

## **Under *The Bell Jar* and Across the *Wide Sargasso Sea*:**

### **Women's Mental Health and Wellness in novels by Sylvia Plath and Jean Rhys**

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Many works of women's literature find their purpose by acting as ways to draw attention to what Maria Farland labels "the psychological implications of sexist stereotypes" (925). The 1960s saw an emerging trend of feminist fiction focusing on mental illness, especially as a way to indicate the negative influence of the standards set and the roles applied to women by the prevailing social order of patriarchy, eurocentrism, and capitalism. Several novels by women were published in the 1960s that follow accounts of women and insanity, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, and Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Sylvia Plath also noticed "this increasing market for mental-hospital stuff" and used it as an opportunity to document her own experiences in her work of autobiographical fiction *The Bell Jar* in 1963 (Kukil 495). The story follows Esther Greenwood's descent into depression from her time interning in New York City to her summer trapped in the Massachusetts suburbs. Set in the 1950s, Plath's novel is informed by her own experiences in the rigid world of the United States Post-World War II in which a woman who esteemed career aspirations over family aspirations were looked down upon. Plath's novel examines the ways the pressure of rigidity and uniformity creates a breeding ground for a mental breakdown. Jean Rhys explores similar issues in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* while also adding the additional layer of a historical and cultural complexity – which establishes the long-standing existence of a split between gender and the ability to accomplish individual ambitions and objectives. She spent much of the 1950s and early 60s writing her protagonist Antoinette Cosway Mason. Antoinette's internal fragmentation is exacerbated by her particularly divided surroundings of early 1800s, post-emancipation Jamaica,

in which the split between black and white communities was especially prevalent, as well as her inability to find her place within that setting. The novel is a retelling of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in which the concentration shifts to provide a history of the story's madwoman Bertha Mason. All of the novels mentioned find their central theme in madness – with *The Bell Jar* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* being cornerstones of this literature - which seeks to dismantle the traditionally held fixed notions of femininity such as chastity and purity, the necessity of wifehood/motherhood, and propriety. Though the function of madness in both *The Bell Jar* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* have been previously examined independently, the two works are rarely compared. As will be shown, there is more than foundational similarities between the two novels. The enduring lack of attention paid to this fact signals to prevailing sociological issues regarding the continued presence of adversarial feminism within literary criticism. With lack of recognition of the similarities between *The Bell Jar* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, comes a lack of acknowledgment of the continued struggle for non-European and non-American voices to be heard on an equal playing field within the feminist community.

Madness in these novels, according to the critics, results from each protagonist's respective inability to cope with the divisive aspects of their settings. Each protagonist's madness exhibits itself in a different way. Esther Greenwood feels "very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo" (Plath 3). This emptiness and dullness in the face of what should be an exciting time is a tell-tale characteristic of depression that comes in the early pages of the novel and sets up the rest of the story of Esther's progressing struggle with mental illness. She attempts suicide and seemingly recovers, though the end of the novel is ambiguous about Esther's future. As a child, Antoinette feels unprotected and must remind herself "I am safe from strangers"; she prefers to be alone and

believes nature to be “better than people” (Rhys 27-28). Unlike the typical characterization of a child, Antoinette is not carefree and happy. Instead, she experiences very real fears and apprehensions and has a sense of separation from her surroundings. Her story ends after she is seemingly completely insane as seen in *Jane Eyre*. On the last page of the novel, Antoinette comes to a realization: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (190). This is in reference to the series of three dreams she has had over the course of her life, with the last one being just moments before this sentence is uttered. Two times during her childhood, Antoinette has dreams in which she feels terrified and as if she is being followed by a frightening stranger. The first time, Antoinette dreamt that “[she] was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated [her] was with [her], out of sight” (26). The second time she has this dream, she is wearing a “white and beautiful” dress; following the stranger “sick with fear but mak[ing] no effort to save [her]self” (59). Antoinette is wearing a wedding dress in her dream and is following a man to a place where she becomes trapped in an “enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall” (59). She is entrapped by the man who she was following, foreshadowing the way Rochester will trap her in the future. This also references the ways in which men and the standards set by the patriarchy for Antoinette work as a malevolent presence in her life – following her through life creating new fears and unattainable expectations. The third dream comes after she has been imprisoned in the attic. This is when she says she knows what she must do. Just as the other dreams acted as foreshadowing of her future while also being symbolic of her present, this dream dictates the future to her and how she must escape her present situation. The dream shows a “wall of fire protecting” Antoinette and she throws a lit candle on the floor of the second story of the house. She awakens from her dream “know[ing] why [she] was brought here” (190). The last we see of her in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is when she is “holding [her] candle”

walking “along the dark passage” (190). Leaving us to guess whether or not her story ends here in the same way as it does in *Jane Eyre*. The English country house imprisons Antoinette literally while acting as a symbol for the patriarchal, Eurocentric expectations that also imprison her. Burning down the house in England acts as a symbolic rebellion against the life that has been laid out for Antoinette – like Esther’s suicide attempt which will be discussed in more detail.

Despite these women’s dispositions which can be categorized as mental illness, their madness should not be seen wholly as insanity but as an expression of anger or disillusion. Their madness is intensified by the expectations they can’t and won’t meet. The term “madness” has an outdated connotation, it echoes the archaic nature of societies in which inequality reigns. Though the word madness has implications that relate to the days in which women’s problems were seen simply as feminine hysteria, it is the word typically used to describe the personalities of Esther Greenwood and Antoinette Cosway Mason. Therefore, I also use the word to refer to them. Several works have been written which define the word madness that imply the necessity of such a reaction to societal constructs and also indicate the liberation that comes with it. Importantly, these definitions do so without ignoring the presence of symptoms of mental illness.

