

**“ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” UNIVERSITY OF IAȘI**  
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*The Madwoman: From Life to Page to Screen*

*(Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emily Holmes Coleman, Zelda Fitzgerald,  
Mary Jane Ward, Shirley Jackson, Sylvia Plath, and Joanne Greenberg)*

– SUMMARY –

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**KEYWORDS:** madness, the madwoman, creativity, (semi)autobiographic fiction, filmic adaptation, catharsis, feminism, ethics, awareness.

## SUMMARY

### 1. Why madness?

The title of my thesis is **The Madwoman: From Life to Page to Screen**, and I would like to start by explaining the motivation behind my choice of topic, a choice which stems, in fact, from several directions.

Firstly, as a Cultural Studies graduate, I was interested in a subject that would allow me the interdisciplinary research in the spirit of which I have conducted my studies and, in the end, formed as a professional. My paper has done precisely that: through the charting of the journey of madness from the personal experience, to the space of the text, to that of the screen, it has granted me the opportunity to merge my passion for literature and the cinema with the interest I have always manifested for the mechanisms that govern the complex, yet perilously fragile, human psyche.

The decision to combine literary analysis with filmic analysis is, then, I believe, not a surprising one, since adaptations and translations are, undoubtedly, the most interesting means of critically approaching a literary text. Furthermore, the comparison between the respective techniques that books and films employ in conveying their messages, along with the highly productive tension that has always governed the relationship between the written text and the on-screen narrative, represents a true intellectual feast. Apart from this, in the post-Freudian age, whether one agrees with the vision of the founder of psychoanalysis or not, one cannot help but see literature and the s-called *sciences of the mind* as inextricably linked.

Two questions are, thus, left: why autobiographical texts and why female subjects exclusively? The answer to the first one lies in the main objective of the thesis, which is to discover whether creative writing does, indeed, serve a cathartic function in the lives of individuals battling mental instability.

As far as my choice to focus on the effects of mental disturbances upon women (be they flesh-and-blood or (partially) fictitious) is concerned, it is based on the controversy spurred by the two conflicting interpretations of the *madwoman in the attic* motif, on the one hand as symbol of the rebellion against patriarchal authority, and, on the other, as the embodiment of powerlessness in the face of the same authority. As the author of a dissertation paper written from a feminist perspective, I found the vivid debate generated within feminist circles by these two antagonistic views particularly challenging.

So far, so good, but, still, you may ask, *why madness*? The answer is quite simple: irrespective of whether one believes that madness (the term lacks any pejorative connotations; when chosen over more politically-correct phrases, it is due to its great symbolic charge) is an illness in its own right (or, more precisely, a plethora of illnesses) – either one of fate's many forms of cruel arbitrariness or the result of a

chemical imbalance or neurological abnormality, favored by a certain genetic disposition – or, on the contrary, a cultural construct, madness is, in the end, relevant for each and every one of us.

I believe that those touched by madness reflect the values of the society to the margins of which they are exiled. Therefore, the decision to choose madness narratives as the topic of my doctoral research stems from a feminism that I understand as the struggle for the empowerment of all people whose rights are infringed upon, irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, degree of mental health, or any other of the numerous aspects that shape our identity as individuals, but do not essentially define (or restrict) us as human beings.

I will admit, however, that such an openly stated perspective can be misleading. Indeed, I do focus exclusively on madness narratives belonging to female authors. Yet, instead of seeking to portray women as the sole victims of dangerous mental health policies, of a (contested) medical discipline that, for a long time, regarded itself as mandated by society to label and regulate deviation, as it may be inferred, my work actually aims at investigating the hypothesis that women's madness was more likely born out of socio-cultural inequities (legal powerlessness, economic marginality, imposed submission etc.), rather than the much-invoked proneness to emotion or unstable sexuality, and that, compared to men's madness, it has historically borne heavier connotations. Such an assumption does not, of course, imply that male insanity is not symbolically and politically charged. There were (and, to a large extent, still are), however, greater stakes associated with female madness as far as the reproduction – both literal (the birthing of new generations) and cultural (the instilling of traditional values into these new generations) – of patriarchal society was concerned.

What needs to be stressed, however, is the fact that the main goal of my research is not to disregard what is, in fact, central: the madwomen themselves and what can be learned from their (biographical and literary) stories, since, unfortunately, despite consistent efforts to revolutionize the medical system and today's more enlightened outlook on mental imbalance, the world in which we live is still far from the liberal society we are trying to project, and abuse, under its many guises, continues to be a reality for the mentally challenged.

We have managed to distance ourselves too little from the age in which those deemed *mad* (often based on criteria which seem more than absurd today) were seen as animal-like and treated accordingly; when madness was regarded as divine punishment for moral corruption or the attempt at stepping outside social norms (particularly in the case of women), and confinement, doubled by the deprivation of everything human, was considered the only possible course of action; when the treatments applied to patients in asylums were often mere brutal experiments favored by a young and competitive field, whose scope and methods had not been fully shaped.

