Resolving the madwoman: unlocking the narrative attic by writing the maternal journey

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Abstract

The ‘madwoman in the attic’ became many a twentieth-century writer’s muse. Texts such as Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) responded to a growing sympathy for the madness-as-rebellion metaphor. In recent times, however, many American feminist theorists (Chesler 2005; Donaldson 2002; Caminero-Santangelo 1998 et al.) have begun to question the non-rational as a resistance strategy.

Building on such criticism, this exegesis suggests both a new reading of these texts and a new writing of the madwoman in the attic. Employing Maureen Murdock’s model of the heroine’s journey, the aforementioned narratives are revealed as cutting their protagonists’ archetypal journey in half, trapping the madwoman in the darkness of descent. In turn, the twentieth-century madwoman can be seen as, what I term, an ‘eternal madwoman’: a liminal person who is prevented, by a ruptured narrative structure, from achieving any real personal or political efficacy.

Central to the arguments made in the exegesis is the importance of reuniting the eternal madwoman’s descent with the narrative possibility of ascent. In this way, the study aims to build on the research of Marta Caminero-Santangelo, who poses the most important question of current feminist debate: how can the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts open an imaginative space for women to escape madness by envisioning themselves as agents?

Together, the critical and creative components of this project explore the possibility that the intersection between recent maternal scholarship and feminist myth criticism identifies maternal agency as a possible key to the madwoman’s attic and enables us to construct what I call the ‘maternal journey’. This framework aims to enable writers to transform the eternal madwoman from oppressed victim of the patriarchal hegemony to self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subject.
Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.

—G.K. Chesterton
Introduction

In September 2010 I stood in the room in which Charlotte Brontë died and reflected on my PhD research. I had originally wanted to visit the Brontë museum to research Bertha Mason, the original madwoman in the attic. Although other writers, such as Jean Rhys, have already written novels exploring the dark figure's context and history, I was interested in writing a modern-day interpretation of a woman gone mad. What I shared with Rhys, though, was a discomfort in the way in which Bertha was silenced and portrayed in a negative light, and in turn a contention with choices that Brontë had made as a writer. The disagreement I felt before visiting the museum stemmed from personal experience with madness – growing up with parents who worked as nurses at Mont Park Psychiatric Hospital, a notorious institution in Victoria, Australia. Thus, stories of madness permeated my childhood. With each personal experience and with each story I was told, I collected an understanding of the complexity and gravity of such a chaotic existence.

On the morning of my visit to the Brontë Museum, I had sat with collections manager Ann Dinsdale in a narrow room, sifting through stalagmites of papers and glass boxes of books. I had taken a magnifying glass to the tiny pages on which Charlotte would write when paper was scarce, and I had worn white gloves to open creased letters she wrote to family and friends. I read Charlotte’s author notes on Rochester’s first wife in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and traced many of the Creole character’s attributes back to books the writer was given in school. What I discovered on my visit to the museum was an immense empathy for Charlotte and an interest in the narrative structure of the two women’s lives.

During that intimate research I began to realise that the lives of Bertha and Charlotte were not dissimilar. Although the two women have previously been linked as author and doppelganger, in contrast, I saw similarities between their story structures. And what I realised saddened me. Both women’s lives seemed prematurely cut short. Bertha, torn from her homeland and locked in an attic, plunges to her death after burning Thornfield to the
ground; and Charlotte, on the brink of becoming a mother and soon after experiencing romantic love, dies at the age of thirty-eight. Walking from Charlotte’s bedroom I was struck by the epitaph she wrote for Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (1853): “The orb of your life is not to be rounded; for you the crescent-phase must suffice.”

For days after I left the museum I was haunted by the idea of a crescent-shaped life; a life half lived, a life prevented from experiencing so many of its usual milestones. As a woman in my thirties, I was about to marry and had begun to think about having children. The thought of having my life cut short before being able to experience those events hit a creative and intellectual nerve. As a result, I suddenly felt drawn to write a narrative to counteract this sudden story closure, to represent creatively the ways in which the personal felt political.²

The practice of creative writing has always been my way of representing and comprehending the world around me. In this way, the figures of Charlotte and Bertha started to re-imagine themselves in more contemporary forms.

I recalled women I had known, like my grandmother, women I had been told about, like my great-grandmother, and women who I had read about in fiction and non-fiction, who had all been unable to experience any real long-lasting love (whether for self or for others) or happiness. They may not have all died young, but at a young enough age they had all become trapped by sadness, madness or despair – in an emotional attic, if you will – and never seemed to be able to move beyond this stasis.

I started to think of this captured woman as a kind of madwoman in the attic. The madwoman’s identity thus began to shift from how she had historically been considered to something new and more prevalent.

**Who was the madwoman in the attic?**

Over the past 150 years, theoretical, fictional and biographical discourse, in all its multiplicity, has explored the concept of women and madness. From Sigmund Freud’s hysteria to Phyllis Chesler’s feminist approach to mental illness, intellectual commentary has repositioned itself from viewing women as synonymous with madness to paying particular attention to the gender biases in psychiatric practice. From Charlotte Brontë’s madwoman in the attic to Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) definitions and depictions of madness have also woven their way through our artistic interpretations of insanity. Straitjacketed by expectations and, often, by more tangible restraints, the character of the ‘madwoman’ has
been an enormously compelling image of both thwarted feminine potential and society’s oppressive assumptions.

The moguls of feminist criticism on literary madness, as Elaine Showalter calls them, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, argued in their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) that the madwoman is an important figure of feminist rebellion. They were the first to publish a diverse commentary on ‘mad intertextuality’ and, importantly, to use the phrase ‘madwoman in the attic’. Thanks to Gilbert and Gubar, the madwoman character has become an enormously compelling image of feminist disobedience and narrative subversion.

**Madwoman as heroine’s doppelganger**

In the nineteenth century, many writers chose to create a ‘dark version’ of their heroine. The motif of the double or doppelganger manifested itself abundantly in Gothic literature (*Frankenstein*, 1818; *Wilson Wilson*, 1839) and mystery stories (*Jekyll and Hyde*, 1886; *Despair*, 1936) where repressed fantasies asserted themselves with particular vengeance. The novelist, who consciously or unconsciously exploited psychological doubles, either juxtaposed or related two characters: the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalising the free, uninhibited, often criminal self. We see this inner duality externalised in Charlotte Brontë’s use of Bertha Mason as Jane’s double in *Jane Eyre*.

Part of what influenced this practice was the binary with which nineteenth-century women writers were faced: women were depicted in male writing as either angels or monsters. Confronted with such images, their writings reveal a prevalence of submissive heroines who characterise acceptable behaviour and madwomen who represent the marginalisation of rebellious femininity as insanity.

**Madwoman as author’s double**

In the preface to their book, Gilbert and Gubar explain that their study began with a course on literature by women, which they had taught together at Indiana University in 1974. During that course, as they read the writings of women such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, they were surprised by recurring patterns of imprisonment, claustrophobia and narcissism.

While Gilbert and Gubar illustrate the enormous variety in female literature, they also emphasise an underlying distinctiveness, unity and coherence in the vision and imagination of women writers of the nineteenth century. They identify a number of common themes
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– including starvation, doubles, silence, rage, incest, survival, birth and rebirth – but one of the key themes is literal and figurative confinement. They believe that, trapped within a male-dominated society, the writers struggled with an internal rage against their confinement and with a complexity of anxieties they inherited as a result of their confinement. They dealt with these tensions by creating a metaphor, a double: the ‘madwoman in the attic’. Gilbert and Gubar started their research with the most famous of these – Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* – because they felt that Brontë provided them with a ‘paradigm of many distinctively female anxieties and abilities’.

Even though *Jane Eyre* occupies a central position in their study, Gilbert and Gubar set out to explore the presence of these anxieties and abilities in the work of nineteenth-century, mostly British, female writers, including Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë and George Eliot. The only American writer who is explored extensively is Emily Dickinson, a woman whose life and career were dramatic embodiments of the madwoman in the attic. Studied together, these writers offer an insight into the struggles they underwent and the pressures to which they were subjected in order to determine their identities as writers.

**Madwoman as heroine**

The nineteenth-century madwoman in the attic was therefore a peripheral figure: the protagonist’s and author’s double. Chapter 1 of this exegesis explores and defines the role of the twentieth-century madwoman. Just as the madwoman has historically been employed by writers and interpreted by literary theorists as a powerful feminist motif of rebellion and rage, so too have writers such as Sylvia Plath (*The Bell Jar*, 1963), Jean Rhys (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966) and Margaret Atwood (*Surfacing*, 1972) fabricated with their narrative form a madwoman to subvert cultural conventions of romance. The madwoman character, still a metaphor for feminist disobedience and narrative subversion, moved from object to subject and from peripheral figure to protagonist.

The three texts are presented as using madness to rebel against both the ideology which affirms the domestic destination of women and the narrative structure which enforces the belief that home should be the very centre of a woman’s world. The heroines created by twentieth-century writers in this way subvert the closure enforced by the dominant discourse in Victorian novels.
The narrative role of the madwoman in the attic across the two centuries can therefore be illustrated as follows:

The nineteenth-century peripheral figure:
madwoman as protagonist’s and author’s double

The twentieth-century heroine:
madwoman as rebel

Yet, Chapter 1 also explores how using this motif of madness as an effective form of rebellion has been called into question. Many American feminist theorists (Baym 1984; Caminero-Santangelo 1998; Donaldson 2002; Chesler 2005) argue against the madness-as-resistance metaphor. Rather than rallying against societal assumptions of and constraints on women, they believe madwomen possess and enact little personal or political efficacy.

Chapter 2 explores the madwoman-as-rebel’s narrative structure and the ways in which the resulting plot might support this argument against the use of madness as effective rebellion. Since, even though the texts using the madwoman-as-rebel trope yield powerful revisions of social order, they are still ‘built upon foundations of traditional story or discourse’ Maureen Murdock’s ‘heroine’s journey’ is used as a method for new readings of The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea and Surfacing. This narrative structure of Murdock’s model is, in turn, the theoretical framework for the exegesis.

Taking issue with a prominent strand of current feminist literary criticism, this exegesis identifies a counter-narrative that rejects madness as a symbolic resolution. To achieve this, Chapter 3 utilises the concept of Jung’s shadow archetype and the theory of liminality to explore where and why the female protagonist descends into madness and is held captive until the story’s end. From this analysis I determine the reasons why the madwoman becomes trapped and, in turn, from a creative writing perspective, determine the character development that is required for her to be released from her narrative captivity. This research is in turn directed at enabling discussion upon issues such as those surveyed by Caminero-Santangelo, on how fiction about madness duplicates through its structure the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first place.
Resolving the madwoman

Caminero-Santangelo argues that the central question of feminist debate is, ‘How can the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts contribute to the transformation of gender ideologies?’ She argues for feminist practice that improves the lives of real women:

Instead of privileging the retreat into madness, then, let us privilege forms of agency, and of active transformation in all its forms, which women engage in. And, in doing so, let us open an imaginative space for women to be able to escape from madness by envisioning themselves as agents.

Chapter 4 explores how the practice of creative writing might work towards resolving the madwoman discussed by Caminero-Santangelo, and represents the possible narrative journey of this twenty-first-century madwoman. Ultimately, I apply my research to creative writing practice; I employ a narrative model to construct a novel that can be used by other writers who are concerned by female characters left in a hopeless situation. As such, I propose that using myth criticism to read and write about female madness provides a new and dynamic understanding of madness in narrative. In this way I explore narrative structure in an effort to, as Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper suggest in Research Methods in Creative Writing (2013), ‘not only provide insights into writing practice but also to illuminate how creative writing itself can provide new knowledge’ about female madness.

Chapter 5 represents this theoretical approach in creative practice and provides an example of how the framework created in Chapter 4 can be applied to a work of fiction. This novel is itself a representation of a framework that can enable writers to transform their protagonists from oppressed victims of the patriarchal hegemony to self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subjects.

PhD research questions

Therefore, the questions this exegesis seeks to answer are the following:

Primary
How might a writer symbolically resolve the madwoman character in a fictional text?
Introduction

Secondary
— What is the current narrative structure of the twentieth-century madwoman?
— Who is the twentieth-century madwoman?
— How has she remained trapped in the narrative attic?
— How might one write her release?
— How might one write the continuation of her story?
— Who is the twenty-first-century madwoman?
— How does the new framework transform gender ideologies?

Definitions of madness and madwomen

In this exegesis I use Kate Zambreno’s definition of madness from her study *Heroines* (2013): a ‘female protagonist’s alienation, a breakdown that is about the confinement, or even death, of the self’.

The term madwoman thus relinquishes conventional notions of mental illness, and the attic represents more than an image of women's metaphorical confinement. The madwoman in the attic embodies a female protagonist whose narrative has been trapped by despair, whose story ends without any prospect for love and happiness.

The madwoman in the attic, for the purpose of this argument, at once acknowledges and transcends the aforementioned literary history. She is not a peripheral figure, a metaphor, or a heroine’s double. She is, in fact, the heroine herself. Yet, she is not only the heroine of her story, she is the protagonist of a particular story structure. This study views the madwoman as, what Nina Baym calls, ‘a woman’, the ‘female subject’.

A structuralist approach to reading and writing

By using Murdock’s heroine’s journey, this exegesis utilises a structuralist approach to determine how twentieth-century feminist writers have told the madwoman’s story, and then how a writer in the twenty-first century could construct a counter-narrative. Robert Scholes in his seminal *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (1974) explains that structuralism is ‘the perception of order or structure where only undifferentiated phenomena had seemed to exist before’. Therefore, I would like to suggest that, rather than impose a structure on the novels analysed in this exegesis, I will simply uncover one structure that has been there all along. Analysing structure also allows me to contribute further to work undertaken in feminist narratology, maternal research and myth criticism, and to construct a new plot framework
Resolving the madwoman for creative writing practice. Thus, the investigation of women’s narratives in this way leads to the discovery not only of neglected modes of narration, but also of new types of plot.16

Yet, it should be noted that this type of approach has endured much judgment. The main criticisms of structuralism and myth criticism to which deconstructionists subscribe stem from a belief the approaches are reductionist in nature,17 and that to think of a work as simply a piece of a literary system diminishes the uniqueness, even the creative genius, of individual works of literature. Specifically, the criticisms of structuralism and myth criticism are that they lack a concern for meaning or content,18 treat a text as self-contained and thus detached from context,19 and fail at the level of the individual text.20

These criticisms created an evolution in narratological criticism, from text-based investigations subject to formalist limitations to a ‘more valid and fuller investigation that takes into account contexts and readers’.21 Although it is recognised that many critics, such as Dan Shen, believe that the decontextualised formal investigation of generic structures has been and should be abandoned, and that narratologists should always take into account the contexts surrounding the work,22 this exegesis also acknowledges that there are often limitations to the number of contexts that can be considered in any one study. Therefore, the exegesis takes into account feminist effects on structure, all the while acknowledging that, due to the constraints of the exegesis, this could be perceived as a somewhat limited approach.

In general, the approach being taken is a similar approach to that taken by structuralists when reading a text or group of texts: ‘we give up our general sense of all observable information in exchange for a heightened sense of some specific items’,23 emphasising some features at the expense of others.24 I argue that, for the purpose of this exegesis, this method provides us with greater conceptual power and that what is lost in mass is gained in energy.25 It is believed that this selective approach will best generate the energy required to release, through writing, the madwoman from her narrative captivity.

Overall, I argue for a new optimism: a counter-narrative that transforms, even transmogrifies, a modern-day imagining of Bertha from an oppressed and marginalised victim of the patriarchal hegemony into a self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subject. Simply put, I believe that we should have the want and willingness to create a narrative structure that fights against the previous literary resignation. I believe that this kind of structure is what is missing in current and twentieth-century feminist writing in which the female protagonist remains trapped in madness. Thus, the ultimate objective of this exegesis is to translate theoretical discourse into a practical framework for writers who believe the aforementioned crescent-shaped life should not suffice.
Introduction

1 Rebecca Fraser applies this quote to Charlotte Brontë’s life in her biography *Charlotte Brontë* (London: Vintage, 1988), 483.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 89.

7 Ibid., 17.

8 Ibid., xiii.


11 Ibid., 181.


13 Kate Zambreno, *Heroines* (California: Semiotext(e), 2012), 78.


18 Ibid., 11.


20 Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, 175.


22 Ibid.


24 Ibid., 144.

25 Ibid., 41.
Feminist friction: the call for new narratives on madness

Why didn’t our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers tell us what battle it was we lost, or never fought, so that we could understand how total was our defeat, and that…madness was how we mourned it? Why, when they had so many words, did they not name our heroines for us, tell us about feminists and suffragists and Amazons and great mothers?

—Phyllis Chesler

In the nineteenth century, female writers were only able to conceive of and construct two types of narrative endings for their gender: heterosexual love and marriage, or death. The narrative closure of novels during this period, therefore, is seldom anything more than ‘double or binary choices for most female characters.

In response to this restraint, theorists such as Molly Hite (1989), Alison Booth (1993) and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) argue that twentieth-century feminist writers aimed to examine and delegitimise cultural conventions about ‘romance as a trope for the sex-gender system’. Such writers aimed to reinterpret the lives of the women they depicted by writing outside the novel’s script, and aimed to invent a narrative that offered an alternative to individual quests.

Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (1963), Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) and Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing (1972) have been seen to deconstruct the conventional romantic plot. Frederick Buell argues that The Bell Jar stretched the post-romantic plot to its furthest limits. Mary Lou Emery describes Wide Sargasso Sea in a similar fashion, defining the novel as a rupture of conventional romance narratives. Rhys, herself, in a letter to Selma Vaz Dias in April 1958, describes Wide Sargasso Sea as a reaction against nineteenth-century romance. Gayle Green argues that Surfacing is an example of a new genre that came into existence in
the 1970s: women's 'quest fiction', in which the protagonist finds 'an ending of her own' that differs from marriage or death.\textsuperscript{10} Green argues that love in general is often problematised in this fiction. So too is marriage, which is seen as representative of the tradition that the protagonist must identify herself against and associated with the ending she tries to avoid.\textsuperscript{11} The three feminist texts in turn question cultural conventions of romance and 'subvert those structures narratively'.\textsuperscript{12}

Booth and DuPlessis argue that this rebellion against conventional narrative structure allowed twentieth-century feminist authors to construct stories that transcend the interaction and interconnection between gender, heterosexual love and narrative closure. Yet, as Booth argues, these novelists not only rebelled against conventional romantic love as narrative closure, they also resisted the motherhood that was inextricably linked to wifehood.\textsuperscript{13}

I suggest that, rather than defining the narrative binary as heterosexual love and marriage, or death, as current scholarship does, a different way to view the limited potential is through the binary domesticity or death. The term domesticity at once refers to all of heterosexual love, marriage, motherhood and the ideology that affirms the belief that home should be the 'very centre of a woman's world'.\textsuperscript{14} This binary also speaks to many twentieth-century feminist writers who constructed their novels in direct defiance of the expected conventions of gender and narrative closure.

This exegesis argues that twentieth-century writers such as Plath, Rhys and Atwood have employed madness as a rebellious trope against social and narrative expectations. It in turn identifies the possible post-romantic narrative structure these writers have employed to formulate an alternative to, and to subvert the supposition of, couple formation and motherhood.

**New French Feminism and madness as rebellion**

Historically, literary criticism has focussed on the madwoman in the attic as a powerful feminist motif of rebellion and rage. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, female authors often utilised the shadowy character to represent a heroine's dark other or doppelganger. Subsequent analyses, for example of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, positioned the madwoman as 'the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and rage'.\textsuperscript{15} Yet twentieth century texts such as *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* rescued the peripheral figure and provided her with a point of view and a platform from which to speak. This reorientation not only heralded a change in narrative perspective,
it revealed an ambiguity in authorial and reader judgement. The previously silenced and socially undesirable was suddenly favourable and no longer assigned a negative value. In this way, the twentieth-century madwoman novel moved madness from marginal metaphor to central concept and with it transformed the madwoman from object to subject. The authors’ growing sympathy for madness also led them to a new denial of order and a rejection of plot-driven narratives. I suggest that this dismantling of previous frameworks supported a new narrative alteration: the use of madness as narrative closure.

Although Gilbert and Gubar’s famous reading popularised the interpretation of madness as protest, its longevity has, in part, been a consequence of influential second-wave feminist theory.16

New French Feminism, a movement that emerged ‘after the student revolt of 1968’, is particularly interested in how language functions as a ‘symbolic function that privileges men’, and seeks ways to ‘subvert the conventions of what they consider to be patriarchal language’.17 This form of feminism influenced many twentieth-century female writers. As DuPlessis argues, writers such as Plath, Rhys and Atwood responded to New French Feminism by ‘placing the critique of narrative at the centre of their fiction in order to question certain plots and conventions’.18

Arguing that men, who have historically controlled most of the production of language, have privileged rationality, theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous advocate l’écriture féminine, loosely translated as ‘feminine writing’. Hélène Cixous first uses this term in her essay, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, in which she asserts, ‘woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies’.19 The concept of feminine writing stems from Elaine Showalter’s ‘gynocritics project’, which sought to provide previously silenced women with a voice, yet believed this was not possible with male language.20

Within this ‘feminine writing’, Kristeva argues that Western philosophy is founded on the repression of difference. Anything that deviates from the prescribed norm is labelled criminality, perversion or madness and is prohibited.21 Thus, in language, female difference is suppressed until only the male ‘norm’ remains as the sole voice. Because the subjective woman does not exist in the male view – she is other, different, lacking – it follows that woman as a speaking ‘I’ does not exist in language. This is why the French feminists say that, even in language, woman is mute.22 Tolan explains that members of l’écriture féminine believe ‘Anglo-American feminists have failed to grasp the full meaning of this fact’.23
Central to *l’écriture féminine* is the construct of binaries. Cixous describes the process by which ‘male reason is ordered as a series of binary oppositions’ – commonly attributed to myth – ‘in which one half is always superior to the other half’: male/female, activity/passivity, culture/nature.\(^{24}\) Irigaray counters this binary structure in her essay ‘The Sex Which Is Not One’ by undermining the masculine binary system of positive/negative and by arguing that the female is not a unified position but multiple ones.\(^{25}\)

Also important to this exegesis is New French Feminism’s approach to narrative structure. *L’écriture féminine* encourages the use of anti-linear structure as a way of disrupting the masculine linear, logical and realistic plot. In this way, patriarchal structure is seen as symbolic whereas feminine writing is semiotic, threatening to ‘unleash chaos where there is order’.\(^{26}\) Cixous argues that hysteria is one of the greatest forces a writer can use to dismantle structure.\(^{27}\) Therefore, texts that provide primacy to hysteria in their narrative closure, and which leave their protagonists in a state of unresolved madness, could be seen to be sympathetic to the ideals of New French Feminism.\(^{28}\)

Yet, while novels such as *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* separate the concepts of the female and domesticity, they ultimately end in paralysis. These texts, which sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction, may momentarily imagine a world devoid from patriarchal expectations, yet they ultimately leave their characters with feelings of futility, confusion and resignation.