Individually, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Bell Jar* have been extensively critiqued and analyzed in the contexts of psychoanalysis and feminism. Antoinette Cosway Mason and Esther Greenwood have both been labeled as mad. A number of critics have used the word madness in relationship to Antoinette and Esther in ways that defy the words early associations with sexist implications of hysteria and psychosis. In *Caribbean Shadows and Victorian Ghosts*, Kathleen J. Renk entitles a section dedicated to Antoinette/Bertha “The Madwoman in the Garden”. Renk links “Antoinette’s “madness” ...[to] a confusion of cultural identity”, referring to the division

created in her by lack of a true place into which she fits (112). Josephs cites the importance of Antoinette's narration of part three saying that "even in madness Antoinette controls the narrative" ("Fighting Mad" 87). Though she is mad, Antoinette is not merely a prop as she is in *Jane Eyre*. Despite her madness, she maintains some control by speaking. This aligns madness not with uncontrollable insanity but rather a disillusion marked by resulting mental illness. Josephs explains the freedom that comes from madness. She notes that Antoinette's narrative control ends in a way that "indicates her having accomplished her objective" (87). As mentioned before, the last page of the novel sees Antoinette discovering that she knows why she has been brought to England. She escapes her torment by burning down the house – in effect freeing her from her prison. Her madness empowers her to take her fate into her own hands. In this way, madness works toward Antoinette's liberation rather than her demise. Both Antoinette and Esther's troubles increase as their stories progress – as they become more entrenched in the happenings of the unequal societies around them. For each woman, madness stems from discontent with the way of the world around them. Esther desires to reject the pressure to conform to societal expectations. Abigail Cheever's states that in *The Bell Jar* there is a connection between "sanity and inauthenticity" (69). Cheever's relates that in Plath's work and "madness emerges as a kind of liberation from social imperatives" (70). As mentioned earlier, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's madness gives her the power to liberate herself from Rochester and, therefore, from the patriarchal expectation of femininity. This is also an often-repeated sentiment in analyses of *The Bell Jar*. Gentry concedes that Esther is in the midst of a "full-fledged nervous breakdown" during her experience with madness but that it acts as a "rebellion against these [gender] limitations" (Gentry 51,62). Critiques of both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Bell Jar* use the word madness to describe the protagonists but do so in a way that shows their

madness to serve a higher purpose – to draw attention to inequality and the duress that results from that inequality. I use the word madness throughout this paper with that idea of madness in mind.

Esther Greenwood is a young woman with artistic aspirations in the 1950s U.S. This was a time period in which women had the “opportunities for individual accomplishments” which Esther (and Plath) took part in by going to college and working as interns for well-known magazines. However, “society still emphasized the roles of wife and mother as the proper choices for women” which could easily result in fragmentation and confusion for women with career-minded, creative goals (Gentry 51). Those societal inconsistencies lay the foundation for Esther’s madness in the novel. Esther covertly knows that she wishes to become a career-woman and not follow the traditional path of motherhood which she says seems like a “dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s” (Plath 84-85). Despite her academic achievements and her desire to follow through on them within her career, Esther still feels a force pushing her toward becoming a wife and mother. She seems sure that this is not what she wants but she does not always rule it out completely. Her ambivalence is clear when she visualizes the different routes her life may take and sees one option as “a husband and a happy home and children” (77).

Esther is also extremely torn about her opinions of chastity and purity. While she comments that an article she once read called “In Defense of Chastity” seems unfair and that she “couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life”, she is also seemingly obsessed with the idea of purity (81). She says that “pureness was the great issue”; She sees “the world divided up into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t” and believes “a spectacular change would come over [her] the

day [she] crossed the boundary line” (82). Esther’s fragmentation is intensified by her “inability to completely accept or reject this dichotomy” – the dichotomy between seeing chastity as a construct while not being able to negate chastity as an important factor (Gentry 57). Esther is aware of and disappointed by the sexual double standard. “In Defense of Chastity” lays out “all the reasons a girl shouldn’t sleep with anybody but her husband” while her husband doesn’t necessarily need to follow that same rule. The article says, “a man’s emotions are different from a woman’s emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds...together”. Esther disagrees with the article noticing that it “didn’t seem to consider...how a girl felt” (81). Despite her observations, she is unable to escape the concepts forced on her by the article and finds herself abiding by the social constructs of sexuality more often than not. She considers the idea that “[she] might as well forget about staying pure myself” but doesn’t act on this notion until significantly after her breakdown (81). She struggles to feel comfortable with her own choices because society quietly informs her they are the wrong choices. Esther’s problems begin in her New York City internship but only worsen when she returns to the Massachusetts suburbs. Unable to cope with the contradictions she sees around her and inching ever closer to life outside of schooling, the only realm where she feels she thrives, Esther experiences “a profound uneasiness about the adult American middle-class life [she] is expected to join” (Cheever 66). As soon as she learns she did not get accepted to her summer writing program and must instead spend the summer in the suburbs with her mother she felt as though “the air punched out of [her] stomach” (114). In her childhood home, she feels as though she has “nothing to look forward to” (117). Soon she tells us she “hadn’t washed her hair in three weeks” (127). The transition from New York City to the Massachusetts suburbs also brings a transition from a slight feeling of displacement to outright depression. The suburbs amplify Esther’s expectation that she will not

be able to accomplish her artistic goals as she no longer sees any women she feels are living happily outside of the sphere of domesticity. Feminist critics read Esther's suicide attempt as a response to that feeling of being trapped in the suburbs and therefore trapped amongst the social institutions that cause her distress such as domestic tasks, motherhood, wifhood, and traditional careers for women like secretarial work<sup>1</sup>. Her suicide attempt "operates partially as a reaction to, and partially as an escape from, the limitations of mid-century American women's roles" (Cheever 70). Esther's madness is both attributed to and an answer to the world around her. She finds it impossible to react with sanity to a social code that she finds mad itself.