Consequently, although the ideal of *art for art's sake* is, indeed, attractive, one must not overlook the fact that, beyond the aesthetic pleasure it arouses (which, given our imperative need for beauty and emotion, is vital), literature can and should act as an instrument of change on the social scene, and its critical reception, analyzed through philological research, can greatly support this function, and, eventually, contribute to the erasing of the stigma.

## 2. Methodology and structure of the thesis

My thesis, built, as previously stated, on the principles of Cultural Studies and Feminism, and combining theoretical and empirical methods, synthesis and analysis, follows the American argumentative model in that it does not start from clearly formulated hypotheses which it seeks to confirm or disprove, but merely from inciting premises, in an attempt to potentially formulate new inciting premises.

After an **INTRODUCTION** meant to explain my choice of topic and the perspective from which I intended to approach it, as well as present the structure of the thesis, my dissertation includes three large chapters, namely: **CHAPTER I. THE MADWOMAN: A FEMINIST CONTROVERSY; CHAPTER II. THE MADNESS NARRATIVE – BETWEEN THE LITERARY, THE THERAPEUTIC AND THE POLITICAL; CHAPTER III. MADNESS AND CREATIVITY AU FÉMININ**, followed by **CONCLUSIONS**. In the following minutes, I will try to sum up the contents of these three chapters.

Before diving into the vast bibliography dedicated to the madwoman motif or the (semi)fictional representations of mental disturbance, I found it both natural and responsible to attempt to grasp the implications of the concept which constitutes the very skeleton upon which my doctoral thesis is built. As expected, I discovered a heated polemic (with multiple philosophical, medical, social and judiciary ramifications) in which tens of brilliant minds have been drawn over the course of hundreds of years, a polemic that promises to remain equally fervent.

A satisfactory analysis of the ideas on which the debate is centered would require a lifetime of arduous research. From this point of view, the mere overview of the evolution of perspectives on mental disturbance and the adequate treatment for it would undoubtedly be an overwhelming project. As a result, as enticing as such an endeavor may be, comprehensively defining a delicate, ever-shifting term like *madness* seems impossible, given the fact that any of the definitions that could possibly be formulated will undoubtedly be contested, as either inaccurate or incomplete, by at least one of the agencies involved in regulating its meaning, namely medicine, the patients themselves, culture and society at large. For instance, *madness* cannot simply be described as *illness* (in the age-old history of madness, a very recent concept, which has, nevertheless, gained great credence) because this invites the use of medical rhetoric. On the other hand, madness cannot simply be labeled as the opposite of *sanity*, because *sanity* is itself a problematic term. In the same way, one cannot view madness as the absence of reason, for the boundary between the two is difficult to establish. The concept of madness is then linked to those of *identity*, *subjectivity* and *the self*, and the matter complicates itself even further.

Throughout time and ideologies, madness has been regarded as anything from a loss of humanity; a more-than-allegorical, palpable regress to a beast-like state; a sign of demonic possession; the prevalence of feelings and drives over reason (a return to the elemental, the instinctual, the primitive); a means of adapting to an alienated social reality; a revelatory state for one's true self (through the liberation from the tyranny of the *superego* and the unleashing of the *id*); mere mental hyperfunction; a part of the continuum of human emotions

(from a complete lack of emotional involvement, as in depression, to the emotional overflow of manic states), or, quite often (and particularly relevant for the aims of the present thesis), a source of heightened creativity. Madness defies definition as much as it invites it, and, feminists argue, patriarchy has heavily speculated upon that. The first chapter of my thesis begins, thus, with a discussion on the sources and implications of this impossibility, and continues with a critical reflection on the controversial image of the madwoman.

The tradition of the perception of the madwoman as symbol of female empowerment begins with the publication of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (1979), by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The study – a revision, in feminist terms, of Victorian literature – seeks to offer an explanation for the fact that, in a patriarchal society, which regards writing as an exclusively male prerogative, and female authors as a defiance of the norms verging on an act against nature, the few daring women who, despite such a hostile context, chose to channel their firmly contested creativity (even if under the protection offered by a pen name), apparently committed the sin of betraying their own female characters.

It was a betrayal through stereotypization, for these female characters were sketched (the use of this particular verb is not accidental) following one or the other of the two patterns imposed by the limited and limiting view on women of the male writers of the time, namely the angel in the house, selfless and pure, and the monster-woman, sensual and rebellious. The motivation behind this literary betrayal, which does appear puzzling, given that we are speaking of individuals capable, nevertheless, of self-assertion, is quite transparent, though, according to Gilbert and Gubar: such a compromise was the only manner in which the female writers of the nineteenth century could make themselves heard in a society which frowned at women penetrating the public scene, in whatever shape or form, but especially when it came to actions that threatened to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, women's intellectual abilities and their incompatibility with the subordinate and restrictive status they had been afforded, as writing meant for publication can.

Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar emphasize the fact that a stance of the monster-woman, the madwoman, with her beastly appearance and behavior, a character full of both pathos and strength, can be reinterpreted as a feminist manifesto *avant la lettre*, an attempt of authors themselves mad in the eyes of the men of their age, at symbolically rejecting the one-dimensional image imposed upon the woman of the nineteenth century.

