Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 189

ISSN 0091-3421

Volume 189

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Tom Burns and Jeffrey W. Hunter
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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 189

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN 0-7876-7412-5
ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Contents

Marie Cardinal
1929-2001

Algerian novelist, essayist, translator, critic, and nonfiction writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Cardinal's career through 2001.

INTRODUCTION

Cardinal is widely considered one of the foremost contemporary Francophone authors of feminist writing—or écriture féminine. Though relatively few of her works have been translated into English, she is a best-selling author in France, where she is regarded as one of the nation's most popular feminist media figures. Her intensely personal narratives—often inspired by autobiographical elements from her own life—typically feature complex examinations of the intergenerational relationships between mothers and daughters. Additionally, her fiction is deeply concerned with the struggle of women against restrictive social mores, championing the feminist ideal that women must claim language as their own in order to subvert the traditionally patriarchal perspective of history. Best known for her emphasis on gender and feminist issues, Cardinal has also developed a reputation as a leading Maghrebian author—Maghreb refers to the geographical region comprised of Morroco, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, and Tunisia. Though she was born in Algeria, Cardinal has lived abroad for most of her life, and her Algerian narratives are frequently tinged with themes of sadness and exile, tempered by a sense of guilt over her French-colonist roots.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born March 9, 1929, to a wealthy French family in Algeria, Cardinal was raised in the nation's elite *Pied-Noir*—or French-Algerian—community. Her parents divorced shortly after her birth, and Cardinal was reared by her emotionally distant and controlling mother. Cardinal's relationship with her mother would later become a frequent recurring motif in her writing. In 1947 she enrolled at the Université d'Alger, graduating in 1953 with a license and a diplôme d'études supérieures in philosophy. She married Jean-Pierre Ronfard in 1953, with whom she had three children. After graduating, Cardinal taught French language and literature in Greece, Portugal, and Austria for seven years while her husband held university positions. Unable to prepare for the agrégation—a competitive degree required of all French university professors—Cardinal worked as a freelance writer in Paris after relocating there with her family in the 1960s. While living in Paris, Cardinal began psychoanalysis, which she continued for several years in order to improve her mental health. The events in *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975; *The Words to Say It*) closely parallel her treatment during this period and the conditions that led to her mental instability. Before her death in 2001, Cardinal divided her time between living in Paris and Montreal, Quebec. She participated in numerous conferences and debates on women's issues and taught an annual seminar in the Continuing Education Division of the Université de Montréal. Her first novel, *Écoutez la mer* (1962) received the Prix International du Premier Roman, and *Les Mots pour le dire* was awarded the Prix Littré.

MAJOR WORKS

Cardinal's novels are highly autobiographical, drawing on details from the author's own life to examine the more universal themes of postcolonialism, dual cultural backgrounds, the reassigning of gender roles, and rebirth through introspection. Her first published work, *Écoutez la mer,* is a romance between a German writer, Karl, living in Paris and a *Pied-Noir* expatriate, Maria, who narrates the novel. Finding herself increasingly haunted by memories of her childhood in Algeria, Maria confesses her past to Karl, who, in turn, shares his experiences in the German army fighting on the Russian front during World War II. An allegory of the feudal conditions of colonialism, *La Mule de corbillard* (1963) follows Madeline Couturier, a seventy-year-old woman who has lived on a small Mediterranean tenant farm for most of her life. When Garcia, the landlord, repossesses the farm to improve his wartime harvest quotas, Madeline begins taking daily walks around Garcia's vineyards, waiting for an opportunity to express her hatred. Her third novel, *La Souricière* (1965), is structured as a five-act tragedy, tracing the decline of Camile, a young provincal woman who marries a university professor and finds herself transplanted into Parisian domesticity. After a series of pregnancies, Camile becomes obsessed with physical decay and images of death, and the novel concludes with her suicide. These early novels establish

several of Cardinal's chief recurring motifs, though some scholars have noted that their bleak worldview may have made them inaccessible to mainstream audiences.