Esther's madness is also influenced by her experiences with psychiatric professionals and psychiatric hospitals. Prior to her suicide attempt, Esther is treated by a male psychiatrist – Dr. Gordon - who comes off as uninterested in listening to what she has to say. Esther "could see right away he was conceited" (129). He asks Esther to tell him "what [she] think[s] is wrong" which to Esther "made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong, [she] only *thought* it was wrong" (129-130). When she tells him her troubles, he answers by asking where she goes to college and then telling her "I was up there, during the war...I was a doctor for the lot, before I went overseas. My, they were a pretty bunch of girls" (131). Dr. Gordon has no interaction with Esther that demonstrates him trying to understand her problems in depth. Instead of truly listening to Esther, he treats her with electroconvulsive therapy which Gentry associates with his wanting to "fix her like a broken machine" (59). Electroconvulsive therapy was very common in the 50s as a treatment for women suffering from mental illness. As Gentry implies, the male psychiatrist

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is mentioned in *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* by Deborah S. Gentry, *Real Phonies* by Abigail Cheever, *A Fine, White Flying Myth: Confessions of a Plath Addict* by Susan M. Gubar, and *The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* by E. Miller Budick.

sees Esther's problems as resulting from her unwillingness to conform to prescribed roles, her refusal to be a part of the machine that is the current social code. He fails to "fix her" with his botched electroconvulsive therapy and causes her to swear off psychiatric help and, by extension, resort to suicide.

Post-suicide attempt, Esther is put under the care of a female psychiatrist where she starts to make strides toward recovery. The female psychiatrist Dr. Nolan is "a cross between Myrna Loy and [Esther's] mother" (1860). By immediately associating Dr. Nolan with her mother, Esther has Dr. Nolan providing a more positive motherly presence than her own mother – who holds her to the same standards as the rest of the world. It shows in her first days in the psychiatric hospital, Esther has not yet overcome the social standards that put her there. She immediately associates Dr. Nolan with motherhood – despite the fact that we never find out if Dr. Nolan is actually a mother. But, it does help Esther in the long run because she is able to use that motherly presence to overcome the negative emotions that she has developed surrounding motherhood. She also helps Esther find her sense of "control and freedom" by prescribing her birth control to help her alleviate her fears surrounding sex and the sexual double standard (64). This is when we see Esther start to feel more comfortable with the idea that she might not live up to the expectations of those around her. This is a turning point we do not have the opportunity to see in *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrating the lack of opportunities and access for Antoinette and other Creole women. Antoinette does not have access to helpful mental health care as a result of her time period. The type of mental health care that might be available to Antoinette is demonstrated by the type of "care" her mother receives after her own breakdown – which comes in full force after the death of Antoinette's brother after the fire at Coulibri, which is discussed later. Antoinette's stepfather's answer to her mother's breakdown is to send her to live in an

isolated house in the country where she is watched over by a man and a woman. Antoinette attempts to visit her mother and sees the true nature of the care that her mother is under. The woman seems resentful of her mother. After her mother breaks a glass the woman says, “if she walk in it a damn good thing...perhaps she keep quiet then”. Antoinette also witnesses the man assault her mother, “[she] saw the man lift her up out of the share and kiss her...she went all soft and limp in his arms and he laughed” (134). Needless to say, instead of improving her condition, her mother only becomes sicker and more catatonic and under this care; eventually she dies and is seldom mentioned after that. Lack of positive mental health care is not the sole opportunity that Antoinette is denied access to. Unlike Esther, Antoinette does not have access to a community with an enlightened way of promoting gender equality and feminine independence which did exist, in some capacity, at that time. Antoinette is marginalized by her being female but she is also marginalized by her being Creole. In her marriage to an Englishman, she is not afforded the opportunity to seek any outlets for her independence. Even an Englishwoman would be denied these opportunities; Considering her husband already sees her as not English enough, Antoinette is definitely not in a position to seek out such an outlet. Exploring any sort of independent thinking would only serve to increase her husband’s resentment toward her as those behaviors do not fit in with the established ideals of English propriety and wifhood.

As Kelly Baker Josephs explains in her study of madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the novel differs from *The Bell Jar* in that it is not solely a look into madness and femininity but also “the figuration of madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is fraught with questions of colonial identity, place, and order” (71). Both the very real division that was present in Jamaica during the post-emancipation era between black and white people (as well as English and Creole people) and the colonizer’s imagined stereotypes of the Caribbean contribute to Antoinette’s madness. As a

white Creole, Antoinette struggles to find her place within post-emancipation Jamaican society. As the daughter of an ex-slave owner, the ex-slaves are understandably wary of Antoinette and her family and are oftentimes unaccepting of Antoinette. Mardorossian points out that at times Antoinette appears “ensnared by colonialist assumptions which she unsuccessfully and often grotesquely attempts to replicate” (1071). This is clear in Antoinette’s treatment of her childhood friend, Tia. For a while, they are together every day (23). But after Tia and Antoinette get into a fight over some pennies, Antoinette lashes out at Tia and uses racial slurs against her. In response, Tia reminds Antoinette that she is not like the “real white people” and takes Antoinette’s dress. (24-25). Antoinette rejects Tia in this moment because she is being manipulated by the societal construct that she is above her simply because she is white. Before Antoinette’s argument with Tia, Antoinette thinks “Why did I look at her like that?” (Rhys 24). This one phrase shows the way in which “colonialist assumptions” have been engrained in Antoinette (Mardorossian 1071). She is not explicitly aware of why she became so angry with Tia but her use of racial slurs in the argument proves that it is due to the fact that she has been taught to think of herself as better than Tia, who is black.

Especially as a child under the influence of those around her, Antoinette embraces the racism of the English and wants to think of herself as superior because she is white. Her adoption of English sentiment toward the black Jamaicans is clear when she says, “they can *smell* money, somebody said” (39). Antoinette is relaying a stereotype someone else told her while presenting it as her own opinion. By doing so, she believes she is aligning herself more with the English and finding a group she fits into. However, her embrace of Englishness is not reciprocated. The English see Antoinette not as one of them but as Creole – and therefore below them. Mr. Mason, Antoinette’s step-father, is “so sure of himself, so without a doubt English” (36). Antoinette

relates feelings of security with the feeling of having a solid identity. Unlike Mr. Mason, she is not English and therefore not secure in that group. She is also not black like Tia and therefore not secure in her Jamaican identity. She completely lacks a group into which she molds perfectly.