**Contemporary American feminism and madness as narrative closure**

Many American feminist critics (Baym 1984; Jones 1985; Caminero-Santangelo 1998; Donaldson 2002; Chesler 2005) have begun to argue that embracing chaos, madness and the non-rational as a resistance strategy does little to dismantle the dichotomous thinking so criticised by New French Feminism; rather, ‘it simply reverses the poles’ while apparently ‘duplicating the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first place’.\(^{29}\) Although the association between rebellion and madness has enabled feminist critiques of the gendered politics of psychiatric diagnosis, another interpretation argues that the mad subject holds little political power.\(^{30}\) This is not to say that accounts of female madness, which provide a voice to the gendered experience, have not been significant for society, feminism and literary studies. Rather, exposing the reality of women’s experience is different to interpreting those stories
as representational of the liberatory potentials of language. In fact, in order to view madness as subversive, feminist critics must entirely 'unmoor it from its associations with mental illness'.

As Elizabeth Donaldson argues, the madness/rebellion configuration subtly reinforces what has become an 'almost monolithic way of reading mental illness within feminist literary criticism' and perhaps the 'larger culture of women's studies scholarship.' Donaldson believes that madness as metaphor has problematic implications. Although Gilbert and Gubar 'warn readers against romanticising madness', she explains, the figure of Bertha Mason as a rebellious woman subverting the patriarchal order by 'burning down her husband's estate has a certain irresistible appeal'. However it is romanticised, Donaldson argues, madness itself offers women little possibility for true resistance or productive rebellion.

This argument is reminiscent of that of Marta Caminero-Santangelo in *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998). In this text, Caminero-Santangelo argues that Bertha Mason's madness only 'offers the illusion of power'. Using both fictional madwomen and women's biographical accounts of asylum experiences, she reveals the limited efficacy of the mad subject. Similarly, Shoshana Felman writes that

> depressed and terrified women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction: quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, "mental illness" is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration.

Nina Baym mirrors this criticism, questioning the use of the madwoman-as-rebellion motif by feminist critics and underlining how their treatments have served to uphold the 'hegemonic mindset that recapitulates and hence capitulates to fear, dislike, and contempt of women'.

Thus we can deduce from these arguments that a text ending with such a motif is seen by many American feminist theorists as an unsuccessful narrative structure for a feminist text. The question then remains, if a writer desires to construct a feminist narrative rebelling against domesticity, what structure would be more successful and why?
Resolving the madwoman

Contemporary American feminism’s call for new narratives

Caminero-Santangelo argues that disputing the effectiveness of the figure of the madwoman has created the central question of current feminist debate: ‘How can the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts contribute to the transformation of gender ideologies?’

She also argues for feminist practice that improves the lives of ‘real’ women:

Instead of privileging the retreat into madness, then, let us privilege forms of agency, and of active transformation in all its forms, which women engage in. And, in doing so, let us open an imaginative space for women to be able to escape from madness by envisioning themselves as agents.

Though by tracing the symbolic rejection of disempowering solutions in fictional and non-fictional narratives Caminero-Santangelo goes some way in responding to her question, I argue that the fictional texts she analyses do not adequately resolve the figure of the ‘madwoman’. Although there are moments of insight and personal growth, the female protagonists remain entangled, broken, unclear and unsettled, the precise opposite to being adequately resolved.

Thus, at the end of The Madwoman Can’t Speak, the dilemma remains of how one writes such a transformational text. Furthermore, while Caminero-Santangelo points to the intersection of studying texts and writing texts, to the combination of theory and practice as a possible answer, we are left unsure as to how this would transpire practically. Her research, therefore, remains as unresolved as the literary madwomen. This positions Caminero-Santangelo’s research as exciting work to put into practice.

Phyllis Chesler, in the 1975 edition of Women and Madness (2005), asks similar questions to Caminero-Santangelo when she writes, ‘how can women banish self-sacrifice, guilt, naiveté, helplessness, madness and sorrow from the female condition? How can a woman survive – and learn to value survival?’ Yet, over thirty years after she wrote her seminal text, Chesler, unlike Caminero-Santangelo, also provides what she feels is a possible solution: the answer is found in myth, in the transformational and empowering stories of goddesses, Earth mothers and Amazon figures. Such narratives are our ‘collective human role models’, she states, and argues that we repress them at our own peril.
Contemporary American feminism and myth

Over the past fifty years there has been a multitude of feminist texts advocating myth as a possible guide for women’s self-actualisation. Marija Gimbutas’ *Language of the Goddess* (1989), Lee R. Edwards’ *Psyche as Hero* (1984), Carol Pearson’s *The Hero Within* (1986), Maureen Murdock’s *The Heroine’s Journey* (1990), Kim Hudson’s *The Virgin’s Promise* (2009) and Valerie Estelle-Frankel’s *From Girl to Goddess* (2010) all explore myth as a possible framework for a woman’s quest for internal growth and change. Green’s identification of ‘quest fiction’ has also led this exegesis to the literary interpretation of myth criticism as a possible way to examine the narrative structure of *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing*.

The theorists promoting the use of myth believe that the function of story is to guide us through the universal transformations of life, collectively known as individuation, using archetypes with their symbolic characters and patterns of behaviour. Yet, even though there is much theoretical encouragement for the creation of myth-based fiction that attempts to resolve the madwoman, there seems to be a lack of writers creating these works and, in fact, acknowledging that it is possible. There is also an absence of practical frameworks for creative writers seeking to release the madwoman character. Therefore, we are left to ask, where are the modern-day interpretations that translate myth’s pedagogical function and provide guidance on ‘how to live a human life under any circumstances’? As evidenced, many theorists are intellectually espousing myth’s virtues, yet few are writing the novels that respond to this supplication.

The mythical journey

The concept of the monomyth is based upon mythology and, most famously, Joseph Campbell’s model of the hero’s journey in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). According to Campbell, a myth is a story that coordinates the living person (hero) with the cycle of his/her own life, with the environment in which he or she is living, and with the society which itself has already been integrated into the environment. Myths are also symbolic representations of our psyches. It is a common belief not only that myths are symbolic representations of our psyches, but also that the role of the hero in myth is universal and that myths help to instruct individuals in charting a course for their own lives. This assertion is based on the work of Carl Jung, a point explored in detail in Chapter 3. Myth is the ‘symbolic expression
Resolving the madwoman
given to the unconscious desires, fears and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behaviour. 'Therefore, understanding the myth puts us in touch with 'the deep forces that have shaped man’s destiny and must continue to determine both our private and our public lives.'

For centuries writers have looked to mythology in an attempt to construct stories that transform their characters’ individual experience to one that is universal. It is likely that the concept of a universal narrative appeals to a writer’s desire to elicit an emotional response from her readers. Although Campbell and myth criticism has been attacked for ‘oversimplification and ahistoricism,’ ‘freeze-dried reductionism’ and ‘logocentric oneness,’ his approach remains popular – there seems to be something about Campbell’s philosophy that ignites the imaginations of writers, sociolinguists, anthropologists, psychologists and critics alike. This influence seems to transcend Campbell’s basic structure. For, when scrutinised in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served humankind in the past, and of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be amenable to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, and the age. The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented by the process – separation-initiation-return – which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow people. The function of this quest narrative, Campbell argues, is to provide a pedagogical structure through which people can learn how best to live a human life.

Therefore, if fiction is, as John Gardner explains, ‘a game played against chaos and death and entropy’, and story, as Jonathan Gottschall has recently argued, should be ‘the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart’, then we can see why writers might find myth’s pedagogical function appealing. If French feminist theory has celebrated chaos, madness and the non-rational, and American feminist theory argues that this approach in fact supports a character’s resignation to extant power systems, then I suggest the practice of creative writing utilising myth’s pedagogical function is a way to combat the chaos. We therefore see a potential response to Caminero-Santangelo’s and Chesler’s desire to privilege forms of agency and illuminate the value of survival. Yet, Campbell’s hero’s journey does not specifically respond to what Caminero-Santangelo described as the central questions of current feminist debate: ‘How can transformation of the sex-gender
Feminist friction

system and ideologies of gender (rather than just resistance to them) take place?’ In fact, there is tension in the gendered symbolic in Campbell’s work.

Analysing Campbell’s hero, feminist theorists Carol Pearson notes that though Campbell initially declares that the hero can be of either gender, he ‘then proceeds to discuss the heroic pattern as male’ and to ‘define the female characters as goddesses, temptresses and earth mothers’. Yet, the depth of the confused gender depictions of Campbell’s heroic outline seems deeper than this statement might suggest. Campbell’s use of gender-inclusive language is conscious and deliberate and, as Segal points out, in illustrating the journey he ‘enlists myths of female heroes as often as those of male ones’.

In the hero’s journey the women are the manifestation of evil and the embodiment of desire – where man is self/agent, she is his undifferentiated all/other. At the heart of the journey, woman ‘recalled to nature’ becomes symbolic flesh: sex, desire, generative motherhood. As flesh, woman loses her agency and it is the male who retains it as well as the ability to act as hero. Woman disappears and is replaced by symbol because she is not fully allowed her subjectivity.

The heroine’s journey

A number of publications have proposed a feminine variation of the hero’s journey. Maureen Murdock’s The Heroine’s Journey (1990), Kim Hudson’s The Virgin’s Promise (2009) and Valerie Estelle Frankel’s From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine’s Journey Through Myth and Legend (2010) argue that a careful examination of the central agent of the hero’s journey finds that the subject, protagonist and central individual of each articulation is consistently ‘man’. While Campbell suggests that ‘the whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero’s passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women’, (a point subscribed to by Vogler in his re-writing of Campbell’s work for screenwriters), these writers suggest that in analysing the journey’s ‘zenith’ or ‘central point’ the hero is distinctly male. It is the woman who serves as a ‘crisis at the nadir’ of the male hero’s journey, and in mythic symbology, Campbell argues that woman represents the ‘totality of what can be known for the hero’. Maureen Murdock questioned Campbell about the difference between the female and male journey in 1981 and was deeply unsatisfied by his response. During their discussion, Campbell suggested that women ‘don’t need to make the journey’ and that ‘in the whole of mythological tradition the woman is there…all she has to do is realise that she’s the place that people are trying to get to’.
Resolving the madwoman

While all the aforementioned feminist mythologists espouse a heroine’s journey that is different to that of the hero, Frankel’s almost mirrors Campbell’s monomyth. This might be due to the texts from which Frankel drew her inspiration. Campbell and Frankel take their picture of the monomythic cycle from wide-ranging historic sources: Greek, Roman, Persian, Melanesian, Korean, Celtic and Egyptian myths; the Bible; Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu texts; the Quaran; shamanic Siberian tales; and James Joyce and Shakespeare. The two mythologists loosen the boundaries between religious text, sacred recollection, mythology, literature and folklore, and they pose the journey as hermeneutic – in both psychoanalytic and spiritual terms, a journey of self. Yet they both look to historic texts to form their journeys.

Murdock and Hudson utilise historic texts as the basis for their models but, in contrast, adapt their journeys to encompass a contemporary perspective. For Murdock, these are the stories of women she has heard in her practice as a psychologist. For twenty-five years prior to writing her text, Murdock had heard a resounding cry of dissatisfaction from women who have embraced the hero’s journey. These personal stories motivated Murdock to write *The Heroine’s Journey*.

Murdock proposes that a woman’s quest is to become a ‘fully integrated, balanced and whole human being and to heal the deep wound of the feminine’.61 First, we embrace the masculine principles ruling society, often rejecting our female natures, which we are taught to see as powerless. We join the ‘heroic’ journey with male allies and role models. Later in life, we are unsatisfied with the world’s definition of success. We experience a period of dryness and despair, confronting the ‘dark feminine’ – our own feelings of loss and anger. When a woman decides not to play by the patriarchal rules, she has no guidelines to follow. Not knowing the answers, we look to our intuition and become what Murdock calls ‘spiritual warriors’.62 We seek to heal the mother-daughter split and integrate our female values with our learned masculine skills. It is important to note from the outset that Murdock does not believe that this journey only occurs once, but that it is a continuous cycle, repeated throughout our lives.

In contrast, Hudson focuses on the unique archetypal path of the ‘virgin’, that is the young female or princess character. Both Murdock and Hudson take care to draw parallels between their own work and Campbell’s so that the hero’s journey is not rejected but acknowledged as part of their larger systems. As a result, Murdock’s and Hudson’s models build upon components of Campbell’s theory, whilst contributing knowledge gained from more recent research and experience.

Yet, there is a clear distinction between the hero’s and the heroine’s journeys. The narratives’ different settings illustrate the internal and external aspects of the process of
knowing oneself as an individual, and thus the hero and the heroine symbolise two aspects of knowing one's place in the world. The archetypal journey takes the protagonist from one polarity to the other: from shadow to light. Yet the hero's and heroine's descent to the shadow and the ascent to the light travel in different directions, and in turn growth initiates from two different origins. The hero begins his journey with a strong sense of self-preservation and ultimately embarks on an external descent, then returns to achieve individuation. In contrast, the heroine begins her story lacking a sense of self, giving too much energy to the needs and opinions of others and embarks upon an internal journey of descent from which she travels outward to achieve her individuation.

For the purposes of this exegesis, a heroine's journey model, which includes an interpretation of the modern-day heroine, has been chosen as it parallels the purposes of feminist literature outlined previously. That is, the heroine's journey focuses on a female as the protagonist, on claiming an 'I' for one's story and putting women in the centre of the narrative. Since Hudson focuses solely on the 'virgin' character, Maureen Murdock's heroine's journey is a possible feminist narratological framework to conduct a new reading of female madness in literature.

Consequently, the intersection between recent American feminist literary studies and myth criticism points us towards Maureen Murdock's heroine's journey as the vehicle to create Caminero-Santangelo's imaginative space – a space in which a female reader can envision herself as an agent for change. With this knowledge we are able to re-phrase Caminero-Santangelo's question of how one symbolically resolves the madwoman in a fictional text to the more specific, how can Maureen Murdock's heroine's journey be used to write a new narrative that symbolically resolves the madwoman? To determine whether this model can be used as a tool for such analysis and creative writing practice, it is important to conduct a close reading of existing texts featuring a madwoman character using Murdock's heroine's journey.
The following three chapters will explore poetics as the general principles of the writing in each stage of the heroine’s journey and, as such, will divide the previous figure into three.

Figure 1: Maureen Murdock’s model of the heroine’s journey

Figure 2: Exegesis structure
Feminist friction


3 Ibid.


5 Ibid., 6.

6 Ibid., xi.


11 Ibid.

12 Green, “Feminist Fiction, Feminist Form,” 83.


14 Ibid., 130.


18 DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, x.


22 Ibid., 12.

23 Tolan, “Feminisms,” 335.

24 ‘Ibid., 336.

25 It is important to note here, due to the reference of the maternal later in this exegesis, that in the theoretical discourse of the French feminists Kristeva and Irigaray, the maternal occupies a central space. Yet, this exegesis utilises Marianne Hirsch’s argument that these two women’s maternal discourse remains ‘firmly embedded in structures of representation which place the mother outside or on the margin’ (Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, 173). For this reason an analysis of Kristeva’s or Irigaray’s maternal research is not included in this study.


28 It is important to acknowledge that a term such as New French Feminism is far-reaching and includes many other theories than the ones included in this exegesis. The term has been used to attempt to transcend l’écriture feminine yet be as specific as one can be within an exegesis’ limitations.


33 Ibid., 99–119.


38 Ibid., 181.

39 *Oxford Thesaurus of English*, 2nd ed. revised, s.v. “Resolve”.


44 Ibid., 255.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 255–56.


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 30.

52 Ibid., 31.


56 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 121.


59 Ibid., 116.


61 Ibid., 3.

62 Ibid.

63 Hudson, *The Virgin's Promise*, 22.

Poetics of rupture: madness as descent rather than dissent

'I'm still defeated by the conundrum of God. But I have the devil clear.'

'And what's he?'

'Not seeing whole.'

—John Fowles

The madwoman in the attic became many a twentieth-century writer’s muse. Jean Rhys, Sylvia Plath and Margaret Atwood are just some of the feminist writers whose creativity was captivated by the dark, animalistic figure first portrayed by Charlotte Brontë in Jane Eyre. Though Plath in The Bell Jar (1963) and Atwood in Surfacing (1972) were not as literal as Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) in their depiction of Bertha Mason, they still gave a previously silenced character a voice, a history and a context. In all three texts, the ‘other’ is given the role of narrator; we see events through her eyes and therefore gain a new empathy and understanding of female madness.

Yet, as highlighted, American feminist theorists question the effectiveness of the madness-as-resistance writing strategy. In its place critics such as Caminero-Santangelo, Woolf and Chesler call for the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts. Though there is a request for new narratives, there seems to be an absence of novels that respond to this supplication. Claire Messud’s The Woman Upstairs (2013) is one of the only novels that attempts to traverse this divide, yet her novel deals with women’s anger rather than, specifically, the resolution of the madwoman. It is this gap that is of importance not only to the exegesis, but also to the creative artefact. To determine how best to construct this text – to resolve creatively the madwoman and explore notions of contemporary female madness in my fiction – I felt it useful to investigate the narrative structure of the texts central to the arguments of the aforementioned critics. Though
there are many models that could be used for this analysis, it is Chesler's advocation of myth as a possible guide for women's narrative journeys through madness to self-actualisation that prompted the direction of the following critical enquiry. In this way I will explore the intersection and interrelationships between myth criticism and creative writing practice.

In this chapter, three novels that employ the madwoman character as their protagonist – *Wide Sargasso Sea, The Bell Jar* and *Surfacing* – will be read using Maureen Murdock's narrative model of the heroine's journey. Through this application I will highlight the ways in which the three texts mirror, deviate from, or concentrate on specific concepts within, each stage of the journey. These findings will then inform a framework for a female character gone mad: a madwoman's journey. It should be stressed at the outset that patterns in three novels does not a framework make. Though, due to the limitations of the exegesis, I suggest a possible structure that can be further tested on similar novels and thus developed further by other researchers. It is important to note also that the intent of the exegesis is not to criticise novels that break down certain social and literary conventions but rather to build upon their work.

**The madwoman’s journey**

The fabric and function of the heroine has changed over time and varies across cultures and genres. In myth she has been a warrior and a goddess; in fairytales she has been a damsel in distress and a besotted bride; in literature she has played every part from saint to diva. The madwoman in the attic has also played her part as heroine, yet it has been interpreted as one of defiance and subversion. Yet, this role played by the madwoman as heroine has been called into question by feminist theory. By reading *Wide Sargasso Sea, The Bell Jar* and *Surfacing* using Murdock's heroine's journey, I open up a dialogue for alternative readings.

The following analysis of three twentieth-century literary texts determines how and when the texts correlate and deviate from the stages of Murdock's heroine's journey. It also pinpoints, when there is correlation, the specific nature of the similarity and whether these similarities can be witnessed across the three texts. Therefore, I conduct both a vertical analysis (comparing the individual texts with the heroine's journey) and a horizontal analysis (comparing these patterns across the three texts).
Separation from the feminine

The beginning of the hero's journey is marked by a movement towards a goal, a call to adventure, an expedition in order to achieve a desired result. In contrast, Murdock's heroine's journey begins with a movement away, a separation both physically and psychologically from a mother and from the mother archetype either by choice or by force. In The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea and Surfacing, the female protagonists experience both a literal and a figurative detachment, which is foreshadowed with criticisms of femininity. Esther in The Bell Jar describes herself as separate from the ‘awfully boring’ women in her hotel, ‘waiting to get married to some career man or other’. Among the ‘starched cotton’ women who fit into society's expectations for cheerful and flexible women, Esther feels she must repress her natural gloom, cynicism and dark humour. She is supposed to be having the ‘time of her life’, whirling around the New York fashion world but she merely feels empty and numb. Esther's sense of alienation from the world around her comes from the desire to reject the expectations placed upon her as a young woman living in 1950s America.

Antoinette's (Wide Sargasso Sea) rejection by her mother is foreshadowed by the feminine image of the orchids that are ‘not to be touched’ and that she never goes near. The flower, often said to represent a beautiful lady, is ‘wonderful to see’ but for Antoinette it remains ‘out of reach’. Similarly, before we learn that Atwood's narrator (hereafter referred to simply as Narrator) has lost her mother, she criticises stereotypically feminine traits. She observes women as being either vain – Anna does not wear jeans because she 'looks fat in them'; whining – the loggers' wives sit on back porches and complain; or of secondary importance to their husband's priorities – Narrator's mother and 'Madame' endure uncomfortable silences as their husbands enact a pointless tradition of exchange. In these examples of repeated reproval, we see the protagonists distance themselves from apparently feminine attributes.

The mother archetype is often referred to as the unconscious, involving the body and soul; but it is also a symbol for the collective unconscious, which contains the unity of all opposites. In all three narratives, the heroine's separation from the feminine fosters imbalance. As a result, the stories depict confusion, uncertainty and insecurity. Antoinette is unable to distinguish between her friends and her enemies, her family rejects her, the little girl Tia steals her clothes and she is betrayed by her husband. Esther also feels out of place and consumed by confusion. She feels anxiety about her future because she can see only mutually exclusive choices: virgin or whore, submissive wife or successful but lonely career woman. In this way, Esther's separation from the mother archetype prevents any integration of, or harmony between, the binaries by which she is taunted. Narrator is also haunted by the separation of dualities: the body and mind, the natural and the man-made, the truth and imitation. She is almost literally in limbo.
as she travels into what is supposed to be the familiar territory of her hometown but is, in fact, a land transformed by progress. Driving in the car they are ‘between stations’, Narrator or her companions are in the ‘wrong place’, and everything seems an imitation: the cherub with the missing face, the moose dressed as humans, Paul and his wife who are ‘like carvings’, and the bar’s ‘regulation picture’ that is an imitation of a nineteenth-century shooting lodge. There are also repeated images of physical uncertainty. Once at her childhood lodge, she repeatedly sees visions of severed heads or limbs, she often fears that her body could fall apart or lose an arm like Madame in the old store. She describes divorce (which we later realise is an abortion) as an amputation and is sure that she could have amnesia and no one would notice.

Although the heroine’s journey depicts a variety of ways in which a woman may separate from her mother, including the choice to reject her parent, the three novels describe protagonists who are abandoned by their mothers. Antoinette’s mother’s rejection is physical and emotional: ‘…she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her’. One evening her mother does not speak to her or look at her at all, and Antoinette takes this as a sign that her mother is ‘ashamed of her’. That night the little girl dreams she is walking in a forest but not alone. Someone who hates her is there, but out of sight. She hears heavy footsteps coming closer and closer to her, but even though she struggles and screams she is unable to move. She wakes to find her mother looking down at her. Antoinette may be ‘safe from strangers’ but she repeatedly describes feeling frightened of her mother. In the morning she wakes knowing that ‘nothing would be the same’, that it would ‘change and go on changing’. Murdock describes this process as ‘particularly intense’ and explains that the daughter will experience a fear of loss, anxiety about being alone, separate, and difficult because she must differentiate herself from someone who was ‘the same as her’. After her nightmare, Antoinette runs away, visiting parts of Coulibri she has never seen where there is no road, path or track. Interestingly, we see this image mirrored in Surfacing where Narrator thought she knew the way home but in fact has to ask for directions because the old road is closed.

