MODERNISM'S MADWOMEN: A FEMINIST AND FOUCALDIAN READING OF EMILY HOLMES COLEMAN'S THE SHUTTER OF SNOW AND ANTONIA WHITE'S BEYOND THE GLASS

Britta Maren Moelders

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Committee:
Dr. Kim Coates, Advisor
Dr. Jolie Sheffer
Kimberly Coates, Advisor

“Madness” has fascinated theorists, writers, and readers for a long time. Elaine Showalter’s publication of *The Female Malady* revealed the close connection between women and madness; however, I argue that our understanding of female madness remains somewhat elusive. With its intense emphasis on subjectivity, modernist fiction helps the reader gain insight into what it means to be mentally ill and confined in a mental institution. These fictional accounts of madness function as institutional critiques and can be opposed to “official” legal, administrative, and historical accounts that portray mental institutions of the 1920s as places of recovery and entertainment. Through a close reading of Emily Holmes Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow* and Antonia White’s *Beyond the Glass*, this Master’s thesis offers an analysis of the representation of modernism’s madwomen and their critique of mental institutions and the patriarchal culture at large. In short, this thesis discusses the intersection between madness, modernism, and gender. Advancing Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, other relevant theory on madness, as well as trauma theory, I contend that the madwomen in Coleman and White’s fiction enhance our understanding of madness, mental institutions, and, compellingly, patriarchy at large. While both novels offer a feminist Foucauldian critique of the confining nature of mental institutions, they also suggest that, counterintuitively, madwomen have more agency in mental institutions than in the patriarchal culture at large. Offering a respite from potentially traumatizing female experiences such as childbirth, motherhood, and marriage, mental institutions allow women sexual and creative freedom. Illuminating madwomen’s agency through an emphasis on interiority and the protagonist’s fantastic imaginations and
metamorphoses, Coleman and White’s fiction complicates Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s claim that madness is not subversive. While the madwomen in Coleman and White’s fiction are subversive regarding their critique of mental institutions and patriarchy at large, the novels do not celebrate madness. Ultimately, Coleman and White’s novels offer a feminist critique of the oppressive patriarchal nature of society and the limiting experiences and gender roles it assigns women. In women’s accounts of madness, modernist characteristics such as an emphasis on interiority, fragmentation, and metamorphoses can function as a feminist critique of patriarchy.
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Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White’s brilliant prose is key to my Master’s thesis on modernism’s madwomen. Coleman and White’s fiction not only shows us the world “beyond the glass” and connects madness, modernism, and gender in unique ways; it also is proof that mentally ill women can accomplish great things in life. In this case, the reader is presented with two madwomen’s feminist critique of mental institutions and patriarchal culture at large. Spending these last few months with modernism’s madwomen has been challenging and enriching. Finishing this thesis in partial fulfillment of my Master’s degree would not have been possible without several people.

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INTRODUCTION

Critics have frequently regarded mental institutions as places of confinement and horror. These institutions have existed on the margins of society. In these so-called “madhouses,”¹ the mentally ill have been shunned by society, confined in cells, physically restrained, abused, silenced, mocked, and othered. And yet, quite surprisingly, some modernist fiction suggests that mental institutions might be more desirable places to be than the patriarchal culture at large. If mental institutions were oppressive, why would anyone wish to be back in such an institution once they have returned to “normal” society?

This Master’s thesis is concerned with teasing out a better understanding of modernism’s madwomen. My research has been guided by several key questions: How do modernism’s madwomen differ from the Victorian era’s madwomen? How does modernist fiction enhance our understanding of what it means to be mad and confined in a mental institution? Why do modernism’s madwomen seem to have more agency in mental institutions than in the patriarchal culture at large, especially if madhouses are oppressive? How is the space of the mental institution similar to and different from the patriarchal culture at large? What is new about madness that only modernism’s madwomen can teach us? How do women’s experiences change our understanding of madness and modernism?

With my thesis, I hope to offer a better understanding of the intersection between madness, modernism, and gender. While physical illnesses are most often tangible, mental illnesses remain enigmatic. Some modernist fiction offers us a unique perspective on mental illness and also the experience of institutionalization through formal characteristics such as subjectivity and internal fragmentation that scholars have identified as modernist. I argue both that mental institutions can be oppressive and that they can be strangely liberating in some
regards. Confined to the roles of (house)wife and mother in patriarchal society, modernism’s madwomen experience some freedom in mental institutions. Women are free to explore their female (homosexual) desire and their creativity in the confines of the institution. The institution is a unique female space that, however counterintuitive it may seem, endows women with sexual and creative agency. Emphasizing these moments of freedom and agency, some modernist fiction critiques the limiting gender roles that women are assigned by patriarchy at large. As certain modernist fiction suggests, supposedly “normal” experiences like childbirth, mothering, and marriage can be traumatic. Hence, this modernist fiction on madness also sheds light on oppressive female gender roles in patriarchal society.

In my thesis, I argue that modernism’s madwomen reveal the disciplinary structure of mental institutions. Through my literary analysis, I illustrate how and to what extent modernism’s madwomen have more agency in these mental institutions than in the oppressive patriarchal culture at large. I discuss moments where the madwomen in Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White’s fiction have certain experiences in mental institutions that the patriarchal culture at large would deny them. Analyzing these moments, I reevaluate the restraints that the patriarchal culture has put on women, specifically in the 1920s. To follow this argument, it is necessary to take into consideration the history of the figure of the madwoman.

Prior to the nineteenth century, those who were diagnosed as “mad” were perceived as the frightening Others who threatened “normal” society. Historically, the mad have been locked up, restrained, ridiculed, silenced, mistreated, abused, dehumanized, and othered. In his historical analysis and critique of mental institutions Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, Michel Foucault has revealed the confining nature of so-called madhouses. Madhouses contained everything that was not “normal,” provoking the existence of a plethora of
tales and fables that dealt with madness: “Madness and the madman become major figures, in their ambiguity: menace and mockery, the dizzying unreason of the world, and the feeble ridicule of men” (13). Further, Foucault reveals that “from the fifteenth century on, the face of madness has haunted the imagination of Western man” (15). Madness blurred the lines between what constituted human beings and animals. Since the mentally ill posed a threat to supposedly essential human characteristics, society othered them. Madness also became closely connected with death: “The head that will become a skull is already empty. Madness is the déjà-là of death” (16). According to Foucault, madness and death both questioned the “nothingness of existence” (16). Acknowledging the mad hence meant admitting one’s own mortality and frailty. The body of the mad was a reminder of one’s own human form; the sick mind signified a possibility that anyone’s mind could go mad. Thus, the madman (for Foucault excludes madwomen in his analysis) unsettles the sane and supposedly powerful human existence. Since “normal” people were made uneasy by the presence of the mad, they ridiculed the mentally ill by keeping them like animals in a zoo. The mad were made a spectacle of: They were looked at, pointed at, and laughed at. The mad thus signified the quintessential Other.

Women were confined in madhouses (mostly by their husbands) from the sixteenth century onwards (Chesler 93). In France’s first mental institution, there were special wards for prostitutes, pregnant, as well as poor women (Chesler 93). These special wards indicate that the male doctors and administrators organized the institutionalization of female patients. Madness became even more closely linked to women in the relatively recent past: At the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, representations of madness were mainly of women (Chesler 94).
In the nineteenth century, then, gender and female sexuality play a significant role in the diagnosis of madness. Madness becomes distinct from hysteria: While madness can be biological/organic, hysteria is tied to psychosomatic factors. Hence, hysteria affects the mind and the body. The hysteric’s body bears signs of the mind’s illness; it becomes the vessel for the mind’s illness. Both madness and hysteria are mental diseases; however, while madness is an illness (or rather several different illnesses) exclusively related to the mind and the chemicals of the brain, hysteria is a mental disorder that supposedly causes physical symptoms. Sigmund Freud’s work with hysterics is central here. Especially in his work on Dora, Freud interprets physical symptoms such as coughing as indicative of his patient’s hysteria (Freud: *Fragment*). In her introduction to *Freud On Women: A Reader*, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl points out that Freud traces the term “hysteria” back to “the ancient word *hystera*, ‘womb’” (3). This indicates that the notion of hysteria is founded on the female body. While Freud’s work with hysterics is patriarchal in nature, his psychoanalytic theories opened the door for a deeper understanding of the human mind. Freud’s so-called “talking cure” dissipated with time as the psychoanalyst changed his emphasis from listening to and interpreting the patient’s words to reading the woman’s body to interpret her hysteria. As Dora’s case has shown, there is a power disparity in the relationship between male psychoanalyst and female patient: The female patient’s every bodily movement is recognized and analyzed by the male psychoanalyst. Freud’s hysterics were almost exclusively women. According to Freud, one central reason for women’s hysteria was their suppressed sexuality.

Critics have argued that hysteria and/or madness has been a response to the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles in both Victorian America and Britain. Elaine Showalter, for example, wonders whether “hysteria – the ‘daughter’s disease’ – [was] a mode of protest for
women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options” (147). In this view, hysteria served as a means of escape from normative female sex roles. Women in Victorian America and Britain had to obey their sex roles closely; otherwise, they would have been ostracized by the patriarchal society. The Victorian feminine ideal was the so-called Angel in the House, who devoted herself completely to her role as obedient (house)wife and caring mother. In the nineteenth century, hysteria prevailed mainly among middle and upper class women. Madness and (female) sexuality became intricately connected. Women were invariably regarded as lacking sufficient strength, health, and reason. In Victorian America and Britain, madness and/or hysteria seems to have been women’s only escape from traditional sex roles.2

Regarding nineteenth-century America, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, in her essay “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America,” has argued that female sex roles caused hysteria. Smith-Rosenberg discusses the intersection between the ideal feminine sex role and hysteria. She points out that hysteria has been regarded as essentially female for several centuries, and that the hysterical woman has been “the embodiment of a perverse or hyper-femininity” (198). According to Smith-Rosenberg, “the parallel between the hysteric’s behavior and stereotypic femininity [was] too close to be explained as mere coincidence” (198).3 In American literature, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a famous example that supports this view of hysteria, where mental illness and female sex roles are linked. Similarly, Kate Chopin’s The Awakening paints a bleak picture of women’s roles in society and culminates in the protagonist’s suicide.

Regarding nineteenth-century Britain, Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar’s text The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination argues that women writers of the Victorian era were limited in their portrayal of women because
men had established the notion that women were either the “angel” or the “monster.” Gilbert and Gubar show that in the Victorian age, women writers were both “literally and figuratively confined” (xi) in life and art: Women were subject(s) of and to male authority (11). The woman writer, therefore, “[had to] come to terms with … those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face… a woman writer [had to] examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors [had] generated for her” (16-17). Gilbert and Gubar call for moving beyond this binary portrayal of women, pointing out that the images of “angel” and “monster” have persisted in nineteenth century’s women’s writing: “few women have definitely ‘killed’ either figure” (17). One example of the female monster is the madwoman Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which is represented in Gilbert and Gubar’s title. According to Gilbert and Gubar, madness is Bertha’s only means to rebel against her situation: she is confined to the attic, while her existence is kept secret. She is completely and utterly powerless, with no recourse left but to either quietly accept the fate her husband decided for her or act out.

The main problem with these causal arguments that link sex roles and mental illness is that they tend to present madness/hysteria as subversive. However, while I agree that actual mental illness is not subversive, madwomen in modernist fiction have some agency, criticizing the mental institution as well as patriarchy at large. In *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive*, Marta Caminero-Santangelo points out that there is a feminist desire for a subversive figure (1). For feminist critics, the madwoman is supposed to be this subversive figure. According to Caminero-Santangelo, Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of *Jane Eyre* “popularized the reading of the madwoman as closet (or attic) feminist: madness signified anger and therefore, by extension, protest” (1). In the extreme form, then, madness is a conscious
choice, which some women prefer to what is commonly referred to as sanity (1). In her critique of feminists’ use of the madwoman, Caminero-Santangelo wonders why feminists use the concept of madness at all if its original connotations must be abandoned (2). Madness thus takes on a meaning that is severed from the original meaning of a mental illness as such. While feminists may want to claim her as subversive, Caminero-Santangelo argues that, to the contrary, the madwoman “offers the illusion of power, although she in fact provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater powerlessness” (3). Caminero-Santangelo does not celebrate madness like other critics have; rather, she cautions us about the significance of the madwoman. She points out that madness is only “an illusion of power that masks powerlessness [and] … thus the final removal of the madwoman from any field of agency” (12). Hence, Caminero-Santangelo makes a strong case against any agency with regard to the figure of the madwoman.

While I agree with Caminero-Santangelo that it is dangerous and simplistic to idealize the madwoman as a subversive figure, I argue that some modernist fiction does suggest that madwomen have some agency in mental institutions. As I point out in Chapters II and III, Coleman and White’s fiction reveals that, counterintuitively, women have more agency in mental institutions than in the patriarchal culture at large. While Coleman’s Marthe and White’s Clara are subversive figures in the sense that they are critical of their surroundings (that is, both mental institutions and patriarchy at large), their authors do not idealize them as other madwomen in literature have been. Therefore, I suggest that modernism’s madwomen offer a more complicated portrait of agency and confinement that neither Gilbert and Gubar nor Caminero-Santangelo offer. I argue that modernism’s madwomen have agency because they critique their confinement in the mental institution as well as patriarchal society.
The figure of the madwoman in two modernist novels and two short stories differs significantly from that of the seemingly subversive Victorian madwoman in both British and American fiction. In Emily Holmes Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow* and “Interlude” and Antonia White’s *Beyond the Glass* and, to a lesser extent, “Surprise Visit,” madness is treated first and foremost as a serious illness and hardly as something desirable or subversive. Coleman’s autobiographical novel *The Shutter of Snow* is one example of modernist fiction concerned with mental illness. First published in 1930, and received with very mixed reviews and small sales (Callil & Siepmann), Coleman’s novel portrays the post-partum psychosis of Marthe Gail, who spends time in an asylum after having given birth to her son. Antonia White’s *Beyond the Glass* is, like Coleman’s novel, autobiographical. White’s Clara suggests that only someone who has been mentally ill can know the world “beyond the glass.” Hence, autobiographical fiction offers a unique and subjective insight into the personal experience of madness. First published in 1954, White’s novel is concerned with Clara Batchelor’s experience of her life after her disastrous marriage, first at her parents’ home, and then in a mental institution. Although it is not completely clear whether it causes her mental breakdown, Clara becomes mentally ill after having had a very intense love affair. Coleman and White’s texts offer the reader an insider’s perspective of what it means to be mentally ill and confined in a psychiatric hospital, critiquing the disciplinary structure of mental institutions. While doing so, they also reveal how in some ways it seems more desirable to be in a mental institution rather than live in the patriarchal culture at large because the mental institutions in *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* offer sexual and creative freedom. Thus, there are moments in the novels where the protagonists have more agency in the mental institution than outside of it. Rather than being subversive,
madness in Coleman and White’s fiction signifies a state of critical awareness of women’s oppressed position in mental institutions and patriarchy at large.

Coleman and White’s fiction on madness is unique because of its emphasis on the protagonists’ interior state of mind as well as its critique of patriarchal society and oppressive gender roles in the 1920s. Victorian fiction such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” also focuses on madness. However, a detailed portrayal and critique of the mental institution does not occur until the modernist period. An exception is the non-fictional account of the mental institution in Nelly Bly’s 1887 Ten Days in a Mad-House, which describes the author’s experiences after she had managed to get committed to Blackwell’s Island Insane Asylum while being perfectly sane. Bly revealed the confinement present in mental institutions of late nineteenth-century America. Her work can be considered an example of feminist activism, as the publication of her work brought about policy change: Bly reports that “the City of New York […] appropriated $1,000,000 more per annum than ever before for the care of the insane” (“Introduction”). While Bly’s non-fictional account of the mental institution highlights bare facts, modernist literature on madness and the mental institution offers insight into the patient’s perspective of what it means to be mentally ill and confined in a madhouse. As both Coleman and White give their female protagonists a voice to critique the conditions of mental institutions and patriarchy at large, they bestow political power on them. Commonly, we do not hear the voices of madwomen. Coleman and White’s fiction is testimony to the power of these personal accounts of mental illness. Through a feminist Foucauldian critique, these accounts can give us valuable insight into the nature of madness and mental hospitals. Furthermore, they also offer (mad)women’s perspective of “normal” female gender roles such as childbirth, mothering, and marriage. Hence, Coleman and White’s fiction goes beyond a mere critique of mental institutions, complicating Foucauldian
notions of institutionalization. Coleman and White’s fiction offers valuable insight into the experience of mental illness. Elizabeth Podnieks argues that *The Shutter of Snow*

[is] groundbreaking for being one of the first literary works to depict postpartum depression. As she [Coleman] described the book to her father, ‘It is the first time anyone has written an account of life in an insane hospital in any other way than to make propaganda – no one has ever treated a subject of this kind in an imaginative, poetic way. Obviously such a subject lends itself gorgeously to the opportunities of modern writing - extravagant imagery and the dream forms that the Freud era has released for poetry and poetic prose.’ (‘Introduction” xxx)

Coleman and White’s novels help the reader better understand the subjective perspective of mentally ill women, as well as the kind of life these madwomen would return to upon their release. Both novels question whether a life outside of mental institutions, in the patriarchal culture at large, is desirable for women. While Coleman and White’s fiction is far from idealizing mental institutions, it recognizes mental institutions as a strange respite from female gender roles.

