, but whereas this appears to undermine her authority as
a female author and mental patient, it could also mean that Kaysen recognises the absurdity of
the prevailing stereotypes of women's madness. After all, the words Kaysen uses to describe
women's madness, such as “nuts” and “lunatics”, do not necessarily explain Kaysen's
diagnosis of these women, but the way they were stigmatised by society. This would also
explain her description of the aforementioned trip to the ice-cream parlor. After all, as
Brontë's stock character Bertha has shown, “Madwomen” were expected to have lost control
of themselves and their behaviour. Kaysen's description of women's madness could, therefore,
be said to play into this and thus critique society's branding of these women.

In addition, Kaysen also criticises the inferior position of women in society. In one
particular passage, she focuses on how gender differences influence whether a person's
behaviour is accepted or not:

Many disorders, judging by the hospital population, were more commonly
diagnosed in women. Take, for example, ‘compulsive promiscuity’. How many
girls do you think a seventeen-year-old boy would have to screw to earn the
label “compulsively promiscuous”? Three? No, not enough. Six? Doubtful. Ten? That sounds more likely. Probably in the fifteen-to-twenty range, would be my guess – if they ever put that label on my boys, which I don't recall their doing. (118)

Even at this time, women were judged differently concerning “madness” and inappropriate behaviour than men. After all, as Freud wrote in his essay “Female Sexuality,” women's sexuality was often a source of neurosis. If women opposed to their inferior position, women were considered unfeminine and abnormal. Kaysen therefore shows that the way in which men and women are judged has not changed that much since Freud published his essay.

Kaysen also focuses on a particular male-female relationship: that of doctor (or therapist) and patient. For example, on page 116 she describes how her male therapist at McLean said to her “You want to sleep with me.” Clearly, this therapist's view shows a striking resemblance to Sigmund Freud's discussion of Dora, whose mental instability, so Freud believed, was caused by sexual desire. By making this sexual reference, the therapist proves that he does not take Kaysen's symptoms seriously. This inferior position of women to that of men, particularly in the relationship between the male doctor versus the female patient, is also discussed concerning the doctor who referred Kaysen to McLean. Although she has never seen this man before, she believes him when he says he has interviewed her for three hours, while she is adamant it was much shorter: “We can't both be right…But it turns out I'm wrong… I said I was in his office before nine, but I seem to have been wrong about that, too” (60). Although initially she is sure she is right, the status of the psychiatrist as a male doctor convinces her to believe him, thus emphasising the notion of the dominant male versus the inferior female. This doctor-patient relationship has also been discussed by Michel Foucault in his book *Madness and Civilization* in which he asserts that “[i]n the patient’s eyes, the doctor becomes a thaumaturge; the authority he has borrowed from order, morality, and the
family now seems to derive from himself; it is because he is a doctor that he is believed to possess these powers” (275). On the other hand, however, the use of the word “seem” in the final sentence of Susanna’s quotation is interesting, because it raises the question whether she takes the psychiatrist's opinion seriously. An alternate reading could therefore indicate that Susanna doubts that the psychiatrist’s assertions are correct, which would mean she questions the doctor's domination over her and therefore Foucault’s theory on the doctor-patient relationship. In addition, this means she puts into question men’s domination over women. Thus, by using humour, Kaysen subtly critiques the inferior position of women in society.

The question still remains why *Girl, Interrupted*, as a woman writer’s memoir, was so well-received. I would like to argue that the fact that Kaysen writes in a non-emotional manner proves that she is actually “sane” and thus it was easier for critics to accept her memoir. After all, the hallmark of women's madness has been hysteria throughout history and the fact that Kaysen is able to describe her situation with such clarity and without any sign of emotional distress emphasises her sanity. Hence, to the reader Kaysen comes across as a mentally healthy person, instead of a “Madwoman”. However, replacing emotion with sarcasm and humour does have its consequences. After all, although the topic she writes about is very personal, her use of sarcasm and humour create such a distance between the author and her experiences that it lacks the signs of emotions belonging to such a personal memoir. At the same time her use of humour shows how Kaysen manages to break away from the “Madwoman” taboo by indicating her awareness of stereotypes concerning the “Madwoman”. Although the lack of emotion in the memoir initially seems an indication of how she undermines her own authority as a writer, her use of humour and sarcasm actually show how society is “mad” for creating stereotypes of the “Madwoman”.