During her wandering, Antoinette realises that it is as if a door has opened and she is ‘somewhere else, something else, someone else’. Here we see the daughter’s geographical and physical separation from her mother and the sadness that comes with the movement from the fused symbiotic relationship of mother and daughter to separateness and, in turn, a new identity. Antoinette’s experience of her mother as absent and unable to mother her encourages the relationship she develops with Christophine as she sets out to find ‘an older’, more ‘positive female role model’. 
Similarly, Esther’s mother in *The Bell Jar*, Mrs Greenwood, is depicted as unfeeling and is never shown to display any warmth or emotion towards her daughter. Mrs Greenwood is a practical woman and stresses the need for Esther to have skills such as shorthand; even the ‘apostles were tent makers’, she argues. This focus on the practical frustrates Esther, and she defines her mother as a martyr who sacrificed her own life after her husband died and, like Antoinette with Christophine, she embraces Jay Cee: ‘I wish I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do’. Esther feels as though her mother is useless to her: ‘My own mother wasn’t much help’. As she sits on the *Ladies’ Day* banquet table, she thinks what a long way she has come – a long way from her mother’s suffocating encouragement to ‘settle’ just has she had done, and a long way from Mrs Willard, her boyfriend’s mother, who sacrificed her career for her husband and children, and whom she sees as an equivalent to her mother. This self-sacrifice can be seen in the description of Mrs Greenwood’s hands after Esther’s first treatment: ‘bone white, as if the skin had worn off them in the hour of waiting’.

Certainly, Mrs Greenwood has been eternally waiting, passively accepting and experiencing the tragedies in her life, gliding from one place to the other without leaving and without arriving.

Narrator describes her mother in a similar fashion. When visiting her mother in hospital, Narrator describes her as a ‘harsh bird’ with ‘clinging claw’s and ‘absent eyes’. At one point Narrator decides that her lack of personal interest might mean her mother does not even know who she is. Leaving the hospital, Narrator steals her mother’s journal in the hope that it will include something about her. Yet all it contains is seasonal commentary: ‘no emotions, no reflections.’ In this way, like Esther’s mother, the protagonist’s mother emotionally rejects her daughter and refuses to engage in anything that could be defined as personal inquiry. Narrator not only rejects the feminine, as the other characters do, she also rejects becoming a mother herself. Whether it is in the beginning when we believe she has abandoned her baby, or towards the end when we realise she was encouraged to have an abortion, Narrator is not only rejected by her own mother but she herself rejects motherhood.

The portrayal of mothers in the three texts reiterates the daughter-centric narrative approach in which mothers are prevented from voicing their own story and are constrained to the ‘age-old dichotomies’ of the angel or the whore – they remain demonised characters. Even in *Surfacing*, Narrator is critical both of the decisions she has made as a potential mother and of her mother. When we leave Narrator at the end of the text, in a state of supposed pregnancy, she is constrained to a private life in which she is unable to move forward into the public sphere.
Identification with the masculine

Antoinette's, Esther's and Narrator's separations from their mothers causes them to reject the feminine and search for recognition by the 'father', literally and/or figuratively. Since 'men are in a position of strength...women look to men for support to strengthen themselves.' It is interesting that once Antoinette has been rejected by her mother and begins to identify with the masculine, the narrative's point of view changes from Antoinette's to that of her husband. Antoinette's mother's failings, internalised as part of the inner negative mother, cause her to feel humiliated about being female and therefore unworthy of a point of view. It is the masculine that must speak – the strong, the patriarchal. However, a positive masculine role model was as absent from Antoinette's life as her mother's affection. Her father and feeling safe, as if they were connected in some way, 'belong to the past.' The only other male role model is her stepfather, Mr Cosway, who promises Antoinette and her fortune to an English man. Once she is married, after a short hesitation, Antoinette puts her life in his hands: 'I never wished to live before I knew you. I always thought it would be better if I died.' Antoinette's husband now has all the power – it is his voice, his point of view. He has control over her finances, her estate and her happiness: 'suppose you took this happiness away when I wasn't looking.' The damaging effect of Antoinette's absent father means that she believes she does not exist except in the mirror of male attention.

Esther's father is also a figure of the past and resented by Mrs Greenwood for dying and leaving them with nothing. Esther, having rejected the feminine and living a life devoid of positive male role models, seeks approval and encouragement from the masculine world of scholarships, success at college, writing prizes and work experience in New York. In Esther we see Murdock's description of the inner masculine figure as 'not a man with a heart but a greedy tyrant that never lets up...nothing is ever enough'; he 'drives her forward, more, better, faster, with no recognition of her longings to be loved, to feel satisfied, or even to rest.' Esther was supposed to be having 'the time of her life' since people see her 'steering New York like her own private car.' But she admits to herself and the reader that she is not steering anything, not even herself. This is because her inner masculine figure has the wheel and control of her journey. But on and on she tries to convince herself:

_All my life I'd told myself studying and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all As, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me._
Poetics of rupture

When Esther meets Constantine, he fills the void of a father figure. She hopes that he will see through all her bravado to who she really is and when he squeezes her hand she feels happy – happier than she has been since ‘running along the hot white beaches with her father’. Esther realises at this point that she has never been happy since that time.

The search for a father is also Narrator’s driving force in *Surfacing*, yet, in her case, she is looking for her actual father who has ‘simply disappeared…vanished into nothing’, rather than a replacement figure. Even before her father goes missing, she aligns herself more with a masculine than feminine image. When she first meets Joe he falls for her ‘coolness’ after they have sex, by the way she ‘puts on her clothes…as if she is feeling no emotion’. She also takes on the masculine role at her childhood lodge as she catches frogs in jars, hooks them on lines and kills fish: ‘this was never my job, someone else did it, my brother or father’. It is clear that the ‘someone else’ is a masculine other.

Antoinette, Esther and Narrator find temporary comfort in the masculine world – in the prevailing myth in our culture that certain people (husbands, professionally successful men, fathers), positions (employers such as Jay Cee) and events (marriage and scholarships) possess more inherent value than others. Although, in the heroine’s journey, there is an archetype of the father as ally, the madwoman as heroine in these three novels seems to have an absent father and thus seeks to be valued either by becoming like men and/or becoming liked by men.

Road of trials: meeting ogres and dragons

The outer road of trials takes Antoinette, Esther and Narrator through the expected obstacle courses that lead them through education, employment, marriage, promotions, prestigious titles and financial success. Along the way, these women face ogres, dragons and monsters resembling boyfriends, parents and friends, and employers who tell them they cannot possibly succeed.

Antoinette’s dragon is not only her husband, but also the temptation of sex, care and dependency disguised as requirements for love, power and achievement. Her husband’s physical interest – ‘I did not love her…I was thirsty for her’; his protection – ‘“You are safe”, I’d say…She’d liked that – to be told you are safe’; and his need to be pleased and taken care of – ‘You must let me cover you up, ‘I’ll wear the dress you like tonight…and I will have another made exactly like it…will you be pleased?’ – flatters Antoinette into thinking she has arrived in the land of power and independence when all she has received are the talismans of success.
Esther’s primary ogre is Buddy Willard and the illusions he provides. Buddy makes Esther feel sexy and experienced. He improves her credibility with older students and changes her self view from someone who is set up on blind dates with ‘pale mushroomy men’ with ‘protruding ears or buck teeth or a bad leg’ to a woman who has earned the attention of a handsome Yale medical student. Buddy represents the ideal 1950s American male and subscribes, like Mrs Greenwood, to society’s notions about and expectations of women. Because Esther takes everything Buddy says as the ‘honest-to-God truth’, his criticism of Esther’s interest in poetry and his unapologetic sexual conduct with a waitress undermines her clarity, self-confidence and self-worth. When Esther realises that she has not been happy since her father died, she begins to add up all the things she cannot do. But these are not just talents she lacks, they are feminine traits she believes she does not possess. Esther begins with cooking, which her grandmother and mother could do, then moves on to shorthand, which her mother teaches and has been encouraging her to learn. The list grows longer and longer until she feels completely inadequate. Without a positive male role model in her life she has never developed the self-confidence to be able to battle with the dragons and ogres that now rage within and around her.

Narrator is also taunted by internal and external ogres. Her internal dragon prefers logic and the mind, and she finds herself caught up trying to decipher her father’s codes. Yet, she is really ‘covering over the bad things and filling empty spaces with an embroidery of calculations and numbers’. ‘There is no room for dreams, love or emotions. For a while she wanted to become an artist but her ex-partner convinces her that there have ‘never been any important women artists’ and therefore that she should study design.’ Like Antoinette and Esther, Narrator believes everything her ex-partner says and discards her own feelings to accommodate his beliefs.

Rochester, Buddy and Narrator’s ex-partner are the gatekeepers to the women’s self-confidence, self-definition, reality and truth. The three men are similar in their behaviour and treatment of Antoinette, Esther and Narrator. All men cheat on their partners; undermine the women’s passions – for her West Indies home, for poetry, for art; and use sex as a way to manipulate and overpower. In all three novels, the male characters can also be seen as individual representations of a greater patriarchal society – Rochester and the English, Buddy and 1950s America, Narrator’s ex-partner and the ‘Americans’. All with self-righteous and self-interested expectations, these ogres and dragons prevent the women from trusting their own sense of the truth. Rather than a stage in the journey, as Murdock represents it, the road of trials – meeting ogres and dragons – seems to occur throughout the novels.
The boon of success
Antoinette, Esther and Narrator become enamoured with the accolades ‘winning’ brings. There is a great adrenaline rush associated with the achievement of a goal, and this high masks the deep-seated pain associated with not being enough. Yet their constructs of ‘success’ are deeply flawed: Antoinette believes that if she can make her husband want her, to desire her physically, then she will be happy; Esther believes that if she can have sex with someone other than Buddy, she will achieve some sort of retribution for his affair. The rewards of the outer journey are seductive and the protagonists are unable to sacrifice the false notions of the heroic to find the ‘inner’ boons of success. Antoinette, Esther and Narrator are each unable to achieve two main things at this stage: autonomy and detachment from ego.

None of the heroines are able to discard their old ideas of success. Antoinette, Esther and Narrator fall into sexually destructive cycles because they believe the act will bring them what they need. For Antoinette, this is love; for Esther, it is independence; and for Narrator, it is a baby. As such, they are unable to give themselves what they need without the assistance of a man. In addition, the heroines are unable to find the courage to realise that they are adequate just as they are. They are unable to detach themselves from the whims of the ego and say ‘I am not all things…and I am enough’. Antoinette, Esther and Narrator are trapped by an attachment to their egos. Therefore, the madwoman as heroine, rather than finding the inner boon of success, succumbs to the outer temptations of her ego.

Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity: death
When Antoinette’s husband stops giving her attention, she seeks Christophine’s advice: ‘He does not love me, I think he hates me. He always sleeps in his dressing room…if I get angry he is scornful…I cannot endure it anymore.’ Antoinette believes that if Christophine can use obeah to make her husband come to her one more night, she could make him love her. But when Christophine tells her she cannot make him love her, Antoinette says she does not care, she just wants him to want her for one more night. Antoinette is so afraid all the time that she begins to sink into a state of depression. This forces her to betray Christophine and, in this section of the novel, Antoinette is narrator once more. Antoinette gives her husband the potion and they make love, but the next day he has an affair with Amélie right next door to his wife. It is after that betrayal, signalled by the cock crowing, though she has betrayed him as well. Yet, it is the fact that her husband has destroyed her beloved home that hurts her the most. Antoinette smashes a bottle and ‘with broken glass in her hand and murder in her eyes’ she calls her husband a coward and becomes red eyed and wild haired.
Esther begins to feel like a champion college footballer suddenly confronted by Wall Street and a business suit – his days of glory shrunk to a little gold cup on his mantle with a date engraved on it like the date on a tombstone. Like the footballer, Esther believes that her glory days are over. In trying to be everything to everyone, in her constant desire for recognition and success, she has become over-worked, confused and depressed. She describes herself as sitting in the crotch of a fig tree with lots of figs hanging in the tree above her: a happy family, a famous poet, an amazing editor, a brilliant professor. She wants them all, and because she cannot just choose one, the figs all shrivel up and fall to the ground at her feet.52

When Narrator realises that her memory is playing tricks on her and that she was never married, that she was having an affair with a married man which led to a child and an abortion, she believes she has failed, that she is ‘inoculated, exempt, classified as wounded’.53 It is at this point the reader can revisit her memories and interpret them with new knowledge. When she describes the divorce as like an amputation, ‘you survive but there is less of you’,54 we realise she is actually describing the abortion and that, as a result of losing the baby, she feels like less of a person. It is this event that marks the ‘funny break’ Anna reads from her hand and becomes dislocated from her heart and her body.55 She has been ‘split in two’, dislocated from the ability to feel physically or emotionally: a ‘woman sawn apart in a wooden crate…a trick done with mirrors…only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head’.56 And so we see Narrator becoming the madwoman in her attic. It is now not her father’s death that she is worried about but her own, though not a future death but one from the past, the ‘break’ referred to in her life line, the time of the abortion during which she distanced herself from any emotion.

Initiation and descent to the goddess

During the heroine’s descent in Murdock’s model, she experiences a period of introversion and depression, a slow painful process through which her identity is scraped away. Narrator identifies with trapped animals and babies in jars, Esther believes she is confined in the stale air of a bell jar and Antoinette is a prisoner in an English attic. As Rochester begins to rename Antoinette as Bertha, she becomes lost in the dark and she wishes to stay in the dark ‘where she belongs’.57 She feels an incredible sense of emptiness and goes back to a state of body/mind before there were words. Antoinette has ‘looked for love in all the wrong places’ and it has broken her.58 In the attic in England we see Antoinette in a dark, cold cave where her
identity is finally eradicated. “There is no looking glass here and I do not know what I am like now.” Antoinette is a ghost of herself.

Esther also loses herself towards the end of The Bell Jar. She ‘practices her new, normal personality’ on Irwin, behaviour she needs to exercise since it has come from the shock therapy rather than from any real personal insight. Yet we also see that, behind the changed façade, Esther is still battling with the same demons. Esther decides to seduce Irwin to spite Buddy, who slept with a waitress over summer, and only after she has seen his study, the room of a mathematician. Her inner masculine still controls her decisions and she remains driven by the need to ‘measure up and achieve according to male-defined standards.’ Esther lies about where she is staying to Doctor Nolan and so is caught up in her same tricks. When Esther feels the blood between her legs, the ‘tradition’ she feels a part of – the blood-stained bridal sheets, the capsules of red ink bestowed upon already deflowered brides – is not part of a feminine tradition, it is part of a line of practices designed to conform to male expectations. Esther is no more aware of the continuing influence of masculine forces to determine how she behaves than she was in the beginning of the novel when she believed everything Buddy told her. Yet, when Esther haemorrhages after losing her virginity she is ‘fixed’ by a male doctor at the hospital, just as she is shocked into recovery in the asylum. With her emotions buried and her life force stopped, Esther loses an element of her truth, her ability to see the whole picture since part of it is always buried: the ugly, the crazy, the denied, the disappeared.

Narrator marks her descent by staying at her childhood lodge while her companions return to the mainland, since to leave with them would be running away and ‘the truth is here.’ She turns the mirror around so it ‘no longer traps me’, a gesture similar to that of Antoinette, removes her clothes in an animalistic gesture, and adorns the blanket her mother used to wear when she experienced bouts of depression. Narrator begins to shed her human identity, yet she is also terrified of losing control, of letting go of the logic she held on to like a crutch: ‘Blank dark, I can see nothing…The fear arrives like waves…it’s my skin that is afraid, rigid…that they should arrive is logical; but logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror.’ She tries to inflict rules on her descent – a focus on the mind just as Esther focuses on the mathematician and getting back at Buddy – but the rules change and morph.

All three women make lists in their heads of their histories, their pasts: Antoinette remembers ‘the grandfather clock…Aunt Cora’s patchwork…orchids…her doll’s house and her mother’s parrot’; Esther remembers ‘the cadavers…and Doreen…the story of the fig-tree and Marco’s diamond…the broken thermometers…the rock that bulged between sky and sea’; Narrator reads through her childhood scrapbook, burns her attempts at drawing
princesses and discards her fake wedding ring in an attempt to eliminate everything from the past. Yet, as Esther remarks, it is not about forgetting the past, covering it up like a kind of snow, it is about acknowledging the landscape of the self.66 Ultimately, though, the protagonists in all three texts repress their pasts and are unable to acknowledge their personal feelings or opinions. In this way, we witness the separation from subjectivity discussed in the previous chapter.

The descent can often be precipitated by a life-changing loss.67 Antoinette loses her culture and her home and, even before she is taken to England, she believes her husband has ruined the West Indies for her. Esther loses her place in the writing workshop and therefore a large part of her identity; and Narrator loses her baby after being coerced into having an abortion, and also loses her father. Murdock explains that this bereavement can open the space for 'dismemberment and descent'.68

Women need to find themselves, Murdock explains, not by 'moving up and into the light like men' – such as Esther's rise up to sit on the doctor's table, or her entrance and acceptance into the asylum meeting room – women must 'move down into the depths of the ground of their being'.69 What Antoinette, Esther and Narrator should experience to move forward in this part of the journey, Murdock explains, is the spiritual experience of 'moving more deeply into self rather than out of self';70 they need to move down into the depths to reclaim the parts of themselves that split off when they were abandoned by their fathers and when their mirrors of the feminine were shattered. Yet, Esther buries everything which she should be uncovering, should be exploring: the snow is numbing and covering her landscape like the trees and grassland which sit waist-high under floodwater; like the rolling lawns of the cemetery in which she 'buries' Joan, which are knee-deep in snow with tombstones rising out of it like smokeless chimneys. Rather than delving into her depths, Esther has buried everything for a temporary recovery.

Although Narrator in Surfacing can be seen to make some way through Murdock's model of the heroine's journey towards yearning to reconnect with the feminine, she remains trapped in the private sphere and, as Adrienne Rich argues, is 'no free woman, no feminist; her way of dealing with male-identification, the struggle with a male culture, has been to numb herself, to believe she can't love'. She remains trapped by her father's solution.71

Murdock explains that a personal descent is a sacred journey but in our culture it is usually categorised as depression that must be medicated, shocked and eliminated as soon as possible.72 Even though shock treatment may have temporarily lifted the bell jar so that Esther can breathe, as she says at the end of the novel, she is still 'blank and stopped as a dead
baby’ in a world that is a ‘bad dream’. Esther’s ‘recovery’ is nothing more than a temporary ‘forgetfulness’, a ‘kind snow’ that has numbed and covered her emotions and behaviour, but not treated them or the sources of her illness. At Joan’s funeral Esther wonders what she is burying – Esther buries her mental illness, like the image of trees and the grassland half submerged beneath water – but there is still the ‘black shadow’: ‘Under the deceptively clean and level slate the topography was the same.’ As Antoinette remarks, ‘you can pretend for a long time, but one day it all falls away and you are alone.’ Esther moves to action too soon because the pain – both for her and her doctors – of holding the tension of the unknown is unbearable. But what this means is that true healing is unable to occur: ‘If we abort our process we never allow ourselves to come full term.’

Thus, in our vertical and horizontal textual analysis we can see that there are correlations with and departures from Murdock’s heroine’s journey, and that there are many similarities between the texts themselves.

**Madness as narrative closure in the heroine’s journey**

Caroline Rody argues that the rebellious heroine, Antoinette, furiously opposes her prescribed fate and is thus ‘our greatest figure for the resisting female figure’; Elaine Showalter states that Esther is ‘reborn at the end of the book’; and Barbara Hill Rigney proclaims that *Surfacing*’s protagonist has surfaced from madness and is finally secure in an undivided self. Yet, by reading the three novels using Murdock’s heroine’s journey, the protagonists can be seen to remain trapped both figuratively by extant power structures, and literally by a dark passage, a mental asylum and by surrounding trees. In the end, the protagonists remain straightjacketed by social constraints and oppressed as victims of patriarchal hegemony. Simply put, Antoinette, Esther and Narrator are more terrified and trapped than traitorous and triumphant – they are prisoners of their descent.

Although there are similarities between the three novels, it is difficult to generalise a ‘madwoman’s journey’ using Murdock’s heroine’s journey as its base. Regardless, there exists across the novels a pattern that reflects madness as narrative closure: the journey of the ‘eternal madwoman’. This leads us to draw a revised version of Murdock’s heroine’s journey, one which is adapted to the specific experiences noted in the three novels and which stops halfway through its progression.
The eternal madwoman’s journey: a crescent-shaped narrative

In the construction of the eternal madwoman’s journey we see a narrative representation of Brontë’s crescent-shaped life – a half life – cut short at the end of a treacherous descent. If we read feminist texts of this era – such as Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Atwood’s *Surfacing* – using the model of the heroine’s journey, we discover that the writers have, in fact, divided their protagonist’s narrative journey in half. Thus, instead of experiencing the personal growth associated with this mythical structure, the women become locked in a descent into darkness. These texts, which sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction, may momentarily imagine a world devoid from the patriarchal expectation of the domestic, yet they ultimately leave their characters with feelings of futility, despair and resignation.

Although previous interpretations have viewed madness as narrative closure as an act of rebellion, by contemplating the novels’ narrative structures as depictions of the heroine’s journey, we are able to illuminate new meanings. Rather than rallying against societal
assumptions of and constraints on women, the eternal madwoman, in the descent phase of a mythic journey, has little personal or political efficacy. Therefore, through this new reading, the protagonists can be seen as more tragic than transformational. This analysis supports the arguments of American feminist theorists (Baym 1984; Jones 1985; Caminero-Santangelo 1998; Donaldson 2002; Chesler 2005) who argue against the madness-as-resistance metaphor. This new reading also begs the question, have we, in our eagerness to deconstruct what we believe to be patriarchal structures and provide alternatives to individual quests, actually prevented our female protagonists from any real character development and, in turn, power?

Rupturing the descent/ascent binary

A powerful narrative binary can be found in the opposition of descent/ascent. Put together, the two halves can be interpreted as the patriarchal plot structure discussed in Chapter 1, and criticised by New French Feminism. Just as Cixous argues that hysteria is a force that dismantles structure, so too do we see, in this model, madness as a force to separate the mythic descent/ascent binary. Thus we see New French Feminism prioritising descent as a way to subvert the supposed masculine expectation of ascent.

In Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure (1993), Alison Booth argues that ‘no point in narrative bears more conventional weight than the ending.’ We see in this eternal madwoman’s journey writers attempting to change the expected path of their protagonists in what Booth calls a writer’s attempt to achieve canon reformation, advocate alternative knowledge paradigms and decentralise sources of authority.

Similarly, Rachel DuPlessis in her text Writing Beyond the Ending (1985) calls this crescent-shaped life a ‘ruptured narrative’: an invented strategy that severs the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction. Overall, as outlined in Chapter 1, DuPlessis’ hypothesis is that the only resolution available to writers of the nineteenth century was marriage or death, and that this fate of female characters expressed attitudes toward family, sexuality and gender. She identifies a number of narrative strategies invented or deployed by female writers of the twentieth century explicitly to delegitimise romance plots and related narratives.

One of the primary approaches is what DuPlessis calls ‘breaking the sequence’; that is, to question the construction of gender in narrative form, a writer must distance the reader from ‘codes of the expected narrative and from patterns of response that had seemed to command universal or natural status.’ DuPlessis explains that the only way she believes authors can reinterpret the lives of the women they depict is to write outside the terms of
the novel's script; a strategy which forces an author to invent a narrative which offers an alternative to individual quests.