Women’s experiences in *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* suggest that “normal” life in the 1920s with its specific role expectations of childbirth, motherhood, and marriage might be traumatic for women. Cathy Caruth’s notion of trauma and Laura Brown’s feminist approach to trauma help the reader understand several experiences of trauma in both Coleman and White’s fiction. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth defines trauma as a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and
possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. … The
pathology consists … solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is
not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated
*possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed
by an image or event. (4-5)

Thus, trauma is a reaction to a specific event. The traumatized keeps trying, without success, to
go back to this initial traumatic event, which is only experienced belatedly. Brown’s feminist
approach to trauma, then, helps the reader recognize the traumatic nature of women’s “normal”
experiences in Coleman and White’s novels. According to Brown, the American Psychiatric
Association’s definition of trauma is gendered because it refers “first and foremost, [to] an event
outside the range of human experience” (Brown 100), where “human experience” referred to
white, young, fit, middle-class, Christian males with an education (101). With her feminist
analysis, Brown asks us to look beyond the public (and male) experiences of trauma to the
private, secret experiences that women encounter (102). As some modernist fiction suggests,
supposedly “normal” female experiences can be traumatic. Taking into account Brown’s feminist
approach to trauma, I argue in Chapters II and III that Coleman and White’s protagonists
experience the “normal” female experiences of childbirth, mothering, and marriage as traumatic.
In Coleman and White’s fiction, trauma and madness are intricately connected. The protagonists’
traumatic experiences are related to their mental illnesses: Marthe suffers from postpartum
psychosis/depression after the “normal” experience of childbirth, and Clara has a mental
breakdown after her disastrous marriage and intense love affair.

So far, no scholar has discussed the intersection of madness/institutionalization and
trauma, modernist aesthetics, and gender in Coleman and White’s fiction that my thesis
accomplishes. There is not a lot of research on either of the novels. So far, *The Shutter of Snow* has been talked about in terms of madness, modernism/modernist techniques, creations of the self/autobiographical writing, and motherhood/mother-son relations. White’s fiction has been discussed with regard to mental illness, autobiographical writing, and the complexities of the topics it deals with (especially with regard to the main character’s development). As both Coleman and White can be considered modernist writers and have both dealt with madness in their fiction, their novels have been analyzed alongside each other by some critics. In her essay "*Beyond the Glass* and *The Shutter of Snow,*" Kylie Valentine looks at madness in White and Coleman’s novels. She discusses them with regard to what they contributed to the field of modernist studies, how they engage with modernist techniques, psychiatric treatment, and the discourse of psychoanalysis. Valentine sees the two texts as “cultural representations of madness” (171). According to Valentine, the representation of madness in Coleman’s text is mirrored in the text itself. The novel’s internal fragmentation, then, is also one of the central characteristics of modernist texts. Coleman’s text is clearly an example of a late modernist text, as it questions the genre of the novel through its fragmentation and blurring of the genres of poetry and fiction. In her chapter “Framed Liminalities: Antonia White's *Beyond the Glass* and Emily Coleman's *The Shutter of Snow,*” Julie Vandivere also compares and contrasts these two novels that are the focus of this thesis. I will discuss Vandivere’s implications in the respective chapters on Coleman and White’s texts. Coleman and White’s texts, then, help the reader see clearer the connection between madness/institutionalization, gender, and modernism. In the following, I highlight the central points of my analysis of each individual chapter of this thesis.

In Chapter I, I discuss the institutionalization of the mentally ill. I begin by analyzing historical and administrative documents regarding the mad. The historical and administrative
accounts signify what I refer to as “master narratives” of madness. These are official accounts, which the authors intend to be objective and factual rather than subjective and intuitive. The authors of the accounts I discuss here are typically male figures of authority. However, I also take into consideration literary portrayals of women’s experiences of mental illness and institutionalization in modernist fiction. The master narratives and women’s accounts of madness are at odds with each other. While the master narratives portray mental institutions as places of recovery, the fictional accounts of madness also reveal mental institutions as places of confinement. It appears that some aspects of mental institutions are oppressive to the mad while others are liberating. Since the madwomen in Coleman and White’s fiction are very concerned with their institutionalization by giving us rather detailed accounts of institutional procedures, patients, nurses, and doctors, it makes sense to take a closer look at these mental institutions. Using Foucault to analyze historical and administrative documents that are concerned with the physical sites of the mental institutions that modernist madwomen and authors Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White were hospitalized in, I then compare these findings to the fictional accounts. Thus, the administrative and historical texts serve to give the reader a better understanding of what specific mental institutions looked like in the 1920s. These administrative and historical narratives offer one truth about these mental institutions, namely, that Rochester State Hospital in Rochester, New York, and Bethlem Royal Hospital in London, England, were places of recovery and even entertainment. As I will show, this truth differs significantly from the truth that Coleman and White’s fictionalized accounts offer. Chapter I thus addresses the representation and experience of mental illness and institutionalization in master narratives as contrasted with those detailed in the modernist fiction of Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White.
Chapter II and Chapter III, then, focus solely on the fictional and subjective accounts of madness in Coleman and White’s fiction. In Chapter II, I claim that the disciplinary structure of mental institutions paradoxically allows women to explore their sexuality and lesbian desire in these gender-segregated spaces. Feeling confined by the traditional female roles of childbirth and childrearing in the patriarchal culture at large, Coleman’s Marthe, once in the institution, questions female sex roles. I illustrate these points with specific examples from *The Shutter of Snow* and “Interlude.”

In Chapter III, I analyze how the narrative voice in *Beyond the Glass* uses some modernist characteristics such as internal fragmentation, an emphasis on subjectivity, and the protagonist’s metamorphoses to represent the protagonist’s madness. I argue that these modernist formal techniques also are key to Clara’s exploration of her new self. After her nine month-long stay in the mental institution, Clara is reborn with a new, creative, more autonomous, and socially critical self. Her fantastic imaginations throughout her experience of madness, then, endow her with creative freedom and a sense of agency. As the mental institution offered her the freedom to explore her creative self, Clara wishes to be back there after her recovery. Thus, she implies that in some ways institutionalized madwomen have more freedom than “normal” women in the patriarchal culture at large. To elucidate these points, I am offering a close reading of relevant scenes in *Beyond the Glass*.

In addition, I hold that Coleman and White’s fiction can be regarded as examples of feminist activism. Both authors suffered from mental illness themselves and used their experience to give their mad protagonists a voice. The authors’ stories reveal the confining nature of patriarchal mental institutions, without romanticizing madness. As Caminero-Santangelo states, madness is not subversive. While Coleman and White’s madwomen are
portrayed as subversive figures, neither Coleman nor White celebrates madness. I also argue that these texts constitute feminist activism because the narratives were created by two modernist (mad)women writers. Giving their protagonists the power to tell us their stories, Coleman and White endow them with agency. Both women writers problematize the confining nature of mental institutions as well as their inhumane practices of dealing with the mad. At the same time, they also point towards certain liberating characteristics of mental institutions: In particular ways, these institutions are less rigid in their gendered role expectations than patriarchal culture at large. Coleman’s modernist and poetic depiction of madness offers a rather different perspective from previous accounts of mental illness. As I claim in this thesis, both Coleman and White’s fiction offers a unique perspective on madness, hospitalization, and patriarchy at large. *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* also complicate existing theory: Foucault’s institutional critique by adding a feminist perspective and Caminero-Santangelo’s discussion of the subversiveness of madness by asserting that modernist madwomen have agency.
CHAPTER I. A MICROCOSM OF PATRIARCHY AT LARGE: MENTAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE 1920S AS PLACES OF RECOVERY AND CONFINEMENT

As Michel Foucault reveals in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, mental institutions have historically been spaces of discipline. However, as legal, historical, and administrative accounts of mental institutions suggest, these institutions were first and foremost places of recovery in the 1920s. While what I refer to as the “master narratives” of madness emphasize the benign qualities of mental institutions such as cure and recovery, women’s experiences, as represented in modernist fiction, suggest that mental institutions were mainly places of patriarchal discipline and confinement. Some modernist fiction indicates that women’s experience of institutionalization goes hand in hand with the notion of trauma. The supposed cures and treatments, then, magnify the patriarchal constraints already placed on women’s bodies by the patriarchal culture. In this chapter, I discuss both the master narratives of madness and the voices of the mad as they portray the space and discipline of mental institutions, or, in other words, the institutionalization of madness. I argue that the “official” legal, historical, and administrative accounts do not give the reader a comprehensive view of mental institutions in the 1920s. While the administrative accounts emphasize the notion of recovery through revealing positive aspects of the institution such as a friendly atmosphere and entertainment, Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White critique the disciplinary nature of mental institutions. Coleman and White’s madwomen reveal how male doctors and administrators organize madness, discipline women’s bodies in a way that exacerbates the restrictions those bodies face in the patriarchal culture at large, and dominate the discourse. Hence, mental institutions of the 1920s are places of contradiction: While offering a respite for the mentally ill, they also, paradoxically, are places of discipline and trauma in which male doctors and
administrators exercise power over women’s bodies to an even greater degree than in the patriarchal culture at large.

Throughout the chapter, I analyze legal, historical, and administrative accounts of the institutions Coleman and White were hospitalized in during the 1920s. Coleman was institutionalized at Rochester State Hospital in Rochester, New York, for two months in 1924, following the birth of her son (Podnieks, “Introduction” xv-xvi). Correlating the public discourse surrounding Rochester State Hospital with Coleman’s account of the mental institution in *The Shutter of Snow*, I examine how these accounts are at odds with each other. Specifically, I look at some of the legal and administrative discourse surrounding madness of the State of New York. From *The Revised Statutes, Codes and General Laws of the State of New York* (Birdseye) from 1891, we can gather some information regarding how “insane persons” were regarded and treated under the New York State Constitution (until the revision of the laws in 1930). The Annual Reports of Rochester State Hospital offer insight into the administration’s view of the management of their mental institution since its founding in 1891 (Koren 169). The two reports concerning the year 1924 are the most relevant for my analysis, as Emily Holmes Coleman was hospitalized at Rochester State Hospital that year. The reports for the year 1924 are the *Thirty-Fourth Annual Report of the Rochester State Hospital at Rochester, NY, to the State Hospital Commission for the Year Ending June 30, 1924* and the *Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Rochester State Hospital at Rochester, NY, to the State Hospital Commission for the Year Ending June 30, 1925*. These documents provide a framework in which we can try to understand the mental institution of the 1920s from a legal and administrative perspective. I counterbalance these master narratives of madness with close readings of Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow*. Coleman’s novel offers readers the subjective perspective of Marthe Gail’s experience in
Gorestown State Hospital, which is different from the portrayal of the mental institution in the master narratives in distinctive ways.

White was hospitalized in Bethlem Royal Hospital in London, England, for ten months in 1922 (Andrews et al. 657). White was one of many famous patients admitted to Bethlem over the course of its more than 750-year-long history (656). Her account of Nazareth Royal Hospital in *Beyond the Glass* and the mental institution in “Surprise Visit” are based on her experience at Bethlem. Andrews et al. point out that White’s stay was a “traumatic time…, as shown in her book *Beyond the Glass*. Her experiences helped shape her later writings and influenced her portrayal of mental hospitals” (657). Just like Coleman’s account, White’s narration differs significantly from the public discourse surrounding Bethlem Royal Hospital, showing that, despite official statements suggesting otherwise, mental institutions of the 1920s were still places of discipline and trauma.

While the master narratives signify the official narrative of mental institutions, Coleman and White’s novels offer a more subjective, personal account of these institutions. The experiences represented in Coleman and White’s texts function as a (feminist) Foucauldian critique of mental institutions. Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* mainly deals with eighteenth-century mental institutions; however, Foucault’s institutional critique helps the reader understand the disciplinary nature of the mental institutions in Coleman and White’s fiction. Their modernist fiction, then, is a feminist critique of (the patriarchal nature of) American and British mental institutions of the 1920s.

**Mental Institutions as Places of Cure and Recovery**

The master narratives of madness portray mental institutions of the 1920s as places of cure and recovery. According to these narratives, Rochester State Hospital had a welcoming
atmosphere with various offers of therapy and entertainment, whereas Bethlem Royal Hospital was compared to a hotel. The thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth annual reports of Rochester State Hospital overall emphasized the welcoming and caring atmosphere created by the staff. The administration pointed out that “[i]n our inspections we … found a great deal to commend and little to criticize” (State of New York: *Thirty-Fourth Annual Report* 5). In both the thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth reports, the administration emphasized the institutional efforts at offering therapy for their patients, group singing, and other forms of entertainment. In earlier reports, the administration mentioned a number of different things regarding the amusement and recreation of patients. Outdoor activities included baseball games, walking and excursion parties to the woods and the hospital’s Lake Ontario farm, picnics in the hospital woods, sleigh-rides, and daily walking parties (State of New York: *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report* 26; State of New York: *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report* 23). The rhetoric describing these outdoor activities had the positive connotation of freedom, as patients were allowed and encouraged to roam around freely. Other, indoor activities included occasional dances and small parties, religious services, an annual art exhibit, and the hospital orchestra. The hospital staff also provided magazines and music boxes and showed movies (State of New York: *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report* 26; State of New York: *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report* 23). As can be seen by the above examples, the rhetoric used by the hospital administration included words that signified a variety of leisurely activities and social events. This rhetoric of amusement and recreation almost made the mental institution seem like a holiday resort. The administration offered all of these activities to try to “break the monotony of institution life” (State of New York: *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report* 26). Hospital administrators thus regarded everyday institutional life as something that could and should have been improved. Hence, the rhetoric of amusement and recreation suggested that
Rochester State Hospital was decidedly benign and that the hospital’s administration cared for the well-being of its patients. Besides positively occupying the patients, the administration also created a welcoming atmosphere by distributing flowers daily and allowing visits of relatives (State of New York: Twenty-Fourth Annual Report 26). The rhetoric in the annual reports portrayed Rochester State Hospital as a place which tried to facilitate patients’ recovery in every possible manner: Besides offering the necessary therapy, the staff of the mental institution also involved patients in various activities of recreation and amusement.

The portrayal of Gorestown State Hospital in Coleman’s The Shutter of Snow similarly reflects some administrative efforts to create a space that is conducive to recovery. The space of the mental institution offers a variety of activities of recreation and amusement: Patients can sew (11), play the piano (19), play billiard (20) or bridge (98), read (98), go on sleigh rides (15), go for walks with the nurses (101), go to the movies (107), and attend parties (118). Many of these activities reflect tasks women would be expected to perform in the outside world as well. Replicating women’s roles in patriarchy at large, the administration and staff of the fictional Gorestown State Hospital create experiences for their patients that are meant to help them recover.

The rhetoric surrounding Bethlem Royal Hospital amplifies the notion of recreation and amusement suggested by the rhetoric of Rochester State Hospital: Bethlem was compared to a hotel in 1928 (Andrews et al. 543). The word “hotel,” then, has positive connotations of recreation and entertainment. Historical accounts of Bethlem suggest that while the institution had been abusive for most of its history (539), by the 1920s, it had become a more positive space and, as mentioned above, even compared to a hotel. While from a historical perspective, Bethlem
had not always been a model institution (in fact, quite the opposite, as it had come to be known as Bedlam), its image improved much in the twentieth century:

Bethlem has all too often been characterized by what happened to it in the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. In the popular imagination, however, where Bethlem could never be entirely free of the Bedlam image, in the twentieth century the image itself gradually lost its associations with the Hospital. (539)

According to Chambers, “by the turn of the twentieth century Bethlem was no longer popularly viewed as being an abusive asylum but was instead thought of as a psychiatric hospital” (255). By the early twentieth century, Bethlem was regarded as a site of recovery instead of the stereotypical madhouse. Andrews et al. describe the late 1920s as “a period of development and improvement in registered mental and voluntary hospitals” (547). The Southwark hospital had 200 beds (651) and was relatively “popular:”

While institutional care may have been a last resort for many, Bethlem remained a relatively popular institution because of its hotel-like conditions, apparent success rate, and comparatively low charges. It was not a ‘dumping ground for the sick whom nobody wanted’ like many other contemporary institutions. (651)

Hence, Bethlem was considered to be one of the better institutions for the treatment of the mentally ill. The historical accounts of Bethlem suggest that the institution emphasized recovery and cure.

In White’s Beyond the Glass, there are moments indicating that the administration tries to create a space for recovery. In one scene, Nurse Jones gives Clara old magazines “to pass the time” (233), for which Clara is “very grateful” (233). While handing Clara these magazines was well intentioned, Clara soon becomes confused and unhappy (233). The images in the magazines
remind her of moments from her old life. Since she cannot fully remember the details of her past life, Clara gets upset. In another scene later in the novel, when Clara has improved much, she finds that she has been moved from her cell to a room that delights her and reminds her of a room in the “normal” world: “It was almost like being in a tiny bedroom in the other world” (239). The “wonderful” (239) room causes a desire in Clara to “make herself as neat as possible” (239). Hence, the change of rooms helps Clara take care of herself.

Besides being a place of recovery, Nazareth Royal Hospital is also a place of entertainment. The nurses try to facilitate this entertainment: Sister Ware offers Clara that she can knit or read (241). As can be seen by Dr. Bennett’s explanation to Clara, the administration of Nazareth Royal Hospital intends to create a space of amusement and recreation: “Lots of people would rather be here than anywhere else. We have good fun sometimes. Concerts, you know. And twice a year we have a dance” (242). Like The Shutter of Snow, Beyond the Glass shows that the administration and staff of mental institutions in the 1920s attempted to create a space for their patients conducive to recovery. Thus, in this sense Coleman and White’s novels confirm the positive aspects emphasized in the master narratives of madness. However, Coleman and White’s fiction also illustrates the disciplinary nature of mental institutions. These disciplinary spaces exacerbate the restrictions placed on women’s bodies in patriarchy at large.

Mental Institutions as Disciplinary Spaces/Places of Confinement

The notion of discipline is at the center of Michel Foucault’s Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason. In his critique of mental institutions, Foucault reveals the confining nature of so-called madhouses. Tracing the history of madness from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century, Foucault points out that “from the fifteenth century on, the face of madness has haunted the imagination of Western man” (15). While in the Middle
Ages, the *Narrenschiff*, or *Stultifera Navis*, or the so-called “Ship of Fools” (7) was the site of madness, the Classical Period saw the emergence of the “‘Hospital of Madmen,’ the ‘Madhouse’” (35). The Hôpital Général, which is an example of these first “hospitals” that Foucault takes a closer look at, however, was not a medical institution; rather, it was “a sort of semijudicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, [decided], [judged], and [executed]” (40). Further, the Hôpital Général was a “moral institution responsible for punishing, for correcting a certain moral ‘abeyance’ which [did] not merit the tribunal of men, but [could not] be corrected by the severity of penance alone” (59). The mental institution thus has functioned as a disciplinary structure bent on “correcting” certain deviances from “normal” behavior.