*The Madwoman in the Attic* has had a great impact upon feminist criticism, leading to studies that either support the hypotheses it advances, or, on the contrary, question them, as does *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998), by Marta Caminero-Santangelo. In *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, Caminero-Santangelo claims that the idea of madness is perceived so negatively, both at a medical and at a socio-cultural level, being equated with chaos, loss of self-control, confinement and silencing, that attributing positive connotations to it and transforming the madwoman (notice the dissolution, through the absence of a hyphen, of all other aspects of her identity into the all-absorbing mental state and subsequent socio-cultural status) into an image of female empowerment, as Gilbert and Gubar had attempted to do, is virtually impossible. According to the author of *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, the madwoman represents a confirmation of deeply-

entrenched patriarchal notions regarding the essence of womanhood, and, thus, her ability to question these very notions becomes doubtful.

Caminero-Santangelo argues that, since there is no subversion in the unintelligible, seeing the madwoman as a channel for the expression of frustration at gender-based impositions and limitations is not possible. The madwoman's raging cry is, in fact, muted by her being situated outside any field of agency. Moreover, in Caminero-Santangelo's view, Gilbert and Gubar contribute to the proliferation of the stereotypical idea that women are inherently irrational (this equation of women with madness grew, apparently, out of a previous equation, that between women and their biology, more precisely their sexual and reproductive organs), an idea which, for a long time, legitimized abusive hospitalizations.

The analysis of the thirty-year-long debate on *the madwoman* and her significance in literature and beyond it, starting from *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, but including the ideas brought forth in other studies that are part of the same continuum, as well, is followed, within the thesis, by a synthesis of the main aspects related to *madness narratives* (a phrase adopted so as to avoid (and, thus, question) psychiatric jargon). Throughout this synthesis, I have summarized the types, functions and limitations of such texts within the larger contexts of women's autobiographical writing (a type of writing that is, despite general assumptions, quite difficult to achieve, given the fact that one is both subject and object) and illness-based writing, in an attempt to provide the theoretical framework necessary for the analysis of specific madness narratives further on. Madness narratives are heterogeneous texts at the border between creative writing, pathography, scriptotherapy and activism. They include entirely fictional accounts of madness, instances of (auto)biographical fiction dealing with mental instability, the self-proclaimed *non-fictional* madness memoir, as well as the so-called *relational madness narrative*, which approaches mental afflictions from the perspective of a witness, rather than the person touched by them (the two do, however, share a close bond).

Within my thesis, I have chosen to focus on (semi)autobiographical works of fiction. Although, overall, I seek to distance myself from rather simplistic (yet quite common) views on the relationship between fictional writing and autobiographical writing, which regard the two as essentially different, therefore separable, and autobiographical writing as necessarily subordinated value-wise, I do feel that, when it comes to madness narratives, beyond the writerly desire to transgress the personal, fictionalization *is*, understandably, a self-protection strategy – not against the least “literary” kind of writing, as autobiographical writing is often viewed, but against the pain of the mental disturbance itself, the unbearable memory of its ordeal, or, quite often, its negative connotations. From this point of view, (semi)autobiographical works of fiction become the felicitous middle ground. Yet, penning them is by no means easy, as I have, hopefully, managed to prove within the thesis.

Since one of my focus points was the impact of madness narratives (after all, pain has come to represent a guarantee of authenticity, thus appealing to fairly large audiences), an entire sub-chapter has been dedicated to the delicate issues raised by their reception by both readers and viewers (given the fact that many have

benefited, over time, from filmic adaptations). Throughout the last decades, madness narratives have, indeed, managed to raise difficult questions regarding human rights, as well as deeply philosophical questions such as: What is real? Can truth be regulated? Are the mind and the soul one and the same? How much subjectivity is one, in fact, allowed? By turning their texts into healing acts of self-assertion, female authors of madness narratives have overturned the tradition of portraying women as feeble-minded and feeble-bodied, a tradition which has penetrated women's own writing, as well as that of depicting individuals suffering from mental disturbances as passive victims. Moreover, they have denounced the uneasy alliance between psychiatry and medicine and have provided a better understanding of mental instability, which is of utmost importance in a world that still fears its mad(ness), regarding it as a crime, rather than a misfortune, or, as some of those touched by it view it, a blessing in disguise. What is, however, the immediate impact of such charged texts upon those who come into contact with them? It is precisely this question that this sub-chapter attempts to answer, by discussing aspects ranging from readers' fears of emotional contagion, their battle with innate voyeuristic impulses, with competing voices and the lack of chronology, to critics' temptation to sacrifice the aesthetic value of such texts in favor of their socio-political messages (and vice versa), to the ethical issues raised by the filmic portrayals of deranged, often highly violent or highly sexualized, individuals.

In the following chapter, I have attempted, through a case-study-like integrated analysis of biographical data, letters, diaries etc. (it is, however, important to stress that one must be aware at all times of the fact that, even after decades of dedicated study, a critic can still be at fault when assessing the influence of biographical circumstances upon a writer's work; a novice critic is twice as prone to errors in this respect), to shed light on the interaction between creativity and madness in the lives of seven (magical number!) remarkable American women, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emily Holmes Coleman, Zelda Fitzgerald, Mary Jane Ward, Shirley Jackson, Sylvia Plath, and Joanne Greenberg.