Nevertheless, although her writing style makes her seem “sane”, Kaysen does not seem to get an insight into the causes and consequences of her “madness”. It is significant that
Kaysen is not released from the hospital because she is considered to have “healed”, but because she has received a marriage proposal. Hence, even though she criticises women’s position in society and blames her “madness” on the fact that women are dominated by men, she allows herself to go back into the patriarchal society she blames for her “madness” in order to live up to society’s expectations. At the same, Kaysen's lack of insight into her “madness” means that she does not seem to take her symptoms seriously. She represents women's madness as trivial and as a phase women simply go through. This is emphasised by her use of humour to describe situation at the hospital. For example, after a patient has run away, is found by the hospital staff and wraps all the furniture in toilet paper Kaysen that they “had a good summer, and Lisa told us lots of stories about what she'd done those three days she was free” (24). Thus, she writes about the hospital and “madness” in a very light-hearted way, which makes it seem as if she does not take women's madness seriously.

To conclude, Girl, Interrupted's fragmented style is due to Kaysen's experiences as a woman and female mental patient in the 1960s society. Although the novel appears to reaffirm the notion of women as inferior beings who are dominated by the presence and opinions of the men in their lives by making the male characters the dominant figures throughout text, Kaysen has challenged these notions through the use of humour and by questioning the sanity of society through her sarcastic tone. One the one hand this sarcasm serves as a way of distancing herself from her experiences as a mental patient, but by doing this she also undermines her own authority as a woman writer and diagnosed “Madwoman”. On the other hand, however, the use of sarcasm can be taken as a sign of rebellion against the prevailing stereotyping of women's madness and as a sign that Kaysen is actually the “sane” one. By criti- cising the workings of society she therefore shows how perhaps not she, but society, is the “Madwoman”.

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Chapter Four: Handle with Care: Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Struggle with Depression in *Prozac Nation*

One year after Susanna Kaysen published *Girl, Interrupted* in 1993, Elizabeth Wurtzel published her memoir *Prozac Nation*. This memoir was the first work that she published and it relates her experiences with depression from the time she was eleven until she turned twenty-five. As opposed to Kaysen's memoir, *Prozac Nation* was not reviewed well by critics. I will argue that this is because, as opposed to Kaysen, Wurtzel uses a lot of emotion in her writing and expresses her feelings throughout her memoir. Moreover, her writing is considered narcissistic, because she writes in the first person. In addition, by admitting to her “madness”, Wurtzel appears to affirm stereotypes about the “Madwoman”, which allowed critics to deem her a Modern “Madwoman”.

Like *Girl, Interrupted, Prozac Nation* also attracted the media's attention and several reviews of Wurtzel's book were published. Interestingly, the majority of the reviews are critical of Wurtzel's writing style and the way she describes her depression. In the *Kirkus Reviews*, Wurtzel is described as “want[ing] it both ways: to be at once the Head Loony and a representative voice. But her nihilism offers nothing new.” In addition, they feel that Wurtzel takes “narcissistic pride” in relating her story in details concerning her promiscuity, drug use and depression.

Erica L. Werner from *The Harvard Crimson* even goes as far as to ask why Elizabeth “was allowed to write such crap” in the first place. She continues her critical commentary by saying that the tone of Wurtzel's novel consists of “self-indulgent whining.” At the same time Werner feels that all the partying, drugs and alcohol “[make] depression look pretty good. Sure, the author was a miserable wreck, but she *really lived.*” Therefore, Werner feels that Wurtzel idealises her depression. Additionally, she blames Wurtzel for viewing “everything
through the prism of her personal hell, so everything ends up being about her, including a lot of things that shouldn't be.” In the Chicago Review, Dawn Marlan is slightly more positive about the novel. She argues that Wurtzel “does have her moments, the best of which concern her mother. Here tenderness for another surfaces, resulting in more forceful, fluid writing” (96). However, she also agrees that Prozac Nation is fundamentally compromised by Wurtzel's “inflated and under-argued assumption that her story immediately explains the stories of others” (94).

It is interesting to see how the reviews focus on the amount of detail of Wurtzel’s out of control behaviour in the novel: instead of seeing Wurtzel’s writing as descriptive, the reviewers consider her writing to be narcissistic. Equally surprising is Werner's claim that Wurtzel focuses on herself, which could be considered a logical consequence. After all, Prozac Nation is a memoir and thus relates the life experiences of its author. Reviews like that of Erica L. Werner show a clear connection to Simone de Beauvoir’s explanation of woman’s immanence and man’s transcendence. By commenting that Wurtzel’s memoir is too much about herself, Werner forces Wurtzel back from transcendence to immanence. After all, by writing about her experiences so openly, Wurtzel has changed herself from object into subject. However, because she is being criticised for making this transition, she is once again positioned as object, instead of sovereign figure and author.