In New York State, disciplinary space was regulated by law. As the policymakers perceived the mad as a threat against “normal” people (and themselves), confinement was deemed an appropriate response to mental illness. State law regulated the commitment of mentally ill persons. Accordingly, two physicians needed to certify under oath the insanity of the person in question. Within five days, a judge needed to approve the certificate of insanity (Birdseye 1508). The law also regulated the “confinement” and “maintenance” of mentally ill persons:

Whenever any person who is possessed of sufficient property to maintain himself, becomes by lunacy or otherwise, so far disordered in his senses as to endanger his own person or property of others, it shall be the duty of the committee of his person and estate to provide a suitable place for his confinement, and to confine and maintain him in such manner as shall be approved by the proper legal authority; and in every case of lunacy hereafter occurring, the lunatic shall be sent within ten days to some State lunatic asylum,
or to such public or private asylum as may be approved by a standing order or resolution of the supervisors of the county… (1514-1515)

According to The Revised Statutes, Codes and General Laws of the State of New York, the mentally ill person is “confined” in an institution for his or her sake as well as for the sake of others’ safekeeping. Thus, the “insane” are seen as a potential threat against “normal” people. Confinement, then, is presented as an appropriate response to mental illness. The notion of confinement is very much part of the rhetoric of madness. Koren points out that “[a]s part of the New York state hospital commission, the “medical inspector … is charged with the examination of the patients confined in the different hospitals” (164; emphasis added). Confinement is a loaded term for women. Restricted by the restraining gender roles in patriarchy, women experience an even more literal, physical confinement in mental institutions. While gender roles such as childbirth and motherhood also involve women’s bodies, these bodies are literally disciplined in the confines of mental institutions. Confinement of female bodies, then, becomes exacerbated within mental hospitals.

In The Shutter of Snow, Marthe critiques the disciplinary structure inherent in the psychiatric institution: Gorestown State Hospital resembles a prison in both its architecture and metaphoric meaning. In Coleman’s novel, the psychiatric clinic is a closed space surrounded by walls, bars, and locked doors (3; 43; 55; 114), which is also opposed to the “outside” (55). From the outset of the novel, Coleman creates a claustrophobic space:

The window was closed and the bars went up and down on the outside… There were six bars to the back of her bed… There was nothing in the room but the bed and the chicken wire... There was no light in the room. Only a dull red light in the hall. (3)
The description of Marthe’s room invokes the image of a prison cell: it has bars in front of the window, is barely furnished, and dark. The Gorestown State Hospital resembles a prison in both its architecture as well as metaphoric meaning. Marthe is confined physically and trapped in the limiting gender roles patriarchy assigns her. Experiencing trauma and madness as a result of childbirth, Marthe does not live up to the specific role expectations the patriarchal society has for her. Marthe’s physical confinement in her cell in the mental institution, then, signifies that her mental illness has rendered her as the Other in the eyes of society. As I will discuss in Chapter II, Marthe’s physical imprisonment is also an image for the restraints of motherhood.

In White’s *Beyond the Glass*, confinement manifests itself in various ways. When Clara first regains some sense of consciousness after her mental breakdown,

she woke up in a small bare cell… she was lying on a mattress on the floor, without sheets, with only rough, red-striped blankets over her… she was bitterly cold. In front of her was the blank yellow face of a heavy door without a handle of any kind. Going over to the door, she tried frantically to push it open. It was locked… Was this place a prison? (211)

Clara’s room does not even contain a proper bed, but only a bare mattress. While Clara and Marthe’s rooms resemble each other in their bleakness, Clara’s room seems to be even less friendly. The desolate atmosphere is emphasized by the fact that Clara is cold and locked in her cell. The room is frequently referred to as a cell, and it is mentioned that the doors are almost always locked: “[T]here was her cell again. They threw her down on the mattress and went out, locking the door” (213). Thus, Clara is imprisoned in her cell. There are also “high brick walls” (236) around the asphalt yard outside, as Clara finds out later.
Clara also spends some time in a rubber-padded room, which is meant to confine and protect patients from themselves. The room is “a small six-sided room whose walls were all thick bulging panels of grey rubber. The door was rubber-padded too, with a small red window, shaped like an eye, deeply embedded in it” (214). With its eye-like window, the room is just like a prison cell or a cage, where somebody can always be watching. The window invokes Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon, which he describes in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. This notion of surveillance is crucial because it illustrates the power imbalance between the male doctors and administrators and the female patients. This power imbalance, then, is a reflection on the hierarchy between men and women in patriarchy at large. Constantly watched, women have to obey their gender roles closely. While the rubber room arguably serves to protect patients from themselves, it does not have a calming effect on Clara. Quite the opposite: To Clara,

[t]he rubber room was a compartment in a sinking ship, near the boiler room which would burst at any minute and scald her to death. Somehow she must get out. She flung herself against the rubber walls as if she could beat her way out by sheer force. The air was getting hotter. The rubber walls were already warm to touch. In a second her lungs would burst… (214)

Clara is in a panic, trying desperately to get out of the rubber room. She even imagines her own death. The rooms and buildings that constitute the mental institutions in both *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* are spaces of discipline, which closely resemble prisons.

Mental institutions of the 1920s were not merely disciplinary spaces, but also spaces that frequently traumatized rather than comforted or cured patients. The notion of trauma is best illustrated in White’s short story “Surprise Visit,” where the trauma of institutionalization stays
with the protagonist years after her release. In fact, the trauma overwhelms her in the end, which
gestures towards the severity of the experience and the power the mental institution has over the
protagonist. “Surprise Visit,” which was published in 1964, deals with the mental institution as it
haunts protagonist Julia Tye. Julia has been meaning to go back to the building that is described
much like Nazareth Royal Hospital in Beyond the Glass “[f]or over fifteen years” (White,
“Surprise Visit” 160) and is finally prompted to do so by a newspaper article that tells her that
“the place had been turned into a War Museum” (161). In “Surprise Visit,” the mental institution
she spent time in fifteen years ago still haunts Julia Tye. She feels compelled to remember, yet
cannot ever go back to the event of madness fully:

To forget was, of course, impossible, though at first she hadn’t deliberately tried to recall
it. It had recalled itself often enough, in the first year or two after her release, in those
nightmares where she found herself back there, this time without hope of escape, being
herded up and down long corridors and up steep winding stone stairs with other women
or locked alone in a cell with a high, barred window, beating frantically on a blank door.
(165)

The fact that Julia seems unable to go back to the event itself is indicative of a trauma as defined
by Cathy Caruth. According to Caruth, the traumatized are possessed by the traumatic event,
which they can never fully reclaim and return to. In “Surprise Visit,” the event recalls itself and
possesses Julia. She does not consciously choose to remember; rather, the event has a grip on
her. After the initial experience of trauma, Julia tries not to forget the period she spent in the
mental institution, deliberately recalling the event. Her nightmares reflect the inhumane
treatment she received while being in the mental institution: She is “herded up” with others like
animals and locked away like a prisoner. While Julia tries not to forget, the name of the place
gives her a “faint, apprehensive chill” (161) whenever someone mentions it unexpectedly.

However, Julia’s memories of her stay in the mental institution or “the place” (160), as she calls it, are never articulated; the reader never quite knows what her experience was. Julia’s silence about her hospitalization reveals that she herself cannot recall the event:

Though she could recall a number of concrete details about the apparently endless time she had spent in it, the place itself remained unreal. She could shrink her experience into a period between two known dates, but she could not reduce the building to a concrete mass occupying a fixed point in space. (162-163)

The space of the mental institution thus is the site of trauma in the short story: Julia is aware of its haunting presence, yet she lacks the ability to go back in time and space to the presence of the asylum. The narration thus suggests that she has experienced something traumatic; the experience is omnipresent for Julia, yet she can never fully go back to the event itself. The trauma in “Surprise Visit” cannot be abreacted; instead, the memory of the institutional space is so powerful that it overwhelms the protagonist. Julia’s attempt to go back to “the place” is an attempt at ridding herself of her memories. She imagines that “to walk right into that building of her own accord, as an ordinary member of the public, free to walk out of it when she chose, would disinfect it once and for all in her imagination” (162). However, Julia is unable to abreact her experience. When she faces the exercise yard, memories overwhelm her. She becomes “two women at once. One this side of the window, in an admirably tailored suit; one out in the yard in a shapeless smock” (173). Her two worlds thus collapse into one; she is both “normal” and respected as well as mad. At the end of the short story, Julia again becomes the raging madwoman, moaning: “No… Oh, no! … Not there… Not in the pads… Don’t put me back in the pads! … I’ll be good, Nurse Roberts, I’ll be good!” (173). The trauma of the mental institution is
thus represented as something that stays with a person even after they recover or can return at any time. The mind of the madwoman in White’s story is precarious; she can never fully escape and is possessed by her experience of institutionalization. Thus, institutional discipline is so overwhelmingly oppressive it traumatizes patients. Institutional discipline in Coleman and White’s fiction is not restricted to the confinement of patients in these mental institutions. Discipline also prevails with the organization of madness.

Organization of Madness

According to Foucault, psychiatrists organized madness in the mental institution: “[T]here was an operation, or rather a series of operations, which silently organized the world of the asylum, the methods of cure, and at the same time the concrete experience of madness” (Madness and Civilization 243). Hence, in the asylum, madness was acted upon according to the rules of those who had power, namely the (male) psychiatrists. Foucault points out that under Samuel Tuke, fear and guilt dominated the mad, “who became an object of punishment always vulnerable to himself and to the Other” (247). Surveillance and judgment are thus central to the nineteenth-century asylum (251). While Foucault’s analysis and history of the mental institution ends in the nineteenth century, his findings are still relevant to the twentieth-century madhouses.

Foucault’s notion of the organization of madness helps us understand how administrators and psychiatrists dealt with madness in mental institutions in the 1920s. While the New York state hospital commission oversees mental institutions, it also endorses the organization of madness within the confines of asylums. The New York state hospital commission exercises some control over mental institutions: “The commission … is required to examine all institutions, public and private, authorized to receive and care for the insane, and the methods of government and management of the inmates” (Koren 164; emphasis added). The word “inmates”
suggests that patients were considered as prisoners first, and then as patients. The notion of imprisonment also sheds light on the imbalance of power between those in control (i.e., the administration, doctors, policymakers) and “inmates.” The commission maintains the organization of madness:

When the commission has reason to believe that any person adjudged insane is wrongfully deprived of his liberty, or is cruelly or improperly treated, or inadequate provision is made for his care and safe-keeping, it may order an investigation of the facts, compel the attendance of witnesses and the production of papers, and exercise the powers of a referee in the supreme court. (166)

Hence, the New York State hospital commission monitors the treatment of mentally ill patients. It is clear that madness is organized: The patients are “governed” and “managed.” According to Foucault, those in power, that is, the doctors, have unspoken rules of managing the mad. The organization of madness comprises the “operation, or rather a series of operations, which silently organized the world of the asylum, the methods of cure, and at the same time the concrete experience of madness” (243). As silence surrounds these rules, operations, and methods of cure, it becomes even more important to listen closely to a variety of accounts of institutionalization, including legal, historical, and administrative ones, but also fictional and non-fictional ones.

In Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow*, the organization of madness in Gorestown State Hospital is best illustrated by hospital transfer and release policies. Deviant women are hospitalized, and kept away from society until they have “recovered.” Before they can be returned to society, they are subject to scrutiny. In order to be transferred to the West Side, the ward that precedes release, the patients have to go to Conference: “Once a month the Board came and those who were ready to go home were taken singly before them and the doctors. It
was very solemn. You generally have to go twice before you get out…” (81). Thus, patients have to prove to the Board (which mostly consists of men) that they have sufficiently recovered and may go home. The Gorestown State Hospital is harshly regimented.

In some significant ways, the organization of madness in the mental institution is patriarchal in nature. In The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America, Elizabeth Lunbeck points out the disciplinary power of the psychiatric clinic: “In the hospital, patients’ words, bodies, even thoughts (if committed to paper) became common property” (166). In modern America, control of the patients was still mostly limited to men: “Psychiatry was a man’s field. Women psychiatrists were either relegated to the profession’s lower echelons or nervously tolerated, at what appears to have been great personal cost, at its highest ranks” (36). However, because of its low status, psychiatry was more open to and able to attract women to its staff (35). While women were able to obtain positions in the field of psychiatry, these positions denied them importance and visibility (36) and were mostly limited to the position of the nurse, who usually followed their (male) superior’s instructions. Some of Coleman’s psychiatrists are women. However, their work in the psychiatric hospital is not a sign of women’s liberation; instead, it suggests complicity with the notion of patriarchal confinement.

They strike what Deniz Kandiyoti calls a “patriarchal bargain” (80). The notion of patriarchal bargains refers to strategies women employ in dealing with different forms of patriarchy. Dr. Brainerd, the head of the Women’s Psychopathic Ward (Coleman, Shutter 118), gives Marthe paraldehyde against her will. While the female doctor “gently” (116) says Marthe must take it, her order is carried out in a not so gentle fashion:

… A sign from the doctor, the two nurses held her jerking arms and legs. She struggled like a fish caught in a net and yearned and stretched her neck to get away. She choked
and screamed and turned her body round and kicked her legs and stomach and her throat
sprang up and threw back from her the captive stream. (116-117)

Dr. Brainerd leads her ward in compliance with patriarchal standards. Her female patients must
play by the rules; if they disobey them, they must be silenced. Dr. Brainerd’s act of medicating
Marthe against her will can be considered a disciplining of the body, to use Foucault’s term. As I
discuss in the following, disciplining patients’ bodies is a key feature of Gorestown State
Hospital.

**Disciplining of Bodies**

According to Foucault, while the madhouse itself is a place of confinement in which
madness is organized, it is the doctors who most directly discipline the mad patients’ bodies.
Foucault states: “The madman’s body was regarded as the visible and solid presence of his
disease” (*Madness and Civilization* 159). Therefore, doctors offered physical cures that follow “a
moral perception and a moral therapeutics of the body” (159). Doctors treated weakness in spirits
with different practices of consolidation, such as iron. Moritz Hoffman’s method of purifying of
the blood (i.e. blood transfusion) was considered a very effective means of curing melancholia:
“It would consist of substituting for the melancholic’s overcharged, thick blood, encumbered
with bitter humors, a light, clear blood whose new movement would dissipate the delirium”
(162). The water cure was a different yet related method of curing patients who supposedly
needed purification. According to Foucault, the water cure became a major treatment of the mad
from the end of the seventeenth century (168). Depending on their state of excitement, patients
were either treated with hot or cold water. Darut’s thesis contends that “cold water heats and hot
water cools” (169). Thus, doctors would treat melancholic patients with cold water, whereas
more agitated patients received soothing hot baths. Doctors also regulated their patients’
movements. As the mad could be immobile or agitated, the doctors’ objective was to reinstate a “movement that [would] be both regular and real, in the sense that it [would] obey the rules of the world’s movements” (173). All of these examples demonstrate that doctors disciplined their patients’ bodies. While their intentions were to cure the patients, the practices that were used are very questionable from contemporary and human rights perspectives.

While state law sanctions the commitment of the mentally ill to asylums, New York law also sanctions the use of restraint. Thus, state law enables doctors to discipline the bodies of the mad. As Foucault has revealed, the body has been disciplined in various ways: Doctors have used restraint, consolidation, purification, and regulation of bodily movement. While the state law is silent regarding the specifics of the confinement of mentally ill persons, the use of restraint appears to be sanctioned by law: The superintendent of an asylum “shall also make entries from time to time of the mental state, bodily condition and medical treatment of such patient, together with the forms of restraint employed…” (Birdseye 1508; emphasis added). The use of different forms of restraint is not questioned at all; instead, it is portrayed as an appropriate way of dealing with mentally ill patients. Since the law does not specify the kinds of restraint to be used, there is a lot of flexibility regarding the use of various methods of restraint. None of the methods of restraint seems prohibited. Thus, the law sanctions the use of any method of restraint in dealing with mentally ill patients.

Doctors and nurses discipline madwomen’s bodies in various ways in The Shutter of Snow. While the intentions behind the various ways of disciplining bodies and using restraint can be assumed to have been benign, the treatments were inhumane to the women, as they forced women’s bodies into positions in which the women had no control over their bodies. The patriarchal institution of psychiatry could not tolerate their female patients’ deviance from the
rules. In Coleman’s novel, digression from what was considered proper behavior at the time is answered by manifold policies of silencing. One of the ways of silencing patients is the use of the canvas sheet. When Marthe attempts to break out, she stirs the whole ward:

> She was surrounded. They twisted both her wrists and she was calm… She was being wound up like a French doll. She could not move. If she moved a finger two of them began to twist her wrists. The others wound the strips of cloth together… When it was done they carried her like a Pharaoh to her bed. She was put into bed with the blankets and over that the canvas sheet was pulled. It was very strong and thick with a hole for the head. But I can’t sleep on my back. (6)

The scene implies that Marthe is being put in a straightjacket, and then tied down in her bed with the canvas sheet. Her body, then, is literally confined by the rules and regulations of the Gorestown State Hospital; the frequent use of the canvas sheet in other scenes (14; 21; 28; 29; 31; 34; 43; 68) suggests that it is understood as an “effective” way of dealing with female patients. The madwoman in Coleman’s novel thus is managed through physical restraint. The fact that doctors and nurses of Gorestown State Hospital use restraint to manage their patients suggests that there is also a possibility that restraint was used in the “real” site of Rochester State Hospital. Coleman based her novel on her experiences in the latter. Hence, she might have experienced the use of restraint herself, or at least seen it used. This notion of disciplining of bodies is realistic, as New York law sanctioned the use of restraint. While Coleman’s fiction is not factual, I contend that we should still listen to Marthe’s voice and consider that doctors and nurses used restraint to “treat” madwomen in the mental institutions of the 1920s.