Christopher Booker also explores the notion of a narrative's separated hemicycle in his *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (2004). He explains that the ancient Greeks were the first to ask, ‘What is it that prevents a hero or heroine from transformation and brings them so inexorably to catastrophe?’ Their answer created the notion of *hubris*. Yet, Booker explains, we have misunderstood this concept. Rather than being a form of overwhelming pride and reckless arrogance, the term is actually derived from the word *hyper*, meaning ‘over’, which meant ‘stepping over the bounds’, a defiance of the cosmic order, that state of perfect balance which ultimately, as Todorov and Campbell also believe, holds the universe together. Booker takes this notion of *hamartia* and extends it beyond the Tragedy genre to explain narratives that are, by his definition, inverted. He builds on their universal narrative to suggest essential values that are programmed into our unconscious. The essential message implicit in this programming, he argues, is that the central goal of any human life is to achieve the state of perfect balance which we recognise as maturity; and that the central enemy in reaching that goal is our capacity to be held back by the ‘deforming and ultimately self-destructive power of ego-centricity’. Certainly, he is borrowing such notions from Freud and Jung. Yet Booker applies the hypothesis to storytelling over the past two centuries to argue that a fundamental shift has taken place, in many modern stories, in the psychological ‘centre of gravity’ from which they have been told. Booker argues that modern narratives have become detached from their underlying archetypal purpose and that they have taken on a fragmented, subjective nature, becoming ‘more like personal dreams or fantasies’.

This detachment can be seen in our reading of the three novels using the model of the heroine's journey. In the end of *The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* the women get caught in the heroine's journey, unable to move beyond their descent into darkness. They are on thresholds, stuck in a kind of limbo or purgatory. We leave Antoinette roaming the hallways of Thornfield thinking about burning down the house; we leave Esther in a room in the mental asylum not knowing if she has been determined ‘well’ enough to be released; and we leave Narrator standing behind and in between trees as Joe calls her name. The three women are on the brink of action, yet nothing has happened to move them past meeting their shadow self. There does not seem to be, as Caminero-Santangelo argues, any form of effective rebellion in this paralysis.

While Booth, DuPlessis and Booker discuss ruptures in expected narrative structures, I argue that many writers in the twentieth century have, in fact, specifically cut the quest
narrative in half. Yet, as Christiane Makward asserts, this deconstruction is highly problematic, since the theory of rupture is dangerously close to repeating in deconstructive language the traditional assumptions. While texts that end in madness may momentarily envision a world devoid of patriarchal oppression, these writers are finally unable to create it and, in the end, their characters succumb to feelings of futility, despair and resignation. Just as madness as rebellion can actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced it, so too can the narrative structure – this ruptured quest – ultimately trap the woman in eternal silence. Arguably, the narrative structure used to promote madness as closure is an unsuccessful feminist writing device.

A new reading: madness as descent

A fictional character’s narrative decline into darkness is a well-worn path. Campbell calls this trajectory the down-going or *kathodos*; Tzvetan Todorov defines it as a gradual ‘breakdown in equilibrium’, and Charlotte Brontë, as previously discussed, describes it as a ‘crescent-shaped life’. In the previous analyses, we see *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* travelling down the right-hand side of Murdock’s heroine’s journey, yet the characters remain trapped halfway, unable to move beyond the stage of initiation and descent to the goddess. Yet the journey downward usually precedes a journey upward, an up-coming (anados) or a re-establishment of equilibrium. Campbell believes that these two narrative paths (a downward and upward path) are inextricably bound and that together they ‘constitute the totality of the revelation that is life’. Similarly, Todorov argues that the two halves constitute the ‘very definition of narrative’ and that without the second hemicycle there is no character transformation and thus, he believes, no narrative.

Therefore, if we read madness as narrative descent rather than dissent, it inevitably alludes to the possibility of an ascent. As Jung argues, while ‘no one should deny the danger of the descent…every descent is followed by an ascent…enantiodromia.’ In turn, new narrative possibilities open up for the previously trapped character of the eternal madwoman. Consequently, by departing from the established madness-as-rebellion metaphor and questioning the narrative structures that support a character’s resignation to extant power systems, there is potential for more constructive and hopeful resolutions to our feminist stories.

Ultimately, with its focus on the practice of creative writing, this exegesis is concerned with the following questions: How do I move an eternal madwoman character out of her suspended picture of hopelessness and write the personal development necessary to progress
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the narrative past the protagonist’s real or metaphorical confinement? And, how do I transform a female protagonist from an oppressed and marginalised victim of the patriarchal hegemony into a self-actualised, self-loving, self-respecting subject? In the following chapter I answer these questions and enable myself and other authors to write critically and creatively beyond the madness and out of the attic.
Poetics of liminality

3 Ibid., 2.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 11.
8 Ibid., 15.
12 Ibid., 11.
13 Ibid., 12.
15 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 162.
21 Atwood, *Surfacing*, 16.
22 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 56.
27 Ibid., 57.
29 Ibid., 39.
31 Ibid., 29.
32 Ibid., 70.
33 Atwood, *Surfacing*, 18.
34 Ibid., 22.
35 Ibid., 62.
37 For the purpose of this exegesis I will name Antoinette's husband Rochester, though he is never named in Rhys' text.
38 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 58.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 53.
46 Atwood, *Surfacing*, 127.
47 Ibid., 46.
48 Murdock, *The Heroine’s Journey*, 68.
49 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 68.
50 Obeah is a term used in the West Indies to refer to folk magic, sorcery.
52 Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 73.
53 Atwood, *Surfacing*, 89.
54 Ibid., 36.
55 Ibid., 2.
56 Ibid., 109.
60 Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 216.
63 Ibid., 168.
64 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 123.
66 Ibid., 227.
68 Ibid., 88.
69 Ibid., 89.
70 Ibid.
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72 Ibid., 90.
73 Plath, The Bell Jar, 227.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 226.
76 Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, 83.
77 Murdock, The Heroine’s Journey, 108.
84 DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending, x.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 20.
87 Ibid., 6.
88 Ibid., xi.
89 Christopher Booker, The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories (New York: Continuum, 2004), 569.
90 Ibid., 339.
91 Ibid., 347.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., 348.
Poetics of liminality: the eternal madwoman as narrative captive

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost…
So bitter is it, death is little more.
—Dante

Reading the madwoman's narrative against the model of the heroine's journey reveals an abrupt closure. In the previous chapter, we leave Esther, Antoinette and Narrator trapped at the lowest part of their narrative descent. In this chapter I aim to answer, from both a psychological (character's psyche) and narratological (external to character) perspective, the question of what keeps the madwoman trapped halfway through the heroine's journey. Using Jungian psychology and the concept of liminal spaces, I will examine the specific place at which the eternal madwoman character becomes trapped. In turn, I will outline why her character growth and narrative trajectory have been discontinued.

The eternal madwoman's encounter with darkness

The relationship between the mythic journey and Jungian psychology in many ways began when Joseph Campbell found Jung's fundamental structures and stages in numerous myths from disparate times and regions. From this realisation, Campbell created a standardised language, which made it possible to uncover and communicate the underlying archetypal structure of these narrative traditions. One of Campbell's most overt uses of Jungian psychology is the concept of meeting the shadow, which he describes as finding oneself in the belly of the whale. Campbell found that the image of the dark womb is a recurrent theme in storytelling.
'The Eskimo of Bering Strait’ tells of the trickster-hero Raven who darts into the belly of the whale; ‘The Zulus’ tells a story of two children and their mother who are swallowed by an elephant; the Irish hero Finn MacCool was swallowed by a monster; the little German girl Red Ridinghood was swallowed by a wolf; Polynesian hero Maui was swallowed by his great-great-grandmother; and the whole Greek pantheon, with the sole exception of Zeus, was swallowed by its father, Kronos. This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation.

Variations of Campbell’s journey also reference the belly of the whale or dark passage. Frankel defines it as a ‘descent into darkness’, Hudson calls it the ‘crisis’, and Vogler calls it the ‘inmost cave’:

Seeker, enter the Inmost Cave… The way grows narrow and dark. You must go alone on hands and knees as you feel the earth press close around you. You can hardly breathe. Suddenly you come out into the deepest chamber and find yourself face-to-face with a towering figure, a menacing Shadow composed of all your doubts and fears… Here, in this moment, is the chance to win all or die. No matter what you came for, it’s Death that now stares back at you. Whatever the outcome of the battle, you are about to taste death and it will change you.

As early as 1912, Jung used the term ‘shadow side to the psyche’ to characterise ‘unrecognised desires’ and ‘repressed portions of the personality’. In 1917, in his essay ‘On the Psychology of the Unconscious’, Jung speaks of the personal shadow as the ‘other’ in us: the unconscious personality of the same sex, the reprehensible inferior, the other that embarrasses or shames us. ‘By shadow I mean the “negative” side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious.’ It is important to note, though, that Jung did not mean ‘negative’ in the purely moral sense. Jungian analyst Marie Louise von Franz tells of an occasion when Jung, impatient with fellow psychologists, dismissed a nit-picking conversation about whether the shadow is illicit: ‘This is all nonsense. The shadow is simply the whole unconscious.’ Jung often wanted to clarify that the shadow is not evil. ‘The shadow’, he explained, ‘is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted, and awkward; not wholly bad.’ He battled against contradictory understandings of the shadow and still the definitions are numerous. For the purposes of this exegesis, I use a definition developed from Jung and
outlined by von Franz: ‘in the first stage of the approach to the unconscious, the shadow is simply a mythological name for all that is within me of which I cannot directly know’.

To the ego, the shadow may appear at first as frightening or evil, since it represents what the ego has repressed. But with its acceptance, the shadow reveals itself as the helpful friend, helping to bring to consciousness those elements of the unconscious, especially eros, necessary to the wholeness and health of the self. Yet, unassimilated, the shadow figure becomes evil, a constellation of all that is demonic in the dark side of the psyche, which in itself is ethically neutral.

In a narrative sense then, the meeting with the shadow is crucial to the development of the self and therefore of a character. The shadow is the guardian of the threshold who can lead the way to selfhood. Jung himself writes that

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our life is like the course of the sun. In the morning it gains continually in strength until it reaches the zenith-heat of high noon. Then comes the enantiodromia: the steady forward movement no longer denotes an increase, but a decrease, in strength... The transition from morning to afternoon means a revaluation of earlier values. There comes the urgent need to appreciate the value of the opposite of our former ideals, to perceive the error of our former truth, and to feel how much antagonism and even hatred lay in what, until now, had passed for love.
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Here, Jung seems to describe a form of descent much like the heroine’s journey and similar to that of the three female protagonists explored in the previous chapter. As Campbell notes, entering into a dark sphere on the journey to rebirth is a common image in writing. In reading *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing*, and through the heroine’s journey, we see the protagonists entering into this darkened stage. Yet, there seems to be two main differences between the shadow stories Campbell identifies and that of the madwoman. First, rather than being ‘swallowed’ by something, the women are trapped within walls – an attic, an asylum, tall trees. Second, whereas Campbell’s examples emerge from their confinement, the eternal madwoman remains in darkness: immobile at the threshold, poised to move forward but stationary, trapped within what seems like a constant pause.
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Identifying the eternal madwoman’s shadow

In *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, Robert Bly describes Jung’s shadow as the ‘long bag we drag behind us’.\(^{15}\) When we are one or two years old, Bly explains, we are a complete person. But one day we notice that our parents do not like certain parts of that person, saying things like, ‘Can’t you sit still’, ‘Don’t be a cry baby’, or ‘Don’t talk back at me’. Behind us, Bly believes, we have an invisible bag, and to keep our parents’ love we hide the parts of us our parents do not like. By the time we go to school our bag is quite large, and then our teachers and our friends encourage us to add to it. Bly argues that we spend the first twenty or so years stuffing the bag and then the rest of our lives trying to go through it. It is the contents of this bag that are our shadow.

The eternal madwoman has also spent her life stuffing the bag and in turn this load burdens Antoinette, Esther and Narrator. In the previous chapter we see the protagonists’ mothers and their male partners spurn specific parts of their personalities: the ‘feminine’. It appears that four main personality traits are deemed unacceptable to the people the women love and these are therefore put in each woman’s ‘bag’: creativity (Antoinette’s love of nature, Esther’s writing and Narrator’s drawing); sensitivity (all three mothers discourage an awareness of one’s feelings); sensuality (Rochester, Buddy and Narrator’s ex each use sex as a form of manipulation and each woman is punished for desiring sex); and the maternal (Antoinette wishes to look after Rochester yet he rejects her, Esther cannot choose between motherhood or her career, and Narrator realises that she had an abortion). These three character traits are, as Murdock points out, often associated with femininity and with what Jung calls the anima.\(^{16}\) While the protagonists are rejected by the feminine (represented by their mothers) at the outset of their journeys, they also repress the feminine (or anima) as a consequence of these traits being deemed unacceptable by the other characters in their lives.

This initial rejection and repression causes further disconnection from the feminine. Deena Metzger suggests that another way to understand a character’s shadow is to ask the question, who or what does the character hate in an irrational way?\(^{17}\) In the previous chapter, we see the three protagonists disliking anything considered feminine. Antoinette dislikes orchids; Esther separates herself from the women in her hotel; and Narrator criticises women for being vain, whining, or submissive. In these examples of repeated reproval, we see the protagonists distance themselves from the anima.

Therefore, in the three texts, we see the protagonists rejecting the anima due to their loved ones’ disapproval of ‘feminine’ attributes, which then causes the women to dislike
those traits in other people. With this understanding then, we can look at the development of madness in the three novels with new insight. I would like to suggest that it is at the point at which the three women are forced to look into their bags that they descend into darkness: Antoinette battles with her repressed sexuality; Esther, when rejected from the writing course, is forced to face the possibility of motherhood; and Narrator must accept her role in the abortion of her unborn child.

The eternal madwoman and projection

Metzger’s question provides further clarification of the madwoman’s journey. Whereas each protagonist’s repression of the anima is considered her shadow, each protagonist’s hatred of the ‘masculine’ or animus is defined as her projection. Although an individual’s shadow is the same sex as them, an individual’s projection is a ‘contrasexual figure’. Here we meet the anima of a man, or in the eternal madwoman’s case, the animus of a woman; corresponding archetypes whose autonomy and unconsciousness explain the stubbornness of their projections. Typically Jung personifies these images: the most macho of men will be harbouring a shy little girl inside him; the woman may be ‘cohabiting psychologically with the figure of a violent hoodlum’.

Thus, if we apply Metzger’s question to the three novels we discover that hiding within Antoinette is a patriarchal white man, within Esther is an arrogant white doctor, and within Narrator is a loud and ignorant American man. Virginia Woolf, writing around the time that Jung was discovering the anima, also senses that many memorable female figures in literature are not wholly convincing as portraits of actual women. She hypothesises that male authors are portraying images of their own inner compensatory idea of femininity, in both its negative and positive dimensions, under the guise of creating fictional characters:

It is becoming daily more evident that Lady Macbeth, Cordelia, Ophelia, Clarissa, Dora, Diana, Helen and the rest are by no means what they present to be. Some are plainly men in disguise; others represent what men would like to be, or are conscious of not being. To cast out and incorporate a person of the opposite sex all that we miss in ourselves and desire in the universe and detest in humanity is a deep and universal instinct on the part of both men and women. Rochester is as great a travesty of the truth about men as Cordelia [the saintly self-sacrificing daughter in King Lear] is of the truth about women.
In distinguishing between the truth about the sexes and the ‘travesty of the truth’ one finds in gender stereotypes, whether in the positive terms of idealising images or in the negative terms of scapegoating, Woolf expresses in ordinary language what Jung, as a psychologist, expresses in his descriptions of the anima and animus. Though, one might question whether all fictional representations of the anima and animus are untruthful, since it could be the truth of the portrayal of these characters that accounts for their popularity.

Yet, there is a difference between a developed and an undeveloped animus in a woman. In the case of the madwoman, she could be said to have an undeveloped animus since, as we determined in Chapter 2, there is an absence of any father figure. Interestingly M. Esther Harding, one of Jung’s earliest students, argues that the undeveloped animus is likely to appear as a group. Therefore, if we look at the groups the eternal madwoman characters illogically hate we can determine their projections. Antoinette detests the British patriarchy, Esther hates 1950s American culture, and Narrator hates Americans.

As a postcolonial work, Wide Sargasso Sea indicts England’s exploitative colonial empire and aligns its sympathies with the plight of the black people of the Caribbean. However, the ex-slaves despise Antoinette and her family because they are white Creoles. Although the Emancipation Act has freed the slaves by the time of Antoinette’s childhood, compensation has not been granted to the island’s black population, breeding hostility and resentment between servants and their white employers. The text opens with Antoinette’s alienation from both black Jamaicans and white slave owners. As the text progresses, we understand Antoinette’s fear of the black Jamaicans, but we also witness her hatred of the British patriarchy.

Esther’s sense of alienation from the world around her comes from the expectations placed upon her as a young woman living in 1950s America. Esther’s main hatred is directed at this culture and the people who represent it, such as Buddy and Buddy’s mother. She feels pulled between her desire to write and the pressure she feels to settle down and start a family. While Esther’s intellectual talents earn her prizes, scholarships and respect, many people assume that she most wants to become a wife and mother. The girls at her college mock her studiousness and only show her respect when she begins dating a handsome and well-liked boy. Her relationship with Buddy earns her mother’s approval, and everyone expects Esther to marry him. Buddy assumes that Esther will drop her poetic ambitions as soon as she becomes a mother, and Esther also assumes that she cannot be both mother and poet.

Atwood packs Surfacing with images of Americans invading and ruining Canada. The Americans install missile silos, pepper the village with tourist cabins, leave trash everywhere
and kill for sport. Atwood depicts American expansion as a result of psychological and cultural infiltration. Narrator calls Americans a ‘brain disease’, linking American identity to behaviours rather than nationality. To Narrator, an American is anyone who commits senseless violence, loves technology or over-consumes. Atwood depicts American expansion as destructive and a corruptive psychological influence.

In these three novels, the protagonists maintain their hatred towards figures of patriarchal oppression. None of the characters entertain the possibility that the attributes they hate in others may be parts of themselves since ‘what we are unconscious of in ourselves is likely to be projected onto others.’ The characters can be said to remain unconscious of not only their projections, but also the fact that their projections could tell them something about themselves.

**The effect of shadow and projection omission**

Denial of one's shadow and projections prevents the process of individuation. This, as can be seen in Figure 1 and the subsequent journey figures, is the main objective of the second part or the ascent of the heroine's journey. Jung explains that the consequence of this ignorance is ‘falling victim to the shadow’ and then feeling constantly overwhelmed by confusion and paralysed by indecision. The impact of such embroilment with the shadow produces ‘a standstill that hampers moral decisions and makes convictions ineffective…tenebrositas, chaos, melancholia.’ Consequently our heroines are unable to emerge from the dark.

In the texts we see Antoinette in the attic, bemused as to how she got there; Esther envisioning her prospects as rotten figs left to fall from a tree; and Narrator as indecisive about whether to walk forward towards her search party. Furthermore, as slaves to their shadows, the three protagonists are unable to understand that their shadows and projections are in fact repressed parts of themselves. Without this awareness, moving past their journey’s descent and therefore on towards an ascent is impossible.

Jung, towards the end of his life, warned people trapped at this stage of their journey: ‘One cannot avoid the shadow unless one remains neurotic, and as long as one is neurotic one has omitted the shadow’ [emphasis in original]. In Jung's words we see described the eternal madwoman, trapped in darkness, in descent, in neurosis. This state of personal and narrative ambiguity is evocative of the cultural phenomenon of the liminal space.
The eternal madwoman’s attic as liminal space

Arnold Van Gennep defines the term liminality in his 1909 *Rites de Passage*. The most prominent type of *rites de passage* tends to accompany critical moments of transition, which all societies ritualise and publicly mark with suitable observances to acknowledge the significance of the individual; these are important times such as birth, puberty, marriage, pregnancy and death. Van Gennep argues that all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*) and aggregation. This transition can be seen to display a similar trajectory to that of the heroine’s journey, in which there is a separation from the feminine, a margin (threshold) at the base of the descent and then an aggregation, or as Murdock calls it, integration.

![Diagram of the heroine’s journey and rites of passage](image-url)
The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behaviour and signifies detachment of the individual, either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a set of cultural conditions (a state). During the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the passenger) is ambiguous; she passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase, the passage is consummated, and the subject is in a stable state once more. In anthropology, liminality is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete.31

It is this marginal stage that is of particular importance to this chapter and the exegesis. Also pertinent is the idea of rites de passage. Though not specifically outlined as this in her work, Murdock's model and the model constructed thus far as the eternal madwoman's journey, certainly represent individuals moving through a rite of passage. In Wide Sargasso Sea this rite is getting married; in The Bell Jar it is a change in career; and in Surfacing it is pregnancy and the subsequent loss of that child. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their identity and a new way of life. Each of the characters in the three novels structures their identity around their external boon of success: Antoinette and her marriage, Esther and her writing career, and Narrator and her pregnancy.

The eternal madwoman as liminal persona

In 1967 Turner published The Forest of Symbols, which includes an essay entitled 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage'. Within this article he introduces the term 'liminal personae' (threshold people): those who live in an ambiguous world where one's sense of identity dissolves, to some extent, and brings about disorientation. These individuals are trapped in a stage of darkness, unable to move forward in their personal journey. Turner argues that we should view this period of margin or liminality as an 'interstructural situation'.32 In such situations, the very structure of someone's life is temporarily suspended. This notion provides an important development for this exegesis since I have previously argued that the twentieth-century madwoman's text aimed to dismantle structure and, in fact, cut an established structure into two halves. Within this description we hear echoes of l'écriture féminine battle against binaries and their support for the chaos that unravels structure. Thus we see the three protagonists, and subsequently our eternal madwoman character, as not
only denying her shadow and projections, but also as being trapped in a period of margin during an important rite of passage.

I suggest that eternal madwomen can therefore be defined as liminal personae; or, in another way, that the eternal madwoman can be defined as a liminal persona. This individual, Turner explains, is the ‘structurally indefinable’: she is at once no longer classified and not yet classified. Turner’s description of the liminal persona’s condition as ‘one of ambiguity and paradox’, of confusion of ‘all customary categories’, echoes Jung’s explanation of an individual in denial of her shadow and projections.33

Another similarity can be found in Turner’s description of an individual who is denied aggregation (the final stage of rites of passage), which mirrors Jung’s account of people who are unable to achieve individuation. When aggregation or the reintegration process does not take place, liminality becomes permanent, which can also become very dangerous. This is the darker side of liminality, which may produce ‘undifferentiated monsters’ who have not had the necessary rituals conducted when they have experienced a major stage in life. They become the unsavoury agonistic side of the community, the dark mirror of humanity. This ‘dissolution of differences’ encourages the ‘proliferation of the double bind’.34 Turner also suggests that a liminal state may become ‘fixed’, referring to a situation in which the suspended character of social life takes on a more permanent character. The idea of a fixed state in a rite of passage has been defined as ‘permanent liminality’ by sociologist Arpad Szakolczai.35

In this concept of permanent liminality we see mirrored my concept of narrative captivity. By defining the eternal madwoman as a liminal persona, we are also provided with ways in which we can release her from permanent liminality and in turn narrative captivity.