Antoinette's inability to transform herself into an English girl during her marriage to Rochester causes a lot of the fragmentation she experiences in the novel. She works to further disassociate herself from Jamaica in some instances to be more like the English girl Rochester wishes she was. Antoinette tells her maid, "Don't put any more scent on my hair. He doesn't like it" (79). Mardorossian points out that this is not the first time this concept has been mentioned. As a child, Antoinette comments on another girl's hair saying, "I could smell the sickening oil she had daubed on it" (49). Mardorossian's point is to inform us that Antoinette has picked up this cultural custom despite her earlier aversion to it. This aversion shows the ways that she is engrained with prejudice toward the black Jamaican people as a child. It's possible, despite the prejudice, that she may have picked up this custom in an attempt to fit in with the Jamaicans but now she is rejecting it again in order to be a better English wife to Rochester. However, she never would have been able to become English enough in Rochester's estimation. He sees her as *too* Jamaican and *too* Caribbean, the opposite of what she views her problem as in earlier parts of the novel. When Rochester and Antoinette first arrive at Massacre, Antoinette runs off to talk to a woman she recognizes. It's raining and Rochester is concerned that her clothes will get wet but "she held up the skirt of her riding habit and ran across the street. [He] watched her critically...Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (66-67). Rochester is pointing out that he associates Antoinette much more with Jamaica than she believes herself to be. He hears her "talking not in English but the debased French patois they use" (67). Rochester is seeing how much more well-adjusted to the Caribbean

Antoinette is than he. He is seeing that he definitely did not marry a traditional Englishwoman and, though he already knew that, seeing it in action truly repulses him. He conflates her with the Caribbean itself. Kathleen Renk explains that “both females and colonies were considered prone to madness” by the English (89). Antoinette goes mad, in part, because it is Rochester’s expectation of her. He assumes she is inclined to “madness of the tropics” Renk refers to because he sees her as so comfortable and such a part of the tropics (94). According to Rochester, Antoinette would “be like any other girl” during the day and at night become “silent, or angry for no reason, and chatter to Christophine in patois” (91). Rochester does not make any real attempts to figure out what causes Antoinette’s silence or anger, or at least what he perceives as silence and anger. Through these assumptions, he associates her alleged mood swings with madness. He notices that when he perceives her madness to be apparent, she talks to only Christophine. This connection further associates Antoinette with the Caribbean – as she turns to her closest ally in Jamaica during her bouts of sadness. This also serves to further conflate madness with the Caribbean through Rochester’s assessment.

Rochester also expects Antoinette to be the perfect English wife. Considering his more dominant expectation of her is to be mad, she can never become the wife he wants. His responses to all of her actions are shadowed by his expectation that she is mad. Ironically, the inability to meet his expectations of a wife contribute to her madness. Just as Esther Greenwood’s true self seems to sabotage her chances of conforming seamlessly into her society, Antoinette’s real connection to Jamaica renders her unable to conform into the Englishwoman that would allow her marriage to Rochester to work on his terms. Esther is conflicted about the ideals of womanhood surrounding her disdain for marriage and her desire to have a literary career. Antoinette is conflicted by the disdain held against her in her marriage for being Creole.

Antoinette is also troubled by the fact that in order to be Rochester's ideal of a perfect wife, she would need to completely rid herself of any Creole identity – which she and Rochester both know is impossible. These depictions of colonial and patriarchal expectation that hinder Antoinette are the exact sorts of unfair representation that prompted Jean Rhys to write *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a response to *Jane Eyre* in the first place.

Despite the fact that each of these novels, published just four years apart, center on women experiencing madness within the context of an inability to meet expectations the further similarities between the two works are often overlooked because they appear so different in the foreground. At first glance, two novels about different women, in different time periods, experiencing different problems with the existing social code do not seem to have much in common besides the very basic foundation. However, Esther Greenwood and Antoinette Cosway Mason are not that different from each other and certain characteristics of their stories appear nearly formulaic. That does not serve to discredit the artistic achievement or social commentary of either work. Rather, it provides an interesting look into the intersections of Plath and Rhys and how that communicates the overarching problems relating women's mental health that have clearly plagued western society as a whole since the time of colonial imperialism. The fact that the similarities between these novels continue to be ignored shows the continuation of the same critical problem that is indicated by comparative analyses of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. By avoiding a comparison of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Bell Jar* we continue to view the Creole woman as worlds apart from the white woman of European descent. Jane positions herself as the antithesis of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys was provoked by this unfair representation of the Creole madwoman to write *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bronte dehumanizes her madwoman and ignores the implausibility of the circumstances leading up to Bertha's

imprisonment as Rochester explains them in favor of providing her readers with, as Rhys pointed out, “only one side – the English side” of the story (297). Bertha does not speak, she “growled like some strange wild animal”, she is usually nameless – referred to as “the maniac” or “the lunatic”, she is not human but a “clothed hyena” (Bronte 258-9). Rhys’ goal in writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* was to break away from the “impossible” Bertha and to tell “the real story – as it might have been” (Wyndham 271, 153). Through Antoinette, she sought to show that a Creole woman experiencing madness does not result from the tropics or “tropical madness” but rather it is a similar reaction to any European women who are disillusioned with the social code that aims to keep women in their so-called place, women like Esther Greenwood. By viewing *The Bell Jar* as unrelated to *Wide Sargasso Sea* the English and European stories that Rhys found problematic the antagonistic feminist character that *Jane Eyre* creates continues to reign. To view *Wide Sargasso Sea* as only Caribbean feminism, without a relationship to works of American and European feminist authors like Plath, allows a divide and promotes the European/American fixation that has continually plagued feminism. Though the divided society of Jamaica plays an additional role in Antoinette’s struggle, at its core her madness is induced by male influence and the rules set up by the patriarchy.