With *La Clé sur la porte* (1972), Cardinal's writing began attracting widespread critical and popular attention. The narrative opens with a forty-year-old mother struggling to find a middle ground between serving as friend and parent to her three teenaged children. She decides to allow her children to experiment with personal freedom and responsibility, in contrast to her own strict and stifling upbringing. The children's friends come and go freely in their small Paris apartment, camping on the floor, sharing in a communal form of living which wreaks havoc in the mother's private life. Despite the calamity, the unorthodox living arrangements enable her to reexamine her own values and free herself of restraining social obligations. Cardinal continued her examination of mother-child relationships in *Les Mots pour le dire,* her most celebrated work. Composed after Cardinal's own experiences in psychoanalysis, the plot revolves around a woman suffering an emotional breakdown caused by her relationship with her mother and the repression and self-incrimination that has occurred during her childhood. The narrator—whose primary outward symptom of her condition is severe menstrual bleeding—undergoes a lengthy period of Freudian psychoanalysis which leads to the realization that she has been unable to cope with the rigid codes of conduct and the patriarchal systems governing her since her youth. With the aid of therapy and by putting her emotions into writing, the narrator begins to unravel the chaos in her past and is able to "rewrite" her life. *Une Vie pour deux* (1978) centers on Simone, her husband, Jean-François, and the dead body of a young woman that the two find on a beach near their summer home. The couple attempt to construct the history of the deceased woman's life, and Simone begins recording her reflections in a notebook. Through the act of writing, Simone and Jean-François are able to acquire a renewed understanding of each other's motivations.

In *Le Passé empiété* (1983), Cardinal revisits her recurrent theme of language, composing a narrative around a "brodeuse," a woman who embroiders fabric. Having achieved fame for her "embroideries," which are sold all over the world, the fifty-year-old protagonist buys her grown children a motorcycle. Unfortunately, the children have an accident and are severely injured. Though her offspring recover fully, the mother remains anguished and guilt-ridden, retreating to her brother's beach house. There, she becomes entranced by visions of characters from Greek mythology, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. These characters provide a backdrop for the mother's narrative "tapestry" depicting a tragedy of families divided by death and vengeance. The mother, in employing her creativity, uses her "embroidery" to move from her subjected state in a patriarchal world to the status of an empowered female with her own identity. In *Les Grands Désordres* (1987; *Devotion and Disorder*) Elsa Labbé, a widow who lost her husband in the Algerian war, is faced with a crisis when she discovers that her daughter has become addicted to heroin. In trying to help her daughter, Elsa begins reexamining her own life and hires a ghostwriter to assist her in organizing her thoughts and personal recollections. Through the act of writing and collaborating with the ghostwriter, Elsa realizes the power of stories to both transform and subjugate. Cardinal additionally explores the power of words in *Comme si de rien n'était* (1990), drawing on a series of telephone conversations between two cousins to demonstrate how language is used and received differently by individuals. *Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula* (1993) traces the lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, Charles and Lula, and examines how they are both able to find individual and sexual freedom within the confines of their partnership.

Though most audiences recognize Cardinal for her fiction, she has also published several nonfiction works and translations. *Cet été-là* (1967) recounts Cardinal's experiences in the summer of 1966 during which she participated in the filming of two motion pictures—Jean-Luc Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (*Two or Three Things I Know about Her*) and Robert Bresson's adaptation of George Bernanos's *Mouchette.* In *Autrement dit* (1977), Cardinal collects a series of conversations between herself and Annie LeClerc, in which she discusses her personal history, her creative techniques, and her political beliefs. *Au Pays de mes racines* (1980), Cardinal's journal of her first return visit to Algeria, attempts to reconcile the advantages and disadvantages of coming from a mixed cultural heritage. Cardinal records her impressions of the present-day impact of the country's colonial history, the progress of Algeria's women's movement, and the turbulent relationship between the Islamic Algerian natives and the wealthy Catholic *Pied-Noirs.* Cardinal has additionally composed a number of notable translations of such works as Euripides' *Medea* and *Trojan Women* and Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt.*

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Though Cardinal's works have received a degree of popular acclaim in Europe, her writing has not been widely reviewed by literary critics. While scholars have written extensively on French feminist writing, some have asserted that Cardinal's simple and direct prose may have prompted the critical mainstream—and those who focus on écriture féminine—to largely ignore her work. Lucille Cairns has commented that the lack of