While the doctors’ and nurses’ intent of different ways of dealing with patients was positive, the outcome was still detrimental to patients. One form of hydrotherapy, for example,
was supposed to calm agitated patients. As mentioned earlier, the so-called “water cure” was based on Darut’s thesis that “cold water heats and hot water cools” (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 169). In Marthe’s case, however, a special kind of canvas sheet is used when patients receive baths. Marthe “lay in a sling. A canvas sheet was drawn over the top only her head coming out” (Coleman, *Shutter* 28). While the canvas sheet primarily serves to silence women (14), it also restricts them physically. When Marthe is in the bath tub, the canvas sheet (which can be considered as a symbol of patriarchal disciplinary power) does violence to her body:

> Now the tight cloth about her body became hot and irritating and she no longer felt the softness of the water. She twisted her body and turned her arms pinioned behind her, and rolled her body about… It was heat, languorous and clinging, and it pricked the pore of her skin. She twisted and fumbled with her fingers. (29)

Hydrotherapy here involves restraint, which upsets Marthe. In this scene, she is represented as rather powerful and rebellious. Even though the canvas sheet restrains her, she somehow manages to free herself: “It was off, the spiral casket. She had reached with a finger, and torn the threads, torn them down the whole length of her body, in and out, and around and round, until the entire strip was unwound from her and kicked to oblivion below her feet” (29). Thus, Marthe resists against her restraint and, at least once, is successful in doing so. Coleman critiques the disciplinary notion of the mental institution through Marthe’s resistance against the use of restraint.

Similar to Coleman’s novel, White’s novel also critiques the disciplinary nature of the mental institution. In *Beyond the Glass*, the narrator portrays the disciplining of women’s bodies as a form of torture, which is illustrated in the description of forced feeding:
She [Clara] came out of this dream suddenly to find herself being tortured in her own person. She was lying on her back with two nurses holding her down. A young man … was bending over her, holding a funnel with a long tube attached. He forced the tube down her nose and began to pour some liquid into the funnel. There was a searing pain at the back of her nose, she choked and struggled, but they held her down ruthlessly. At last the man drew out the tube and dropped it coiling in a basin. The nurses released her and all three went out and shut the door. (213)

Clara is “tortured” and held down with force. The process of inserting the funnel and pouring liquid through it into her nose is described as painful. The hospital personnel “ruthlessly” goes on with the treatment, even though Clara tries to fight it. In a later scene, the two nurses and the young man are referred to as “the torturers” (214). In her precarious mental state, Clara is completely powerless and at the mercy of the nurses. The way the hospital personnel treats Clara is clearly inhumane because Clara is treated against her own will.

Another instance of the use of methods of confinement includes the use of the sheet, which is also described in Coleman’s novel. Like Marthe in The Shutter of Snow, Clara is restrained forcefully through a canvas sheet: “She was lying on a mattress in what looked like a great wooden manger clamped to the floor. Over it was stretched a kind of stiff canvas apron, like a piece of sailcloth, fastened to the manger with studs and metal eyelets” (216). Clara does not have any command over her own body, being physically tied down. She is forced underneath the canvas sheet. In a later scene, “[t]hey stripped her, forced her struggling limbs back into the heavy canvas garment and fastened her down under the sailcloth again” (218). Thus, Nazareth Royal Hospital employs methods of restraint to control their patients. The third-person limited
narrator gives us a vivid sense of the details involved in the use of restraint by describing soberly every aspect of confinement.

While the use of the sheet is a method of confinement that the nurses employ routinely, there is also a scene in White’s novel that suggests that nurses sometimes lose their temper with patients. One night, as nurse Smith is about to lock the cell door, Clara pleads with her to keep it unlocked. Nurse Smith replies “furiously” (234): “None of that, my lady. I’ve had enough trouble with you bitches for one day” (234), “[rapping] Clara hard on the knuckles with the great key. Clara cried out and pressed her hurt hand to her mouth” (234). This instance of physical abuse was serious enough to make Smith look frightened that Clara would tell on her (234). When Clara reassures the nurse she will say to the other nurse she banged her hand on the door, nurse Smith is relieved (235). Smith’s violent outburst suggests two things: First, that nurses sometimes might physically abuse patients, and, second, that the administration does not approve of this behavior. Hence, the administration does not support physical abuse that is unrelated to any treatments, whereas, as previously mentioned, the administration does endorse disciplining of patients’ bodies when the intention is supposedly benign. Using the water cure or restraint were actual treatments at the time, which is different from the abuse Clara suffered from nurse Smith. The scene with nurse Smith also reveals that nurses and doctors use abusive language to discipline madwomen. Nurse Smith condescendingly calls the female patients “bitches,” which indicates the hierarchy of power between nurses and patients. Language and discourse are central features of the disciplinary power of mental institutions.

**Discipline Through Discourse**

As doctors and administrators have all the (institutional) power, they determine the discourse surrounding madness. The nurses merely are an extension of the institutional power of
doctors and administrators. They do not have any real power, which can be seen by nurse Smith’s fear of her superiors finding out about her physical abuse of Clara. According to Foucault, the language in which we usually talk about madness is the language of reason, which overrules the silence surrounding madness (*Madness and Civilization* x-xi). Foucault demands that we listen to the language of silence, which is the voice of the mad. In *Madness and Civilization*, he has attempted to write the “archaeology of that silence” (xi; emphasis in original). As they offer very different perspectives, the master narratives of madness and the personal experiences narrated in Coleman and White’s novels elucidate the imbalance of power revealed through discourse.

The New York law definitions of madness render the mentally ill as the Other. Foucault argues throughout *Madness and Civilization* that the mad have historically been labeled as the Other. Houses of madness have isolated the mad from the general population and therefore tried to avoid scandal (66). While Foucault refers to the physical isolation of the mad from “normal” society, this separation also applies to the language used in relation to the mad. People called mental hospitals “asylums,” which marks these institutions as different and Other, as a space that solely exists for the mad. The mad have thus been shunned from society both physically and linguistically. *The Revised Statutes, Codes and General Laws of the State of New York* offer some insight into the legal situation of the mentally ill in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the state laws, terms with negative connotations like “asylum,” “insane,” and “lunatic” are still very much part of the discourse. The section of mental health laws is titled “Insane Persons.” Within it, an asylum is defined as follows:

any buildings or building, or part of building for the insane erected, established or set apart for such purpose, either by the State, or by any county, or by any corporation;
“institution” shall mean any buildings, home or retreat, licensed in accordance with the laws of the State, to have the care, treatment, and custody of the insane. (Birdseye 1507) An asylum is thus marked as a space that is separate and different from society. Hence, it is a space for the Other. The section on the State Lunatic Asylum at Utica has further definitions, which complement the statewide definitions:

The terms “lunacy,” “lunatic” and “insane,” as used in this act, shall include every species of insanity, and extend to every deranged person, and to all unsound mind other than idiots… [T]he word “asylum” and “institution” means “any State lunatic asylum;” a word denoting the singular number is to include one or many; and every word importing the masculine gender only may extend to and include females. (1520-1521)

The terms “lunacy,” “lunatic” and “insane,” thus signify deviant behavior or states of being. Those who are not “normal” are stigmatized and othered, and they are confined to mental institutions through language and physical space. Language thus serves as a dividing line between the “normal” and madness.

The aforementioned policies of silencing and disciplining of bodies in The Shutter of Snow are also suggestive of Foucault’s notion of discourse, where the male doctor speaks and the female patient is silent and still. The patients of the Women’s Psychopathic Ward are expected to be inaudible. The nurses and doctors always tell them to be quiet. If the patients do not obey the rule of silence, they are punished. When Marthe gets excited, Dr. Brainerd tells her “[i]f you will promise to be quiet I wont have them put on the sheet” (14). Since Marthe does not stop shouting they use the canvas sheet (14). Similar to the threat of the sheet (which is not just an empty threat but a mode of punishment), the doctors and nurses use the threat of keeping or moving the women “downstairs.” When Marthe starts to sing, Mrs. Fenwick, another patient, warns Marthe:
“Listen to me Gail youd better stop that right this minute if you expect to get upstairs. Everybodys quiet up there” (40). The female patients of the Gorestown State Hospital are neither allowed to speak up nor to sing. In denying the women a voice, the psychiatric hospital follows a patriarchal rule: The man/doctor has the say, whereas the woman/patient has to be quiet.

This narrative of patriarchal power and silencing of women also suggests that in the Women’s Psychopathic Ward, “quiet” equals “sane.” Desiring conformity, those in power regard speaking up as madness. Marthe, however, shows some signs of resistance, raising concerns and fighting for some rights: “Dr Brainerd said Marthe earnestly, just because Ive got a toxic exhaustive psychosis is that any reason why I have to be treated like a dog?” (32). She writes several letters every day to Dr. Brainerd, asking for things both for herself and the other patients (35). Towards the end of the novel, after having suffered numerous times from the institutional policies and under the people who enforce them, Marthe speaks up, addressing Miss Wade, one of the nurses: “You fat smug inefficient little fool she said, whoever gave you authority over so many people who are more decent than you are” (115). Subsequently silenced by drugs (116-117), Marthe in this scene critiques the psychiatric clinic on the grounds of its inhumanity and authoritarian principles.

Modernism’s madwomen offer a gendered Foucauldian critique of mental institutions in America and Britain of the 1920s. These mental institutions are officially touted as places of recovery; yet, according to Coleman and White’s fiction, they also remain the same kind of disciplinary spaces they have been for hundreds of years. Coleman and White’s fictional narratives reveal the disciplinary space of the mental institution is patriarchal in nature, and therefore a microcosm of society. Power belongs to male doctors, while female doctors and nurses have struck a patriarchal bargain. Madwomen, then, are powerless and at the mercy of
those who confine them. However, as Chapter II suggests, the notion of gender is a site of contestation in *The Shutter of Snow*: Coleman’s Marthe challenges commonly accepted gender roles. Revealing the trauma of female gender roles such as childbirth and mothering, Coleman’s Marthe experiences freedom from these restraints patriarchy assigns her in the confines of the institution. Chapter III, then, discusses Clara’s exploration and birth of her fantastic imaginations and creative self. Clara’s agency is intricately tied to the modernist characteristics of *Beyond the Glass*. 
CHAPTER II. EMILY HOLMES COLEMAN’S *THE SHUTTER OF SNOW* AS A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY AND “NORMAL” FEMALE SEX ROLES

With its unique insider’s perspective of one of modernism’s madwomen, Emily Holmes Coleman’s 1930 *The Shutter of Snow* helps us gain a better understanding of mental illness and the patriarchal culture at large. I argue that the disciplinary structure of mental institutions paradoxically opens up a space for female experiences that are denied by patriarchy at large. For example, the specifically gendered spaces of mental institutions allow women to explore their negative feelings associated with childbirth and motherhood, as well as female sexuality and female desire that transgress the heteronormative gender system. Counterintuitively, the mental institution in Coleman’s novel offers freedom from motherhood as well as sexual freedom. Feeling confined by the traditional female roles of childbirth and childrearing in the patriarchal culture at large, once in the institution, Coleman’s Marthe begins to question female sex roles. Marthe Gail gives the reader valuable insight into what it means to be mentally ill and confined in a mental institution. She shows the reader her double confinement: the physical and spatial confinement of the mental institution discussed in Chapter I as well as the symbolic confinement of motherhood, which is the focus of this chapter. The symbolic confinement of motherhood, then, is revealed in Marthe’s madness because it is a form of postpartum depression/psychosis.

In her autobiographical novel, Coleman tells us the story of what happens to Marthe after giving birth to her son. Coleman herself suffered from postpartum depression and had a mental breakdown after giving birth to her son, John. She was hospitalized in Rochester State Hospital in Rochester, NY, for two months in 1924 (Lee 117). Thus, *The Shutter of Snow* is a firsthand, yet fictionalized account of madness.
Carmen Callil and Mary Siepmann point out that Coleman’s novel was ahead of its time: “The Shutter of Snow expressed an understanding of the female condition, of the nature of madness and the reasons for it, delivered with a panache and skill well beyond the comprehension of the popular literary critics of the day.” At the time, reviews for Coleman’s novel were mixed, and it did not sell very well (Callil & Siepmann). While mental illness typically was not discussed at all in the 1920s, Coleman made madness the focus of her novel.

Emily Coleman seems to have understood instinctively, through her madness, the conflicts experienced by so many women in relation to the process of birth: the powerlessness of the female body in this condition, the mixture of love and hatred felt for husband and child by a woman defenseless in the face of its mysteries and agonies. Fathers, husbands, Doctors, God emerge as enormous figures in her mad world… (Callil & Siepmann)

As I will discuss throughout my chapter, while Coleman’s novel is set in a mental institution, it is also very much about the patriarchal culture at large. Chapter I dealt with male, disciplinary power within mental institutions. This chapter focuses on the representation of madness in Emily Holmes Coleman’s The Shutter of Snow as it illuminates and questions conventional gender roles in the 1920s. In Coleman’s work, madness also functions as a lens through which one can view society and its gender roles. Coleman’s Marthe offers a twofold critique. First, she critiques the patriarchal nature of Gorestown State Hospital, and, more broadly speaking, the disciplinary structure of the mental institution, as already discussed in Chapter I. Second, she critiques the patriarchal culture at large through the experience of postpartum psychosis, which I will focus on in this chapter. In offering this twofold critique of mental institutions and patriarchal culture at large, Coleman’s Marthe differs significantly from seemingly subversive Victorian madwomen.
In Victorian fiction, madness is often celebrated as being subversive (Caminero-Santangelo). Coleman does not celebrate madness; instead, Marthe’s madness functions as a lens through which the reader can see society. Coleman’s novel portrays the psychiatric hospital in detail and makes madness a primary focus of experience, while also offering a critical reflection on society.

Postpartum psychosis or depression stands in for the possible traumatic nature of giving birth, which is tied to the limiting (heteronormative) sex roles available to women in the 1920s. The experience of giving birth can be traumatic; however, this notion is not commonly talked about. *The Shutter of Snow* thus addresses the taboo of regarding childbirth as something potentially traumatic. In patriarchy at large, childbirth was a “normal” part of women’s lives. Coleman’s portrayal of childbirth as traumatic and potentially dangerous is a critique of society’s view of childbirth as “normal.” Coleman’s representation of childbirth in *The Shutter of Snow*, then, would possibly change how women felt about what patriarchal society expected from them.

It was certainly a taboo in the 1920s for women to see childbirth as traumatic, when their roles revolved around the home again. While many women had been employed in factories during World War I, they had to surrender their jobs to returning soldiers after the war (Showalter 196). Thus, “denied their work and coping with emotional loss, many women felt despair at the prospect of returning to shopworn roles and old routines” (196-197). The postwar period was marked by a resurgence of conservatism regarding gender roles (197). Thus, women were expected to return to being the (Victorian) “Angel in the House.” Childbirth and childrearing was an essential part of playing the role of “Angel in the House.” In the world outside of the mental institution, male and female spheres were clearly segregated; with men operating in the public sphere and women being confined to the private (Lunbeck 259). Women who saw psychiatrists
were often “deeply disappointed in their spouses as men” (264). Thus, women’s position in relation to their husbands’ was frequently one of subjugation. At the end of Coleman’s novel, it is clear that Marthe would return to such a position of subjugation, where she would be mother and housewife. Since patriarchy at large in certain ways seems more oppressive than the mental institution, *The Shutter of Snow* questions whether Marthe’s return to the patriarchal culture really is desirable to her release from the mental institution. In the mental institution, Marthe experiences different kinds of freedom: freedom from motherhood as well as sexual freedom. While the novel asks us to reflect on these alternatives, Coleman does not celebrate madness. Instead, she uses the experience of madness to critique the restrictions the “normal” patriarchal society places on women.

**Modernist Aesthetics as a Method of a Feminist Critique**

Performing a feminist critique of patriarchal society, Coleman uses modernist aesthetics to make her point. With its intensely subjective nature, *The Shutter of Snow* qualifies as a modernist text. Coleman’s text questions key concepts of the traditional novel such as form and linearity, which emphasizes that her text is modernist. However, Coleman’s novel also pushes the boundaries of some modernist characteristics such as the notion of an unreliable narrator. In *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Louis Sass has pointed out that modernist fiction lends itself well to the representation of mental illness, due to its quality of being difficult to understand, “by acute self-consciousness and self-reference, and by alienation from action and experience – qualities we might refer to as ‘hyperreflexivity’” (8). While I have used the term “novel” in relation to *The Shutter of Snow*, Coleman’s work challenges the conventions of the genre. *The Shutter of Snow* is clearly unconventional in terms of its (loss of) form and lack of a cohesive plot. The loss of form is
reflected in the narrative voice. The absence of linearity reflects the protagonist’s state of mind: The narration is obviously fragmented, constantly shifting from a third-person to a first-person point of view. Narration and direct speech are not clearly segregated by punctuation; the third-person narrator’s voice thus mingles with Marthe’s: “It was cold and she shivered under the blankets… [S]he would be wrapped in the hot blanket very tightly and the covers tucked in over that. My feet are cold. Her throat was always hot, like old bread in the sun” (3). Marthe’s mental illness shows in the way *The Shutter of Snow* is written; the narrator frequently jumps between thoughts and events. Just as the narration is erratic, the reader is also very much aware of the fact that Marthe is delusional, for she considers herself to be Christ: “I am Jesus Christ she said” (10). Coleman does not offer the reader a mere story about madness; instead, she draws the reader in to experience madness up close through the text’s loss of form. The reader is denied any grounding in “normal” lines of thought and action because the narration meanders between different scenes and thoughts, shifting perspectives and ideas constantly. Hence, the whole novel does not give the reader a cohesive plot with any grounding; instead, the narration shifts with Marthe’s awareness of her surroundings and fleeting memories of her past, especially the experience of childbirth. As I will discuss later, instead of being cohesive, the narrative point of view is indicative of trauma and fragmentation.