Each of these authors has channeled her experience with mental disturbance into at least one literary product. The ones that I have chosen for analysis are *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Shutter of Snow* (1930), by Emily Holmes Coleman, *Save Me the Waltz* (1932), by Zelda Fitzgerald, *The Snake Pit* (1947), by Mary Jane Ward, *The Bird's Nest* (1954), by Shirley Jackson, *The Bell Jar* (1963), by Sylvia Plath, and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), by Joanne Greenberg. These seven texts make up a chronology of the representation of female mental disturbance in (semi)autobiographical works authored by American women. Post – *Rose Garden*, there is an abundance of madness memoirs and fictional madness narratives written either by male authors, or by female writers who have not experienced mental instability themselves, but no significant work to meet the sum of my criteria for selection.

What needs to be mentioned at this point is that, as a non-specialist, I do not claim to be able to diagnose the forms of madness which touched the exceptional individuals – not accidentally women – that my thesis focuses upon. Indeed, diagnosing them, a process which, generally, tends to equate the person with the disease, is neither an ability I have, nor one of my objectives. Yet, having at least a basic notion of the symptoms

associated with the conditions that these seven women (whom I will most often refer to using their first names, since I feel I have reached a level of intimacy with them that can only derive from such a courageous act as inviting readers into a troubled existence) have been afflicted with is vital in understanding both their life and their work. As a result, the present thesis has required significant prior research.

I had intended to pair or group the seven writers selected based on what they had in common (a constant strive for artistic recognition, a tumultuous marriage, a tragic death and the subsequent mythicization, the rebellion against gender roles, an active involvement in the movement to reform the American mental health system etc.), but I eventually discovered that they actually shared far more things than those that set them apart. As a result, within the body of my thesis, each author has been afforded a sub-chapter benefiting from a title which anticipates the two poles of the discussion that follows, and incorporating its own conclusions.

As far as Charlotte Perkins Gilman is concerned, I have addressed the issue of the apparent conflict between an unsatisfying marriage and her feminist beliefs and activities, along with her prolonged mental instability, the ill-famed *rest cure*, and her suicide in the face of terminal illness, as reflected in Gilman's autobiography, her letters, the short-story "The Yellow Wall-Paper," and the essay "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (1913).

The issues under scrutiny in relation to Emily Holmes Coleman have been her literary aspirations, her alleged inheritance of mental instability, her traumatic commitment to a sanatorium as a child, the postpartum psychosis that prompted *The Shutter of Snow*, and, most importantly, Emily's life-long diary writing and its significance.

In relation to Zelda Fitzgerald, I have discussed her status as a Southern belle and, later, a flapper, the glamorous, yet seemingly unhealthy marriage to F. Scott Fitzgerald, the conflict between Zelda, the muse, and Zelda, the woman in search of her own voice (through writing, ballet, and painting), her life-long schizophrenia, as well as her tragic death, as reflected in Zelda's diary, her autobiographical novel *Save Me the Waltz* and her paintings.

Diagnosed with schizophrenia, but likely suffering from bipolar disorder, Mary Jane Ward went through an initial emotional collapse brought on by financial problems, followed by life-long mental distress, which prompted her to become a national spokesperson for mental health awareness, as well as to center three of her eight novels on the topic of madness and its treatment. These are, as a result, the aspects I have attempted to discuss in relation to Mary Jane's life and work.

In Shirley Jackson's case, I have analyzed her early preoccupation with writing, followed by her mental breakdown during college, the strict writing discipline she adhered to throughout the rest of her life, her marriage, the long history of psychosomatic illnesses, as well as whether her particular writing style and choice of topics can be regarded as means of purging a troubled mind.

In trying to understand Sylvia Plath, I have focused on aspects such as her tendency to be an overachiever, her marriage and its interaction with her literary ambitions, the prolonged depression interspersed

with manic episodes, and her suicide after (at least) one previous failed attempt, as reflected in her journals, her letters, the autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, as well as the posthumous collection of poems *Ariel* (1965).

In relation to Joanne Greenberg, I have touched upon issues such as her schizophrenia and her recovery from it without medication, through psychotherapy and writing, under the guidance of a remarkable therapist, Joanne's role in the making of the 2004 feature-length documentary film *Take These Broken Wings*, by Daniel Mackler, as well as her firm rejection of the idea of insanity as a source of creativity.

After having attempted to understand how each author regarded the creative process as such and, if possible, to answer (strictly at an individual level, for the issue of the relationship between madness and creativity is so complex and so sensitive, that generalizations simply cannot be made) the difficult question of whether creativity is enhanced by mental disturbance, inhibited by it, or, maybe, even a catalyst in its onset, I have analyzed the transition from biographical reality to literary fiction for each of the texts above.

Given that my thesis is based on the broad meaning of the word *text*, each of the analyses of the transition from life to page is followed, where possible, by an analysis of the transition from page to screen. Only two of the literary works I have chosen have not benefited from a filmic adaptation, largely due to the experimental style in which they were written and their authors' preference for poetry, rather than plot itself. It is true: *Zelda* and *Scott* have inspired, among other intertextual responses, a series of theatrical productions; *The Shutter of Snow*, on the other hand, has not received sufficient critical attention – which has, indeed, played a part in my decision to include the novel in the present thesis – to elicit the attention of any stage or film director. In the future, this may, obviously, change.