French feminist scholarship on Cardinal's oeuvre seems ironic because "her recurring preoccupations are of critical importance to feminism as a political reality rather than as stylized discourse: preoccupations with the perceived antinomy between motherhood and women's quest for individuality, with heterosexual relationships and the power balance therein." However, several commentators have praised Cardinal's direct language, arguing that her unconventional and vivid descriptions of feminine bodily functions confront a once-taboo subject in the male-dominated literary world. Others have noted that the author's graphic and unusual imagery may have contributed to audiences overlooking her works. During the advent of the women's liberation movement, Cardinal's novels were applauded by both activists and academics for their examination of the feminine condition, their rejection of traditional patriarchal values, and Cardinal's refusal to debase men or characterize them as villains. Such acclaim has remained consistent throughout Cardinal's career, with critics praising her works for continually striving to redefine feminine literary roles. Certain scholars have emphasized the significance of Cardinal's French-Algerian heritage in her prose, though some have argued that Cardinal's ruminations on the characteristics of her "homeland" are marked by a sense of innocence and naïveté regarding the modern-day political forces at work in the country.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Écoutez la mer (novel) 1962
La Mule de corbillard (novel) 1963
Guide junior de Paris [with Christiane Cardinal] (nonfiction) 1964
La Souricière (novel) 1965
**Cet été-là* (journal) 1967
Mao [with Lucien Bodard] (nonfiction) 1970
La Clé sur la porte (novel) 1972
La Cause de Femmes [with Gisèle Halimi; *The Right to Choose*] (essays and criticism) 1973
Les Mots pour le dire [*The Words to Say It*] (novel) 1975
Autrement dit [with Annie LeClerc; *In Other Words*] (interviews) 1977
Une Vie pour deux (novel) 1978
†*Au Pays de mes racines* (journal) 1980
Le Passé empiété (novel) 1983
La Médée d'Euripide [translator; from Euripides' *Medea*] (play) 1986
Les Grands Désordres [*Devotion and Disorder*] (novel) 1987
Les Pieds-Noirs (novel) 1988
Comme si de rien n'était (novel) 1990
Peer Gynt [translator; from the play by Henrik Isben] (play) 1991
Les Jeudis de Charles et de Lula (novel) 1993
Les Troyennes [translator; from Euripides' *Trojan Women*] (play) 1993
Amours . . . amours (novel) 1998

*Published with Jean-Luc Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle.*

†Published with Bénédicte Ronfard's *Au Pays de Moussia.*

CRITICISM

Elaine Martin (essay date spring 1981)

SOURCE: Martin, Elaine. "Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in *The Bell Jar* and *Les Mots pour le dire.*" *French-American Review* 5, no. 1 (spring 1981): 24-47.

[*In the following essay, Martin explores the mental instabilities of the protagonists in* Les Mots pour le dire *and Sylvia Plath's* The Bell Jar, *noting the similarities between the two women's mental states and the extreme pressures that influenced their illness.*]

Human madness and the representation of that madness in literature have existed in Western civilization for centuries, beginning as early as Classical Greece. Not only does madness have a long literary history, but it has also engendered a complex system of motifs that identify and attempt to define and confine this social aberration. Lillian Feder, in the conclusion to her historical survey, *Madness in Literature,* summarizes some of these motifs: "the identification of the mad with animals by society and by the mad themselves, the hunt as symbol of their persecution, the concept of reason or insight in madness, the incorporation of an accusing or sustaining deity."[1] Feder's list of motifs, based upon numerous literary works from Euripides and Aeschylus through Shakespeare, Mann, and Nerval to Brown, Soyinka, and Ginsberg, is seminal to research on madness and literature, and her choice of works—primarily by men about madmen—is significant for the purposes of the present study of women's madness because it raises questions of gender-related madness. Also, as we will see, not all of the motifs she identifies seem to apply equally to the experience of madwomen.