Coleman’s novel is unconventional in another way: *The Shutter of Snow* challenges the notion of an unreliable narrator and thus even pushes the boundaries of what is considered modernist. The notion of an unreliable narrator is one possible characteristic of modernist fiction. Typically, a reader would consider a narrator who is severely mentally ill and delusional unreliable. However, Marthe rationalizes everything that is happening to her and around her. Her
comments are remarkably sharp and make sense to the “sane” reader. For example, Marthe thinks everyone has conspired against her:

She did not know where this was. It wasn’t the Gorestown State Hospital. She knew that was to fool her, she could see through these stupidities. They didn’t know her mind was new and brilliantly lighted. G S H on all the sheets and blankets. They had not forgotten one. They were clever these people but she knew. (9)

Even though they might appear delusional, Marthe’s thoughts work according to a kind of logic. She is confined in a cell, without really knowing how she got there. As she tries to make sense of her situation, she assumes that it would be too easy to believe what is in front of her. Trying to assess her situation, her mind questions what the nurses and the evidence that is put in front of her tell her. Even though she sees “G S H” on the sheets and blankets, she knows that those in power in the patriarchal system (i.e. in the institution, doctors and nurses) might deceive her: In her madness, she realizes the “truth” that she is powerless and at the mercy of those who assume power. She is aware of the fact that those in power might abuse it to remain in power. She refers to what she suspects to be a deception as a “stupidity,” which her “new and brilliantly lighted” brain sees through.

Coleman’s fiction, thus, can be considered as part of a new literature that emerged after World War I. Some of her other work was published in the journal transition. Eugene Jolas, one of the editors of transition, described the journal as “‘a proving ground for the new literature.’ This new literature would require ‘new words, new abstractions, new hieroglyphics, new symbols, new myths. It is the artist’s search for magic in this strange world about us that transition desires to encourage’” (Callil & Siepmann). This “new literature” Jolas referred to is the literature of modernism, which reflects the emerging complexities of the modern world in
new ways, such as the loss of form, stream of consciousness, and an emphasis on subjectivity. As Sass has pointed out, all of these features of modernist fiction lend themselves well to a representation of madness. Modernist fiction, then, can offer the reader an insider’s perspective of madness. Critics like Showalter have theorized madness as a uniquely female malady, which typically plays out in a patriarchal mental institution in a patriarchal society. Modernism’s madwomen and their “new literature” offer a unique perspective because they have insight into the confines of both mental institutions and patriarchal culture at large. Jolas’ definition of this “new literature” certainly also applies to The Shutter of Snow, as Coleman constantly challenges the conventional use of words, form, lines of thought and invokes new images (especially the image of snow that occurs throughout the novel). The image of snow recurs throughout the novel and creates an atmosphere which on the one hand is cold and icy and on the other hand invokes a sense of freedom which Marthe yearns for. In the first scene, Marthe realizes that she is confined in a cell, when she also “could hear the wind sliding the snow off the roof. An avalanche of snow gathered and fell and buried the sun beneath” (3). Marthe thinks about the outside of the mental institution. As the snow buries the sun, it becomes cold and dark, for the sun has the positive connotations of warmth and light. When Marthe thinks about the snow, she thinks about escaping the confines of the institution and moving around freely: “The only thing to do is to put hammers in the porridge and when there are enough hammers we shall break down the windows and all of us shall dance in the snow” (8). The snow symbolizes free movement, as Marthe imagines dancing in it. A flurry of snowflakes also moves around freely; only the wind blows them in a certain direction. As I will discuss later, functioning as a space for a feminist critique, the mental institution facilitates Marthe’s sexual awakening and freedom. However, first, I will
look at normative sex roles and the trauma of childbirth, which is at the center of Coleman’s novel.

Normative Sex Roles and the Trauma of Childbirth

The patriarchal society at large in modern America assigns women the place of housewife and mother. As illustrated by the experience of giving birth in Coleman’s novel, these “normal” experiences can be traumatic. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. … The pathology consists … solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (4-5)

Thus, a trauma is a strong reaction to a specific event, which takes hold of the person experiencing the trauma. The traumatic event is so powerful that it causes repetitive dreams, thoughts, and behaviors, making the traumatized more sensitive to stimuli that trigger memories of the event. The traumatic event, then, takes possession of the traumatized. This traumatic event, however, has been defined by the American Psychiatric Association as “first and foremost, *an event outside the range of human experience*” (Brown 100). According to this definition, an event has to be unusual to classify as traumatic. In her feminist approach to trauma, Laura Brown points out that the American Psychiatric Association’s definition is gendered, as
the “range of human experience” only includes white, young, fit, middle-class, Christian males with an education (101). Rather than limiting the definition of trauma in this way, she suggests a feminist analysis that asks us to look beyond the public (and male) experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter (102). While Brown here refers to the traumatic experience of incest, I contend that we should also take into consideration other experiences that might not commonly be regarded as traumatic or “outside the range of human experience,” such as the experience of childbirth.

In relating the post-partum psychosis of Marthe Gail, Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow* asks us to reconsider what trauma means. Coleman’s text itself can be seen as a feminist approach to trauma, similar to Brown’s, as Coleman reveals that trauma and psychosis follow Marthe’s experience of childbirth. *The Shutter of Snow* artistically shows that “normal” events can be traumatic. The references to Marthe’s baby are scattered across the novel. These flashes and snapshots of Marthe’s mind are the only means for the reader to learn about her baby and the event of childbirth. Marthe never tells the reader a neat and complete story about giving birth. Instead, the reader learns bits and pieces over the course of the novel. The scattering of snapshots creates a sense of fragmentation which, in turn, represents the trauma Marthe is experiencing.

In Coleman’s novel, trauma manifests itself through flashbacks; therefore, the narrative itself is indicative of trauma. Flashbacks to the event of childbirth or her baby usually occur when something in her environment suddenly reminds Marthe of her child. Along with Caruth’s notion of trauma, Marthe is sensitive to stimuli that recall the traumatic event of childbirth. She is reminded of her baby by mention of Mary Soulier’s dead puppies:

They wept the puppies in unison. Marthe … turned to the opposite wall and poured forth in bitterness and weeping. Christopher, Christopher was in the ground with never a touch
of her lips to his hand... The baby was with him hidden close in the grave clothes. The little white baby with quiet eyes that would not take of her milk. (7)

Marthe’s weeping shifts from weeping for the dead puppies to weeping for her presumably dead husband and child. The dead puppies functioned as the stimuli that recalled the traumatic event. This scene helps the reader understand the effects of Marthe’s trauma through the disruption of the text. The narrative voice mirrors Marthe’s hurried and confused state of mind: Marthe first mentions that Mary Soulier is in the room. Next, she mentions Mary’s dead puppies, which triggers the memory of her child, which is left as suddenly as it first occurred. The text abruptly ends here and moves on to a different scene, taking place in the afternoon of the same day. This abrupt shift is significant because it shows that Marthe is unable to go fully back to the memory of childbirth.

Nevertheless, Marthe is obsessed with the image of her child. Caruth’s definition of trauma contends that the traumatic event possesses the traumatized. The event that triggered the trauma thus has a hold on the traumatized. Marthe’s possession by the experience of giving birth to her son manifests itself in different ways in the novel. Unable to access her own baby, she imagines a doll and someone else’s baby to be hers. While she is traumatized by the event of childbirth, she also appears possessive regarding her child. In another scene, which is also left suddenly and without any explanations, a dummy stirs Marthe’s memory: “Mary… was holding a doll. It was a towel and a ribbon. Marthe cried give him to me its my baby… Give him to me hes mine” (11). The similarity between the “doll” and Marthe’s baby creates her wish to snatch the baby as fast as she can. This scene happens again in a similar way later in the novel, when she tries to snatch a baby from a visitor: “Let me have him he is mine!” (54). In her wish to have her baby back, Marthe tries to reclaim it by calling a doll and another baby hers. This act of
trying to reclaim her baby shows first, how deeply traumatized Marthe is, and, second, that she is trying to be a “good” mother and care for her child. Marthe also bemoans that her baby has been taken or is being withheld from her (16; 88) and expresses the wish to see her baby (11; 26; 54). Her acts of mothering can be read as attempts to conform with heteronormative gender roles. Thus, Marthe vacillates between expressing her ambivalent feelings about maternity and childbirth as revealed through her trauma and a desire to have and to hold the child taken from her.

In this sense, the mental institution offers Marthe a space to express her ambivalent feelings about motherhood and childbirth. While the psychiatric hospital physically confines Marthe, as discussed in Chapter I, it also allows her to explore her confinement in “normal” society. The traumatic nature of childbirth displayed in The Shutter of Snow signifies pregnancy and childbirth as confinement. Since it is not socially acceptable to voice concerns regarding motherhood and childbirth, Coleman’s novel serves as a feminist critique of “normal” female sex roles. As the mental institution is at the margins of society, it is a relatively “safe” space for exploring a feminist critique. The feminist critique of Coleman’s novel, then, is conveyed through the notion of trauma.

While Marthe mentions her baby several times, she does not provide the reader with a clear picture of the event of childbirth; she seems to be unable to go back to the event itself. Instead, the reader gets glimpses of the event when Marthe tries to return, in her mind, to the event. This attempt to return to the event of childbirth can be read as the repetition compulsion Freud describes in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In his narrative on the death drive, Freud explains the compulsion to return mentally to the event that triggered the trauma: “He [the patient] is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of …
remembering it as something belonging to the past” (19; emphasis in original). Freud ascribes the repetition compulsion to the “unconscious repressed” (20). While the unconscious repressed tries to return to the traumatic event, the ego tries to resist the power of the repressed: “it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed” (21). In The Shutter of Snow, Marthe Gail’s unconscious tries to go back to the trauma of childbirth, and yet cannot seem to do so.

Marthe’s unconscious also connects childbirth with the notion of death, suggesting that childbirth in some ways ends a woman’s life. Marthe asserts several times that her baby is dead (7; 65; 78; 80; 102). This insistence of her child’s death could be interpreted as the expression of an unconscious wish. It is indicative of Marthe’s wish to be free from mothering and stands in opposition to her wish to care for her child. Thus, Marthe is conflicted between what society wants her to do (i.e. mothering) and what she wants for herself (i.e. freedom from mothering). While Marthe emphasizes that her child is dead, she also invokes images of her own death. At the beginning of the novel, Marthe suggests the private and personal nature of her experience, asking: “How can they expect her to sleep when she was going through all of it? They didn’t (sic) know” (5). Her experience is inaccessible to others and impossible to utter. In the same scene, she imagines her own death and burial:

There had been the burial. She was lying quietly in the bed and being covered over her face. She was carried quietly out and put in the casket. Down, down she went in the rectangle that had been made for her. Down and the dirt fell in above. Down and the worms began to tremble in and out. (5)

Her hallucination about her own death shows what the birth of her child means to Marthe: it quite literally ends her life as it used to be.
Besides being connected to childbirth, the image of Marthe’s death also recalls the notion of madness through the image of Ophelia. Ophelia has embodied the intersection of madness and death in numerous works of art. Showalter points out that “[t]he English Pre-Rafaelites returned again and again to the subject of the drowning Ophelia” (90). The image was also very popular in association with women in Victorian asylums: “Ophelia became the prototype not only of the deranged woman in Victorian literature and art but also of the young female asylum patient” (90). Ophelia is a Shakespearean figure from the play “Hamlet,” in which the young woman dies of drowning. Her death was a suicide. Ophelia thus signifies both death and madness. The image of Ophelia befits the portrayal of Marthe’s situation quite well: After giving birth to her son, she hallucinates about her own death, which occurs within the confines of a mental institution.

Marthe’s imaginative depiction of her own death portrays childbirth in a very negative way, as it is the cause not only for madness but also for her death (and/or suicide). The trauma of childbirth is so overwhelming that Marthe loses her sanity and, figuratively, her life. Since the event of childbirth triggers Marthe’s madness and the image of death, it functions as a harsh critique of the social expectations of women’s roles at the time of the novel’s publication.

In the sense that childbirth symbolizes the end of her own life, Marthe can be considered a “bad” mother, to borrow a term from Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umanski. Ladd-Taylor and Umanski point out that “mother-blaming” (2) has been a quite common practice in twentieth-century American culture. Women termed “bad” mothers have typically come from three different groups: mothers who lived outside of the nuclear family where the father works and the mother stays home; mothers who were unable to protect their offspring from harm; and mothers whose children became homosexual, delinquent, and/or dependant on welfare (3-5). Marthe fits in the second group of “bad” mothers revealed by Ladd-Taylor and Umanski. Since she
unconsciously wishes for her child’s death, she is actually worse than the “bad” mothers of the group of women who are unable to protect their offspring from harm. Marthe thus clearly defies societal expectations of mothering in early twentieth-century America. Women were expected to be mothers first and foremost; they were not expected to have the wish for a life (and career) of their own. To Marthe, giving birth to her son signifies the end of her freedom, as can be seen in the image of her own death discussed above.

As Podnieks reveals in her essay “‘The One True Thing in My Life’: Mother-Son Relations in the Art and Life of Emily Coleman,” Coleman herself could be considered a “bad” mother. According to Podnieks, Coleman herself belonged to “a group of women we might call the ‘bad’ mothers of modernism … who oftentimes privileged themselves over their offspring” (259). Coleman gave her only son John away so she could spend all of her time writing. Podnieks realizes that Coleman “‘subverted’ and ‘reinvented’ traditional concepts of mothering” (260): She disappeared from her son’s life for periods of time but at the same time provided him with another set of parents (260). While this unique relationship certainly challenges conventional notions of mother-son relationships, Podnieks also emphasizes that Coleman and her son were close. Coleman’s Marthe and Coleman herself ask us to reconsider preconceived notions of mothering. Blurring the lines of fiction and reality, Coleman suggests that women might not want to mother.

Coleman’s short story “Interlude” is even more explicit in its rejection of motherhood. The event of childbirth and motherhood can be seen as a literal imprisonment: “She swayed in the bed and clutched the bars. She pulled viciously at them” (91). Mrs. Temple, the main character of the story, is imprisoned in her bed and wants to break free. The hospitals deal with childbirth very efficiently: “Deliveries every half hour” (93). And yet what Amy Lee calls the
“free-floating subjective voice” (129) points out that giving birth is still painful (Coleman, “Interlude,” 93). Mrs. Temple also does not want to “die ignobly in childbirth” (93), voicing the risks related to childbirth. The pain of childbirth suggested by Coleman’s short story is rarely acknowledged in society. Lee points out that “our culture has put mothering, motherhood, and womanhood together as the accepted mainstream experience of the female, and this lumping together of what is essentially separate identities subjects women to an unfair stereotype of weakness” (128). The title “Interlude” seems to imply that what is happening in the story is insignificant. Coleman’s short story, however, suggests the opposite: that the experience of childbirth is painful and risky for a mother, and also certainly meant the end of her independence. After giving birth to her little boy, Mrs. Temple declares: “Never again anything like this” (94). She rejects her baby and cries (94). Coleman’s texts make the reader look beyond the ordinary; they reveal the “common” experience of childbirth as traumatic. With both her novel and her short story, Coleman asks us to reconsider the gender roles typically assigned to women. It is considered “normal” that women risk their mental and physical health to fulfill their roles as dutiful wives and mothers. Coleman’s fiction critiques the oppressive nature of patriarchal culture at large, which restricts women to the private sphere. Narrating women’s experiences of childbirth and motherhood, Coleman’s novel and short story offer a feminist critique of the limiting gender roles patriarchy assigns women. The mental institution, then, opens up a space for female experiences that patriarchy denies women.

The Mental Institution as a Site of Sexual Awakening

While the patriarchal culture at large expects women to be mothers with heterosexual marital relationships, the mental institution interestingly facilitates Marthe’s (homo)sexual awakening. Within the confines of the authoritarian, patriarchal mental institution, Marthe finds
a unique female space that does not exist as such in the patriarchal culture at large. The women share their intimate space; they eat together, sing together, and take baths together. The female ward in the Gorestown State Hospital is a women’s space, which facilitates Marthe’s sexual awakening. This sexual awakening at the same time allows Marthe to transgress the patriarchal, heteronormative rule of the mental institution. Hence, I argue that Marthe has sexual agency. This claim complicates Caminero-Santangelo’s notion that madness is not subversive. According to Caminero-Santangelo, madness only offers the illusion of power; the madwoman does not actually have any agency. While I agree that madness should not be celebrated, The Shutter of Snow suggests that women have sexual agency in the mental institution. Ironically, Marthe has more (sexual) agency in the mental institution than in the patriarchal culture at large.

The narrator reveals Marthe’s sexual agency through the metaphor of the garden. In Coleman’s novel, the garden is a metaphor for sexual freedom. In a very erotic scene, which occurs just after Marthe has first met Anabel Neuman, another patient of the Gorestown State Hospital, Marthe touches a flower and licks its petals, stating: “This was her garden again the one she had had before the baby was born” (49). The image of the garden has erotic properties; it can be associated with fertile ground. Fertility, then, implies the possibility of reproduction. A garden can also be associated with the notion of freedom. A garden is hard to control, as it follows the laws of nature. Flowers and plants develop and multiply with the seasons. Flower seeds can be blown far, far away with the wind. Thus, the image of garden invokes the notion of almost limitless freedom. Since Marthe suggests that with childbirth the garden has disappeared, childbirth signifies the destruction of whatever sexual freedom Marthe might have had before motherhood. Giving birth to her son means that patriarchy requires her to fulfill her role of motherhood. In Marthe’s case, the birth of her child symbolizes the end of her (sexual) freedom
as well as her death, a loss of a sense of self. In the novel, same-sex desire offers a route to regain that lost sense of self.