Antoinette and Esther each refer to their experiences with madness as beginning at a young age. Esther was “only purely happy until [she] was nine years old” (Plath 75). The end of her ‘pure’ happiness coincides with the death of her father. Within the first page of *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette speaks of how her “father...belonged to the past” and with the death of her father “feeling safe” also is left “to the past” (Rhys 17). The death of both of these women’s fathers ushered insecurity into their lives. Their fathers provided economic, and therefore emotional, support in ways that their widowed mothers cannot. Antoinette’s father was a

plantation owner. The combination of his death and emancipation left Antoinette's mother unable to provide for her family. In early 1800s Jamaica, the role of the father is to conduct business and earn money. As a woman, Antoinette's mother, Annette, cannot be financially independent. Instead, she marries Mr. Mason. The women in town hint at that reasoning for Annette's marriage, "why should he marry a widow without a penny to her name...he will have to spend a pretty penny before the house is fit to live in...but Annette is such a pretty woman" (28-29). The implication is that Annette has fooled Mr. Mason into marrying her with her good looks in order to use his money. This is not far from the truth. Annette and Mr. Mason's marriage is rocky from the start but Antoinette says she is "glad to be like an English girl" (35). Seeing that Mr. Mason is bringing his English lifestyle, and with it his English money, proves that Annette had aims of financial security – for both herself and her children - with her marriage. Despite saying she is "glad to be like an English girl", Antoinette does not say that her feeling of security returns with the arrival of Mr. Mason – that feeling is saved for her father. She is content in her newfound position as an English girl because it brings with it comfort, though not security, that she did not have while her mother was widowed. Her childhood home is restored, "Coulbri looked the same when I saw it again, although it was clean and tidy" (30). She has a lot of the material possessions that made her early childhood, before the death of her father, a better one. However, she also "missed the taste of Christophe's cooking" – Caribbean cooking (35). She is not completely sold on her Englishness and longs for times when she felt more secure in her Creole identity, times when her father was present. Antoinette's complex feelings about her father's death and her relationship with her step-father show her innate discord surrounding English, Jamaican, and male influence.

Esther's father was a university professor – more specifically her mother's university professor (Plath 57). Esther noting that her mother was married to her university professor enlightens the reader to the fact that Mrs. Greenwood did attend university but that she did not necessarily utilize her education. Esther is indicating that for her mother, attending university was a means to an end resulting in marriage with an older, financially stable man. Esther explains that her “mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money” (Plath 39). Esther's mother is forced to scrape by on the money she makes teaching at a secretarial school when she expected to lead a comfortable life by marrying a professor. Unlike her mother, Esther idealizes her father, “I thought if my father hadn't died he would have taught me all about insects, which was his specialty at the university. He would also have taught me German and Greek and Latin, which he knew” (165). Esther pictures a better life for herself in a world where her father is present. Meanwhile, she resents her mother for trying to teach her shorthand and denying her literary ambitions – saying that “nobody wanted a plain English major” (76). The idealized picture of her father comes in stark contrast to a lot of the other men in the novel who Esther characterizes as domineering and uncaring. Esther's lack of father shows that she feels the presence of positive male influence is also lacking in her life. Considering Esther is reminiscing on the death of her father which took place 10 years prior to the summer being described in the novel, there are fewer references and much less information provided about her father as compared to Antoinette's story. Antoinette's quality of life is directly impacted by the death of her father in the beginning of the story – without slavery or a male head of household there is no way for Antoinette's family to make money; her mother tells her they “would have died if

[Christophine] had turned against us” (21). Esther exists in a lower economic status after the death of her father but, she is more directly concerned with hatred of her mother.

Esther’s mother wants her to attend secretarial classes, “my mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again...She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men” (76). This is the life Esther’s mother wishes she would have followed so that she would not have ended up in her current position. Esther’s mother feels as if she had followed that path, she might be married to a rich man instead of being a widow who has to work extremely hard to make ends meet. She also believes getting a job with one of the “up-and-coming young men” is the first step in Esther being able to marry a rich man. Esther and Antoinette’s mothers act as personifications of their own fears about their futures within their respective societies. Antoinette hopes to have a positive relationship with her mother but finds herself unable to cry at her funeral (61). Antoinette’s mother also continually rejects her, she tells us that when she tried to hug her mother she “flung me from her” (48). By rejecting Antoinette, Annette is rejecting the roles of homemaker and motherhood for herself but also creating a feeling of tension and madness surrounding those roles for Antoinette. When Antoinette hears her mother threaten to leave Coulibri without her, “I will go and take Pierre with me”, she not only perceives herself to be of lesser value but also senses an inherent disdain for motherhood from Annette (34). In acting as though she has no desire to be a mother to Antoinette, Annette gives Antoinette a bad feeling about the ideals of mothers and motherhood themselves. Unlike Antoinette, Esther hates her mother. Esther is rejecting the roles of motherhood and homemaker by rejecting her mother. She also rejects her mother’s expectations that she learns a practical skill, like shorthand, to help her achieve the roles of mother and homemaker that she does not want. Both Esther and Antoinette have strained

relationships with their mothers that trouble them. Antoinette wishes for her mother to accept her; Esther feels that she should respect her mother because society idealizes motherhood. These feelings about their mothers both produce part of their inner turmoil and is created by their inner turmoil. Both Antoinette and Esther hold expectations of their mothers that their mothers are unable to meet. This results in Esther and Antoinette becoming disdainful of their mothers. They do this without realizing that they are acting in the same fashion as the societies they rebel against expect them to. The split between their feelings towards their mothers and the manifestation of these feelings add to the fragmentation caused by other societal expectations about women that will be discussed further.