Narrative captivity: why the madwoman remains unresolved

By utilising Jung’s theories of the shadow and projection, and Turner’s cultural construct of liminality, we are able to theorise that the eternal madwoman’s narrative captivity is caused by the character’s inability to acknowledge her shadow, withdraw her projections or experience the necessary societal rituals for her rite of passage. Therefore, analyses included in this chapter and previous chapters allow us to elaborate three possible reasons why the eternal madwoman remains unresolved:
— *Omission of shadow.* ‘Without the realisation of the shadow all real further psychological progress is blocked.’

— *Maintenance of projections.* She is unable to be conscious of her projections and therefore cannot take back consciously what she still casts out unconsciously onto the outside world. She is therefore not able to accept responsibility for her own inner turmoil.

— *Absence of ritual.* The character does not experience the necessary societal rituals necessary to move her through the rite of passage.

In the entrapment of the madwoman at the narrative stage of descent (see Fig. 5), we see the woman as unable to move past the chaos, to transcend the emotion. Indeed, she is unable to integrate all the aspects of what are referred to as masculine and feminine attributes so as to become a whole individual. Rather than an act of rebellion, as many current American feminist theorists suggest, I argue that madness in literature simply reiterates a doctrine of gendered behaviour. Ending a narrative with the female protagonist locked within this behaviour does so even more. Jung himself tells us we have ‘dealt the devil…[no] serious blow by calling him neurosis.’

I argue, therefore, that the narrative structure used by writers of the twentieth-century madwoman, what I am calling the eternal madwoman, encourages its protagonists to become trapped in a state of psychological and cultural stasis. I would also like to argue that there is little ability for rebellion or resistance in this state of permanent liminality. How, then, do we construct a narrative that moves the character of the eternal madwoman past this confinement and towards a more hopeful and self-empowering closure? And, consequently, how do we ‘resolve’ the madwoman in a fictional text?

At this point it is important to explain the link between releasing the madwoman from the attic and Caminero-Santangelo’s ‘resolving the madwoman.’ I argue, with this exegesis, that it is in fact writing the eternal madwoman’s release from narrative captivity that provides the possible symbolic resolution of a madwoman in a fictional text, and that it is the reconstruction outlined in the following chapter, which enables a writer to contribute to the transformation of gender ideologies.
Resolving the madwoman

Figure 5: The eternal madwoman’s narrative captivity

- Madwoman becomes trapped here in a stage of permanent liminality due to a resistance to acknowledge her shadow or withdraw her projections, and also due to the absence of any ritual for her rite of passage.

- Alerting to feelings of spiritual aridity: death when rite of passage disappoints.

- Healing of the wounded masculine.

- Initiation and descent to the goddess – permanent liminality.

- Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine.

- Healing the mother/daughter split.

- Absent father and projection of animus.

- Identification with the masculine.

- Enjoying the external boon of success (or a rite of passage).

- Rejection by the mother.

- Repression of the feminine, which becomes her shadow.

- Mining the wounded masculine.

- Integration of masculine and feminine.
2 Ibid., 248
3 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Atwood, *Surfacing*, 123.
24 Ibid., 41.
26 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 32.
Poetics of reconstruction: resolving the eternal madwoman through writing

To understand is always an ascending movement; that is why comprehension ought always to be concrete. (One is never got out of the cave, one comes out of it.)

—Simone Weil

I suggest in this chapter that by determining a creative writing practice that is able to release the eternal madwoman from the ‘descent to the goddess’ stage of the heroine’s journey, we will be able to respond to the questions raised by Caminero-Santangelo in Chapter 1: ‘How can transformation of the ideologies of gender (rather than just resistance to them) take place?’ and, ‘How can the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts contribute to such transformation?’

Murdock’s model of the heroine’s journey does not explain, specifically, what must take place within a character to move her on from the base of descent to the beginning of ascent. I believe this to be a significant gap in a tool to be used by the writer concerned with such resolution – absent information that is important not only for writing a counter-narrative to the madwoman in the attic, but for any practice of creative writing which follows, or uses as its inspiration, the structure of this journey.

Yet, just as reading madness in literature as descent rather than dissent allows us immediately to point to a possible ascent, so too does the identification of the causes of her narrative captivity allude to catalysts for her release. If the omission of shadow, maintenance of projections and absence of ritual preclude her from narrative ascent, then we can hypothesise that it is the antithesis of these attributes that will enable us to write the eternal madwoman’s narrative release.
The eternal madwoman’s individuation and aggregation

The word individuation comes from the Latin word *individuous*, meaning ‘undivided’, and is used by Jung to describe the process by which different aspects of the immature psyche become integrated into a well-functioning whole. Specifically, the process of individuation requires recognition and assimilation of the shadow and the withdrawal of its projections. Understanding the shadow, Jung argues, can ‘act like a life-saver’. It integrates the unconscious – reincorporating the shadow into the personality, producing a stronger, wider consciousness than before. Acknowledging the shadow is a ‘launching-pad for further individuation’, without it, further withdrawal of projections and recognition of the animus is impossible. Therefore, the process of individuation can be identified as part of the antidote to the causes of the madwoman’s narrative captivity.

It is also important to respond to my previous identification of the eternal madwomen as liminal persona and the subsequent denial of the character’s aggregation. During the phase of aggregation, Turner explains, the person ‘re-enters society’, and assumes ‘a new identity’ that needs to be acknowledged, understood and accepted by either a culture, a community or an influential cultural figure. Therefore, for the eternal madwoman to be released, it is important that she experiences the societal recognition necessary for the reincorporation phase. This type of reintegration is ‘only possible after the liminal has been accepted as a marginal experience’ that leads to a new, ‘transformative relationship with the social structures of the culture’. Just as reading *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* using the model of the heroine’s journey uncovered attributes specific to the eternal madwoman’s journey, so too does the analysis reveal particular ways in which the character must undertake individuation and aggregation if she is to be released from narrative captivity.

The key: unlocking maternal agency, unlocking the attic

This exegesis argues that the madwoman referred to by Caminero-Santangelo in her call for resolution is an eternal madwoman created by twentieth-century feminist texts’ rebellion against the narrative closure dichotomy of domesticity or death. This resistance also causes a separation between the female protagonist in this fiction and any form of agency, love or empowerment. There is a rupture between descent and ascent, the private and the public, and woman from the domestic. The writers have, so to speak, thrown the baby out with the bath water. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, there can be, in the practice of creative writing, a
Poetics of reconstruction

way to resolve the usual relationship between the patriarchal hegemony and the construct of domesticity. This chapter therefore aims to reinstate the importance of the metaphorical baby whilst staying true to feminist objectives.

I argue that recent approaches to maternal agency (Andrea O’Reilly 2010; Marie Porter 2010; and Judith Kegan Gardiner 1995) enable us to respond both to the need for the eternal madwoman to undergo the processes of individuation and aggregation, and to the counter-narrative’s aim to transform gender ideologies.9 As defined in the recent Encyclopedia of Motherhood (2010), maternal agency is the notion that mothering can be a site of empowerment and a location for social change for women. It also draws on the idea that agency provides someone with the ability and power to influence and control her own life.10 However, these maternal scholars argue that the concept of the ‘maternal’ does not need to be restricted to a biological mother, mothers or, indeed, women. This exegesis thus focuses on extending the definition of ‘maternal’ beyond ‘motherhood’ and therefore the constraints of biological determinism.

Maternal agency includes two important components: the maternal and agency. I have chosen to use Gardiner’s definition of maternal as behaviour that is guided by an orientation to care for the self and others in a way that empowers.11 When defining agency, Gardiner explains that in individualist models, when agency is attached to the ‘self’ and is conceived of as an element of psychological being, it is said to be an ‘individual’s capacity for self-determination realised through decision and action.’12 I have chosen to define ‘self-determination’ as the power or ability to make a decision for oneself without influence from outside. Since ‘relationality’ is the key concept to feminist thinking about maternity,13 the definition of maternal agency for the purposes of this exegesis transcends essentialist terms. That is, as Jeremiah argues, rather than pertaining to actual mothers, maternal agency is, rather, a figuration that may serve as a paradigm of relating to others. This concept of ‘relationality’ has also, interestingly, recently been linked to the process of individuation.14

I combine the approaches of Hirsch, O’Reilly and Gardiner to define maternal agency as an individual’s capacity for self-determination realised through actions ‘not only of literal mothers but of any and all people’15 that ‘grant legitimacy to one’s feelings,’16 refuse the role of victim,17 and that are guided by an ‘orientation to care for self and others in a way that empowers.’18 This kind of agency can be a powerful form of development during which there is a unification of the unconscious and conscious, resulting in a deeper responsibility to support, serve others, and foster peace, wholeness and integrity in the world.19 It is this form of maternal agency that Judith Butler argues holds the ‘possibilities of gender transformation’20 and in turn
 masturbation and the transformation of ideologies we require to provide an answer to Caminero-Santangelo’s questions. Ultimately, it is the denial of the maternal that manifests itself through repression and projection and that maintains the eternal madwoman’s narrative captivity. Therefore, for the eternal madwoman, the process of enacting maternal agency can be defined as one of individuation and aggregation.21

For this reason, the previous framework of the eternal madwoman has been transformed so that the initial ‘repression of the feminine’ is the more specific and relevant ‘repression of the maternal’. Certainly this repression is represented in the analysis of The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea and Surfacing, as is demonstrated in Chapter 2, and is parallel to the necessary maternal agency. Yet, in a narrative sense, what would need to occur for Antoinette, Esther and Narrator to enact maternal agency? Or, in other words – when Antoinette is standing, candle in hand; when Esther is standing at the entrance to the asylum meeting room; when Narrator is standing watching Joe and the search crew – what could happen in that precise moment to move the character forward towards the possibility of narrative ascent?

Though Murdock’s model of the heroine’s journey does not explain how a protagonist moves from descent to the goddess to her ascent, Campbell’s original monomyth does refer to the ‘keys’ to the hero’s release as being the ‘termination of the old eon and initiation of the new’.22 This change in perspective, he argues, must be the result of the cataclysm of a crisis.23 Therefore, for the protagonist to be shifted from embodying emotional stasis to enacting maternal agency, a sudden upheaval must occur which creates the desire for self-determination. Since I have defined self-determination as the power or ability to make a decision for oneself without influence from outside, I would like to term the required upheaval the ‘Demeter decision’.

In the tradition of the myth of Demeter, where a mother negotiates the part freedom of her daughter by threatening a barren land, the Demeter decision is a choice the eternal madwoman must make which precipitates maternal agency. With this decision I aim to create, not only a catalyst for self-determination in the exegesis and associated novel, but also a decision that theorists and creative writers might consider in and for their own work.

I suggest, therefore, that to release the eternal madwoman from narrative captivity through the practice of creative writing, the protagonist must be presented with a Demeter decision, which motivates her to grant legitimacy to her feelings, refuse the role of victim, and care for herself and others in a way that empowers. Thus, Antoinette, rather than burning down the English manor that has held her captive, must realise she has the ability to walk out of the building and away from her captor. Esther must understand that the psychiatric institution is merely enabling her to bury the issues with which she must deal, and therefore
she must leave the asylum. Narrator must decide to leave the island, and therefore to start her journey to integrate her private and public spheres.

These realisations could be as a result of any number of decisions, but in each of the textual scenarios I believe that providing examples illuminates the narrative possibilities. For example, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Grace Poole could become terminally ill and the house could be empty. Antoinette might have to decide whether to leave and get help or to leave Grace to die. In *The Bell Jar* Esther could be told she is not well enough to leave and in turn have to decide whether she will stay or leave. Narrator could be faced with a health scare with the baby, causing her to have to decide whether or not she will stay on the island or leave to seek help. This embodiment of maternal agency enables the eternal madwoman to realise in that threshold moment that there is hope for a more positive resolution, and that only she has the power to effect that change.

At this stage of the heroine's journey, Murdock speaks of 'taking a cap off your heart'.

In this description we see similarities with the need to grant legitimacy to one's feelings, since 'feelings that are not acknowledged do not go away, they go underground and bind us to the past'. Interestingly, Murdock believes a woman at this stage 'drags her bag of bones behind her', a close parallel to Bly's description of the 'long bag'. In this sense, it is important for the protagonist to acknowledge her emotions and true feelings. The ultimate goal of this stage is for the protagonist to feel as though she is enough as she is – that 'everything I need is within me', and therefore to be forced by the Demeter decision to embody Gardiner's self-determination. This threshold decision creates the desire for self-determination and unlocks maternal agency.

By enacting maternal agency, the eternal madwoman can unlock the confining walls of her narrative captivity and the confines of being an oppressed victim of patriarchal hegemony and take the necessary ascending step towards becoming a self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subject. Although, as O'Reilly states, this ascendance does not necessarily mean success, but rather enables the maternal protagonist to begin the 'struggle' towards empowered maternalism.

**The second crescent: writing the ascent**

Once the Demeter decision, which encourages the enactment of maternal agency, has released the eternal madwoman from narrative captivity, there remain necessary steps for her ascent. I propose that a combination of Murdock's model of the heroine's journey, Turner's notion
of aggregation, and O’Reilly’s components of maternal empowerment – agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity – can enable a writer to respond to Caminero-Santangelo’s questions and construct a feminist narrative for the twenty-first century.

The following steps will be explored in detail throughout the chapter. I argue that this combination balances the elements of the descent identified in Chapter 2.

— **Authority: finding the maternal mentor.** The protagonist must find a mentor to understand, accept and acknowledge the protagonist’s new identity and role within society. This process allows the protagonist to learn from an experienced guide and develop her own authority.

— **Autonomy: acknowledgement of shadow.** The protagonist must come to be able to say of her shadow, as Prospero says of the monster Caliban at the end of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, ‘this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine’.28

— **Authenticity: withdrawal of projections.** The protagonist must take back consciously what she originally cast out and accept responsibility for her own inner turmoil.

— **Empowered maternalism: integration of private and public spheres.** The protagonist must assimilate elements of her private and public life so that they are integrated and so that both halves are as important and respected as the other.

These stages work as a counter-narrative to the maternal descent (seen in Fig. 6). The finding of a maternal mentor and subsequent authority balances the enjoyment of the external boons of success; autonomy, which allows the acknowledgement of the shadow, balances identification with the masculine; authenticity, which allows the withdrawal of projections, balances the projection of the animus; and the empowered maternalism to integrate the public and private spheres balances the repression of the maternal.

**Authority: finding the maternal mentor**

Murdock argues that the most important element for a protagonist to begin her ascent is a positive feminine individual – that the heroine needs to be able to accept help, and to accept it from the right person: ‘The Heroine needs someone to help her make her ascent from the Underworld (like Ninshubur in the myth of Inanna – Inanna asked Ninshubur for her help in making her return). The fictional heroine needs a friend or mentor she can trust to help her cross the return threshold’.29
Since it has been determined that maternal agency unlocks the eternal madwoman’s attic, I define a new type of narrative guide, that is, the ‘maternal mentor’. The maternal mentor is similar to Vogler’s ‘mentor’, who comes from The Odyssey. Mentor, in Greek mythology, was a close friend of Odysseus and was given the responsibility of looking after Odysseus’s son Telemachus together with Eumaeus. He was a trusted counsellor, in whose pretext Athena became the protector and educator of Telemachus. In the anatomy of the human psyche, Vogler explains, mentors represent the higher self – the wiser and nobler part of us. This figure also represents a protagonist’s highest aspirations and is who the heroine would like to become if she persists up through the ascent.

Although Vogler describes different types of mentors who serve various purposes at different parts of a narrative, the eternal madwoman’s mentor is primarily a source of wisdom, gifts and conscience, and aids the eternal madwoman in overcoming her fears. Since the mentor embodies the goal of the narrative ascent, the maternal mentor must exude empowered maternalism, as will be defined later in this chapter.

The maternal mentor, or ‘wise old man or woman’, enables the protagonist to develop authority, defined here as ‘an influence exerted because of recognised knowledge or expertise’. By sharing her experience and knowledge with the protagonist, the maternal mentor imparts the ‘gift’ of authority. Gift giving has often been part of the role of the mentor in mythology and is referred to as his or her ‘donor function’. In Propp’s dissection of Russian fairy tales, he observes that donor characters give magical presents to characters, but usually only after the heroes have passed a test of some kind. The Demeter decision is able to act not only as a catalyst, but also as a sign that the protagonist is ready to receive the knowledge of the maternal mentor.

Autonomy: acknowledgement of shadow
The heroine’s journey begins with the separation from the feminine and, in the construction of the eternal madwoman’s journey, we found that, specifically, the eternal madwoman is rejected by her mother. Murdock explains that if a woman’s psyche ‘has taken up’ her mother in a negative or destructive way (as the eternal madwoman character has) she splits from her maternal nature and has ‘much work to do to reclaim it’. One way of seeking to heal this wound is by renewing or transforming this initial relationship. Yet, whether the daughter is able to do this or not, the most important part of this stage, Murdock argues, is the reclaiming of the negative mother within ourselves. As explained previously, the ‘negative mother’ construct that is part of the daughter-centric narrative is
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referred to here and throughout the exegesis as a socially and psychologically damaging
construct and not as a reality.

Interestingly, Murdock actually refers to this return as ‘reclaiming the madwoman’. To
‘take back the dark’, the character must reclaim repressed parts of herself (seen as the shadow
in earlier sections if the exegesis); the mean, cruel, withholding, manipulative, jealous and
greedy attributes that she has learned to repress and also to associate with her mother are
in fact part of herself. This stage is therefore, in Jungian terms, her acknowledgement of the
shadow. Taking back the dark for the character means ‘moving beyond shame to reclaim
all of the feelings she hid from herself, no matter how frightening, so that she can find her
authentic voice’.39

As outlined in Chapter 3, it is important to note that Jung did not define the shadow
as ‘negative’ in the purely moral sense. Jungian analyst Marie Louise von Franz explains that
the shadow is simply the ‘whole unconscious’.40 As previously explained, for the purpose of
this exegesis I will use a definition developed from Jung and outlined by von Franz: ‘In the
first stage of the approach to the unconscious, the shadow is simply a mythological name for
all that is within me of which I cannot directly know’.41

In the journey’s ascent, I link this acknowledgement of the shadow to O’Reilly’s
concept of autonomy, which I define as ‘personal freedom gained from self esteem’.42
Influential women’s rights activist Gloria Steinem has written extensively on the concept
of self-esteem and connects external revolution to an internal revolution of spirit and
consciousness. In many ways, the journey I construct in this chapter is also a direct
response to Steinem’s argument for the transformational qualities of self-esteem and for
‘thinking about ourselves in circles, with the goal as completion…progress through mutual
support and connectedness’.43 I suggest that this is an essential part of the resolution of
the eternal madwoman. While the protagonist has repressed the maternal at the outset
of her journey, she also represses the feminine (or anima) as a consequence of these
traits being deemed unacceptable by the other characters in her life. By acknowledging
this shadow, the protagonist is able to achieve the autonomy that Steinem describes as
‘trusting our very selves, despite the educational and societal pressures that may denigrate’
the maternal experience.44
In a narrative sense then, the meeting with the shadow is crucial to the development of the self and therefore of a character. The shadow is the guardian of the threshold who can lead the way to selfhood, symbolised by the mandala: the circle, the wheel with the vital centre. Here we can return to what Jung himself wrote:

_The transition from morning to afternoon means a revaluation of earlier values._

_There comes the urgent need to appreciate the value of the opposite of our former ideals, to perceive the error of our former truth, and to feel how much antagonism and even hatred lay in what, until now, had passed for love._

It is Jung’s description of ‘revaluation of earlier values’, the ‘urgent need to appreciate the opposite to our former selves’ and to ‘perceive the error of our former truth,’ that is vital to this exegesis and to the resolution of the eternal madwoman. For, in the construction of the ascent as a counter-narrative to the eternal madwoman, there is required an acceptance of falsehood in external influences and in turn a development of autonomy.

**Authenticity: withdrawal of projections**

Once the protagonist has developed a new authority and autonomy – motivated by maternal agency – she is able to recognise and withdraw her projections. I link this acknowledgement to the development of what O’Reilly calls authenticity.\(^47\) As previously explained, the masculine and the feminine are not genders but archetypal forces. When the masculine archetype becomes unbalanced and ‘unrelated to life’ it can become combative, critical and destructive. This unrelated archetypal masculine can be cold and inhuman, and it does not take into account our human limitations. It demands perfection, control, domination; nothing is ever enough.

It is this masculine archetype which Jung calls the animus. Thus we see, in this stage of the journey, the madwoman’s projections on cultural groups described in the previous chapter. The only way a woman can heal this imbalance, Murdock explains, is to ‘bring the light of consciousness into the darkness’.\(^48\) Here we see the need for the character to withdraw her projections and to accept the ‘nameless, unloved parts’ of herself. Part of this process is to quieten the _machismo_, the voice inside that says, ‘I can tough it out, I’m strong, I don’t need any help, I’m self sufficient’.\(^49\) Thus, the madwoman must stop seeing the other as the enemy, she must ‘stop rationalising her criticism, judgement and the polarisation she creates by arrogantly saying she is always correct’.\(^50\) Murdock argues that, at this stage of a fictional text,
the heroine must take a good look at herself to heal the wounded masculine. A best male friend who is wounded in some way himself might be one approach (for example, a male friend who has trouble with intimacy, or a male friend who is very controlling). Another would be the death of her father so that the heroine can look at how much alike she was to him, or how he held her back creatively, or how her relationship with him prevented her from having an intimate relationship with a partner (male or female).51

Indeed, this machismo is also the patriarchal voice of societal expectations that prevents the protagonist from being true to herself. I have chosen to define authenticity as ‘the ability to make decisions which are consistent with her own beliefs and values’. Yet, up until this point, the protagonist has been unable to identify, understand or respect her true feelings. Through the enactment of maternal agency, authority and autonomy, the protagonist is now able to recognise and withdraw her projections, which leads to a better understanding of the self and in turn one’s own beliefs and values. This new understanding leads to a new authenticity, and the ability to ‘reject normative expectations of patriarchal culture’.52

Empowered maternalism: integration of private and public spheres

Finally, the heroine must integrate her public and private spheres. She does this, Murdock explains, by having the ‘strength to set limits and the willingness to take responsibility’ for herself and others in a new way.53 In this stage I have defined these ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ archetypes as the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres, as I believe that it is by integrating these two constructs that the protagonist is able to complete the journey and achieve empowered maternalism.

As previously argued ‘maternal’ is defined here as a figuration that may serve as a paradigm of relating to others; as behaviour that is guided by an orientation to care for the self and others in a way that empowers. Therefore, the term maternalism also transcends reference to mothers and motherhood and rather refers to an attitude of ‘care, nurturance and morality’ that can be applied to any individual, community, organisation or, indeed, to society. I therefore define ‘empowered maternalism’ as the ability to employ care, nurturance and morality to effect change in one’s own life and in one’s community.54

I have, very deliberately, chosen to use ‘empowered maternalism’ rather than O’Reilly’s ‘maternal empowerment’.55 Firstly because, as an academic discipline, ‘maternal scholars and activists have sought to define and develop a politic or theory of maternal empowerment’.56
Poetics of reconstruction

and secondly because maternal empowerment has been defined specifically to allow 'mothers to be the focal point of the theory and politic'.\(^{57}\) I believe it is important to maintain the use of maternal empowerment as a term referring to the oppositional stance that 'seeks to counter the many ways that patriarchal motherhood causes mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women'.\(^{58}\) Therefore, I use the term 'empowered maternalism' to transcend gender and references to motherhood and women.