After childbirth has destroyed her “garden,” Marthe finds a different “garden” in exploring her attraction to other women within the walls of the psychiatric hospital. Her first encounter with Anabel deeply impresses her:

A brilliant Jewess came out of one of the rooms… Her hair was worn down her back, soft and springing. She had a wide yellow ribbon about her head tied on top in a great bow. Her cheeks were scarlet bosoms. Her deep sprung eyes looked out from strong black brows. Who is that, who is that? I’ll introduce you, said Mrs. Glope. Her name was Anabel Neuman. She presented to Marthe a smile that streamed over white rocks. I have to sit and look at her said Marthe. They sat down together and Anabel was pleased. (48)

Marthe desires Anabel: she is eager to learn about her and wants to indulge in looking at her. Anabel is the exotic Other for Marthe, as the narrative voice describes her as the “brilliant Jewess.” In a later scene, both of them undress before the whole ward, even though Marthe has a room of her own. Marthe and Anabel are enticed by each other’s bodies. Marthe’s fascination shows when she describes the naked Anabel: “She had a sensuous soft body warm with life” (51). Similarly, when Marthe stands undressed, “without embarrassment small and white” (51), Anabel says: “Your body is like a shoot of spring through muddy ground” (51). As the comparison of Marthe’s body to “a shoot of spring” suggests, the imagery of the garden becomes a metaphor for fertility/female reproduction that is not tied to maternity and heterosexual marriage. The imagery of the garden in some idiomatic expressions refers to the sex organs. In colloquial terms, a woman signifies the passive yet fertile ground which a man “plows” or “plants” his “seed” in. This garden in *The Shutter of Snow* is different: It will not bear fruit, as
the purpose of sex is pleasure, not procreation. In fact, Marthe’s sexual awakening and attraction to Anabel completely eradicates the possibility of procreation. This garden is a garden of pure pleasure. Marthe and Anabel find a space to pursue their same-sex desire within the otherwise rigid structure and confinement of the psychiatric hospital. In a strange sense, the female ward is a relatively safe space for them to explore their sexual desires.

Their public display of same-sex desire does not only show their attraction to each other, it also offers a critique of and rebellion against patriarchal confinement in the home and in the psychiatric hospital. Miss Wade, a nurse who obeys the patriarchal structures in the psychiatric hospital, is opposed to the public display of their nudity: “Why are you undressing out here? said Miss Wade, have you no decency at all standing there naked like that? Don't you know any better, go to your room immediately and take your clothes” (51). While the staff of the Gorestown State Hospital clearly does not support patients’ female sexuality in general and lesbian tendencies in specific, the exploration of same-sex desire functions as a rebellion against the patriarchal institution. Developing strong female bonds and exploring same-sex desire would not be possible in the patriarchal culture at large as “easily” as in the mental institution because in patriarchal society, relationships by default were heterosexual. In the heteronormative patriarchal culture, same-sex desire does not have any room. Further, patriarchal culture is a space where men and women (and their children) live together, rather than women amongst themselves. Hence, the female ward in the mental institution is a unique space, which brings women closer together. While the mental institution is a microcosm for the patriarchy at large, it also provides a space where women bond exclusively with other women.

Other examples of female desire in The Shutter of Snow emphasize the notion that the mental institution can function as a space for strong emotional connections. These emotional
connections challenge conventional relationships in patriarchy at large because emotional bonding, just like sexual bonding, is supposed to occur first and foremost in heterosexual relationships. Marthe is quite taken by Mary Soulier, another female patient. Marthe remarks several times that Mary is beautiful (8; 11). Furthermore, Mary appears like an angel whereas the other patients are fiends: “Mary with calm lovely face looking at her from the demons that stood around with inept towels” (8). In Marthe’s description, the beautiful Mary stands apart from the “grotesque” (8) female bodies of the other women. Marthe’s portrayal of Mary is not primarily sexual; instead, Mary has a calming effect on Marthe. While the reader learns Mary’s name, Marthe only identifies body parts of the unnamed women: “All of them with breasts that did not fit, and rotting elbows. Toenails and trailing hair” (8). Later in the novel, Mary puts her arms around Marthe (38), and when Marthe visits Mary in the Strong Room, Mary will not let her go (112). Marthe and Mary’s relationship is indicative of a tender bond of emotional connection. This connection suggests that the mental institution offers women a space in which they can connect with other women in different ways, sexually and emotionally.

Same-sex desire does not constitute a new norm in The Shutter of Snow. Instead, same-sex desire challenges binary categories we typically use to define people, things, and concepts. Challenging these categories, Coleman’s novel critiques the norms of the patriarchal and heteronormative society. In her chapter in Hayford Hall: Hangovers, Erotics, and Modernist Aesthetics, Julie Vandivere is concerned with the “framed liminality” (46), the borderland space which blurs binary oppositions such as reality/imagination, conventions/freedom, heterosexuality/homosexuality, life/art. In her text, Vandivere looks at both the relationships between the four women of the Hayford Hall circle and the linguistic constructions of two of the women, Antonia White and Emily Coleman. On the one hand, she reveals the complex nature of
the relationships between Peggy Guggenheim, Emily Coleman, Djuna Barnes, and Antonia White: the sexual tensions, love, jealousy, as well as intellectual challenges and artistic attractions. On the other hand, she points out that White and Coleman’s novels “go on to use this space of framed liminality to explore the relationships between inside and outside, between permeability and containment, in the construction of female subjectivity” (49). Both aspects of Vandivere’s argument can be helpful in understanding Marthe’s exploration of her sexuality and same-sex desire within the closed space of the psychiatric hospital better. *The Shutter of Snow* illustrates the complexity of female-female relationships. The female space of the mental institution permits women to explore their feelings towards other women in a much more intense way than patriarchy at large would ever allow. Women’s complex relationships also challenge binary categories in several ways. First, conventional definitions of friends and lovers are challenged through the blurring of the differences between the two. Second, through these intense female-female relationships, the patriarchal space of the mental institution loses some of its rigidity. Hence, in Coleman’s novel, binary categories lose some of their definitive power. Marthe pursues her same-sex desire outside the boundaries of her marriage, yet in a patriarchal, conventional context. This patriarchal context is generally seen as denying women their sense of self. It is also heteronormative, denying women the capacity to express female to female desire. Marthe’s same-sex desire on her way to reclaiming her self therefore challenges and blurs the categories of conventions/freedom and heterosexuality/homosexuality. While Marthe’s sexual awakening can be seen as a moment of freedom, she experiences this moment within the confines of the mental institution. Blurring these binary categories, Coleman’s novel questions the validity and existence of such “normal” thinking.
The end of the novel asks us whether recovery is really desirable. If the mental institution truly were liberating in some ways, would anyone (including Marthe herself) wish for Marthe’s return to society? And what does it mean to fully “recover”? The end of the novel does not stage Marthe’s release from the Gorestown State Hospital but rather leaves her waiting for release. Dr. Brainerd tells Marthe that she can go “tomorrow” (124); the narrative, however, does not contain a “tomorrow.” The text is disrupted by the image of snow, which also covers the text throughout the novel. Standing alone at her window, Marthe states: “I shall have snow on my glassy fingers she said, and a shutter of snow on my grave tonight” (124). This rather cryptic utterance implies that Marthe is concerned with the idea that she is dead, which brings back the notion that giving birth has ended her life. Her “grave” might refer to her gender roles of wife and mother, to which she would return were she released. As it is not clear whether Marthe leaves the Gorestown State Hospital, the reader is left wondering where Marthe might be better off: in a society that assigns her the limiting roles of mother and dutiful wife, or in a psychiatric hospital, where she might find ways to transgress the borders of what is acceptable and what is not. While according to Valentine “the asylum is retained in The Shutter of Snow as the site for staging recovery” (193), I would argue that full recovery seems questionable. However, the mental institution allows Marthe to explore her conflicting feelings about motherhood as well as her female to female desire. Through Marthe’s experience of madness and the trauma of “normal” female experiences like childbirth, Coleman’s novel offers a feminist critique of patriarchy at large and the limiting gender roles it assigns women.
CHAPTER III. FANTASTIC IMAGINATIONS: MADNESS, MODERNIST AESTHETICS, AND AGENCY IN ANTONIA WHITE’S BEYOND THE GLASS

Like Coleman’s Marthe, Antonia White’s Clara critiques the mental institution on the grounds of its inhumane treatment of its patients. As many critics have pointed out, mental hospitals have historically mistreated patients. I argue that, for women especially, mental hospitals have represented an exacerbated version of the constraints associated with patriarchy in the “real” world. And yet, it seems that, paradoxically, these institutions have provided forms of agency that the culture at large refuses. While White’s novel critiques the disciplinary structure of the mental institution, I contend that the novel also reveals the institution to be a respite from patriarchal constructions of motherhood; a respite to which its protagonist wishes to return after her release. In this chapter, I will analyze moments in the novel that demonstrate the protagonist’s agency. These moments of agency reveal that, contrary to patriarchy at large, the institutional space affords Clara an outlet for imaginative expression. Through the novel’s emphasis on interiority, the reader gains insight into Clara’s thoughts and fantasies. These fantasies allow for transformation and multiple selves. Clara’s interior state of mind is the central focus of the section of the protagonist’s hospitalization. The notions of interiority and multiplicity/multiple perspectives, then, are modernist. Even though White’s novel was published after World War II, it can be considered modernist. I argue that the modernist aesthetics of White’s novel are central to communicating madness and an enhanced, critical understanding of the patriarchal culture at large.

**Madness as a Critique of the Patriarchal Culture**

*The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* are linked through their portrayal of a heteronormative society, female gender roles and the notion of childbirth. As discussed in
Chapter II, Coleman’s novel challenges heteronormativity and female gender roles, suggesting that the experience of childbirth can be traumatic. In *Beyond the Glass*, after having experienced a disastrous marriage, protagonist Clara Batchelor moves back in with her loving but strict parents. She begins an intense love affair, during the course of which she becomes mentally ill and is hospitalized in Nazareth Royal Hospital. She remains in the mental institution for “[a] long time… Many, many months” (254), nine months, to be precise, before she surprisingly recovers. It is significant that Clara’s illness has the length of a pregnancy. The consequences of the love affair were not a child but were just as life changing. Making Clara’s hospitalization follow her love affair and mirror the period of gestation, White suggests that madness is the result of female sexuality and/or reproduction. Clara’s mental illness, then, seems to be a commentary on gestation, whereas her mental illness and the following recovery could be seen as a (re)birth. Clara’s confinement in the mental institution mirrors the confinement of motherhood. Her stay in the institution can be seen as a metaphor for the constraints of female gender roles.

Clara’s rebirth, then, signifies the birth of a new, creative, more autonomous, and socially critical self. This new sense of self is connected to Clara’s realization that the mental institution might offer her more freedom than patriarchal society. Her new self and the awareness of freedom are also tied to her visions of transformation/multiple selves, which define moments in the institution in which she experiences agency. Agency and the creative imagination in White’s novel, then, are closely intertwined with the modernist aesthetics of the text because the narrative of madness emphasizes interiority, transformation, and multiple selves, which are all characteristics that can be considered modernist. In her visions, Clara experiences the freedom she yearns for after her release from the institution. Clara’s experience of madness endows her
with a creative gift, which offers her some kind of second sight. This second sight, which comes with agency and more autonomy, as well as creative imagination, is the key to Clara’s new sense of self. With all its attributes, second sight fits well with a modernist narrative. Interestingly, the narrative of madness in White’s novel differs significantly from the rest of the text because it breaks with the realist perspective that the rest of the narration offers. The notion of second sight also implies that Clara has become more critical of patriarchy. Hence, White’s novel is also political at its core, revealing and critiquing the limiting gender roles patriarchy assigns women. While *Beyond the Glass* is a modernist novel about the experience of being mad and institutionalized, it is also very much about patriarchal culture and conventional gender roles in general.9

Clara’s confinement in the mental institution mirrors the confinement of motherhood, as Clara is hospitalized for the period of gestation. The notion of gestation implies the motherhood that might have been. Clara does not, however, give birth to a baby; instead, she is reborn with some kind of second sight as she is released. While the combination of Clara’s period of confinement and the period of gestation could be a coincidence, its pairing with conventional female gender roles render it a critique of the patriarchal culture. The traumatizing and confining mental institution is a place that Clara wishes to return to. Thus, I argue that ultimately, the novel is a critique of female role expectations. As I have pointed out in the introduction, the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House was closely related to hysteria in both Britain and America. According to Showalter, the notion of the Angel in the House had a resurgence after World War I, when women had to leave the jobs they had held throughout the war to returning soldiers. Claude Batchelor, Clara’s father, illustrates the notion of seriousness that is attached to female gender roles. Clara feels an “old terror of her father’s disapproval” (White, *Beyond* 46) when she
remembers how her father had scolded her for letting a distant cousin kiss her. When Clara tells him later that she had dinner with Clive Heron, her father stops walking immediately and asks her in an appalled manner: “You dined alone in a man’s rooms?” (110). Thus, in the 1920s, a woman could only be alone with a man if she were married to him. Women were expected to be good wives and mothers. In some ways, Clara experiences more freedom in the mental institution than in the patriarchal culture at large and under her Catholic father’s watchful eyes.

Ultimately, Beyond the Glass, like The Shutter of Snow, offers a critique of the restraints of the patriarchal culture at large, suggesting that the mental institution offers more freedom to women. Towards the end of the novel, Clara realizes that “she no longer belonged to the world beyond the glass” (271). While Clara is joyful to be with her family again, “[t]here [are] moments when she almost wished she did [belong to the world beyond the glass]” (271). Clara is somewhat fascinated with this world: “Beyond the glass, however agonising the nightmare experiences, they had had a peculiar intensity. If some had been terrifying, others had been exquisite… Here, for all the kindness and love about her, she felt frustrated and only half alive” (271; emphasis added). The peculiar intensity of the mental institution stimulated Clara’s imagination, which is reflected in the animal metaphors. I will discuss these in detail in the section on modernist aesthetics. It is relevant that the mental institution allowed her the freedom to express herself, whereas patriarchal culture denies this to her. Clara cannot mention her hospitalization to her family: “Whenever she tried to tell them about anything that happened there, they looked so pained that she had to give it up” (271). The experience of mental illness seems to be worse for the family than the mentally ill person. While her family cannot bear to think about it, Clara thinks often about the time she spent beyond the glass. The fact that there
are moments when Clara wishes to be back in Nazareth Royal Hospital reveals much about the patriarchal culture she has returned to.

Clara’s rebirth after her nine-month confinement endows her with a highly perceptive and critical kind of second sight, which allows her to know both worlds (i.e. the world beyond the glass and the “normal” world), and, therefore, see the shortcomings of patriarchal society. Nazareth Royal Hospital strikes Clara as a very peculiar place. In her imagination, she finds herself in a world beyond the (looking-)glass: “[A] bright idea struck her. Why had she never realised it before? She was in Looking-Glass-Land. Of course everything was peculiar. Of course time behaved in this extraordinary way” (233). Further, she thinks that she has gone through the looking glass, just “like Alice Through the Looking-Glass” (233). Invoking Lewis Carroll’s Alice, Clara seeks a return to childhood innocence before puberty and sex. The imagery of glass is indicative of the significant differences between the “normal” world and the world “beyond the glass.” While one can see through glass, it is still an object that divides. The glass separates both worlds; it is extremely difficult to move between them. Only mentally ill people know the difference between the worlds–because the world beyond the glass can only be known if the boundary has been crossed. Thus, mental illness is a requirement to know the world beyond the glass. Once there, it is also difficult and somewhat unlikely to leave the world beyond the glass. Clara’s rebirth signifies that she leaves the world beyond the glass; however, her mental illness provides her with a highly reflective and critical kind of second sight, which allows her to see right at the heart of things. Having been beyond the glass has sharpened Clara’s sense of all the wrongs women face in the patriarchal society.
Modernist Aesthetics, Metamorphosis, and Agency

In *Beyond the Glass*, madness reveals itself in the narration in several ways. In some passages the text is hard to understand, as it reflects the mad protagonist’s subjective perspective. The fragmented narrative/syntax reflects her disturbed state of mind as well as the notion of trauma. Clara’s subjective perspective is sometimes fraught with gaps in the narration; however, she also has visions of transformation into multiple selves. These characteristics of White’s narrative signify some characteristics that have been identified as modernist. In *Beyond the Glass*, modernist aesthetics are thus central to communicating madness and an enhanced understanding of patriarchal culture.

Clara’s visionary way of moving through the world when she is mad is a critique of all that is habitual and effortless. For women, the habitual and effortless are especially fraught with negative connotations because of the mundane nature of domestic labor that is part of women’s gender roles. Clara’s visions and metamorphoses move her beyond the mundane life patriarchal society has assigned her. Through her fantastic imaginations, Clara gains a sense of heightened mental awareness and what Louis Sass calls “hyperreflexivity,” which endows her with agency. This notion of hyperreflexivity, then, is key to White’s text. Hyperreflexivity with regard to White’s novel means that the modernist aesthetics of the novel reflect the protagonist’s mental illness, but also that the protagonist herself is in a state of heightened mental awareness and has the capacity to critically reflect on her surroundings.

The way the novel is narrated shows some similarities to how Sass Portrays modern art. In his book *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Sass discusses modernism in relation to madness. He states:
Modernist art has been said to manifest certain off-putting characteristics that are reminiscent of schizophrenia: a quality of being hard to understand or feel one’s way into … The relevant aspects of such art are, however, antithetical to notions of primitivity and of deficit or defect, for these art forms are characterized … by acute self-consciousness and self-reference, and by alienation from action and experience - qualities we might refer to as “hyperreflexivity.” (8)

According to Sass, modernist texts might be hard to understand. While these texts are only seemingly deficient, they are in fact highly complex and indicate what Sass refers to as “hyperreflexivity.” To the reader, Clara’s experience leading up to and the actual experience of madness are sometimes hard to understand. The hallucinatory prose, which reflects Clara’s own hallucinatory state, marks the novel as modernist in its aesthetic even though it was published post World War II, closely intertwining madness and modernism. More importantly, however, the hyperreflexivity of Beyond the Glass implies metacognition and a heightened sense of interiority, thus emphasizing one of the characteristics of modernism. The emphasis on Clara’s interior state of mind is a sign of hyperreflexivity and also links madness and modernism intricately. In White’s novel, modernist aesthetics such as the intensely subjective perspective and hallucinatory prose are the artistic expression of madness. Clara drifts between dreams and dim awareness of her surroundings: She imagines herself to be a horse and other animals, then becomes her lover Richard, “endlessly climbing up the steps of a dark tower by the sea, knowing that she herself was imprisoned at the top” (213). As she approaches herself in the form of her lover, Clara’s metamorphosis into Richard is an indication of female (auto)eroticism. Clara “endlessly climbing up” the tower as Richard invokes the image of a climax, suggesting sex for pleasure (instead of reproduction). While Clara’s metamorphosis is seemingly delusional, her
transformation is also a sign of the protagonist’s hyperreflexivity. The metaphor suggests Clara’s intense consciousness of herself as a desirable subject, both for herself and her lover. Clara’s sense of herself as a sexual being, then, is one of her new selves she discovers in the mental institution.