Despite the differences in reception, both memoirs do show many similarities. For example, like Girl, Interrupted, Wurtzel's memoir relates her experiences with mental issues and depression. Moreover, both memoirs are written in a non-chronological, fragmented style. For Prozac Nation, this fragmentation is even more visible to the reader, because several of Wurtzel's memories are written in italics throughout her memoir. As with Girl, Interrupted, Wurtzel's style of writing can be explained by her mental state. Her memoir explains how she has been in a state of depression since she was eleven years old and has used alcohol, drugs
and painkillers to numb herself. These symptoms of her “madness” have created a fragmented, choppy writing style that reflects Wurtzel's conflicted state of mind. For example, when she is feeling particularly depressed she says: “Story of my life: I am so self-destructive, I turn solutions into problems. Everything I touch, I ruin. I'm Midas in reverse” (237). These short, repetitive sentences emphasise her unstable mood. Another example can be found on page 61, when, as a young girl, Wurtzel tries to explain her position in the world to a friend:

That's me, I say to Paris. I'm the girl who is lost in space. The girl who is disappearing always, forever fading away and receding farther and farther into the background. Just like the Cheshire cat, someday I will suddenly leave, but the artificial warmth of my smile...will remain behind as an ironic remnant.

Wurtzel, therefore, has trouble establishing herself as a free, independent person. As she says herself, she is lost in the world. She does not want to deal with herself anymore and yet, of course, she is stuck with herself. Hence, Wurtzel's choppy, fragmented style of writing reflects her hopelessness and the lack of control she feels she has over her position in the world.

The question remains, however, why *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation* were received so differently. I will argue that Wurtzel's novel was received so negatively, because she uses very descriptive language to show the desperation of her situation. Unlike Kaysen's memoir, Wurtzel's memoir is an emotional story that has a very dramatic tone. An example of this is when she talks about how desperate she is and says: “I don't want anymore of life's vicissitudes, I don't want anymore of this try, try again stuff. I just want out. I've had it. I'm so tired. I am twenty and I am already exhausted” (293). These short, choppy sentences contribute to the sense of exasperation Wurtzel describes. Whereas Kaysen uses sarcasm to create a distance between her experiences and herself, Wurtzel gives very detailed information about how she felt and she writes in a dramatic tone. Thus, in essence, the difference in writing style between Kaysen and Wurtzel is that whereas Kaysen's writing contains elements
of rational reflection, Wurtzel's memoir uses a lot of drama. The fact that Wurtzel's memoir was criticised for being so much about herself could therefore be taken as a sign that women are still classed as neurotic and emotional.

At the same time, it is remarkable how clearly Wurtzel manages to describe her mental state. For instance, when Wurtzel describes a childhood memory she says:

I remember being in a panic at school when I realized that I could not even fake being the old Lizzy anymore. I had, indeed, metamorphosed into this nihilistic, unhappy girl. Just like Gregor Samsa waking up to find he'd become a six-foot-long roach, only in my case, I had invented the monster and now it was overtaking me. This is what I'd come to (46)

This quotation is what seems to have been the beginning of Wurtzel's descent into “madness”. She vividly describes how there is more to her “madness” than changing moods and emotional outbursts: “madness” overtook her entire being. As a grown-up Wurtzel gets even more insight in her “madness” and the consequences it has on her life. She claims that

“Depression gave me more than just a brooding introspection. It gave me humor, it gave me a certain what-a-fuck-up-I-am schtik to play with when the worst was over. I couldn't kid myself and think that anyone enjoyed my tears and hysteria (...) but the side effects, the by-products of depression seemed to keep me going. I had developed a persona that could be extremely melodramatic and entertaining. It had, at times, all the selling points of madness, all the aspects of performance art (326)

Hence, Wurtzel is able to define her “madness” and its consequences for herself and her social position. At the same time, she knows her insanity well-enough to develop a coping strategy for herself.

In addition, Wurtzel's description of her “madness” also influences how she perceives