For the remaining literary pieces and their corresponding filmic adaptations, the comparative analysis has aimed at highlighting similitudes and differences in terms of content, techniques used in conveying the message, and degree of impact. I have focused on the challenges that the transition from page to screen entails, such as the necessity of the omission and/or compression of the plot, or the creative intervention of the screenwriter. I have, thus, discovered two movies that represent landmarks within the history of filmic portrayals of mentally unstable individuals, to the same degree that the novels they are based on are landmarks within that of the literary depictions of mental instability, namely Anatole Litvak's *The Snake Pit* (1948), and Roger Corman's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1977), an adaptation that fades in the face of the much-acclaimed original text (Larry Peerce's *The Bell Jar* (1979)) and one that does the written madness narrative justice (John Clive's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1989)), and a film which is, to its detriment, a product of its time and of a director's rather narrow vision (Hugo Haas' *Lizzie* (1957)).

### **3. Conclusions**

Given the wealth of texts dedicated to mental disturbance and its multitude of representations and interpretations, the anxiety of influence becomes, I believe, unavoidable, and finding a niche for personal

research – quite difficult. As far as I am concerned, however, I feel that, by focusing on the complete path followed by the experience of madness (from the biographical events, to the manner in which they were filtered through the writer's imagination onto the page, to the filmic adaptation, to the response of the readers and the viewers, to the impact upon the author herself), on the one hand, and by analyzing texts that have not been afforded the critical attention they deserve throughout the decades that have passed since their publication, such as *The Shutter of Snow*, on the other hand, I have brought my contribution to the research dedicated to the (semi)fictional representations of mental instability.

One result that I particularly value is the fact that my thesis has allowed me to reach a conclusion regarding both the significance of the madwoman and the alleged connection between mental instability and creativity. I have, thus, discovered that, when creative individuals touched by madness manage to preserve their abilities, it is always with great effort, and that, irrespective of gender, madness most often entails suffering and, more importantly, powerlessness. At the same time, however, I have understood that writing (as well as dancing, painting or any other creative endeavor) *can* save, even if only temporarily, and that those courageous enough to overcome the natural hesitation that one experiences when faced with the prospect of such exposure as that occasioned by the publication of a text based on madness as personal experience are, indeed, worthy of admiration.

The attempts at communicating of the mentally unstable are very complex, as are the causes and effects of their disturbances, but reaching the level of beautifully-crafted, yet true-to-the-suffering literary pieces (or any other artistic product, for that matter) is not a feat that many can accomplish. As a result, Sylvia Plath, Zelda Fitzgerald, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Shirley Jackson, Emily Holmes Coleman, Joanne Greenberg and Mary Jane Ward, along with all the other brave madmen and madwomen out there, should be celebrated, and, in the end, my doctoral thesis, through which I have understood that writing critically and writing empathically are not necessarily mutually exclusive, is, beyond any scientific purpose or tangible result, precisely that: a celebration. Of the seven writers I have focused upon and of all those who have had to deal with mental imbalance – whether they have discovered an innate, dormant creativity *due to it*, whether they have managed to preserve their creative powers *despite of it*, whether they have simply lost the battle.

#### **4. Why madness?**

The motivation behind my choice of topic for the present doctoral thesis stems, in fact, from several directions.

Firstly, as a Cultural Studies graduate, I was interested in a subject that would allow me the interdisciplinary research in the spirit of which I have conducted both my undergraduate and my graduate studies and, in the end, formed as a professional. My paper has done precisely that: it has granted me the

opportunity to merge my passion for literature and the cinema with the interest I have always manifested for the mechanisms that govern the complex, yet perilously fragile, human psyche.

The decision to combine literary analysis with filmic analysis is, then, I believe, not a surprising one, since adaptations and translations are, undoubtedly, the most interesting means of critically approaching a literary text. Furthermore, the comparison between the respective techniques that books and films employ in conveying their messages, along with the highly productive tension that has always governed the relationship between the written text and the on-screen narrative, represents a true intellectual feast. Apart from this, in the post-Freudian age, whether one agrees with the vision of the founder of psychoanalysis or not, one cannot help but see literature and the s-called *sciences of the mind* as inextricably linked.

Two questions are, thus, left: why autobiographical fiction and why female subjects exclusively? The answer to the first one lies in the main objective of the thesis, which is to discover whether creative writing does, indeed, serve a cathartic function in the lives of individuals battling mental instability.

As far as my choice to focus on the effects of mental disturbances upon women (be they flesh-and-blood or (partially) fictitious) is concerned, it is based on the controversy spurred by the two conflicting interpretations of the *madwoman in the attic* motif, on the one hand as symbol of the rebellion against patriarchal authority, and, on the other, as the embodiment of powerlessness in the face of the same authority. As the author of a dissertation paper written from a feminist perspective, I found the vivid debate generated within feminist circles by these two antagonistic views particularly challenging.