I argue that, by struggling to achieve empowered maternalism, and by bestowing maternal agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity upon a female protagonist, a creative writer might contest, challenge and counter, not only patriarchal motherhood (as is demonstrated in the following chapter and the associated creative artefact), but also patriarchal notions of how women occupy private and public spheres in general. This, I argue, is an important aim for feminist texts of the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, utilising 'empowered maternalism' in the practice of creative writing provides interesting narrative possibilities. For example, if the maternal journey transcends gender, how would an organisation or board of directors make the journey outlined at the end of this chapter? How would a father? A male protagonist? I believe that this approach, rather than using maternal empowerment, allows us to transform the gender ideologies discussed by Caminero-Santangelo. I also argue that the integration of the private and public spheres responds to the call for transformation of gender ideologies.

As previously argued, twentieth-century feminist literature often separated the public/private binary and in turn created what I have termed the eternal madwoman. As Claire Pomery argues,

> the deconstruction of the public/private binary has several implications. It has politicised women’s voices in a way that has disrupted the unity of women. Second, the concerns of private life are now exposed to the public, allowing for public and political influence on the private life, specifically in the form of legislation. Third, the deconstruction of the public/private threatens the individuality of experiences of women as women. By looking at different models for gender equality within the private and public spaces we can begin to find a way these spaces can be reconstructed to achieve a gendered equality.\(^{59}\)

It is important to note, though, as Rich argues, a blurring of the public/private boundary can lead to an increase in patriarchal control over roles such as motherhood.\(^{60}\)
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I suggest that an integration of an individual’s private and public domains, though, transcends this concern, and can enable a balance required for an individual’s empowerment. This is why it is important that the maternal journey does not depend upon male intervention to occasion the narrative.

The maternal journey: a counter-narrative to the eternal madwoman’s journey

Ultimately, I argue that the intersection between recent maternal scholarship and feminist myth criticism identifies maternal agency as a possible key to the madwoman’s attic and enables us to reconstruct a transformational journey. Mapped as the eternal madwoman’s ascent, this approach provides a counter-narrative and completes a new framework for fictional feminist texts. This reconstruction allows us to construct what I am calling the ‘maternal journey’. As well as providing a new way of reading texts that fail to resolve the character of the madwoman, this framework enables writers to transform protagonists from oppressed victims of patriarchal hegemony to self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subjects. These protagonists can be female or male, mothers, families, corporations or, indeed, society itself. The maternal journey, in this way, acts as a counter-narrative to that of the eternal madwoman and responds to American feminist theorists’ call for new narratives on madness and the use of myth criticism in fiction.

I suggest that this model directly responds to Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s call for an imaginative space for women to escape madness by envisioning themselves as agents. I propose that the maternal journey provides such a space – a path for Antoinette, Esther, Narrator, and for authors who aim to write their protagonists more than merely a crescent-shaped life. I also argue that if the maternal journey enables us to respond to what Caminero-Santangelo deems ‘the most important feminist question’ then the concept of the maternal is paramount to feminist creative writing practice. It is, actually, the agency and empowered maternalism enacted within the maternal journey that can be understood as subversive. This suggestion is in direct opposition to the arguments made by the New French Feminists who maintain that chaos and hysteria enact feminist rebellion.

As Hirsch argues, North American and European feminist writing has only been able to inscribe the female by further silencing one aspect of an individual’s experience and identity – the maternal.61 This exegesis furthers Hirsch’s argument by suggesting that it is feminist writers’ attempt to disconnect their narratives from the dichotomy of domesticity or death through
the use of madness that ultimately silences the protagonist’s maternal identity. Hirsch argues that the ‘maternal story’ cannot be filled in because we have ‘no framework within which to write from her perspective’. Again, in another development to Hirsch’s research in which she asks that we try to imagine those maternal stories, this exegesis suggests a framework for writers to actually create them.

Yet, it is important to explain that the framework is not designed as an essentialist prescription for writing about the maternal or, indeed, female experience in the twenty-first century. Rather, it is constructed and theorised to open a dialogue and a creative practice that provides more hopeful and effective narrative possibilities. With this maternal journey model I aim to participate in the dialogue that contributes to re-conceptualising the dominant notions of maternity within society, and to engage in feminist discourse by suggesting new ways to not only theorise and write maternity, but also to theorise and write feminist novels.

Figure 6: The maternal journey
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1 Note: this quote is fittingly taken from the opening of Adrienne Rich's first chapter, 'Anger and Tenderness', in Of Woman Born (1976). She is quoting Simone Weil.


3 Ibid.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.


9 It is important to acknowledge that texts such as Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures (2010) provides a thorough analysis of maternal representations in literature. Rather than beginning with an analysis of the maternal in The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea and Surfacing, this exegesis began with the concept of madness in feminist literature. This starting point then uncovered maternal research as a possible component of the madwoman’s resolution. This is an important note as, I believe, this makes the maternal journey outlined in this chapter even more significant for feminist literary criticism and creative writing.


12 Ibid., 25.


15 Gardiner, Provoking Agents, 152.


18 Gardiner, Provoking Agents, 152.

19 O’Brien, Encyclopedia of Motherhood, 698.

20 Ibid.

21 It is important to note here, due to the reference of the maternal later in this exegesis, that in the theoretical discourse of the aforementioned French feminists Kristeva and Irigaray, the maternal occupies a central space. Yet, this exegesis utilises Marianne Hirsch’s argument that these two women’s maternal discourse remains ‘firmly embedded in structures of representation which place the mother outside or on the margin’ (Hirsch, The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, 173).

For this reason an analysis of Kristeva’s or Irigaray’s maternal research is not included in this study.


23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 O'Reilly, "Feminist Mothering," 805.
29 Maureen Murdock, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2012.
31 Ibid., 40.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 39.
36 Ibid., 41.
38 Ibid., 18.
39 Ibid., 148.
40 Ibid., 80.
42 Ibid.
43 *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. "autonomy".
45 Ibid.
47 O'Reilly, "Feminist Mothering," 805.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Maureen Murdock, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2012.
57 Ibid., 67.
58 Ibid., 68.
62 Ibid., 240.
63 Ibid., 239.
CHAPTER 5

Some Uncertain Facts: writing the maternal journey

There are so few examples, in either life or literature, of empowered mothering. ¹

— Andrea O’Reilly

Just as the madwoman in the attic became many a twentieth-century writer’s muse, so too has she become mine. Although, rather than employ the character to convey a sense of rebellion, I have engaged her as a way of investigating the ways in which apparent resistance can be interpreted as entrapment, and to demonstrate how the practice of creative writing can transform a female protagonist’s narrative captivity. The novel in turn builds upon the work of American feminist theorists who have begun to question the non-rational as a resistance strategy.

In this way Some Uncertain Facts is designed to offer a creative application and interpretation of the maternal journey outlined in the previous chapter. Yet, it is also constructed using the entirety of knowledge gained from researching the exegesis. In this way, this work is an example of, what Scrivener describes as, ‘[how] theory and practice become inextricably linked and mutually dependent,’ ² and what Craig Batty describes as the ‘cross-fertilisation of theory and practice’.³

Although I argue that the twentieth-century madwoman can be an ‘eternal madwoman’ – a ‘liminal persona’ prevented from achieving any real personal or political efficacy – the madwoman in Some Uncertain Facts is transformed by travelling the path of the maternal journey to be a self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subject.

It is worth noting that much of the novel was written in draft form during the early stages of researching the exegesis. Though, I have found the research process to be highly important for the reconstruction of the creative component. Thus, there needed to be a great amount of editing, rewriting and reworking of components of the creative work as the
exegesis was crafted. There was an ebb and flow to the writing process from the start, with word count accumulating in both at different times. Yet it was not until the full picture of the exegesis came into view that I was able to consider the novel’s real content and structure. In this way the ‘creative material is in constant rebirthing through the text that sits beside it’. Simply put, the novel aims to offer a counter-narrative to the eternal madwoman’s journey.

Although the maternal journey outlined in the previous chapter has been constructed beyond biological determinism and can apply to both man and woman (and indeed organisation and society), I have chosen to use a mother as the protagonist of my novel. Along with Hirsch, I am aware of the dangers of ‘idealising and mystifying a certain female experience’ and of ‘reviving an identification between femininity and maternity’, which certainly has not served the interest of women in the past. Yet, I felt it was important to link the feminist theory outlined in the previous chapters directly with not only maternal theory but also the experience of motherhood, to write in first person, and to provide a certain mother’s perspective of the twenty-first century with a voice. This voice is not meant to represent every woman’s perspective. Instead, the novel is the creative practice that enacts a version of the maternal journey.

As well as offering a counter-narrative to the eternal madwoman’s journey, the text is also written as a counter-narrative to the ‘motherhood memoirs’ that O’Reilly discusses and, indeed, the twenty-first century ideology of the ‘New Momism’ [sic]. Rather than assuming that children should be the all-consuming focus and purpose of a mother’s life, Some Uncertain Facts aims to rectify the private/public divide and challenge the assumptions of patriarchal motherhood through its reconstruction of a narrative descent and ascent.

The novel challenges two major and contradictory assumptions: first, that all women should and want to take advantage of the opportunities feminism has afforded them and work full-time; second, that all women have seen the ‘inside of the male working world and found it to be the inferior choice to staying at home’? Rather, the novel seeks to explore a middle ground where mothers want to be able to combine being with their children as much as they can while also being able to build their professional/creative selves.

In the following analyses, I argue, through Some Uncertain Facts, that the current inability for women to adequately combine work or personal/creative endeavours and motherhood creates a twenty-first century madwoman in the attic. I also argue that the maternal journey provides a pathway for agency rather than madness and martyrdom. Thus,
I would like to suggest with the novel that by linking O’Reilly’s and Caminero-Santangelo’s research, the twenty-first century madwoman can be represented as a mother. The imaginative space that in turn needs to be opened for her must ‘affirm the work of social reproduction, acknowledge that it is mothers who do this work and insist that culture (especially fathers) must also assume responsibility for reproductive labour’. As O’Reilly argues, as ‘feminist mothers we must teach our children not only to resist but, more importantly, how to keep safe and sane in doing so’. Resolving the madwoman – who is also a mother – in a fictional text, allows me, as a writer, to demonstrate creatively a more effective resistance. Therefore, by linking these two influential researchers’ work I have constructed a novel that creates an imaginative space for mothers to ‘disrupt and dislodge gender essentialism’ and, in turn, ‘envision themselves as agents’.

The matrifocal structure of Some Uncertain Facts

It was important to me that both the novel’s structure and the maternal journey structure be closely aligned. Originally, each stage of the journey correlated with a section of the novel, which I titled with a season. Yet I soon discovered that this construction slowed the writing’s tone and pace too much, so I therefore changed the first two and last two chapters to contain two stages each of the maternal journey. The middle two chapters – those focusing on the descent into darkness and attic, and the protagonist’s release – required more detail, so I therefore maintained their relationship with one season.

I decided to represent the protagonist’s (Anna’s) downward spiral in the novel in three parts and then mirror this structure with a three-part ascent. I also chose the seasons very carefully so that the narrative’s darkest period would harmonise with winter.
It was also important to me that a first person perspective was maintained throughout the novel. This focus allowed me to ‘hold fast to the maternal perspective’ and to explore the ways in which the research within this exegesis could be employed to ‘articulate and theorise the voice of the mother’.\textsuperscript{11}

By mirroring the structure of the maternal journey in the novel, and by concentrating on a mother’s first person narration, I was able to create a matrifocal narrative in which a ‘mother plays a role of cultural and social significance’ and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated, valued and ‘structurally central to the plot’.\textsuperscript{12}
Narrative summary of Some Uncertain Facts

Anna Mason has spent her whole life climbing ladders – moving up as fast as she can in her career, finances and relationships. Growing up in a traditional home with a stay-at-home mother has made her want more for her own life than the supposed monotony of cooking, cleaning and caring. Her life, instead, revolves around recognition, promotion and status.

She believes getting pregnant and becoming a mother is no different. With a new job at a prestigious Australian university and a place booked for her child in a sought after day care centre, Anna believes she has accomplished her dream of having it all. But, after her daughter Lottie arrives, Anna’s world begins to fall apart.

Suddenly, now that her child is actually here, black and white plans become grey. The prospect of leaving her child to return to work is excruciating, yet Anna is reluctant to give up everything for which she has worked so hard. Her inability to reconcile her new and old lives sets off a chain of events that brings dark truths to light and explodes long-suppressed emotions, as the story eventually reveals that facts held to be true about her parents and their marriage have actually been lies.

Descent in Some Uncertain Facts

The descent in Some Uncertain Facts attempts to capture the sentiment of a generation of women who are struggling to reconcile their professional and private lives – the mothers who strive to live up to the opportunities for which their mothers and grandmothers fought, but who end up feeling burnt out and confused. Anna’s downward spiral explores the question, what do you do when you realise the ladders you have been climbing your entire life have been put up against the wrong wall?

Originally, I set the novel in the United Kingdom to include intertextuality with Jane Eyre and also to place Anna in a foreign environment. But the more I wrote the story, the more I realised that the environment actually wasn’t foreign enough and, certainly, did not provide enough of a tool for my writing. Also, even though I have visited the United Kingdom many times, there was a certain inauthenticity to the setting descriptions. These discrepancies pointed me towards setting the novel in Australia, and specifically in Western Australia, where I could use the variation in climate, the hard rocks and harsh weather, the country community and the lush landscapes to represent Anna’s internal journey. Elements of the novel’s descent, therefore, are witnessed in the landscape, as outlined in the specific stages below.
Repression of the maternal

The beginning of Campbell’s hero’s journey is marked by a movement towards a goal, a ‘call to adventure’, an expedition to achieve a desired result. In contrast, Murdock’s heroine’s journey begins with a movement away, a separation both physically and psychologically from a mother and from the mother archetype either by choice or by force. In the beginning of the novel I wanted to play with these two concepts. Therefore, it initially seems as though Anna is travelling on a kind of hero’s journey, making her way towards her dream job and a professional adventure. Yet, it soon becomes apparent that the male taxi driver (chosen to represent patriarchy) has been driving Anna in circles and thus she is actually not getting any closer to her destination.

Also, in the maternal journey the protagonist not only rejects the feminine but, more specifically, represses the maternal. At the end of the opening chapter, I chose to make the reader realise that Anna is pregnant and that she is so separated from this maternal reality that she does not even consider the wellbeing of her child when she is in a car accident. The killing of an animal, which occurs through the accident, is also symbolic of the rejection of care and the suppression of the importance of life.

Anna is also disconnected from her mother. Anna sees Gwen as weak and emotional, as the person who took Anna away from her father because of a believed infidelity, and as the embodiment of suburban poverty against which Anna spends her life struggling. Anna does not believe her father had an affair and therefore resents Gwen for taking her away on an ‘emotional whim’.

Another important symbol I decided to insert at this stage is Anna’s experience with ceramics. When Gwen first leaves her husband, Anna is exposed to ceramics at her new school and creates a blue glazed bowl. The bowl shape was chosen to be a symbol of a container, a vessel, with which women in myth have long been associated. Anna enjoys this experience and brings the bowl home but then tries to keep it from her mother. In this attempt at secrecy we see Anna trying to keep something for herself, something that her mother ‘cannot spoil’. Yet, Gwen does find the bowl and praises the creation to such an extent that the experience, for Anna, becomes tainted. Anna’s negative association with Gwen means that anything her mother likes is also negative. Anna in turn does not attempt ceramics again until very late in the novel when she meets the members of the Country Women’s Association (CWA).

This negative association with her mother is designed to mirror the demonised mother figure seen in Wide Sargasso Sea, The Bell Jar and Surfacing and which is also common in the daughter-centric narrative. It is important to note that the maternal journey is designed to
later unravel this negative association, but for now Anna’s relationship with her mother has caused her to repress the notion of empowering care.

The initial rejection and repression causes further disconnection from the feminine (anima). When analysing the three texts – *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* – I utilised Deena Metzger suggestion that the way to understand a character’s shadow is to ask the question, ‘who or what does the character hate in an irrational way?’ In Chapter 2 we see the three protagonists disliking anything considered feminine. This notion has also been used in the construction of this novel’s beginning when Anna criticises the ‘caring nurse’ and the secretary at the university. Anna therefore experiences both a literal and a figurative detachment from the maternal as she moves away from Melbourne (where she lived with her mother) and away from anyone she meets (either male or female) who represents a maternal sentiment.

**Projection of animus**

Metzger’s question provides further assistance when writing about Anna’s projection. Whereas Anna’s repression of the anima is considered her shadow, her hatred of the ‘masculine’ or animus is defined as her projections. Typically Jung personifies these images: the most macho of men will be harbouring a shy little girl inside him; the woman may be ‘cohabiting psychologically with the figure of a violent hoodlum.’

Just as with the eternal madwoman, I wanted Anna’s absent father figure to cause her to harbour an undeveloped animus. As noted previously, an individual’s undeveloped animus is likely to appear as a group. To this end, I decided that Anna would have a severe dislike of universities, even though she works within them. She therefore has a love/hate relationship with the institution that, for her, represents male power. Just as Antoinette detests the British patriarchy, Esther hates 1950s American culture, and Narrator hates Americans, Anna detests universities. However, the difference is that she believes that, by working within them, she can change them.

We see this dislike represented by the professor who interviews her at Murdoch University. Anna often looks down upon the male professors who, she believes, have gotten their positions not through any real intelligence or talent but by being male. She often tries to manipulate the situation by telling the professors ‘what they want to hear’, as she does in her interview, which she believes puts her in a position of power. This was an important plot device, since even though the university needs to represent Anna’s projection, it also needs to symbolise Anna’s identification with patriarchal culture.
Identification with the masculine

Anna's separation from the maternal and her undeveloped animus cause her to search for recognition by the 'father', literally and/or figuratively, since 'men are in a position of strength, so women look to men for support to strengthen themselves'. There is an interesting inherent contradiction in Anna's hatred of universities and the male professors, whom she believes obtain their status because of their gender, and her need to be recognised and acknowledged by that same institution and professors. In many ways, to get ahead in her industry and to separate herself from her 'weak, emotional mother', Anna identifies with the masculine. The damaging effect of Anna's absent father means that she believes she does not exist except in the mirror of male attention.

In Anna we see, as we did in Esther, Murdock's description of the inner masculine figure as 'not a man with a heart but a greedy tyrant that never lets up…nothing is ever enough' and he 'drives her forward, more, better, faster'. Anna has spent her entire life working to get ahead – to get a good education, to get a good job, to buy a nice house. This is because Anna's inner masculine figure has the wheel and control of her journey.

When Anna meets Gabe, he fills the void of a father figure. I wrote Gabe as a doctor to represent patriarchal power. Anna initially believes they have the same dreams, the same truth, represented by the fossils and medical results they both carry out of the hospital in the novel's second chapter. When Gabe places her hand on his chest 'like a medallion of belonging' Anna feels happy. It was important that, in this scene, it is not her growing baby that makes her happy or feel complete, but the male figure's physical presence and acceptance.

Anna finds temporary comfort in the masculine world – in the prevailing myth in our culture that certain people (husbands and professors), positions (becoming a professor) and events (marriage and scholarships) possess more inherent value than others. I therefore constructed Anna's story so that it was clear that she seeks to be valued either by becoming like a man and/or by becoming liked by men.

Enjoying the external boon of success

Anna has become enamoured with the accolades 'winning' brings. She feels a great sense of self-value with the achievement of a goal, and this false confidence masks the deep-seated pain associated with her family, and with her experience of motherhood through Gwen. Yet Anna's construct of 'success' is deeply flawed. The reward of the outer journey is seductive and she is unable to sacrifice the false notions of the heroic to find the 'inner' boon of success.
She is unable to achieve two main things at this stage of the novel: autonomy and detachment from ego. She is unable to discard her old ideas of success; Anna has fallen into a destructive cycle of working long hours because she believes the act will bring her what she wants – a professorship at Murdoch University.

I wanted Anna to be unable to give herself what she needs without the assistance of a man – the Dean at the university. Also, she is unable to find the courage to realise that she is adequate just as she is. Even nine months pregnant, she is unable to detach herself from the whims of the ego and say, 'I am not all things...and I am enough.' Like Antoinette, Esther and Narrator, Anna is trapped by an attachment to her ego. Therefore, just before Anna has her daughter, rather than finding the inner boon of success, she succumbs to the outer temptations of her ego.

**Awakenings of feelings of spiritual aridity**

After Anna gives birth to her daughter Lottie, she begins to feel lost and confused. Suddenly, the intellectualised notion of going back to work full-time and leaving Lottie with strangers feels unfathomable, but Anna is also reluctant to give up the professional dreams for which she has been working her whole life. It was very important to me, though, that the notion of 'child care' was not the problem. I did not want to incorrectly give the impression with the novel that paid child care is a negative option. It is important to note that Anna often explains that it is not paid care with which she has a problem and understands that for many women it is an important and vital option. Anna's feelings towards leaving her child with strangers were constructed to juxtapose the concept of Gabe looking after their child. I have chosen to write Anna as feeling uncomfortable with leaving Lottie in child care as I needed her to feel deeply motivated, later in the story, to provide Gabe with an ultimatum: which involves him helping to look after Lottie or not coming home at all.

The arrival of their child also causes cracks to appear in Anna and Gabe's marriage. Gabe has a particular approach to child rearing and it goes against everything Anna feels instinctively. Suddenly the partner who Anna believed shared her dreams and goals makes her feel as though she is emotional and irrational, the exact traits she detested in her mother. Suddenly the woman who prided herself on being competent and logical is faced with feelings of failure and guilt. These emotions are overwhelming for Anna, and her repression of the maternal means that she has pushed any caring individuals away from her prior to having Lottie.
Resolving the madwoman

This stage of the novel is intended to represent a mother’s re-appraisal of the mindset she had prior to having a child; to plant the seed of doubt within both the protagonist’s and the reader’s mind; and to create tension between Anna’s public life as a scientist and her private life as a wife and mother.

Initiation and descent to the goddess

As in *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing*, it was important that when Anna is forced to look into her ‘bag’, or in other words she is faced with her shadow, she descends into darkness. Having a baby forces Anna to experience many of the emotions she has long hated in other women and which she associates with her mother. At the same time she is surrounded by other figures who also dislike these attributes, mainly her husband Gabe and the academics at Murdoch University.

Anna initially believes that she might have struck a balance between her public and private life by asking to work part-time. She soon realises, though, that this simply means that she has to do the same amount of work as her previous full-time job but in less time. When Lottie becomes sick (a foreshadowing of Lottie’s illness in the attic) Anna is unable to find the time to validate the findings of her team who believe they have found the oldest known fossil. Anna doubts the ability of people without a degree, ‘locals’ who ‘know how to dig’, and she rejects the whisperings of her instinct. She then emails Professor Madden a report stating that the fossils are not the oldest known, and in fact are not fossils.

Anna is then faced with her husband losing his job because he was unable to apologise to a patient, and, therefore, to let go of his ego. In these two patriarchal instances we see elements of Anna’s projection, which she is unable to see in herself. Gabe could not tell her about losing his job because of his pride, and Anna realises that this lie is one of the reasons why Gabe was trying to convince her to put Lottie in child care and work full-time.