One of the driving forces behind Antoinette and Esther's madness is their roles as outsiders within their individual settings. For the most part, Antoinette's post-emancipation Jamaica is split between black and white, and within those groups the white people are split further by who is English and who is Creole. Slavery ended in the British colonies, like Jamaica, around the same time *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set. During the post-emancipation period, there was a further divide between the ex-slave owning white people and the previously enslaved black Jamaican people. Without slavery, Antoinette's family does not function, Antoinette describes their estate as "overgrown" and with "a smell of dead flowers" (19). Without slavery, the house has fallen into disrepair. There is also the implication that many of the black Jamaican people did understandably turn against the white Creole and English people after emancipation. In one instance, Antoinette's mother's horse is poisoned; Annette says that Godfrey, the man tasked with caring for the horse, "knew what they were going to do" (18). Though Godfrey is employed by Annette, his allegiance remains with his fellow ex-slaves and he does not stop them when they attempt to send a message to Annette by poisoning her horse. The threat of poverty and

isolation is great for Annette and other ex-slave owners. Their neighbor Mr. Luttrell cannot bring himself to cope with the new way of the world post slavery; He “swam out to sea and was gone for always” (17). The ex-slave owners like Antoinette’s family are struggling both economically and mentally after the end of slavery. They are hated by the black Jamaicans who they used to enslave. Antoinette, then, does not fit in with the black Jamaicans who call her “white cockroach” (23). The English, however, do not consider Antoinette and her family to be on the same level as them either. The novel opens with “They say when trouble comes close ranks and so the white people did” (18). After emancipation, the English were careful to separate themselves from the white Creole people. Clearly, the English do not consider Antoinette to be the same as them but, considering the first-person narration, she also does not feel the same as them. She refers to them as “the white people” and does not include herself in that group. Antoinette is isolated; she is not accepted by the black community or the white community and she grows accustomed to her “solitary life” (18). She still must make some effort to fit into a group – especially after the arrival of Mr. Mason. After Mr. Mason and his English friends begin socializing with Antoinette’s mother, Antoinette is given a new dress despite the fact that she “doesn’t know how [her mother] got the money to buy the white muslin and the pink” (27). She assumes her mother sold the last of her old jewelry in order to make dresses to help them fit in the with English people. By using her money to make herself and Antoinette look the part of the English instead of attempting to repair the house or buy some other practical items, Antoinette’s mother is showing Antoinette the importance of fitting in with the English. This creates Antoinette’s greatest source of fragmentation.

Esther also struggles to find a group that she feels she fits into. Esther’s sense of being an outsider is evident during her internship in New York City. Coming from a modest, middle-class

upbringing in the Massachusetts suburbs and having relied on the fact that she “was good at winning scholarships” to get to college in the first place puts Esther on the outside in the excesses of New York City (77). The women around her in New York come from “society girls’ college” and talk about being “bored with yachts”; She is “so jealous. [She] can’t speak” (4). Compared to them she sees herself as “so poor she can’t afford a magazine” and can’t make herself feel as though she fits in at the extravagant events and elaborate parties that the other girls enjoy (2). Besides feeling economically isolated, Esther also feels she “couldn’t get [herself] to react” and isn’t “excited the way most of the other girls were” (3). She is emotionally an outsider as well. Already, in the earliest parts of the story, Esther is experiencing the split between wanting to be like the other women around her and having her own personality attempt to overcome that. Her lack of excitement in New York stems from the fact that, unlike the other girls, she is not that interested in the fashion shows and the trips to fancy testing kitchens where she is taught “what spoons to use” (27). She is bored by another intern’s story about the “wonderful” fur show where they are taught how to make mink neckerchiefs on a budget (28). The internship program seems to aim to mold the interns into prim and proper ladies, largely ignoring some of the more artistic goals of the girls in favor of making “cover girl[s] out of [them]” (6). Esther apprehensions about making a career out of writing and the idea that she will have to choose a career over all else come into play during this time. She remains uninterested in the fashion shows and the test kitchens because they are meant to engrain the ideals that a woman should be well-dressed, a cook, and a homemaker; ideals that Esther is not sold on. These hesitations create her earliest fragmentation in New York and solidify her as an outsider from most of the other girls.

In an attempt to remedy their outsider status, each woman makes a habit of looking for their idealized counterparts in the women around them. As Gentry points out, “Esther spends much of her time in New York observing the various lifestyles of the women characters around her trying to decide what she wants to be herself” (53). Antoinette acts in a similar manner, seeing what she wishes to be herself in those around her. She talks about seeing Tia “as if [she] saw [her]self. Like in a looking-glass” (Rhys 45). Antoinette and Esther look for mirrors of themselves around them. Antoinette’s mirror comes in the form of Tia and her desire to “be like Tia” (35). Although they have their differences, the two girls are similar considering the fact that they are both outsiders. Neither of their mothers are Jamaican. Antoinette’s mother is “a Martinique girl” and it is simply said that Tia’s mother “was not a Jamaican” (1, 21). As already mentioned above, Antoinette ends up rejecting Tia on account of her “colonialist assumptions”, that is her engrained belief that she is better than Tia because she is white (Mardorossian 1071). Later, Coulibri is set on fire by locals angered by Mr. Masons plan to “import labourers...from the East Indies” (35). In this moment, Antoinette runs to Tia for comfort but, instead, a crying Tia throws a rock at her (45). Despite her earlier actions and the fact that in society’s eye she is above Tia, Antoinette wishes to stay with and be like Tia because that would allow her a space in which she truly felt at home. Even though each girl’s mother is not originally from Jamaica, Tia and her mother are more accepted into the black community because they are also black. Instead of being able to become like Tia, Antoinette becomes completely trapped in the alienating limbo that has already caused her so much suffering. Antoinette wishes, in this moment, to revoke the cultural problems she played into earlier but it is too late.