So far, so good, but, still, you may ask, *why madness*? The answer is quite simple: irrespective of whether one believes that madness (the term lacks any pejorative connotations; when chosen over more politically-correct phrases, it is due to its great symbolic charge) is an illness in its own right (or, more precisely, a plethora of illnesses) – either one of fate’s many forms of cruel arbitrariness or the result of a chemical imbalance or neurological abnormality, favored by a certain genetic disposition – or, on the contrary, a cultural construct, madness is, in the end, relevant for each and every one of us.

I believe that those touched by madness reflect the values of the society to the margins of which they are exiled. Therefore, the decision to choose madness narratives as the topic of my doctoral research stems from a feminism that I understand as the struggle for the empowerment of all people whose rights are infringed upon, irrespective of gender, race, sexual orientation, degree of mental health, or any other of the numerous aspects that shape our identity as individuals, but do not essentially define (or restrict) us as human beings.

I will admit, however, that such an openly stated perspective can be misleading. Indeed, I do focus exclusively on madness narratives belonging to female authors. Yet, instead of seeking to portray women as the sole victims of dangerous mental health policies, of a (contested) medical discipline that, for a long time, regarded itself as mandated by society to label and regulate deviation, as it may be inferred, my work actually aims at investigating the hypothesis that women’s madness was more likely born out of socio-cultural inequities (legal powerlessness, economic marginality, imposed submission etc.), rather than the much-invoked proneness

to emotion or unstable sexuality, and that, compared to men's madness, it has historically borne heavier connotations. Such an assumption does not, of course, imply that male insanity is not symbolically and politically charged. There were (and, to a large extent, still are), however, greater stakes associated with female madness as far as the reproduction – both literal (the birthing of new generations) and cultural (the instilling of traditional values into these new generations) – of patriarchal society was concerned.

What needs to be stressed, however, is the fact that the main goal of my research is not to disregard what is, in fact, central: the madwomen themselves and what can be learned from their (biographical and literary) stories, since, unfortunately, despite consistent efforts to revolutionize the medical system and today's more enlightened outlook on mental imbalance, the world in which we live is still far from the liberal society we are trying to project, and abuse, under its many guises, continues to be a reality for the mentally challenged.

We have managed to distance ourselves too little from the age in which those deemed *mad* (often based on criteria which seem more than absurd today) were seen as animal-like and treated accordingly; when madness was regarded as divine punishment for moral corruption or the attempt at stepping outside social norms (particularly in the case of women), and confinement, doubled by the deprivation of everything human, was considered the only possible course of action; when the treatments applied to patients in asylums were often mere brutal experiments favored by a young and competitive field, whose scope and methods had not been fully shaped.

Consequently, although the ideal of *art for art's sake* is, indeed, attractive, one must not overlook the fact that, beyond the aesthetic pleasure it arouses (which, given our imperative need for beauty and emotion, is vital), literature can and should act as an instrument of change on the social scene, and its critical reception, analyzed through philological research (a type of research which, it is often argued, does not produce tangible results), can greatly support this function.

## **5. Methodology and structure of the thesis**

My thesis, built, as stated above, on the principles of Cultural Studies and Feminism, and combining theoretical and empirical methods, synthesis and analysis, follows the American argumentative model in that it does not start from clearly formulated hypotheses which it seeks to confirm or disprove, but merely from inciting premises, in an attempt to potentially formulate new inciting premises.

Before diving into the vast bibliography dedicated to the madwoman motif or the (semi)fictional representations of mental disturbance, I found it both natural and responsible to attempt to grasp the implications of the concept which constitutes the very skeleton upon which my doctoral thesis is built. As expected, I discovered a heated polemic (with multiple philosophical, medical, social and judiciary ramifications) in which tens of brilliant minds have been drawn over the course of hundreds of years, a polemic that promises to remain equally fervent.

A satisfactory analysis of the ideas on which the debate is centered would require a lifetime of arduous research. From this point of view, the mere overview of the evolution of perspectives on mental disturbance and the adequate treatment for it – from the alleged daimonic nature of mental instability, on the one hand, and *humoral theory* and *hysteria*, on the other, of Antiquity (extending, in Western medicine, up to the modern age); to madness as vice requiring isolation and exorcism in the Middle Ages (a period which did, nevertheless, mark the opening of the first institution for the mentally disturbed in Europe); through Renaissance and its idea of the madman as buffoon; the Enlightenment and its oscillation between the attempt to rationalize mental instability, on the one hand, and the view of madness as spectacle (which led to the flourishing of mental asylums), on the other; to the entrance of madness into the sphere of medicine, largely as a result of Philippe Pinel's idea of the *moral treatment* (the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century); the violent methods used in the treatment of mental afflictions during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the development of clinical psychiatry and the first attempts at reform of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Freud, his supporters and his detractors; the emphasis on the biological nature of mental instability post-WWII; the *antipsychiatry movement* of the 1960s and 1970s, and, of course, mental disturbances in contemporaneity – would undoubtedly be an overwhelming project.