I also wanted Anna to display the traits of the previously described ‘liminal persona’. It was therefore important to include my previous identification of the eternal madwoman as liminal persona, and the subsequent denial of the character’s aggregation. During the phase of aggregation – in Anna’s case becoming a mother – she must ‘re-enter society’ and assume ‘a new identity’ that needs to be acknowledged, understood and accepted by either a culture, a community or an influential cultural figure. Yet, this new stage in Anna’s life remains unacknowledged by anyone around her, and she is given no guidance as to how to navigate this new territory.
Therefore, at this point in the narrative, I ensured that *Some Uncertain Facts* displays many of the same traits of narrative captivity as the three previously analysed novels:

— *Omission of shadow*. Anna is unable to realise and accept her maternal shadow and therefore all real further psychological progress is, initially, blocked.\(^{22}\)

— *Maintenance of projections*. Anna is unable to be conscious of her projections and therefore cannot take back consciously what she still casts out unconsciously onto the outside world. She is therefore not able to accept responsibility for her own inner turmoil.\(^{23}\)

— *Absence of ritual*. Anna does not experience the necessary societal rituals necessary to move her through the rite of passage of motherhood.

Anna is initially unable to move past the chaos, to transcend the emotion and, indeed, to integrate all the aspects of what are referred to as masculine and feminine attributes so as to become a whole individual.

**Unlocking the attic in *Some Uncertain Facts***

During the maternal heroine’s descent, the protagonist experiences a period of introversion and depression, a slow painful process through which her identity is scraped away. Anna suddenly does not know who she is – is she a scientist, is she a wife, is she a mother? Or is she all three? How can she hold these apparently contradictory roles all at the same time? She feels an incredible sense of emptiness, like the dishes she describes filling and pouring in ‘Autumn’. Like Antoinette, Anna has ‘looked for love in all the wrong places’ and it has broken her.\(^{24}\) Though, rather than Antoinette’s ‘dark cold cave’, Anna’s attic is a modern renovation. In its own way, it represents the emptiness and lack of authenticity that Anna is experiencing. Just as the mirror is an important image in the three previously analysed texts, so too is it in *Some Uncertain Facts*. Yet, rather than just turning it away from herself, Anna breaks the mirror in the attic’s meticulous bathroom and hangs it by the strips of cotton she rips from the bed’s sheets. In this scene we see not only a reference to the rags Anna’s mother used to tie in her hair to make her ‘beautiful’, but the broken identity with which Anna is coming to terms. As previously explained, the damaging effect of Anna’s absent father meant that she believed she did not exist except in the mirror of male attention.\(^{25}\) In this scene I wanted to symbolise the breaking of this habit; I wanted to embody the beliefs of which Anna must let go in order to reintegrate herself.
At this point in the novel I also wanted to question the assumption that postnatal depression is always about a mother’s relationship with her child and that a child’s life and/or wellbeing is always at risk. It was important to me that Lottie remain safe and that Anna does not come close to harming her child as she goes through a process of self-annihilation. In fact, I wanted the novel to make it clear that this process for Anna is about all of the other relationships in her life rather than the one she has with her child. Gabe and his mother Elizabeth, as they each knock on the attic door and talk to Anna, represent these relationships and are the embodiment of societal expectations.

When Gabe speaks to Anna through the attic door, he represents the view that women should still have the same aspirations and desires they had before they gave birth. He doesn’t want her to ‘give up on her dreams’ or to have to ‘sacrifice her desires’ for her child’s. Gabe uses the women’s movement against Anna, making her feel guilty for no longer wanting to pursue the same dreams. With the husband’s dialogue in this scene, it is my intention to voice many of the arguments made by second-wave feminism and by the organisations/people for which women work. In contrast, I have utilised Elizabeth in the following scene to represent the polar opposite of these arguments – the voice that tells women that they should want to stay at home full-time, that if they have any desires for themselves then they are being selfish. These are the two voices that Anna has in her head when she grapples with whether or not to face the outside world.

Anna’s Demeter decision and maternal agency

The ‘key’ to Anna’s release is the termination of the old eon and the initiation of the new. Yet, as previously argued, this change in perspective must be the result of the cataclysm of a crisis, during which she shifts from embodying emotional stasis to enacting maternal agency. A sudden upheaval must therefore occur which motivates Anna’s desire for self-determination.

Anna’s struggles have not only been the result of a shifting identity, but of familial and societal judgement of the decisions she makes as a woman and mother. In her heart she has felt the instinct to guide her to make the decisions that are right for her, yet she has been unable to quiet external voices. Part of developing self-determination for Anna is about developing the power or ability to make a decision for herself without influence from outside. As explained in the previous chapter, I define the required upheaval and resultant decision as the Demeter decision.
When writing the novel, I decided that Anna’s Demeter decision needed to be about being forced to trust her instincts. This moment comes when her daughter, Lottie, does not seem herself. Her first instinct tells Anna that Lottie is unwell and must be taken to the hospital, though the voices in her head tell her that she is ‘over-reacting, being overly-protective and too emotional’. Leaving the attic will also mean leaving the inside of her head, checking her ego at the door and having to navigate the expectations of the outside world. In many ways, the women in Surfacing, The Bell Jar and Wide Sargasso Sea remain narrative captives and are prevented any personal or political efficacy because they are unable to face the outside world, the public sphere. This is an important step in the maternal journey, where the protagonist changes, both literally and figuratively, from being inside to outside, from being trapped to being free.

To symbolise this transition, I had Anna open the attic window. The breeze that comes through the room causes the mirror fragments to chime, and with that movement the outside and inside begin to affect each other. This image also represents Anna’s acceptance of a new fluidity of her self-image, with her reflection moving in the wind. At this point, Anna decides to trust her instincts and to insist on her husband’s company and support to take Lottie to hospital. This decision forces her to grant legitimacy to her feelings, refuse the role of victim and to care for herself and others in a way that empowers. This embodiment of maternal agency enables Anna to realise, in that threshold moment, that there is hope for a more positive resolution, and that only she has the power to effect that change.

It was important to me that Anna embodies Murdock’s description of ‘taking a cap off your heart’ as she grants legitimacy to her feelings, since ‘feelings that are not acknowledged do not go away, they go underground and bind us to the past’. Yet, as Murdock explains, Anna still ‘drags her bag of bones behind her’. In this sense, it was important for Anna to continue to move through the stages of ascent since even though she has been forced to move through the descent to the goddess she remains partly in the shadows.

The ultimate goal for Anna at this stage is to feel as though she is enough as she is – that ‘everything I need is within me’, and therefore to be forced by the Demeter decision to embody Gardiner’s self-determination. As she leads the way into the hospital and demands a doctor see her daughter at once, Anna ascends her ego, and unlocks the confining walls of her narrative captivity and the confines of being an oppressed victim of patriarchal hegemony. She can then begin to take the necessary ascending step towards becoming a self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subject and begin the struggle towards empowered maternalism.
Ascent in *Some Uncertain Facts*

Once the Demeter decision, which encourages the enactment of maternal agency, has released Anna from narrative captivity, there remain necessary steps for her ascent. With the creative application of the maternal journey’s ascent, I hope to put into practice the theory that is a combination of Murdock’s model of the heroine’s journey, Turner’s notion of aggregation, and O’Reilly’s components of maternal empowerment. Thus, in writing the novel – in particular the journey’s ascent – I aim to represent how a writer could respond to Caminero-Santangelo’s aforementioned questions and construct a feminist narrative for the twenty-first century.

These stages work as a counter-narrative to the maternal descent (seen in Fig. 6). The finding of Faye as a maternal mentor and subsequent authority balances the enjoyment of the external boons of success; autonomy, which allows Anna’s acknowledgement of her shadow, balances her identification with the masculine; authenticity, which allows Anna to withdraw her projections, balances her projection of the animus; and the empowered maternalism Anna develops to integrate her public and private spheres balances her repression of the maternal.

**Authority: finding the maternal mentor**

When Faye, Anna’s midwife and neighbour, visits her just after Lottie’s birth, she gives Anna the card of the CWA. This token is, what Campbell calls, the ‘gift’. Yet, Anna is not ready to understand the meaning behind this gift or to act upon it as an invitation. In Propp’s dissection of Russian fairy tales, he observes that donor characters give magical presents to characters, but usually only after the heroes have passed a test of some kind. The Demeter decision is able to act, not only as a catalyst, but also as a sign that Anna is ready to receive the knowledge of the maternal mentor. Anna’s Demeter decision and subsequent enactment of maternal agency proves to Faye that she is ready for guidance. In the auction scene, I therefore decided that Faye would give Anna another CWA card, but that this time she would write a note on the back, which Anna sees later, that reads, ‘Make something with your hands’. We discover the significance of this note later in the novel.

Anna is also ready to accept help and to accept it from the right person, ‘a friend or mentor she can trust to help her cross the return threshold.’ Faye has combined working successfully part-time while being a mother of three children and therefore represents Anna’s higher self – the wiser and nobler part of us. This figure also represents Anna’s highest aspirations and is who she would like to become if she persists up through the ascent.
I wanted Faye to represent, primarily, a source of wisdom, gifts and conscience, and to aid Anna in overcoming her fears. Since Faye embodies the goal of the narrative ascent, she must exude maternal empowerment. Yet, it was also important for me as a creative writer to construct her as a believable and fallible human being. Therefore, later in the text, Faye experiences her own descent into darkness when she takes her own life. While I wanted Faye to embody the maternal mentor and Anna's higher self, I also wanted to demonstrate that nobody is perfect. Faye's untimely death also represents the 'eternal madwoman' who is trapped in the descent to the goddess. This death motivates Anna to seek the solace of the CWA.

Faye, representing the wise old woman, enables Anna to develop authority – an influence exerted because of recognised knowledge or expertise. By sharing her experience and knowledge with the protagonist, Faye imparts the 'gift' of authority. This is represented in the auction scene where Faye describes the community care approach that she used when raising her children. In this scene, Anna must also let go of her previous need for material possessions to signify her worth and instead begin to find the value in herself and trust herself, despite the familial and societal pressures that denigrate her maternal experience. Here we can return to what Jung wrote about his own journey: ‘There comes the urgent need to appreciate the value of the opposite of our former ideals, to perceive the error of our former truth, and to feel how much antagonism and even hatred lay in what, until now, had passed for love.’ In a narrative sense then, the ‘meeting with the shadow’ is crucial to Anna's development. For in the construction of the ascent as a counter-narrative to the eternal madwoman, there is required an acceptance of falsehood in external influences and in turn a development of autonomy. This stage is also about healing the separation from the maternal that Anna experienced in the beginning of her life.

Autonomy: acknowledgement of shadow

To ‘take back the dark’, Anna must reclaim repressed parts of herself – the emotional, jealous and needy attributes – that she has learned to repress and to associate with her mother and in turn acknowledge that they are in fact part of herself. This stage is therefore, in Jungian terms, Anna's acknowledgement of her shadow. Taking back the dark for Anna means moving beyond shame to reclaim all of the feelings she hid from herself, no matter how frightening, so that she can find her authentic voice.

In the journey's ascent, I link this acknowledgement of the shadow to O'Reilly's concept of autonomy, which I define as 'personal freedom gained from self esteem', and to Steinem's argument for 'thinking about ourselves in circles, with the goal as completion... progress through mutual support and connectedness.'
During this stage it was important that Gabe tell Anna that he is going to work in the United States, and to ask Anna and Lottie to join him. This conversation forces Anna to think about autonomy and also about the journey that Gabe has gone on as a man and a father. Anna realises that, in many ways, Gabe has also suffered a dislocation from his previous identity, and that this experience must have been difficult. This empathy encourages Anna to agree to come to America once the house has been settled.

Yet, soon after, I decided that Anna should find a note, in one of her mother's jars, from a woman to her father. This note signifies that her father was in fact having an affair and that her mother had actually been right. With this knowledge, Anna is forced to question everything that came as a result of her belief that Gwen took her away from her father on an 'emotional whim'. Anna's career, her choice of husband, her need for male approval and her criticism of anything feminine were enacted as a direct reaction to a fact that Anna now knows is a lie.

Originally, when I began to write the novel, I wanted to distance the narrative from the daughter's story to bring to light the mother's story, which has been so often neglected throughout history. Yet the more I wrote and the more I linked the novel with my research, the more I realised that in many ways I could not have one story without the other, and that it was going to be important for me as a creative writer to explain how Anna's story as a daughter and her story as a mother influence and intersect with each other. This part of the novel is also written and constructed to unravel the demonised mother story that is so common of feminist narratives such as The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea and Surfacing.

The reader discovers in this section that Gwen has passed away and that Anna did not attend her funeral. With this narrative twist I wanted to create a new relationship between Anna and her mother, though I was reluctant to resolve it too easily. The note is, in many ways, Gwen's voice; it is Anna's mother's story and therefore, even though it is in some ways an echo, is not the unheard story seen in daughter-centric narratives. Yet, I also wanted to maintain a focus on Anna's story as a mother rather than a daughter, and to make the comment that Anna can resolve the relationship without having to have her mother present. Even though Anna is unable to resolve the mother/daughter relationship in person, she is able to develop a sense of autonomy since she is no longer bound to the baggage of the past.

**Authenticity: withdrawal of projections**

Once Anna has developed a new authority and autonomy – motivated by maternal agency – she is able to recognise and withdraw her projections. Previously, we saw Anna's masculine side being projected onto the university and the male professors within it. Her masculine
archetype became unbalanced and ‘unrelated to life’, and in turn became combative, critical
and destructive. This archetypal masculine was cold and inhuman, and it did not take into
account her human limitations; it demanded perfection, control, domination, nothing was
ever enough.

Yet, part of this process is also to quieten the machismo, the voice inside that says, ‘I
can tough it out, I’m strong, I don’t need any help I’m self sufficient’.38 Thus, Anna must also
stop seeing other women as the enemy, she must stop rationalising her criticism, judgement
and the polarisation she creates by arrogantly saying she is correct.39

This is demonstrated when Anna is at the CWA and grieves the fact that Faye has
committed suicide. The realisation that even her maternal mentor, the person she has aspired to
be through her ascent, can also be overcome and overwhelmed to the point of self-destruction
shakes Anna’s emotional strength. This event almost quiets the patriarchal voice and societal
expectations that have prevented Anna from being true to herself. Up until this point, the
protagonist has been unable to identify, understand or respect her true feelings. Through
the enactment of maternal agency, authority and autonomy, the protagonist is now able to
recognise and withdraw her projections, which leads to a better understanding of herself
and in turn her own beliefs and values. This new understanding leads to a new authenticity,
and the ability to, as O’Reilly explains, ‘reject normative expectations of patriarchal culture’.40
That is, to reject the belief that she should mother in isolation of other women and that she
should never have to ask for help.

Thus Anna decides to visit the CWA, which Faye recommended to her, and when she
does, breaks down emotionally. It is in this environment of support – an extension of the
maternal mentorship – where we see the societal recognition of the reincorporation phase, the
community that will enable Anna to move away from being a liminal person. This experience
of women leads to a new ‘transformative relationship with the social structures of the culture’.41
Within this new community Anna is exposed to a new way to live and love that transcends
her previous need to ‘measure up and achieve according to male-defined standards’.42

I also wanted the reader to discover the meaning of Faye’s handwritten note, ‘Make
something with your hands.’ One of the other members, Noni, asks Anna what she most
liked to do in art class. Anna remembers the blue bowl she made for her mother and is all at
once motivated to make something ceramic with her hands. In this act we see the need for
being centred and for being strong enough to maintain that balance. Anna and Noni’s scene
at the wheel mirrors what Anna needs to do to complete the maternal journey, to integrate
the public and private parts of herself, and to reconstruct her identity.
Empowered maternalism: integration of private and public spheres

Finally, Anna must integrate the useful aspects of the masculine and feminine archetypes within herself. She does this, Murdock explains, by having the ‘strength to set limits and the willingness to take responsibility for herself and others in a new way’. In this stage I have defined these ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ archetypes as the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres, as I believe that it is by integrating these two constructs that Anna will be able to complete the journey and achieve empowered maternalism. In the previous chapter, I defined ‘empowered maternalism’ as the ability to employ care, nurturance and morality to effect change in one’s own life and in one’s community.43

The final stage of the novel is constructed to challenge and counter not only patriarchal motherhood but also patriarchal notions of how women occupy private and public spheres in general. This, I argue, is an important aim for feminist literary fiction in the twenty-first century. Anna’s private sphere is dominated by motherhood and her public sphere was focussed on working in academia and aiming for a professorship. Her public life is the first area to change through the stages of ascent as she acknowledges her shadow and withdraws her projections. She does not want to be a full-time stay-at-home mother, nor does she want to work in a job she now realises she was in for all the wrong reasons.

Initially Anna needs to change the arrangements of her private sphere. For the first year of Lottie’s life Anna wanted to be around her all the time, but now her daughter is a little bit older, Anna also wants to invest in herself. While I did not want to criticise the notion of paid child care (since it is so important for many women) I did want to focus on Gabe’s role in Lottie’s upbringing. Anna’s ascent – the transformation of her madness into agency, and the achievement of empowered maternalism through the development of authority, autonomy and authenticity – is demonstrated in a second Demeter decision. Anna decides that she wants Gabe to share the load – not just the care of Lottie but all the thinking, the concern and the decision-making that she has shouldered since their daughter was born. Anna thus decides that she does not want to follow her husband to the United States and gives Gabe an ultimatum: move back to Australia and be an equal partner in Lottie’s upbringing or do not come back at all. It is important to note that with this ultimatum I did not want to completely sever Lottie from a father figure. Therefore, I ensured that in Anna’s dialogue she makes this clear to Gabe.

Yet, I believe that this approach in the novel allows the transformation of gender ideologies discussed by Caminero-Santangelo. As Claire Pomery argues, ‘by looking at
different models for gender equality within the private and public spaces we can begin to find a way these spaces can be reconstructed to achieve a gendered equality.44

Once Anna has altered the arrangement of her private sphere she works to carve out some public space for herself, to establish an identity other than ‘mother’. This identity comes in the form of combining ceramics with consulting. In the ceramics, I wanted there to be a kind of tribute to Gwen and to again bring her echoed voice into the narrative. Therefore, it is not until Anna decides to use her love of fossils to realise she can make imprints on the clay using Gwen’s lace and buttons that the bowls truly come to life. With this imprinting, I wanted to signify a new acceptance of the domestic and to also connect this acknowledgement with Anna’s scientific knowledge.

In the novel’s closing chapter we discover that Anna has negotiated a consulting role with Murdoch University, to work on a project with ‘soft fossils’. This project is designed to be symbolic of the ‘soft parts’ of history which Anna has previously rejected. Anna is also on the way to deliver the bowls which were ordered by a shop owner at the Christmas Fair. In this final chapter we also find out that Gabe will be returning. It was important to me that the novel end on a positive note, that the male figure ‘comes to the party; so to speak, as I wanted the maternal journey to have a more hopeful resolution than many feminist texts of the twentieth century.

The final scene was also constructed to contrast the opening scene in which Anna is a passenger in a lost taxi. In the end she is sitting in the car with Lottie and decides that the university and the delivery can wait, that she is in control and that in that instance she wants to watch her daughter’s delight. In the final moments the outer and inner world merge and the rain, a stark contrast with the opening climate, enters the car.

**Some Uncertain Facts as a feminist counter-narrative**

The novel’s closure is written in juxtaposition to the narrative closure of *The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* and indeed many other feminist texts of the twentieth century. The maternal journey’s ascent has broken the heterosexual love and marriage or death binary, yet has also allowed the protagonist to transcend her ‘madness’ and re-enter the public domain. By developing maternal agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity and empowered maternalism, Anna is transformed from oppressed victim of patriarchal hegemony to self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subject. *Some Uncertain Facts*, in this way, acts as
a counter-narrative to that of the eternal madwoman and responds to American feminist theorists’ call for new narratives on madness and the use of myth criticism in fiction.

In fact, the novel is constructed to be the embodiment of the answer Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s question: ‘How can the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts open an imaginative space for women to escape madness by envisioning themselves as agents?’ *Some Uncertain Facts*, I would like to argue, is that imaginative space.


7 Ibid., 73.

8 Ibid., 78.


10 O’Reilly, Outlaw(ing) Motherhood,” 78.


12 Ibid., 3.


15 Ibid.


17 Ibid., 37.

18 Ibid., 39.

19 Ibid., 29.

20 Ibid., 68.


22 Walker, *Jung and the Jungians on Myth*, 34.

23 Ibid., 32.


25 Ibid., 37.


27 Ibid.


30 Maureen Murdock, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2012.


32 Ibid.


36 *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “autonomy”.


38 Murdock, *The Heroine’s Journey*, 64.

39 Ibid.


CONCLUSION

Towards an era of reconstruction and maternal narratology

A book must be an axe for the frozen sea inside us.
—Kafka

In September 2013 I stood, again, in the room in which Charlotte Brontë died and reflected on my PhD journey. I had come such a long way in three years – not just with my research but personally as well.

In 2010 I had visited the Brontë museum to research Bertha Mason, the original madwoman in the attic. Originally, I had believed that it was Charlotte's depiction of a woman gone mad that I wanted my research to question, yet once I delved into the depths of literary criticism on madness, I realised that I wanted to take issue with the prominent strand of feminist literary criticism which promotes madness as rebellion. The primary objective for the project therefore changed from rectifying Charlotte's literary use of madness to identifying a counter-narrative that rejects madness as a symbolic resolution.

On a personal level, three years ago I had been engaged, working and studying full-time, and thinking about starting a family. On my return, I held my eighteen-month-old daughter in my arms as my husband roamed the streets of Harworth to collect coffee. I had spent the last year and a half combining motherhood, working part-time and studying for a PhD full-time and standing in that room again was an important moment in my life. In many ways I had travelled my own maternal journey and had certainly, at times, felt as though I had become my madwoman in the attic.

I returned to Charlotte's bedroom as an academic and a mother; yet I also returned with more answers than questions. The answers that I carried with me on my return were and are linked to the questions outlined in the Introduction to this exegesis:
PhD research questions

1. What is the current narrative structure of the twentieth-century madwoman?
2. Who is the twentieth-century madwoman?
3. How has she remained trapped in the narrative attic?
4. How might one write her release?
5. How might one write the continuation of her story?
6. Who is the twenty-first-century madwoman?
7. How does the new framework transform gender ideologies?
8. How might a writer symbolically resolve the madwoman character in a fictional text?

Though there were many conceptual frameworks that could be used for my exegesis, it was Chesler’s advocation of myth as a possible guide for women’s narrative journeys through madness to self-actualisation that prompted the choice of Murdock’s heroine’s journey. This model permeates the entirety of the concepts below.

On the basis of this research I believe the following suppositions represent a new and innovative contribution to the fields of myth criticism, maternal scholarship, feminist literary theory and the practice of creative writing.