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her body. Due to her drug use and drinking she lacks appetite. However, she claims: “I stopped noticing that I often forgot about eating. When my mother was shocked by how skinny I’d gotten, I was shocked to find out this was the case” (162). Her depression therefore has not only made her out of touch with her mind, but also with her body. The consequence of her low self-image is that she begins to use her body as a tool of power. Although she cannot control her parents, she can control her mind by using drugs and alcohol and her body by cutting herself. She explains this by saying: “I wanted to know that if need be, if the desperation got so terribly bad, I could inflict harm on my body. And I could. Knowing this gave me a sense of peace and power, so I started cutting up my legs all the time” (47). This is equally true concerning her promiscuity, as she decides with whom she sleeps, which she considers to be a source of power. Similar to Polly in *Girl, Interrupted*, who burned herself to show others her inward scars, Wurtzel’s behaviour could be considered outward expressions of inward trauma as well. After all, she uses her body as a coping mechanism, so that she does not have to think about the “madness” she feels inside. Although, initially using one's body as a coping mechanism might seem a symptom of “madness”, I would like to argue that by using her body as a *tool*, she actually subverts stereotypes of the “Madwoman”. After all, women's madness has previously been defined by the fact that women were controlled by their bodies, an example of which is Plato's assertion that hysteria was caused by the uterus. By using her body to benefit herself, Wurtzel has taken back control over her own body and thus she moves away from the dominant stereotypes of the “Madwoman”.

Similar to the way Wurtzel uses her body as a way to control her condition, she also uses writing as a method of control. Initially, writing is used as a way out of her “madness” and it is something that appears to keep her from breaking down completely. She says about herself: “I wrote like crazy, at least two or three reported pieces a week, sometimes more. I wrote like my life depended on it, which it kind of did” (155). For Wurtzel, writing is like a
lifeline that connects her to the normal everyday life she feels so alienated from. At the same time she feels connected to the well-known examples of how creativity and “madness” seem to be linked, such as appeared to be the case with Sylvia Plath and Wurtzel wonders whether she “might not be one of those people like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath who are just better off dead… Perhaps I, too, will die young and sad, a corpse with her head in the oven” (13). Thus, she identifies with these women so completely that she feels that her creativity could actually be part of her insanity, instead of a way out of it.

Still, as opposed to Susanna Kaysen, Elizabeth Wurtzel seems to “grow” throughout her memoir. For example, when she has started taking anti-depressants she explains that “[b]y that time, [she] had the tools with which to manage [her] emotions more efficiently” (247). She also realises that her “madness” is the result of the environment she grew up in and this insight proves to be very important for her healing process. However, unlike Kaysen, Wurtzel does not try to make it appear as if her story has a happy ending: she described how anti-depressants help decrease her “madness,” but that the pills do not cure it. Yet, Wurtzel takes her “madness” very seriously. For instance, at some point she says:

> In a strange way, I had fallen in love with my depression. Dr. Sterling was right about that. I loved it because I thought it was all I had. I thought depression was the part of my character that made me worthwhile. I thought so little of myself, felt that I had such scant offerings to give to the world, that the one thing that justified my existence at all was my agony. (99)

By writing so much about herself, and in the first person, her writing has been mistaken for narcissism. However, while Wurtzel emphasises her emotional state by using dramatic language, the representation of her “madness” is a raw and emotional account of her insight into her mental state and identity and the consequent growth she experiences.

Unfortunately for Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* proves that modern society still is
not ready to accept this type of women's memoir writing. Her honest, descriptive account of her experiences is, in my opinion, mistaken for narcissism. Because Wurtzel behaves in ways that society deems unfeminine or even monstrous, she is not taken seriously as a female author. Moreover, the fact that Wurtzel readily admits that she is “mad” has been considered a sign of “narcissistic pride” by critics. Essentially, Wurtzel embodies the dichotomy of women as either “Angel” or “Monster” that is mentioned by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Elizabeth is expected to be an “Angel”, that is, to receive good grades, go to university and to behave properly. At the same time the relationship with her parents emphasise her inferiority. The figure of the “Angel” strips Elizabeth from her character and freedom and as she moves away from that she falls into a depression that leads her to the modernised figure of the female “Monster” by being promiscuous, using drugs and drinking excessively. Surprisingly, as has been discussed above, this is exactly what the critics comment on. Although the position of women in society appears to have changed, Wurtzel is still criticised exactly because she writes about herself and this is considered “narcissistic” and “whining”. As a result, it seems that society is still not ready for a woman who writes about herself and her emotions. However, the description of her behaviour is essential for the reader, because it is what leads her to something that is even beyond the embodiment of a “monster”: Elizabeth is given the diagnosis of modern “Madwomen” by society and is yet again underappreciated because she expresses herself.
Conclusion

This thesis has set out to explore the position of the “Madwoman” in late 20th century memoirs written by the woman writers Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel. Because this topic has not been given the attention it deserves in recent years, it is unclear if, and how, the figure of the “Madwoman” is used in contemporary literature. By focusing on the most important theories concerning women, the position of women and women’s madness in history as well as in literature, this thesis has established the inferior position of women in the patriarchal society of the 19th and mid-20th century and the position of the “Madwoman” as outcast. Moreover, this thesis adds to previous studies on the “Madwoman” by putting this figure into a modern perspective.