As a result, as enticing as such an endeavor may be, comprehensively defining a delicate term like *madness* seems impossible, given the fact that any of the definitions that could possibly be formulated will undoubtedly be contested, as either inaccurate or incomplete, by at least one of the agencies involved in regulating its meaning, namely medicine, the patients themselves, culture and society at large. The first chapter of my thesis begins, thus, with a discussion on the sources and implications of this impossibility, and continues with a critical reflection on the controversial image of the madwoman.

The tradition of the perception of the madwoman as symbol of female empowerment begins with the publication of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (1979), by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The study – a revision, in feminist terms, of Victorian literature – seeks to offer an explanation for the fact that, in a patriarchal society, which regards writing as an exclusively male prerogative, and female authors as a defiance of the norms verging on an act against nature, the few daring women who, despite such a hostile context, chose to channel their firmly contested creativity (even if under the protection offered by a pen name), committed the sin of betraying their own female characters.

It was a betrayal through stereotypization, for these female characters were sketched (the use of this particular verb is not accidental) following one or the other of the two patterns imposed by the limited and limiting view on women of the male writers of the time, namely the angel in the house, selfless and pure, and the monster-woman, sensual and rebellious. The motivation behind this literary betrayal, which does appear puzzling, given that we are speaking of individuals capable, nevertheless, of self-assertion, is quite transparent, though, according to Gilbert and Gubar: such a compromise was the only manner in which the female writers of the nineteenth century could make themselves heard in a society which frowned at women penetrating the public scene, in whatever shape or form, but especially when it came to actions that threatened to prove, beyond

the shadow of a doubt, women's intellectual abilities and their incompatibility with the subordinate and restrictive status they had been afforded, as writing meant for publishing can.

Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar emphasize the fact that a stance of the monster-woman, the madwoman, with her beastly appearance and behavior, a character full of both pathos and strength, can be reinterpreted as a feminist manifesto *avant la lettre*, an attempt of authors themselves mad in the eyes of the men of their age, at symbolically rejecting the one-dimensional image imposed upon the woman of the nineteenth century.

Gilbert and Gubar's study has had a great impact upon feminist criticism, as reflected by the publication of *Gilbert and Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic" after Thirty Years* (2009), a collection of feminist essays starting from the original work and celebrating its legacy, edited by Annette R. Federico and prefaced by Sandra Gilbert herself.

Another important work which relates itself to *The Madwoman in the Attic* is *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998), by Marta Caminero-Santangelo. Within it, Caminero-Santangelo claims that the idea of madness is perceived so negatively, both at a medical and at a socio-cultural level, being equated with chaos, loss of self-control, confinement and silencing, that attributing positive connotations to it and transforming the madwoman (notice the dissolution, through the absence of a hyphen, of all other aspects of her identity into the all-absorbing mental state and subsequent socio-cultural status) into an image of female empowerment, as Gilbert and Gubar had attempted to do, is virtually impossible. According to the author of *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, the madwoman represents a confirmation of deeply-entrenched patriarchal notions regarding the essence of womanhood, and, thus, her ability to question these very notions becomes doubtful.

Caminero-Santangelo argues that, since there is no subversion in the unintelligible, seeing the madwoman as a channel for the expression of frustration at gender-based impositions and limitations is not possible. The madwoman's raging cry is, in fact, muted by her being situated outside any field of agency. Moreover, in Caminero-Santangelo's view, Gilbert and Gubar contribute to the proliferation of the stereotypical idea that women are inherently irrational, an idea which has, for a long time, legitimized abusive hospitalizations.

The analysis of the thirty-year-long debate on *the madwoman* and her significance in literature and beyond it, starting from *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *The Madwoman Can't Speak*, but including the ideas brought forth in other studies that are part of the same continuum, as well, is followed, within the thesis, by a synthesis of the main aspects related to *madness narratives*. Throughout this synthesis, I have summarized the types, functions and limitations of such texts within the larger contexts of women's autobiographical writing and illness-based writing, in an attempt to provide the theoretical framework necessary for the analysis of specific madness narratives further on. Since one of my focus points was the impact of such texts, an entire sub-chapter has been dedicated to the issues raised by their reception by both readers and spectators (given the fact that many have benefited, over time, from filmic adaptations).

In the following chapter, I have attempted, through a case-study-like integrated analysis of biographical data, letters, diaries etc. (it is, however, important to stress that one must be aware at all times of the fact that, even after decades of dedicated study, a critic can still be at fault when assessing the influence of biographical circumstances upon a writer's work; a novice critic is twice as prone to errors in this respect), to shed light on the interaction between creativity and madness in the lives of seven (magical number!) remarkable American women, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emily Holmes Coleman, Zelda Fitzgerald, Mary Jane Ward, Shirley Jackson, Sylvia Plath, and Joanne Greenberg.

Each of these authors has channeled her experience with mental disturbance into at least one literary product. The ones that I have chosen for analysis are *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Shutter of Snow* (1930), by Emily Holmes Coleman, *Save Me the Waltz* (1932), by Zelda Fitzgerald, *The Snake Pit* (1947), by Mary Jane Ward, *The Bird's Nest* (1954), by Shirley Jackson, *The Bell Jar* (1963), by Sylvia Plath, and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), by Joanne Greenberg. These seven texts make up a chronology of the representation of female mental disturbance in (semi)autobiographical works authored by American women. Post – *Rose Garden*, there is an abundance of madness memoirs and fictional madness narratives written either by male authors, or by female writers who have not experienced mental instability themselves, but no significant work to meet the sum of my criteria for selection.