Further into the novel, Antoinette finds another mirror in Amelie. Antoinette envies Amelie in a completely different way than she envies her childhood friend Tia. Her desire to be

like Tia came from her desire to feel as though she belonged perfectly within one group. She and Tia played together and got along well for the most part which encouraged her to believe that she would be able to seamlessly become part of the black Jamaican culture. Her mirror of Amelie stems more from Amelie's sense of freedom. Antoinette has no way of escaping her marriage to Rochester. When Christophine suggest she takes her money and leave, Antoinette informs her, "I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him... That is English law" (110). Like her mother before her, Antoinette is reliant on Rochester for the money and means to survive. If she were to leave, she would revert back to the extreme poverty she faced as a child. Amelie, on the other hand, does not have this problem. In the eyes of society at the time, Antoinette is considered better off than Amelie. Amelie is of a lower class, is a servant, and is black in post-colonial Jamaica. However, in reality, it is Antoinette who wishes she could be more like Amelie. Rochester cheats on Antoinette with Amelie, which sparks jealousy in Antoinette who questions "is she so much prettier than I am?" (147). After Rochester sleeps with Amelie, she speaks up about her opinion on his marriage, "I am sorry for you. But I find it in my heart to be sorry for her too". She is able to speak to Rochester and give her opinion on his marriage in a blunt way that Antoinette is not because she is not tied to him through marriage, an institution in which the legal system backs him. Instead of being angry, Rochester gives her money and she leaves for Rio and does not come back (141). Amelie is aware that Antoinette does not have this option. Amelie has nothing to lose, she does not have large amounts of money or a husband or a house of her own in Jamaica. Though she is poor, she is free to make her own decisions, unlike Antoinette. Antoinette envies the fact that Amelie has nothing holding her back. Amelie is in a position to be sexually liberated whereas Antoinette is not. As a Jamaican black woman, Amelie is sexualized no matter what she does since the colonies were considered "loci

of uncontrollable sexuality” where a “proper Englishman quickly slid into sexual excess” (Renk 89-90). Amelie is permitted to be sexually liberated if she wants to be because she is viewed as inherently sexual by racist stereotypes. Therefore, since she chooses not to be chaste, it is not viewed as abnormal or improper. The stereotype permits this interaction between Amelie and Rochester to happen with very little effect on Amelie because she is not expected to be chaste like an Englishwoman is expected to be. Rochester’s actions are excused by the fact that he can blame his actions on the madness of the tropics. He justifies his actions to himself implying that he was not in his right mind, saying “In the morning, of course, I felt differently” (140). No one ever blames Rochester or declares him to be hypocritical. *The Bell Jar* explains this phenomenon well when Esther’s friends tell her “most boys were like that” (Plath 81). Esther’s boyfriend Buddy Willard, like Rochester, takes advantage of this double standard. Esther asks Buddy if he is a virgin while thinking “I never thought for one minute that Buddy Willard would have an affair with anyone” (69). Esther expects that Buddy is upholding the same value of chastity that he holds her to, yet she finds out that he is not a virgin. Without any negative judgment of his character, Buddy does not maintain the construct of chastity. Meanwhile, Esther is told that Buddy “was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for” (Plath 68). And, while Rochester is allowed to cheat on Antoinette without consequences, she is chastised for any showing of sexuality. Before locking her away, Rochester says, “she thirsts for *anyone* – not for me...” (165). Here Rochester shows that he believes Antoinette to be a “loci of uncontrollable sexuality” like the rest of the tropics (Renk 89). Daniel Cosway reaffirms Rochester’s belief that Antoinette does not conform to chastity when he informs Rochester “you are not the first to kiss her pretty face” (126). However, since he would prefer her to be a perfect English wife, he does

not ignore it like he does in regard to Amelie. Instead, he is angered by it and seeks to put an end to it.

Like Antoinette's ideas of Tia and Amelie, Esther views her friends as possible mirrors for who she could be. This is especially relevant to Esther's treatment of the characters Doreen and Betsy – her friends and fellow interns. Doreen and Betsy each reside on opposite ends of the societal spectrum – especially in regard to sexuality. Betsy is positive and enthusiastic, and most importantly “innocent” (22). She's the blonde, all-American “sweetheart-of-Sigma Chi” turned “cover girl” (6). When Betsy is asked what she wants to be, she says “a farmer's wife” (101). She is the picture of the perfect 1950s woman. Doreen, on the other hand, is characterized by Plath in her journals as “wise about men”, a major difference between her and innocent Betsy (Kikul 452). She often skips intern events to spend time with men like Lenny Shepherd. When she does show up she spends time making “witty sarcastic remarks” (5). Esther notes that while most of the girls choose “starched cotton summer nighties” Doreen opts for “full length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through” (5). She rejects many of the traditional social norms for women which causes many of the other girls to steer clear of her.

More often than not, Esther appears to prefer Doreen to Betsy and seems to want to be like Doreen. Esther is “attracted like a magnet” to Doreen (5). She admires Doreen's quick wit and carefree attitude. It is Doreen's sexual liberation that creates the most problems for Esther. This is what results in Esther's rejection of Doreen. Like Antoinette rejecting Tia because her whiteness has engrained a false sense of superiority in her, Esther decides she must write-off her friendship with Doreen after witnessing her drunken night out with Lenny Shepherd. Esther is holding herself above Doreen because she upholds the construct of purity. Though she speaks about aversion to the sexual double standard between men and women, she cannot bring herself

to completely disavow the virtue of “chastity” (81). She begins to view Doreen as a hindrance to her own purity so she decides she “would have nothing to do with her” because it is “Betsy [she] resembled at heart” (22). Even after her rejection of Doreen, Esther spends a lot of time thinking about how she “missed Doreen” (29). Like Antoinette’s rejection of Tia, Esther’s rejection of Doreen is complex. It is influenced by both admiration and spite. In the long run for both Antoinette and Esther admiration overpowers their false senses of authority that has been ascribed to them by their positions in their societies.