In another scene, Clara metamorphoses into other, different personae. Clara’s fantastic transformations are an essential part of her rebirth. Before she is finally reborn as a new, creative, more autonomous, and socially critical self, Clara has to transform into various other selves, some of which stay with her, others of which are discarded. When Clara imagines a thunderstorm,

[s]he was terrified. The manger had become a little raft; when she put out her hand she could feel waves lapping right up to the brim. In that other life she had always been afraid of water lapping in the dark. She cried out: ‘Star of the Sea, pray for us.’ The Litany of Our Lady came back to her. She began to say it aloud, very slowly and distinctly, in Latin. (217)

Clara transforms into being someone shipwrecked, and then impersonates one of the nuns who once used to be her teachers at the convent school. The narration closely follows Clara’s thoughts. The narrative voice gives the reader insight into Clara’s interior state of mind. Her thoughts are hurried: She is afraid of the present, remembers her fear of the sound of water in the dark, and then goes from praying to the Star of the Sea to remembering her Catholic upbringing. It is significant that Clara thinks of and prays to Mary, not Jesus or God. She seeks solace in a female figure. The fast pace of the narration, of image following image, symbolizes Clara’s madness. As part of her experience of what society would call “madness,” she metamorphoses into other states of being. Clara’s madness allows her to search for and
ultimately find her self because the constraints of patriarchy cannot really reach in the mental
institution. While in the patriarchal culture at large women’s roles are clearly determined, the
mental institution affords Clara the freedom to transform into other selves to find her own self.

In Beyond the Glass, Clara’s imagination is set free. Her imagination of animal
metaphors gives her some sense of agency. In these metaphors, she attempts to escape from the
constraints of patriarchal culture. At first glance, these animal metaphors portray Clara as a
creature that has lost all its supposedly valuable human attributes. However, this negative view
of animals signifies the perspective of patriarchal culture. For Clara, these metaphors offer a
unique form of agency, one unrecognized within patriarchal culture. Clara finds a unique
freedom in the image of animals that patriarchal culture at large denies her.

In patriarchal culture, animals are considered worthless in comparison to human beings.
In Beyond the Glass, Clara describes herself as a horse (211), a stag (213), a salmon (214), and a
mouse (215). She is also “born and re-born with incredible swiftness as a woman, as an imp, as a
dog, and finally as a flower” (216). Thus, Clara (temporarily and) metaphorically loses her
humanity. She descends into a world of animals (and objects), which, in Western thought, is
opposed to man’s world, which is associated with the mind, reason, and culture. Animals signify
the opposite of man: They do not have the capacity to reason. Animals are mostly perceived to
be driven by instincts: They follow the rule of the survival of the fittest, both in regards to
surviving as well as their sex drive. Sometimes, animals are driven by aggression. Like the
portrayal of animals, the representation of women in patriarchal culture is also negative.

However, woman is the companion of man and, therefore, a step above the animal world. Clara’s
descent into the animal world further removes her from the world of human beings (i.e., man). In
one scene which is at the beginning of the part of the novel which deals with her hospitalization, Clara

lost herself again; this time completely. For months she was not even a human being; she was a horse. Ridden almost to death, beaten till she fell, she lay at last on the straw in her stable and waited for death. They buried her as she lay on her side, with outstretched head and legs. A child came and sowed turquoises round the outline of her body in the ground, and she rose up again as a horse of magic with a golden mane, and galloped across the sky. Again she woke on the mattress in her cell. She looked and saw that she had human hands and feet again, but she knew that she was still a horse. (211)

Clara’s descent into madness renders her somewhat less than human: She is “not even a human being.” This portrayal is in line with how madness has commonly been viewed in Western perception; the mentally ill are frequently othered and denied any sense of agency. In this view, “animal” means less than “human.” In the mind/body split, animals are clearly only associated with the body. Thus, the madwoman becomes reduced to the body, while the mind is associated with man. The animal world is removed from humanity. Clara the horse is completely at the mercy of (other) human beings, as she is “ridden almost to death,” waiting to die in her stable.

On the one hand, Clara’s metamorphosis into a horse signifies dehumanization. On the other hand, it also implies the fantasy of movement, a fantasy that allows for the ability to transform her shape and to control her own body.

While the narrator confronts the reader with commonly accepted views of animals, she also challenges these views by suggesting that the animal metaphors can offer moments of freedom. In the scene mentioned above, Clara also develops superhuman powers as she becomes “a horse of magic.” Clara thus experiences a brief moment of freedom as she gallops across the
sky. This moment of freedom is similar to the image of the garden in *The Shutter of Snow*.

Coleman and White’s novels seem to suggest that flora and fauna offer the madwomen ways of being that offer more freedom than patriarchal culture can give them. Yet the moments of freedom in *Beyond the Glass* do not last, as Clara wakes up from her creative imaginations in the reality of her bare cell. Thus, Clara is completely free only in moments of madness and metamorphosis.

While the animal metaphor offers Clara moments of freedom, it also functions as a critique of the mental institution. As an animal, Clara is completely powerless and at the mercy of those who confine her. When she becomes a salmon, she is “suffocating in a dry, stone-floored cell behind iron bars. Just beyond the bars was the life-giving waterfall. It [i.e., the salmon] lay wriggling and gasping, scraping its scales on the stone floor, maddened by the noise of the water it could not reach” (214). Confined in a cell without water, Clara, the salmon, is being tortured. While she clearly does not have any agency in this scene whatsoever, she is very much aware of her situation, speaking from a marginalized position. White uses the image of the animal to make a political statement about the mental institution. The animal metaphor sharpens her argument that mental institutions are places of confinement. Very interestingly, the animal metaphor reveals both sides of the mental institution; it emphasizes the disciplinary structure of the mental institution yet also complicates this notion by suggesting that it offers moments of freedom.

In his critique of mental institutions, Foucault discusses the notion of animality in relation to madness. He points out that “[m]adness borrowed its face from the mask of the beast” (*Madness and Civilization* 72). He refers primarily to the institution of the eighteenth century;
and yet, traces might still be found in the reception and portrayal of the mentally ill later on.

Foucault further states that it was

as if madness, at its extreme point, freed from that moral unreason in which its most attenuated forms are enclosed, managed to rejoin, by a paroxysm of strength, the immediate violence of animality. This model of animality prevailed in the asylums and gave them their cagelike aspect, their look of the menagerie. (72)

Thus, the mentally ill were viewed as animals that were kept in cages. Clara’s metaphors invoke this notion of the mentally ill as animals. While the animal metaphors in Beyond the Glass reflect the negative view of animality commonly found in society, White’s novel complicates Foucault’s view of animality and madness. The novel suggests a much more positive image of animals, which is associated with freedom. Becoming an animal, Clara is able to experience a sense of freedom that patriarchal society denies her. The mental institution is both confining in some ways and liberating in others.

Clara’s fantastic metamorphoses are key to her interiority. White’s novel places emphasis on subjectivity. While the novel has a third-person narrator, it also has a limited point of view that is centered on Clara most of the time. Thus, the reader is immediately exposed to Clara’s madness. Clara’s delusions and visions become her reality, as she creates her own subjective world. Clara’s madness dominates the narration, which foregrounds her subjective perspective. Symbolizing Clara’s imaginative freedom, her fantastic transformations are vital for her search of her self. The emphasis on Clara’s interiority, then, reveals her agency. Clara has agency in so far as she searches for and ultimately finds her new creative, more autonomous, and critical sense of self. Clara gains this new self through her metamorphoses in moments of madness.
Hence, White’s novel suggests that these moments of madness endow Clara with a unique imaginative power that helps Clara find her self.

In *Beyond the Glass*, madness does not only show in the emphasis on subjectivity; it is also reflected in the fragmentation of the narration. What scholars identify as a modernist aesthetic refuses the linearity commonly associated with the kind of narrative defined as realism. White’s novel, in this sense, is clearly modernist. While the narrative leading up to Clara’s madness is, for the most part, realist, the narrative of madness clearly lacks linearity. The narrative of Clara’s experience of mental illness conveys a complexity that cannot be expressed in a simple, linear way. As observed by Kylie Valentine, the notion of time especially becomes obscured in the narration. Days or weeks become “[m]onths, perhaps years” (White 211). This expansion of time indicates that to Clara, her stay in the mental institution lasts an eternity. As Clara drifts in and out of consciousness, the narration becomes fragmented. While the reader learns some details of certain days, there are vast gaps in the narrative. These gaps are signs of fragmentation. Valentine notices an “internal fragmentation” (176) and the “formal breaking up of time through the alternating of narrative perspective from Clara to her parents and back again” (177). Valentine notes that while the accounts of Clara’s parents include explicit examples of time measurement, Clara’s perspective is fraught with the experience of “time as condensed and expanded” (177). Further, “[t]he progress of ‘real’ time highlights the contrast between Clara’s experience and those of her parents, between those inside and outside the asylum” (177). The fragmentation in *Beyond the Glass* is also “signalled as that of the experience of dreams — as in dreams, memory and a sense of the length of experiences are both imperfect and significant — and delirium is on occasion called ‘nightmare’” (176). Clara’s regaining a sense of “real” time, then, is an indicator of recovery: “The return to sanity comes when these autonomous episodes
become temporally connected, and when the connection between events is explicable in terms of the actions linking them. Sanity is described as completely returned when the maintenance of continuity is habitual and effortless” (177). As mentioned before, Clara’s fantastic imaginations are a critique of all that is habitual and effortless. Escaping the mundane and effortless duties of female gender roles, Clara experiences freedom in her metamorphoses and fantastic transformations.

Clara is in a state of heightened mental awareness when she is hospitalized due to her mental illness. Her madness makes her more acutely aware of her surroundings. In between her delusions, she vividly describes moments in which she is confined and/or force-fed. Clara instinctively understands that the mental hospital operates according to certain rules:

She was frightened of the nurses. Sometimes they were rough and called her ‘naughty girl’: sometimes they were friendly and said ‘good girl’. But she could not discover what it was that she did that made them say ‘naughty’ or ‘good’ though she was very anxious they should not be angry. (216)

This scene shows Clara’s awareness of certain acceptable behavior, although she cannot figure out the distinction between “good” or “bad” behavior. In this moment, the rules of the mental institution reflect the workings of patriarchal culture at large. Clara is aware of the fact that some behaviors might result in negative consequences. In his book *Madness and Modernism*, Sass is concerned with the question: “What if madness, in at least some of its forms, were to derive from a heightening rather than a dimming of conscious awareness, and an alienation not from reason but from the emotions, instincts, and the body?” (4). This question is the basic thesis of his book and helps to elucidate Clara’s favorable view of madness. In Sass’s view, a mentally ill person does not have less but more insight into the world. Madness is not subversive; however, it does
offer a different perspective on things. Clara’s heightened state of awareness, then, enables her to critically assess her surroundings (i.e. the mental hospital). The notion of heightened awareness is most apparent in Clara’s critique of the questionable methods of confinement being employed in the mental institution. As Clara describes moments of torture, in which she receives treatment, and the mental institution itself, her narration is surprisingly clear. I have already discussed several more of these moments of heightened awareness and critique in Chapter I. These moments of heightened awareness function as a critique of the mental institution. In this way, Clara can be considered as a modernist madwoman who is opposed to the seemingly subversive Victorian madwoman. In Victorian fiction, madness has been a means of escape for women from patriarchal culture. In White’s fiction, mental illness endows Clara with the imaginative freedom to critically view the mental institution as well as patriarchy at large and also to explore other selves outside of the restraints of patriarchy. These fantastic imaginations are signs of agency. This kind of agency, however, does not mean that White celebrates madness; instead, Clara offers a critical view of mental institutions and patriarchy alike.

**Modernist Aesthetics and Trauma**

*Beyond the Glass* is also a narrative that is indicative of trauma. I argue that modernist fiction, with its characteristics of subjectivity and fragmentation, lends itself well to the representation of trauma. The narration about Clara’s experience of madness and institutionalization reflects trauma if we think about it alongside Cathy Caruth’s definition already discussed in previous chapters. According to Caruth, a traumatic response to a certain event or events is sometimes delayed and can occur in the form of hallucinations or dreams about the event. Furthermore, the traumatized person might experience numbing as well as an increased response to and avoidance of stimuli related to the event. Caruth points out that the
notions of belatedness of experience and possession of the traumatized are central to traumatic experiences (4-5). Laura Brown’s feminist approach to trauma, then, asks us to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter (102). Brown suggests that “normal” experiences associated with femininity might be traumatic. Both Caruth and Brown’s definitions of trauma are helpful in articulating the way in which Clara experiences her institutionalization and the outside world as traumatic.

As already discussed in Chapter I, the space of the mental institution is traumatic for Clara. Her experience of institutionalization includes confinement, restraint, and force-feeding. White’s narrative reflects the trauma of being mentally ill and confined in a psychiatric hospital: When Clara first gets sick, her narration is full of delusions. Then, there is a break of “[m]onths, perhaps years” (White, *Beyond* 211), after which she has a light moment, in which she remembers her own name and tells the nurse to contact her father. This is immediately followed by another relapse: “She lost herself again; this time completely. For months she was not even a human being; she was a horse” (211). Clara’s account of her own madness is fragmented yet at times surprisingly clear. It is very apparent that she is delusional; therefore, the reader does not always know how much to believe her. Later on in the novel, Clara always wants to go back and remember and talk about her experience; however, she has difficulty in going back to the event (i.e., madness and her stay in the mental institution) itself. According to Caruth’s definition, these moments are indicative of trauma, for Clara is unable to go fully back to the events of madness and hospitalization. Brown’s feminist approach to trauma, then, is helpful in recognizing Clara’s experience as traumatic. Clara’s madness is clearly an experience that is outside the range of white, young, fit, middle-class, Christian males with an education. However, if we take a feminist approach to trauma, we can recognize Clara’s experience as traumatic.
Clara’s mother recognizes forced feeding as an example of a uniquely female, traumatizing experience, stating that this treatment was used for “those poor suffragettes in prison” (White, *Beyond* 224). The narrative voice gives a detailed description of forced feeding:

She came out of this dream suddenly to find herself being tortured in her own person. She was lying on her back with two nurses holding her down. A young man with a signet ring on his finger was bending over her, holding a funnel with a long tube attached. He forced the tube down her nose and began to pour some liquid into the funnel. There was a searing pain at the back of her nose, she choked and struggled, but they held her down ruthlessly. At last the man drew out the tube and dropped it coiling in a basin. (213)

Forced feeding can be seen as a form of penetration, and, therefore, a moment of patriarchal power. Since the man in White’s novel forces the tube down Clara’s nose, this kind of penetration invokes the notion of rape. Clara refers to this repeated experience as “[t]his horror” (213), indicating the severity of the trauma. However, the fact that Clara wishes to go back over her traumatic experience also tells the reader that this experience was a very meaningful one.13

The outside, supposedly “normal” world is also traumatic for Clara. At the outset of White’s novel, the reader learns about Clara’s detrimental marriage: Claude Batchelor had reason enough to be anxious about [his daughter] Clara. She had been married only a few months and it was obvious that things were not going well… What troubled him far more was the swift and violent change in Clara herself. The last he had seen her, there had been a defiance, even a coarseness in her looks and manner which had shocked him. (9)

In *Beyond the Glass*, the “normal” experience of marriage turns out to be traumatizing for the female protagonist. In her marriage, Clara noticeably changes for the worse, making her father
worry about her. Clara herself suggests that Archie’s and her house is “Hansel and Gretel’s sugar house. And we’re trapped in it” (30). Thus, she and her husband are physically imprisoned in their house and metaphorically confined in their marriage. Clara loses her self, recognizing only a stranger looking back at her from the mirror:

Like herself, the other had fair, wildly disordered hair and wore a creased tussoire dress but its face was almost unrecognisable. The eyes were dull and parched between the reddened lids; a pocket of shadow, dark as a bruise, lay under each. The features were rigid and distorted as if they had been melted down and reset in a coarser mould. She forced herself to smile, half-hoping the mask in the mirror would remain unchanged. But its pale swollen lips parted, grotesquely dinting one cheek with the dimple she hated. (30-31)

Through her disastrous marriage, Clara is detached from herself. She hopes that the zombie-like creature looking at her in the mirror is not herself. While the reader learns about the result of Clara’s marriage, s/he does not know a whole lot about the marriage itself. The narrator tells us that Clara’s husband drinks and that the marriage has never been consummated; however, Clara’s experience remains largely inaccessible to the reader, which is consistent with Caruth’s notion of trauma. According to Caruth, the traumatized can never fully go back to the traumatic event itself. In Clara’s case, the supposedly “normal” experience of marriage is traumatic.

White’s madwoman resembles Coleman’s madwomen in that they reveal the mental institution as a site of trauma and a place of confinement, as highlighted in Chapter I. The madwomen in White and Coleman’s fiction offer a feminist critique of the mental institution, shedding light on the confining nature of the patriarchal institution. While Coleman and White’s madwomen confirm Foucault’s institutional critique, they also complicate his claims further by
presenting a feminist critique. Whereas Coleman has shown that the mental institution can serve as a women’s space for sexual awakening, White’s Clara experiences moments of creative freedom in the mental institution which make her wish to return to it after her release. The mental institution allowed Clara freedom of expression, which she is denied in the patriarchal culture at large. Hence, madness becomes a vehicle for Clara’s creativity. Her fantastic imaginations are instrumental in finding her new self and a sense of agency, which she would not have been able to find in the patriarchal society. Patriarchal culture has constraints regarding conventional female gender roles, which the patients do not have to worry about as much in the institution. While both Coleman and White’s examples of modernist fiction offer the reader very unexpected views of mental institutions and the patriarchal culture, madness is far from being celebrated in their texts. In *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass*, mental institutions can offer women some freedom and agency; however, they also remain sites of trauma and confinement. Clara’s fantastic imaginations intricately link madness and modernist aesthetics together. The notions of transformation and fragmentation are modernist characteristics of White’s text that lend themselves well to portraying the protagonist’s madness. However, this madness also liberates Clara’s thoughts from the restraints patriarchal society places upon her. As Clara metamorphoses into various animals, she gains an understanding of the freedom she has been denied all along by patriarchy. Clara’s experience of mental illness, then, endows her with second sight that makes her more critical of patriarchy at large, which is illustrated in her wish to return to the institution after her release.
CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSIONS

Through modernist characteristics such as fragmentation and an emphasis on interiority, Coleman and White’s madwomen offer a unique perspective on mental illness. With these highly subjective, personal narratives, Coleman and White present the reader with rare insight into a topic that still remains incomprehensible to many. Revealing the traumatizing and confining nature of mental institutions, Coleman’s Marthe and White’s Clara perform a feminist and Foucauldian critique of so-called “madhouses.” While mental institutions in the 1920s have increasingly become places of recovery, they also remain places of patriarchal discipline and confinement. In *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass*, institutional power is patriarchal: Mostly male administrators and doctors organize madness, discipline women’s bodies, dominate the discourse and silence women’s voices. Female doctors and nurses have struck a patriarchal bargain; that is, they operate in a patriarchal system and thus facilitate patriarchal power. The madwomen in Coleman and White’s novels, then, are at the mercy of those in power in the patriarchal institution.