As discussed in the Introduction, my hypothesis was that women writers who publish their memoir or autobiography are still undervalued, because women’s autobiographies and memoirs are relatively new as a field of academic interest. As a result, I expected that women who wrote about their mental problems would be stereotyped as “Madwomen”, because mental illness and the “Madwoman” have been interconnected for so long.

As the discussion of the different characters in Girl, Interrupted in Chapter Three has demonstrated, “madness” can occur in anyone. Yet, Susanna shows that even in the 20th century symptoms of hysteria are still present in women, such as the “nervousness”, feeling out of touch with society and “problems with patterns” she mentions, which we have also seen in the descriptions of “madness” by authors such as Sylvia Plath and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Moreover, Kaysen successfully challenges the notion of female inferiority in relation to her “madness”. She explains how women are considered inferior to men, as has also been asserted by Freud, but she questions the reasoning behind these judgements by exploring, for
example, how promiscuity is used to label only women, and never men. As a result, she also questions her “madness” and whether perhaps it is not her, but society, who is really “mad”.

As the discussion of the reviews in Chapter Three has demonstrated, Kaysen’s memoir has been well-received. However, it is noteworthy that the majority of the reviews focus on her use of humour and as a result the reviewers do not seem to notice that this humour and sarcasm has a function: it made the memoir less confrontational for Kaysen to write. By covering up her emotions, Kaysen, however, reaffirms the notion that women who write about their “madness” are not accepted and should hide their true feelings. However, it is possible that her use of sarcasm is meant to point out the absurdity of society’s stereotyping of the “Madwoman”, which actually emphasises Kaysen's sanity. Nevertheless, because Kaysen does not explore the true reasons behind her “madness” she does not seem to heal. Instead, it appears that by saying “yes” to the marriage proposal, she simply tries to escape from her “madness”, instead of facing it.

As opposed to Girl, Interrupted, Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Prozac Nation was not given much praise by reviewers. Instead, they criticised her for being “narcissistic” and writing too much, and too openly, about her experiences. Of course, it is remarkable that a memoir is criticised for being too much about the author and comments like these show the relevance of Simone de Beauvoir’s theory on women’s immanence in today’s society: women are still expected to be the object, and not the subject, of attention.

As with Kaysen’s novel, Wurtzel's state of mind is reflected in her fragmented writing. In addition, she uses writing as a tool of control as well. Although she wants to write her way out of her “madness”, she finds she identifies with women writers like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath so completely that she realises that her love for writing could actually be part of her insanity, instead of a way out of it. Nevertheless, as opposed to Kaysen, Wurtzel seems to get a better insight into her “madness” throughout her memoir and the role society played in
this. In addition, Wurtzel’s representation of women’s madness appears to be more genuine than Kaysen’s. Whereas Kaysen tries to diminish the consequences of her “madness”, Wurtzel’s dramatic tone puts emphasis on the seriousness of her condition.

I must, however, emphasise that this is a small-scale study and therefore my conclusions can only be drawn from this thesis’ two primary sources. This is equally true for this thesis’ background section, which explores several theories on women, women writers and “madness”, but, of course, many more theories have been developed on these subjects. For future research a larger scale study would therefore be beneficial to give even more insight into the current status of the “Madwoman”.

However, to conclude this current research, the reception of these women writers’ memoirs shows that society has not progressed as much as one would like to believe. Although Kaysen's humorous and relatively emotionless account of her “insanity” has been widely praised, Wurtzel's memoir has been criticised for showing too much emotion and being too much about her. Therefore, women writers are only accepted if they use their “madness” as entertainment. Writing does, however, seem to have a function for these women. Buss, for example, compared women’s memoir writing to Freud’s “talking cure”: a therapeutic process that reshapes the self through language (49). This shows that women like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf did help to inspire women to write about their own lives as a form of therapy. This also seems to be the reason why women’s madness and writing are so often linked: writing offers women an outlet, even though, as Simone de Beauvoir has argued, women have trouble positioning themselves as writers due to their inferiority complex. However, it seems that the stories of women like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf have helped women writers like Susanna Kaysen and Elizabeth Wurtzel to look at society’s role in the judgement of women, women writers and “madness”, allowing them to view their “madness” as a consequence of patriarchal society, instead of being women’s fault. Yet, unfortunately, even
though contemporary writers attempt to change the stereotypes of the “Madwoman”, they are still beholden to the stereotypes that prevailed throughout the 19th and 20th century and it appears that there still is a long way to go before the stereotypical “Madwoman” will be a figure of the past.
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