Though Doreen and Tia are the women that Esther and Antoinette most clearly long to be like, Betsy and Amelie also function as mirrors for Esther and Antoinette. The moments when Esther views Betsy as her true image despite their overt differences mimic Antoinette’s envy of Amelie. Even though Betsy is the typical woman of the 1950s and happily accepts the roles dictated to her, Esther cannot say completely she does not envy her. There is a contentment that Betsy finds in sticking to social norms. Esther’s madness is brought on as a reaction to her inability to conform while Betsy seems perfectly sane in the madness of the world around her. That ability to conform causes Esther to want to consider herself like Betsy despite the fact that Esther believes ending up as a wife and mother – as Betsy wishes to – is a recipe for unhappiness. Betsy resembles aspects of society that Esther wishes to take no part in but cannot bring herself to fully reject. Amelie is a black woman in a racist society. Antoinette, being a white woman, is considered by that society as higher up on the social ladder. However, being a black, sexually liberated woman who goes through life doing what she chooses is what inspires Antoinette’s envy of Amelie. Each woman, Amelie and Betsy, are symbolic of something that the protagonists do not feel they can be – either for lack of want or lack of means. However, this

does not stop Antoinette and Esther from desiring to find some glimpse of themselves in Amelie and Betsy.

A maternal female presence apart from their mothers appears, for however briefly, in the lives of Esther and Antoinette and attempts to provide comfort and advice for escaping the binds of their situations. Dr. Nolan acts as this maternal presence for Esther; she is able to save her life and, at least partially, restore her sanity. Meanwhile Antoinette's maternal presence, Christophine, unfortunately is not in a position to directly aid Antoinette as much as Dr. Nolan is for Esther; this is due to the cultural differences in each setting. After Esther is put under the care of the psychiatrist Dr. Nolan she is pleasantly surprised because she "didn't think they had woman psychiatrists" (186). The comfort that Esther finds in working with a woman like Dr. Nolan, who has clearly and happily chosen the career path for herself, is when she makes the most progress toward recovery. This is due to the fact that Dr. Nolan ensures Esther that it is acceptable for her to act out against the rules for living that she finds unfair. She refers Esther to a doctor to get birth control to help her alleviate some of her worry surrounding the sexual double standard that has previously created problems for her. She also allows Esther to voice her frustrations about her mother. Something that she has previously not been able to say out loud for fear of ridicule. The feeling of freedom that Dr. Nolan provides Esther allows her to overcome not her fragmentation but her abhorrence of her fragmentation. At the end of the novel, Esther says "How did I know that someday...the bell jar...wouldn't descend again?" (241). However, this question does not scare her, instead she says, "I was perfectly free" (242). Abigail Cheever explains Laing's stance that "the cracked mind...may let in light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed" (69). It seems that Dr. Nolan is able to help Esther realize this about herself. Her experience with madness has informed

her opinion of society and now that she has maintained her sanity she is able to utilize her madness to provide for herself what Cheever calls an “authentic version” of her life (69).

This is where Esther’s privilege of being in the racial majority at a more psychologically enlightened time period puts her in a better position than Antoinette. Antoinette’s version of Dr. Nolan is Christophine, who was her “father’s wedding present” to her mother (Rhys 21). Christophine has been caring for Antoinette since she was a child. She is said to practice obeah and she works as a healer. She is the only woman in the novel who attempts to save Antoinette and stand up to Rochester; Christophine is “the only friend [Antoinette has]” and she says, “I put no trust in none of those people round you” (114). Because of this, Christophine comes to Antoinette’s defense. Originally, when Antoinette requests that Christophine make her obeah to make Rochester love her, Christophine attempts to provide her with logical advice instead. She tells Antoinette to “pack up and go” but Antoinette says she cannot since she no longer has any money of her own to support herself with. She gives Antoinette the obeah but it does not work. On the contrary, it further repels Rochester from her. Seeing Antoinette become involved in Caribbean customs like obeah horrifies him. In a final attempt to help Antoinette, Christophine argues with Rochester to try to convince him to leave Antoinette, she tells him to “return half of Antoinette’s dowry and leave the island” (158). Christophine does everything in her power to create a similar space of freedom to the one Dr. Nolan created for Esther. However, after she gets into an argument with Rochester, he tells her “you are to blame for all that has happened here, so don’t come back” (159). Rochester uses the obeah as an excuse to get rid of Christophine, Antoinette’s last connection to her sanity. Christophine is unable to save Antoinette because she is not in a position of authority where she can control her surroundings like Dr. Nolan, the white,

head psychiatrist at a private hospital in 50s America. After this Rochester takes Antoinette back to England where she meets the fate we see in *Jane Eyre*.

Each novel is, at their cores, united by their madwoman protagonists and the ways in which each novel is hailed for critiquing social code which is detrimental to women. Comparing these two hugely influential novels shows the similar impact of societal rigidity across the board. It also clarifies the meaning and usage of the word madness in a contemporary context as it relates to women and mental health. The word mad can refer to both insanity and anger. I believe in both Rhys' and Plath's novels it is meant to imply both simultaneously. Finally, the relationship between the two novels and the fact that they are not often talked about together shows the continued existence of a divide within critical thinking. To not think of *The Bell Jar* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in relationship to one another is to continue to find the Creole madwoman Bertha/Antoinette as unworthy of comparison to a European woman. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte successfully defines her classic heroine as an independent woman while reminding the reader that she does not stray too far from the ideal of Victorian English womanhood by painting an animalistic, wild picture of a Creole madwoman which affirms the stereotypes of the Victorian era. Jane is only able to achieve her status as an independent, feminist by bringing down Bertha. This type of feminism is still very much a problem in present day society. The fact that *The Bell Jar* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are not typically compared is a testament to that fact. As I have shown, Esther Greenwood and Antoinette Cosway Mason, though influenced by their distinct settings, experience similar problems that lead to their fragmentation and madness. From expectations of wifehood and motherhood, looking for women who represent both what they feel they are and what they should be, and the destructive influence of patriarchal standards, Antoinette and Esther each end up labeled as a mad. However, each of their "madnesses" can be

seen as reactions to these negative experiences – they are not permitted to show their anger and disillusion outright so they become mad as a means to both mask and exhibit these feelings. To think of these women as opposites who don't warrant comparison is to continue the dangerous rhetoric of adversarial feminism.

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