While Coleman and White’s fiction portrays mental institutions as disciplinary places, it also goes beyond a Foucauldian critique of mental institutions by telling the reader about moments of freedom and agency that women experience in the institution. Mental institutions afford women some freedom that they do not have in the patriarchal culture at large. Patriarchy at large assigns women specific gender roles: They are supposed to be mothers and (house)wives. In mental institutions, female patients are surprisingly somewhat free from these restraints. In *The Shutter of Snow*, Marthe experiences sexual freedom and agency as she explores her lesbian desire. Her lesbian desire challenges the patriarchal, heteronormative society first because it fails to favor heterosexual relationships, and second because it invokes the notion
of sex for pleasure and not for procreation. Coleman’s critique of female gender roles also includes the notion that supposedly “normal” experiences like childbirth can be traumatic. After Marthe has given birth to her son, she suffers from postpartum psychosis/depression. Marthe’s trauma (which is reflected in the narrative) indicates that “normal” female experiences like childbirth and motherhood can be detrimental to women’s (mental) health. While Coleman’s novel does not imply that women should not give birth any more, it asks the reader to consider the risks involved for women in commonly accepted gender roles such as childbirth and motherhood. Hence, Marthe’s mental illness sheds light on women’s disadvantaged roles in patriarchal society. Given the restraints of gender roles in patriarchal society and the sexual freedom in the mental institution, the reader is left to wonder where Marthe might be better off: patriarchy at large which assigns women the roles of mother and (house)wife or the mental institution which confines women yet also, in The Shutter of Snow, allows them sexual freedom.

While it is questionable whether Marthe’s release is desirable to her, Clara explicitly wishes to be back in the mental institution. She utters that “[t]here [are] moments when she almost [wishes] she did [belong to the world beyond the glass again]” (White, Beyond 271). Hence, modernism’s madwomen suggest that a return to the patriarchal culture at large might be potentially worse than staying in a mental institution. At the same time, neither Coleman nor White’s fiction celebrates madness. Caminero-Santangelo has cautioned feminists not to romanticize the figure of the madwoman. According to Caminero-Santangelo, the madwoman only offers the illusion of power; she is denied any form of agency. In my thesis, however, I argue that we need to further complicate our understanding of madwomen.

While Clara critiques the mental institution in Beyond the Glass, she also suggests that the institution affords her some freedom and agency that patriarchy at large denies her. Clara’s
mental illness puts her in a state of heightened awareness as the detailed and vivid narration about her confinement shows. Referring to her nurses and doctors as “torturers,” Clara critiques the disciplinary nature of the mental institution. Interiority is key to White’s portrayal of Clara’s mental illness. In some ways, Clara’s madness liberates her. Clara experiences freedom of expression and explores her own creativity within the confines of the mental institution, searching for and ultimately finding a new sense of self. After experiencing madness, she explores her self and her surroundings through her newfound creativity. As she is thus is reborn as her new self, she has become more critically aware of patriarchy and the restraints put upon her by society. Her madness, then, gives her the means to transgress societal expectations. Unlike in patriarchal society, she can freely express herself in the mental institution. As she searches for her new self, she metamorphoses into animals and objects. These fantastic imaginations endow Clara with agency because she experiences freedom of movement and transformation. Clara’s metamorphoses, then, intricately link madness and modernism as modernist characteristics such as interiority and transformation convey the notion that madness offers a heightened awareness and critique of patriarchal society at large.

While Coleman and White’s novels deal with madness, they are also very much about the restraints put upon women by patriarchy at large. *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* both suggest that the “normal” can be traumatic. Whereas Coleman’s novel indicates that childbirth can cause trauma in women, White’s novel portrays marriage as potentially traumatic. In both novels, the traumatized protagonist has difficulty returning to the traumatic event itself. The narrative voice of both Coleman and White’s texts reveals the trauma to the reader through fragmentation and an emphasis on the respective protagonist’s interiority, which are both characteristics that have been identified as modernist. Hence, these modernist characteristics are
key to conveying the trauma connected with female gender roles. The link between trauma and psychosis (and, therefore, madness) has been widely discussed in the field of psychiatry (Freeman, and Fowler; Kilcommons, and Morrison; Spauwen et al.). Recent research indicates that traumatic experiences can go hand in hand with “psychotic-like phenomena” (Freeman and Fowler 110). Coleman and White’s novels suggest that there is a close connection between “normal” traumatic experiences and madness.

While most fiction up until the twentieth century only offers an outsider’s perspective of madness and institutionalization, modernist fiction shifts the perspective to an insider’s one. This emphasis on interiority in Coleman and White’s novels portrays madwomen as subjects. Contrary to this, portrayals of madwomen in both fiction and nonfiction have mostly presented them as the quintessential Other throughout history. In giving their protagonists a voice, Coleman and White endow them with political power and agency. Demystifying madness and critiquing mental institutions and patriarchal society alike, modernism’s madwomen speak for both themselves and their insane sisters. Much earlier fiction like Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* tangentially discusses madness; however, modernist fiction moves it much more to the forefront. In the case of Coleman’s *The Shutter of Snow* and White’s *Beyond the Glass*, madness is depicted in a complex manner. First of all, the narrative itself is indicative of madness, showing internal fragmentation, gaps in the narration, as well as interior monologue. Regarding the content itself, madness is shown as a severe illness (or several different illnesses) from which recovery might not always be achieved. Even in those narratives where the protagonist does recover, their mental illness haunts them for the rest of their lives, as can be seen in “Surprise Visit.” While recovery is generally wished for, Coleman and White’s texts question whether it really is desirable, as the women would have to return to a patriarchal society in which they don’t have much agency.
Even though Coleman and White’s fiction does not show an easy return to “normal” life, it also does not idealize madness: The reader is presented with a multi-layered view of madness.

Offering insight into the interior state of mind of modernism’s madwomen, Coleman and White’s narratives of madness question categories of illness and sanity. While the male doctors and administrators have deemed Marthe and Clara mad, the reader learns that their madness actually allows them to experience a state of heightened mental awareness. In this state of hyperreflexivity, Marthe and Clara become aware of the restraints of patriarchy at large as well as the limiting female gender roles society has assigned them. Hence, these modernist texts beg the questions of who determines who is mad, and who decides whether a patient has sufficiently recovered to return to “normal” society. Ultimately, Coleman and White’s novels suggest that patriarchal society is ill, because it limits women’s experiences to the roles of mother and (house)wife. As The Shutter of Snow and Beyond the Glass reveal, “normal” female experiences such as childbirth, mothering, and marriage can be traumatic. Hence, these novels offer a feminist critique of female gender roles through a feminist approach to trauma.

Coleman and White’s feminist critique is conveyed through characteristics that scholars have identified as modernist such as fragmentation, subjectivity, and hyperreflexivity. As Sass has pointed out, modernism lends itself well to the representation of madness. My thesis suggests that the aforementioned modernist characteristics are also key to a feminist critique of mental institutions and patriarchy at large. The internal fragmentation in Coleman and White’s texts indicates the traumata that the female protagonists experience. First, the novels point out that “normal” experiences like childbirth, motherhood, and marriage can be traumatic. The narrative voice in Coleman and White’s novels always tries to but never can fully go back to the respective traumatic events. Second, institutionalization in Coleman and White’s novels is
traumatic because the madwomen in these modernist texts are confined and disciplined by the patriarchal rules of the institutions. Revealing the traumata female gender roles can cause as well as the trauma of institutionalization, Coleman and White’s fiction critiques patriarchy at large and the patriarchal nature of mental institutions. The notions of fragmentation and trauma, then, go hand in hand with a strong emphasis on subjectivity. In *Beyond the Glass*, Clara’s interior state of mind is vital for the protagonist’s agency because she develops a new, more autonomous, and critically aware self through her fantastic imaginations. Thus, subjectivity is linked with creativity and imagination. Through these modernist characteristics, the reader learns that Clara’s madness actually makes her more critically aware of women’s oppressive gender roles in patriarchal society. Hence, the narrative voice uses modernist characteristics for a feminist critique in these accounts of madness.

While Sass has already pointed out the close connection between madness and modernism, my thesis suggests that gender be included in a discussion of madness and modernism. In Coleman and White’s novels, modernist characteristics are a vital part of conveying madwomen’s feminist critique of the patriarchal and confining nature of mental institutions as well as patriarchy at large. Hence, modernist characteristics can constitute a critical lens through which madwomen share a feminist critique.

Ultimately, Emily Holmes Coleman and Antonia White are modernism’s madwomen. Coleman and White fictionalized their own, personal experiences of madness. Their accounts of madness are as much about patriarchy at large as about their mental illness. Giving their protagonists a voice is a sign of feminist activism, as readers can learn about (mad)women’s experiences both in mental institutions and patriarchy at large. The example of Coleman and White indicates that one can accomplish something in life in spite of the experience of madness.
It is inspiring that Coleman and White turned their experience of madness into something meaningful.

As experiences are highly subjective, personal accounts may help the reader in getting a better understanding of madness. When reading fiction like Coleman and White’s, it is important to keep in mind that each respective perspective they offer is just one of several possible perspectives of how women experience mental illness. Also, what the reader learns about is a representation and not the experience of madness itself. The representation of madness can come close to the actual experience; however, the two are not the same. Further, literature that takes the mad individual’s point of view usually conveys the point of view of an unreliable narrator. Thus, the reader can never be sure how accurate and close to the “truth” a representation of madness and the mental institution is. Thus, the form of art replicates the illness itself. And yet, these stories seem too exceptional to be completely invented. Narratives of madness further beg the question whether there is any at least somewhat objective “truth.”

Those who benefit from patriarchal power then, create the so-called “truth.” Coleman and White’s accounts, much like Nelly Bly’s non-fictional account, seem to suggest that the decisions of who is mad and who is not are usually made by those in power in mental institutions; that is, by the male doctors. However madness is portrayed, it is relevant to keep in mind that madness might be a very different experience for the same person on another day, for another person at a different place in the same time period, or for another person at a different time. There is a plethora of experiences of madness and of institutionalization, which would be an excellent topic for an anthology.

Different genres of literature (i.e., fiction and nonfiction) on madness can offer insight into the topic on various levels. Of course, it is relevant to look at historical records of mental
institutions. These can show a perspective that is mainly focused on the mental institution, which is either endorsed by or critical of a psychiatric hospital. In the case of early twentieth-century Rochester State Hospital, the annual reports are clearly written from the administration’s perspective: The mental institution is represented as a place of recovery and entertainment. However, besides this institutional perspective, it is at least equally relevant to take into consideration the patients’ perspective, which might vary significantly from the historical/administrative perspective. This thesis has shown that modernist fiction tells a very different story from the historical/administrative perspective. While historical documents (from the perspective of the administration or outsiders) of Rochester State Hospital and Bethlem Royal Hospital depict these mental institutions as places of recovery, sometimes even amusement, *The Shutter of Snow* and *Beyond the Glass* reveal the confining nature of the institutions. In some ways, these fictional accounts confirm the administration’s positive portrayal of mental institutions as places of recovery. In other ways, the reader gains insight into what it means to be mad and confined in a mental institution from a highly subjective and very personal point of view, which would not have been possible without these personal accounts. Both Coleman and White’s fiction show a detailed picture of madness from the perspective of madwomen (although not necessarily from the point of view of a first person narrator). Their fiction also problematizes the confining nature of the mental institution, which really changes the reader’s understanding of mental institutions in the 1920s. The institutionalization of mental illness in Coleman and White’s fiction means that male doctors and administrators organize madness, discipline women’s bodies, dominate the discourse, and silence women’s voices. My thesis strongly urges the reader to listen to women’s experiences as told by modernism’s
madwomen to gain a more thorough understanding of mental illness and women’s position in patriarchal society in the 1920s.

Madness has been a topic of fascination for a long time. In literature, the figure of the madwoman has been very popular, especially in the Victorian era. While the madwoman has often been perceived as the quintessential Other, more recent fiction (as well as non-fiction) removes the madwoman from the margins and brings her to the forefront. Coleman and White’s fiction is a good example of this deeper understanding of madness. This fascination with madness continues on in more recent fiction, such as Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.

It could be argued that in some ways, Coleman and White’s novels are more radical representations of madness than the representation in Plath’s novel. While Plath’s novel emphasizes the notion that mental institutions in the 1960s are still places of confinement that use questionable treatments such as shock therapy, the novel ultimately suggests that Esther will find relief only in suicide. Coleman and White’s fiction, on the other hand, critiques both mental institutions and the patriarchal culture at large, while at the same time finding moments of freedom in the confines of the institution. I contend that these moments of freedom are certainly more fruitful and radical than suicide. In her article “The Example of Antonia White,” Lizzie Hutton compares White’s fiction with Plath’s. She criticizes Plath for leaving the reader with a dead end that favors self-extinction over engaging with the world. Hutton points out that “[o]ur culture, high and low, too readily accepts, even encourages, the story that female energy of the creative or inspiring sort must necessarily turn out to be hopeless or suicidal - and therefore, in the end, inscrutable and unknowable” (121). It would certainly be interesting to examine more contemporary fiction in relation to modernism’s madwomen. Coleman and White do not celebrate madness; however, they offer the reader insight into both mental institutions and
patriarchal culture at large. While these accounts certainly do not present madness as something desirable, modernism’s madwomen grapple with the challenges that face them. If anything, Coleman and White’s example show us how to deal productively with the confines of mental institutions and patriarchal culture. In the 1920s in America and Britain, women experience restraint through the gender roles that patriarchal society places upon them. Revealing the traumatic nature of “normal” female experiences such as childbirth and marriage through modernist characteristics such as internal fragmentation and an emphasis on subjectivity, Coleman’s Marthe and White’s Clara ask us to reevaluate cultural norms. Modernism’s madwomen, then, are in a state of heightened mental awareness, which allows them to perform a feminist critique of patriarchy. Marthe’s and Clara’s experience suggests that it is not the so-called “madwomen,” but patriarchal society itself that is ill.
NOTES

1 I am fully aware of the derogatory meaning of the word “mad.” Because this term has been frequently used to refer to the mentally ill, I am using it to illustrate the very common denigrating attitude towards the mentally ill. I do not use the term to further other the mentally ill; instead I intend to draw attention to the fact that they have been othered historically. Hereafter, I will use the word without quotation marks.

2 Women who did not obey the sex role expectations closely were also often considered mad.

3 Showalter, who focuses on English instead of American Victorian culture, shares this view, stating that “[i]n its historical contexts in the late nineteenth century, hysteria was at best a private, ineffectual response to the frustrations of women’s lives” (161).

4 However, the reports do not reveal what exactly the monotony of daily life signifies.

5 The use of hydrotherapy was fairly common in Rochester State Hospital (State of New York: Thirty-Fourth Annual Report 18).

6 However, the presence of sharply defined characters justifies the use of the term “novel.” For example, the third person limited narrator’s description of Sarah Kemp is very vivid and to the point. Mrs. Kemp looks hardly human: “Mrs Kemp had a badly used face. Her hair was pulled back from a red and uncomprehending forehead. Her mouth fell into her chin” (22). When she is first mentioned, the reader learns that Mrs. Kemp is “[t]he most miserable one of all” (22). Mrs. Kemp is always pacing up and down the corridors crying. The narrator compares her to a tiger or panther pacing up and down, back and forth in a cage.

7 In The Shutter of Snow, the pain of being wound up in a canvas sheet seems irrelevant to Marthe in comparison with the experience of giving birth to her child: “That didn’t matter, nothing mattered after the other. Pain was nothing now and she didn’t care” (21).
According to the nurse, “the birth was quite normal” (Coleman, “Interlude” 93).

White also deals with madness and institutionalization in “The House of Clouds,” which was first published in 1928. The story of protagonist Helen Ryder is remarkably similar to Clara’s story in *Beyond the Glass*. White further developed Helen’s story into the novel about Clara. “The House of Clouds” focuses solely on the experience of madness. Since the experience of madness in “The House of Clouds” and in *Beyond the Glass* is so similar, I will neglect White’s short story.

White’s novel is more conventional in the sense that it retains a sense of form, has round and flat characters, a real plot, as well as the notion of cause and effect. And yet, the narrative surrounding Clara’s madness and intensely subjective narration render it a modernist novel, which also becomes elusive through its fragmentation as well as an obscure sense of time.

The night Clara had her mental breakdown, she had walked into the water of the river on account of her feet (181).

However, at times, the point of view is centered on Clara’s parents.

The mental institution is equally traumatizing in “The House of Clouds.” While Helen’s experience in the story mostly corresponds with Clara’s experiences in *Beyond the Glass*, the notion of trauma in the story is also linked to World War I. In the so-called Great War, war trauma affected many soldiers. Freud discusses the notion of war trauma in his narratives “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). The fact that Helen has a vision related to the war indicates how traumatized people at the time were. Helen’s memory wanders between her childhood and nightmares, until she sees a procession of “women wearing nurses’ veils” (50), which causes her to become their dead sons who have been killed in the war. The notion of the war recurs in “Surprise Visit.”
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