1a Descent as feminist post-romantic structure

Reading twentieth-century feminist novels such as *The Bell Jar*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Surfacing* through the framework of Murdock’s heroine’s journey revealed an abrupt story closure. Through this analysis we found a narrative representation of Brontë’s crescent-shaped life—a half life—cut short at the end of a treacherous descent. Thus, instead of experiencing the personal growth associated with this mythical structure, the women become locked in a descent into darkness. These texts, which sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction, may momentarily imagine a world devoid from the patriarchal expectation of the maternal, yet they ultimately leave their characters with feelings of futility, despair and resignation.
Towards an era of reconstruction and maternal narratology

Although previous interpretations, such as those within New French Feminism, have viewed madness as narrative closure as an act of rebellion, by contemplating the novels' narrative structures as depictions of the heroine's journey, we are able to illuminate new meanings. Rather than rallying against societal assumptions of and constraints on women, the protagonist, in the descent phase of a mythic journey, has little personal or political efficacy. Therefore, through this new reading the protagonists can be seen as more tragic than transformational. This analysis supports the arguments of American feminist theorists (Baym 1984; Jones 1985; Caminero-Santangelo 1998; Donaldson 2002; Chesler 2005) who argue against the madness-as-resistance metaphor. This new reading also begs the question, ‘Have we, in our eagerness to deconstruct what we believe to be patriarchal structures and provide alternatives to individual quests, actually prevented our female protagonists from any real character development and, in turn, power?’

While Booth, DuPlessis and Booker discuss ruptures in expected narrative structures, I would like to argue that many writers in the twentieth-century have, in fact, specifically cut the quest narrative in half. As such, this exegesis argues that twentieth-century writers such as Plath, Rhys and Atwood have employed madness as a rebellious trope against social and narrative expectations. In turn I have identified the descent of Murdock’s Heroine’s Journey as the possible post-romantic narrative structure these writers have employed to formulate an alternative to and subvert the supposition of couple formation and motherhood.

1b New readings of madness in feminist literature

The discovery of this ‘half narrative’, split from a journey’s ascent, allows us to extrapolate original readings of madness. Firstly, I argue that authors’ growing sympathy for madness as rebellion led them to a new dismantling of previous frameworks that supported a new narrative alteration: the use of madness as narrative closure. Just as madness as rebellion can actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced it, so too can the narrative structure – this ruptured quest – ultimately trap the woman in silence. Furthermore, if this practice in creative writing essentially traps and silences the female protagonist, I suggest that the narrative structure used to promote madness-as-closure is an unsuccessful feminist writing device. Rather than an act of rebellion, like many current American feminist theorists I suggest that madness in literature simply reiterates a doctrine of gendered behaviour. Ending a narrative with the female protagonist locked within this behaviour does so even more.
Secondly, I argue that the ruptured quest narrative encourages a reading of madness as descent rather than dissent. While texts that end in madness may momentarily envision a world devoid of patriarchal oppression, the writers are finally unable to create it and, in the end, their characters succumb to feelings of futility, despair and resignation.

Thirdly, if we read madness as narrative descent rather than dissent, it inevitably alludes to the possibility of an ascent. In turn new narrative possibilities open up for the previously trapped character of the madwoman. Consequently, by departing from the established madness-as-rebellion metaphor and questioning the narrative structures that support a character’s resignation to extant power systems, there is potential for more constructive and hopeful resolutions to our feminist stories. These three conclusions therefore propose that using the mythic structure of the heroine’s journey to read female madness provides new and dynamic understandings of madness in narrative.

2a Defining the twentieth-century madwoman as the eternal madwoman

The new structural interpretations and approaches to madness in literature also allow us to define a new type of madwoman. Straitjacketed by expectations and, often, by more tangible restraints, the character of the ‘madwoman’ has been an enormously compelling image of both thwarted feminine potential and society’s oppressive assumptions.

The nineteenth-century madwoman in the attic was a peripheral figure; the protagonist’s and author’s double. Just as the madwoman has historically been employed by writers and interpreted by literary theorists as a powerful feminist motif of rebellion and rage, so too have writers such as Sylvia Plath, Jean Rhys and Margaret Atwood (particularly in the novels The Bell Jar, Wide Sargasso Sea and Surfacing) fabricated with their narrative form a madwoman to subvert cultural conventions of romance. The madwoman character, still a metaphor for feminist disobedience and narrative subversion, moved from object to subject and from peripheral figure to protagonist.

Firstly, I have provided a new explanation of the role of the madwoman, specifically from a writer’s perspective, across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:
Towards an era of reconstruction and maternal narratology

The nineteenth-century peripheral figure: madwoman as protagonist’s and author’s double

The twentieth-century heroine: madwoman as rebel

Secondly, I argue that the narrative structure used by writers of the twentieth-century madwoman encouraged their protagonists to become trapped in a state of psychological and cultural stasis. I therefore defined a new type of madwoman: the eternal madwoman.

In turn it is argued that the madwoman referred to by Caminero-Santangelo in her call for resolution is an eternal madwoman created by twentieth-century feminist texts’ rebellion against the narrative closure dichotomy of domesticity or death. This resistance has also caused a separation between the female protagonist in this fiction and any form of agency, love or empowerment. Rather than rallying against societal assumptions of and constraints on women, the eternal madwoman possesses and enacts little personal or political efficacy. The eternal madwoman remains in darkness; immobile at the threshold, poised to move forward but stationary, trapped within what seems like a constant pause. The discovery of this new madwoman therefore supports American feminist theorists’ argument against the madness-as-resistance metaphor.

2b Defining the eternal madwoman as a liminal persona

The eternal nature of the female protagonist’s madness led to the important connection between the eternal madwoman and Arnold Van Gennep’s cultural theory of liminality. This correlation also allowed me to discover a striking relationship between the stages of Murdock’s heroine’s journey and the stages of *Rites de Passage*. Van Gennep argued that all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen) and aggregation. This transition can be seen to display a similar trajectory to that of the heroine’s journey, in which there is a separation from the feminine, a margin (threshold) at the base of descent and then an aggregation, or as Murdock calls it, integration.

In turn I was able to suggest that the eternal madwoman can be defined as liminal persona; or in another way, that an eternal madwoman can be defined as a liminal person.
This individual, Turner explains, is the 'structurally indefinable': they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. Turner’s description of the liminal persona’s condition as ‘one of ambiguity and paradox’, as confusion of ‘all customary categories’, echoes Jung’s explanation of an individual in denial of their shadow and projections.

Turner also suggested that a liminal state may become ‘fixed’, referring to a situation in which the suspended character of social life takes on a more permanent character. This theory of stasis in turn led me to associate the ‘eternal’ madwoman with Szakolczai’s theory of ‘permanent liminality’. Furthermore, the definition of the eternal madwoman as a liminal person further reiterates the criticism of the rebellion-as-resistance metaphor, since there is little ability for rebellion or resistance in the state of permanent liminality.

From this analysis I was able to determine the reasons why the madwoman becomes trapped and, in turn, from a creative writing perspective, determine the required character development for her to be released from her narrative captivity.

3 Narrative captivity caused by shadows, projections and liminality

By utilising Jung’s theories of the shadow and projection, and Turner’s cultural construct of liminality, I theorise that the eternal madwoman’s narrative captivity is caused by the character’s inability to acknowledge her shadow, withdraw her projections or experience the necessary societal rituals for her rite of passage. Therefore, I elaborate three possible reasons why the eternal madwoman remains unresolved:

— **Omission of shadow.** ‘Without the realisation of the shadow all real further psychological progress is blocked.’

— **Maintenance of projections.** She is unable to be conscious of her projections and therefore cannot take back consciously what she still casts out unconsciously onto the outside world. She is therefore not able to accept responsibility for her own inner turmoil.

— **Absence of ritual.** The character does not experience the societal rituals necessary to move her through the rite of passage.
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The determination of the causes of the eternal madwoman’s narrative entrapment ultimately led to ways in which she could be resolved and released. Thus, by determining creative writing tools that are able to release the eternal madwoman from the ‘descent to the goddess’ stage of the heroine’s journey, I was able to respond to the questions raised by Caminero-Santangelo in Chapter 1: ‘How can transformation of the ideologies of gender (rather than just resistance to them) take place?’10 and, ‘How can the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts contribute to such transformation?’11

4 The Demeter decision unlocks maternal agency and the narrative attic

This exegesis furthers Hirsch’s argument by suggesting that it is feminist writers’ attempt to disconnect their narratives from the dichotomy of domesticity or death through the use of madness and the creation of the eternal madwoman that ultimately silences the protagonist’s maternal identity. I in turn argue that recent approaches to maternal agency (O’Reilly 2010; Porter 2010; and Gardiner 1995) enable us to respond both to the need for the eternal madwoman to undergo the processes of individuation and aggregation, and to the counter-narrative’s aim to transform gender ideologies. My approach to maternal agency combines the approaches of Hirsch, O’Reilly and Gardiner to define the term as an individual’s capacity for self-determination realised through actions ‘not only of literal mothers but of any and all people’12 that ‘grant legitimacy to one’s feelings’,13 refuse the role of victim,14 and that are guided by an ‘orientation to care for self and others in a way that empowers’.15

Yet, there needed to be a catalyst for the protagonist to enact this new agency. To find the answer I looked to Campbell’s original monomyth, which refers to the ‘keys’ to the hero’s release as being the termination of the old eon and initiation of the new.16 This change in perspective, he argues, must be the result of the cataclysm of a crisis.17 Therefore, for the protagonist to be shifted from embodying emotional stasis to enacting maternal agency, a sudden upheaval must occur which creates the desire for self-determination. Since I define self-determination as the power or ability to make a decision for oneself without influence from outside, I term the required upheaval as the Demeter decision, a choice the eternal madwoman must make which precipitates maternal agency.

I therefore suggest that to release the eternal madwoman from narrative captivity through the practice of creative writing, the protagonist must be presented with a Demeter decision which motivates her to grant legitimacy to her feelings, refuse the role of victim, and
Resolving the madwoman
care for herself and others in a way that empowers. The Demeter decision, the embodiment of maternal agency, enables the eternal madwoman to realise in that threshold moment that there is hope for a more positive resolution, and that only she has the power to effect that change.

5 Writing the ascent with maternal theory

By locating interconnections and interrelationships between myth criticism, maternal scholarship (specifically O'Reilly’s components of maternal empowerment) and Jungian psychology, I suggest four stages for the eternal madwoman’s ascent.

— Authority: finding the maternal mentor. The protagonist must find a mentor to understand, accept and acknowledge the protagonist’s new identity and role within society. This process allows the protagonist to learn from an experienced guide and develop her own authority.

— Autonomy: acknowledgement of shadow. The protagonist must come to be able to say of her shadow, as Prospero says of the monster Caliban at the end of Shakespeare’s Tempest, “this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.”

— Authenticity: withdrawal of projections. The protagonist must take back consciously what she originally cast out and accept responsibility for her own inner turmoil.

— Empowered maternalism: integration of private and public spheres. The protagonist must assimilate elements of her private and public life so that they are integrated and so that both halves are as important and respected as the other.

I argue that these stages work as a counter-narrative to the maternal descent (seen in Fig. 6). The finding of a maternal mentor and subsequent authority balances the enjoyment of the external boons of success; autonomy, which allows the acknowledgement of the shadow, balances identification with the masculine; authenticity, which allows the withdrawal of projections, balances the projection of the animus; and the empowered maternalism to integrate the public and private spheres balances the repression of the maternal.
6 Identifying the twenty-first century madwoman as agent

Through writing Some Uncertain Facts I argue that the current inability for women to adequately combine work or personal/creative endeavours and motherhood creates a twenty-first century madwoman in the attic. I also argue that the maternal journey provides a pathway for agency rather than madness and martyrdom. The identification of the importance of maternal agency and of empowered maternalism has allowed me to complete the explanation of the role of the madwoman, from a writer’s perspective, across the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Through this analysis it can be determined that the narrative progression of the madwoman in the attic can be represented as follows:

The nineteenth-century peripheral figure:
madwoman as metaphor

→

The twentieth-century heroine:
madwoman as rebel

→

The twenty-first century heroine:
madwoman as agent

This character development over three centuries is embedded in each madwoman’s cultural context. The nineteenth-century madwoman as metaphor was the personification of femininity as insanity, and the twentieth-century madwoman as rebel was a response to the narrative association between femininity and domesticity or death. Yet it is in this final definition and description – the twenty-first-century madwoman as agent – where we are able to extrapolate interesting polemics.

In the introduction to the exegesis I defined madness as, ‘a female protagonist’s alienation, a breakdown that is about the confinement, or even death, of the self’. In the nineteenth century madness was used as a metaphor for the alienation and confinement of women in society, and in the twentieth century madness was used as rebellion against narrative confinement. In many ways, I would like to argue that the potential use of madness in twenty-first century is a response to the alienation and confinement that defining maternal as feminine creates. Thus, the resolution of the madwoman is a call for the death of the sole association between femininity and the maternal and therefore an opening up of greater narrative and, indeed, societal possibilities.
It is these new options, the opportunity for new choices, that in many ways mirror the feminist textual intents of the previous madwoman incarnations. For this reason I explain the different uses of female madness in literature as a progression, a building from one cultural reaction to another. It is also a progression that I build upon with this work and which allows the possibility of transforming gender ideologies.

7 Transforming gender ideologies by transcending gender

I argue that, by struggling to achieve empowered maternalism, and by bestowing maternal agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity upon a female protagonist, a creative writer might contest, challenge and counter, not only patriarchal motherhood (as is demonstrated in the PhD’s creative artefact), but also patriarchal notions of how women occupy private and public spheres in general. This, I argue, is an important aim for feminist texts of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, utilising ‘empowered maternalism’ in the practice of creative writing provides interesting narrative possibilities. For example, how would an organisation or Board of Directors make the maternal journey? How would a father? A male protagonist? I believe that this approach, rather than using maternal empowerment, allows us to transform the gender ideologies discussed by Caminero-Santangelo. I also argue that the integration of private and public spheres responds to the call for transformation of gender ideologies.

Therefore, recent approaches to maternal research and, specifically, maternal agency enable us to respond to Caminero-Santangelo’s argument for the transformation of gender ideologies by the symbolic resolution of a madwoman in a fictional text. The maternal journey can be seen to contribute to the transformation of gender ideologies by:

— Disassociating effective feminist rebellion from madness
— Disproving the negative mother construct
— Integrating the public and private sphere
— Defining and applying the maternal, maternal agency and empowered maternalism in a way that transcends gender.

Of course, the interaction between gender and ideology in narrative form is vast, complex and dynamic. The above list is presented as four possible ways in which a framework such as the maternal journey is able to reconstruct our beliefs about gender. It is in fact the
reconstruction of the ascent and the descent, and the creative writing practice exemplifying this reconstruction, which has the potential to transform gendered principles.

8a Resolving the madwoman character by constructing the maternal journey

Ultimately, I argue that the aforementioned discoveries and determinations allow me to construct what I am calling the maternal journey. As well as providing a new way of reading texts that fail to resolve the character of the madwoman, the framework provides an enabler for writers to transform protagonists from oppressed victims of patriarchal hegemony to self-realised, self-loving, self-respecting subjects. These protagonists can be female or male, mothers, families, corporations or, indeed, society itself. The maternal journey, in this way, acts as a counter-narrative to that of the eternal madwoman and responds to American feminist theorists’ call for new narratives on madness and the use of myth criticism in fiction.

I would also like to suggest that this model directly responds to the aforementioned questions posed by Marta Caminero-Santangelo. With this maternal journey model I aim to participate in the dialogue that contributes to re-conceptualising the dominant notions of maternity within society. I also wish to engage in feminist discourse with the purpose of suggesting new ways to not only theorise and write maternity, but also to theorise and write feminist novels.

8b Resolving the madwoman character by writing the maternal journey

Though women such as Caminero-Santangelo, Woolf and Chesler call for the symbolic resolution of the madwoman in fictional texts, there seems to be an absence of novels that respond to this supplication. The creative component to this project, the artefact titled Some Uncertain Facts, is constructed to respond to this literary gap.

Yet, the novel is also constructed as a specific application of the maternal journey and therefore, in its own way, resolves the eternal madwoman though a particular pathway. I chose to write about a mother because I wanted to demonstrate a very literal transcendence of the association between the maternal and the feminine. I also believe that, although the maternal journey can be applied to any gender, the most pertinent starting point is the fictional resolution of the relationship between motherhood and maternity. In an era in which the baby blues, postnatal depression and postnatal psychosis affects more than fifteen per cent of
child-bearing women, this seems a more real than figurative representation of the twenty-first century madwoman. It is this ‘real woman’ who I wanted to represent with Anna, the novel’s protagonist, and with the creative application of the new narrative framework.

This choice was partly personal, from having a baby two years ago and witnessing so many friends succumb to postnatal illness, but it was also a response to Caminero-Santangelo’s appeal for feminist practice that improves the lives of ‘real’ women:

Instead of privileging the retreat into madness, then, let us privilege forms of agency, and of active transformation in all its forms, which women engage in. And, in doing so, let us open an imaginative space for women to be able to escape from madness by envisioning themselves as agents.

I believe that by using a female protagonist that represents my experience of the unresolved eternal madwoman, I am better able to write a narrative for ‘real’ women. My creation of Anna – as a mother, as a madwoman who risks becoming eternal, as a woman who could become a liminal persona as so many other mothers do – is who I imagine as my reader. If ‘disruptive prose leads to proliferating ends without palpable effect on the few narratives commonly prescribed for women’s lives’ then I wish for my ordered framework to enact ‘real’ effect on ‘real’ women’s lives.

I propose that Some Uncertain Facts provides Caminero-Santangelo’s creative space – a path for Anna and for authors who aim to write their protagonists more than a crescent-shaped life. I argue that if the maternal journey enables us to theorise, in a new way, what Caminero-Santangelo calls ‘the most important feminist question,’ then the application of the journey serves as its answer.

**Introducing a definition of maternal narratology**

I argue with this exegesis that the concept of the maternal is paramount to feminist creative writing practice. As Hirsch suggests, North American and European feminist writing has only been able to inscribe the female by further silencing one aspect of an individual’s experience and identity – the maternal. This exegesis furthers Hirsch’s argument by suggesting that it is feminist writers’ attempt to disconnect their narratives from the dichotomy of domesticity or death through the use of madness that ultimately silences the protagonist’s maternal identity. Hirsch argues that the ‘maternal story’ cannot be filled in because we have ‘no framework within which to write from her perspective.’ Again, in another development to Hirsch’s research in which she asks that we try to imagine those maternal stories, this exegesis has suggested a framework for writers to actually
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create them. It is such a framework that I believe contributes directly to feminist narratology and which, I argue, paves the way for a new form of literary analysis, maternal narratology.

In 1986 Susan Lanser described the contingent relation between feminism and narratology, which she named ‘feminist narratology’:

My…task [is] to ask whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods…of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understanding of feminist criticism and the experience of women’s texts.27

Just as Lanser suggested a mutually beneficial relationship between feminism and narratology, so too would I like to suggest a possible symbiotic interconnection between maternal theory and narratology. In fact, I argue that bringing maternal theory and perspectives into narratology might reorientate narratology. Many maternal issues such as feminist mothering, domestic violence, adoption, outlaw mothering, breastfeeding, child care and concepts and constructs of the maternal that transcend gender, all impinge on the discussion of how narratology functions by querying subject positions, cultural formation, the laws of genre and the universality and stability of narrative forms.

Although there has been much written recently on ‘maternal texts’ such as Podnieks’ and O’Reilly’s Textual Mothers (2010), and Porter and Kelso’s Mother-Texts (2010), there is certainly space for the specific nuances of narratology to be applied to maternal scholarship, and vice versa. Maternal narratology also allows us to re-think and re-frame feminist narratives and narrative closure. Analysis and frameworks of maternal narratology, such as those articulated in this exegesis, argue for empowered maternalism as a counter-closure – as what should be an alternative to the domesticity or death dichotomy. Yet, there is certainly room for more alternate endings and indeed further structural and narratological analysis of the maternal within literary texts. Indeed the analysis conducted using the framework of the heroine’s journey to read Wide Sargasso Sea, Surfacing and The Bell Jar could benefit from other scholars applying the same reading to other feminist texts of the twentieth century.

Towards an era of reconstruction

As feminist criticism advanced by ‘turning to the construction of a female literary tradition’,28 so too does this exegesis aim to support the advancement of feminist literature by turning...
to the (re)construction of a female literary future. I argue, with the exegesis and the artefact, that this immediate future lies in the identification of maternal narratology and a focus on reconstruction rather than deconstruction. Since realistic conventions provide a 'steadier vehicle for feminist argument' than 'experiments in non-linear or impersonal techniques', an era of reconstruction that responds to the chaotic and open narrative techniques of the past might open up a kaleidoscope of new feminist narrative possibilities.

Gayle Green argues that this type of 'symmetrically patterned, formally well-made' narrative's 'neat, circular structure is finally constricting.' That though the protagonists finds 'an ending of their own', in that she ends alive and alone, the sense is of a 'narrowing off of possibilities rather than an opening up into new ones.' Yet, I argue, it is transcending paralysis and developing empowered maternalism in the narrative that opens up new possibilities. The maternal journey and, in turn, the reconstructed journey model, is therefore an important framework for feminist writers in the twenty-first century.

I would therefore like to argue for a period in feminist literature that privileges the reconstruction of the narrative arc, the descent and ascent of the monomyth. I believe this approach, especially if it acts as a catalyst for further research, definition and clarification of maternal narratology, is in many ways what Betty Friedan had in mind in a literary sense when she called for the 'second stage'.

Returning to the room in which Charlotte Brontë died, I was reminded of the epitaph she wrote for Lucy Snowe in Villette (1853): 'The orb of your life is not to be rounded; for you the crescent-phase must suffice.' In many ways an era of reconstruction pays tribute to any woman, fictional or real, for whom a life half lived has had to suffice. It is these women who I pay tribute to with the exegesis.

When Rhys wrote Wide Sargasso Sea she said she did so with a 'deep curtsey to Charlotte Brontë'. I too have written my novel and this exegesis with deep respect for all the female writers and academics mentioned in this study, since without their work mine could never have materialised. Their work was, in many ways, part of the reason I started my research.

When I returned to the Brontë museum, the same curator I met with in 2010 asked me about my motivations for finishing the PhD thesis. I told her that I wanted to figure out how to write the kind of novel I would want my daughter to read. She smiled and left the room. And as I stood in that room in which Charlotte died, with my little girl in my arms, I whispered in her ear, 'I wrote you a book, Ava. Mummy wrote you a book.'
Towards an era of reconstruction and maternal narratology

1 Note: this question was listed as the primary research question in the introduction. I have listed it as the last in the conclusion as I was not able to answer the primary question until I had answered the secondary questions.


6 Ibid.


8 Steven F. Walker, Jung and the Jungians on Myth: An Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2002), 34.

9 Ibid., 32.

10 Caminero-Santangelo, The Madwoman Can’t Speak, 2.

11 Ibid.


15 Gardiner, Provoking Agents, 152.


17 Ibid.

18 Walker, Jung and the Jungians on Myth, 35.

19 Kate Zambreno, Heroines (California: Semiotext(e), 2012), 78.

20 I use the term ‘potential’ here as, to my knowledge and that of the feminist theorists I refer to in the exegesis, the madwoman as agent in fictional text does not currently exist.


25 Ibid., 240.

26 Ibid., 239.


28 Booth, Famous Last Words, 5.

29 Ibid., 9.


31 Ibid.


33 Rebecca Fraser applies this quote to Charlotte Brontë’s life in her biography Charlotte Brontë (London: Vintage, 1988), 483.
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Zambreno, Kate. *Heroines*. California: Semiotext(e), 2012.