What needs to be mentioned at this point is that, as a non-specialist, I do not claim to be able to diagnose the forms of madness which touched the exceptional individuals – not accidentally women – that my thesis focuses upon. Indeed, diagnosing them, a process which, generally, tends to equate the person with the disease, is neither an ability I have, nor one of my objectives. Yet, having at least a basic notion of the symptoms associated with the conditions that these seven women (whom I will most often refer to using their first names, since I feel I have reached a level of intimacy with them that can only derive from such a courageous act as inviting readers into a troubled existence) have been afflicted with is vital in understanding both their life and their work. As a result, the present thesis has required significant prior research.

I had intended to pair or group the seven writers selected based on what they had in common (a constant strive for artistic recognition, a tumultuous marriage, a tragic death and the subsequent mythicization, the rebellion against gender roles, an active involvement in the movement to reform the American mental health system etc.), but I eventually discovered that they actually shared far more things than those that set them apart. As a result, within the body of my thesis, each author has been afforded a sub-chapter benefiting from a title which anticipates the two poles of the discussion that follows, and incorporating its own conclusions.

After having attempted to understand how each author regarded the creative process as such and, if possible, to answer (strictly at an individual level, for the issue of the relationship between madness and creativity is so complex and so sensitive, that generalizations simply cannot be made) the difficult question of whether creativity is enhanced by mental disturbance, inhibited by it, or, maybe, even a catalyst in its onset, I have analyzed the transition from biographical reality to literary fiction for each of the texts above.

Given that my thesis is based on the broad meaning of the word *text*, each of the analyses of the transition from life to page is followed, where possible, by an analysis of the transition from page to screen. Only two of the literary works I have chosen have not benefited from a filmic adaptation, largely due to the experimental style in which they were written and their authors' preference for poetry, rather than plot itself. It is true: *Zelda* and *Scott* have inspired, among other intertextual responses, a series of theatrical productions; *The Shutter of Snow*, on the other hand, has not received sufficient critical attention – which has, indeed, played a part in my decision to include the novel in the present thesis – to elicit the attention of any stage or film director. In the future, this may, obviously, change.

For the remaining literary pieces and their corresponding filmic adaptations, the comparative analysis has aimed at highlighting similitudes and differences in terms of content, techniques used in conveying the message, and degree of impact. I have focused on the challenges that the transition from page to screen entails, such as the necessity of the omission and/or compression of the plot, or the creative intervention of the screenwriter.

## 6. Results

Given the wealth of texts dedicated to mental disturbance and its multitude of representations and interpretations, the anxiety of influence becomes, I believe, unavoidable, and finding a niche for personal research – quite difficult. As far as I am concerned, however, I feel that, by focusing on the complete path followed by the experience of madness (from the biographical events, to the manner in which they were filtered through the writer's imagination onto the page, to the filmic adaptation, to the response of the readers and the viewers, to the impact upon the author herself), on the one hand, and by analyzing texts that have not been afforded the critical attention they deserve throughout the decades that have passed since their publication, such as *The Shutter of Snow*, on the other hand, I have brought my contribution to the research dedicated to the (semi)fictional representations of mental instability.

One result that I particularly value is the fact that my thesis has allowed me to reach a conclusion regarding both the significance of the madwoman and the alleged connection between mental instability and creativity. I have, thus, discovered that, when creative individuals touched by madness manage to preserve their abilities, it is always with great effort, and that, irrespective of gender, madness most often entails suffering and, more importantly, powerlessness. At the same time, however, I have understood that writing (as well as dancing, painting or any other creative endeavor) *can* save, even if only temporarily, and that those courageous enough to overcome the natural hesitation that one experiences when faced with the prospect of such exposure as that occasioned by the publication of a text based on madness as personal experience are, indeed, worthy of admiration.

As far as the tangible results of my research are concerned, they are represented by papers such as “The Mental Asylum or Violence in the Name of Healing,” presented during the *Wounded Bodies, Wounded Minds: Intersections of Memory and Identity* international conference (“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, 6-10 April 2011); “The Madwoman: A Feminist Controversy,” published in the Supplement to Tome XIV (2011) of the *Scientific Annals of the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași (Foreign Languages and Literatures)*; “The Madness Narrative: Between the Literary, the Therapeutic and the Political,” published in vol. 10, no. 1 (March 2013) of the *Romanian Journal of English Studies*, or “Sylvia Plath and Zelda Fitzgerald or Madness and Creativity Intertwined,” which is to be published in the *Annals of the University of Bucharest (Foreign Languages and Literatures)*.

In the end, however, the present doctoral thesis, through which I have understood that writing critically and writing empathically are not necessarily mutually exclusive, is, beyond any scientific purpose or tangible result, my attempt at paying homage. To the seven writers I have focused upon and to all those who have had to deal with mental imbalance – whether they have discovered an innate, dormant creativity *due to it*, whether they have managed to preserve their creative powers *despite of it*, whether they have simply lost the battle.

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