Aside from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* and Barbara Rigney's *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist*

Novel: Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood, little research has been done on the combined subject of women, madness, and literature. Beginning with Plato, the topic of madness and madness and literature has perennially drawn thinkers and their pens, but the literature as a whole rarely talks intelligently about women. Also there are many studies on women and madness (often more generally women and psychology) by researchers such as Phyllis Chesler, Juliet Mitchell, Judith Bardwick, and Mary Jane Sherfey, but they neither place the experience in its literary context nor analyze literary expressions of madness. Thus much exploration remains to be done, particularly on twentieth-century writers. One problem in dealing with contemporary literature is the increasing tendency on the part of writers to fuse art and life, particularly in the form of autobiographical works. This fuzzy separation of the experiential and the fictional is revealed in the very nature of the questions that critics are currently posing: Is a heroine mad in the same way as a hero? Are the causes of madness similar? And what of the outcomes; can mental stability be regained or does self-destruction seem inevitable? Does society react differently to mad-women than to madmen? Is there anything about women's position in society that would contribute to or exacerbate mental illness? And finally, now that women are "telling their own stories," do women writers have new perceptions to offer on madwomen and their experience? Taken together, these questions indicate two interests that a study of madness in specific literary works can pursue: the source and development of the madness and the nature of the return journey from madness to health.

The insights that result from a close analysis of madness in literature can be both shocking and profoundly moving, for women's stories about madness are often very intense. Such is the case in the two novels I have chosen to examine in this study. The first work is Sylvia Plath's well-known *The Bell Jar*; the second is a lesser-known French novel (at least in the United States), ***Les Mots pour le dire,*** by Marie Cardinal. The similarities between the two works are striking and lead to questions concerning the possible universality of women's experience. But there are also crucial differences, which upon close examination reveal the importance of the social context within which an individual life is lived.

The Bell Jar and ***Les Mots pour le dire*** are eminently comparable, initially because of their subject matter: a young woman attempts to cope with madness as her personal world falls apart. In addition, both novels are highly autobiographical, which is particularly significant because the two authors are of the same social class and, having been born only three years apart (Cardinal in 1929, Plath in 1932), they are also of the same generation. Furthermore, the initial psychic disintegrations that they describe begin when their protagonists are very young—Esther is nineteen, and the heroine of ***Les Mots pour le dire*** is in her early twenties. As a result, and by virtue of the autobiographical character of the works, the two authors are also describing the same society and the same historical period: the middle class in the 1950s. Thus, the social context in which the heroine's struggle for sanity and viability takes place is curiously similar in the two novels despite innate differences between French and American culture.

Madness is a social phenomenon; it exists within a context. Thus, a writer portrays not an individual *per se* in the work of art, but rather that individual's reaction to external stimuli. "Madness as a theme of myth and literature," Lillian Feder points out, "has always dealt with personal responses to environmental influences, which include political, social, and cultural pressures, or perhaps it would be more correct to say which exclude nothing."[2] In Western civilization, "the environmental influences" have always provided for a context that was patriarchal. But is this important? Is the patriarchal nature of the context significant for the health and well-being of women? Gilbert and Gubar are adamant in their answer: "patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally."[3] Their explanations for female "dis-ease" in nineteenth-century society are equally valid for the twentieth-century context:

> Such diseases are caused by patriarchal socialization in several ways. Most obviously, of course, any young girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, selflessness as in some sense sickening. To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health, since the human animal's first and strongest urge is to his/her *own* survival, pleasure, assertion.[4]

In both ***Les Mots pour le dire*** and *The Bell Jar,* it is the repressive patriarchal society's norms, and specifically its socialization process that early on give the impetus to the "dis-ease" that will later develop into madness serious enough to require incarceration.

In ***Les Mots pour le dire,*** the narrator/progatonist undergoes a lengthy psychoanalysis, "for seven years, three times a week." Due to this probing experience, she comes to realize the "lavage de cervelle" which took place while she was growing up. The beginnings of her socialization which was long and harsh seemed innocuous enough, the kind of attitudes with which most readers can identify: "J'aimais les maths mais, dans ma famille, on disait que ce n'était pas féminin. Une fille qui fait des maths c'était, paraît-il, 'incasable' ou alors avec un prof de maths. Je me réservais des jours difficiles."[5] But later experiences assume a more ominous character. She describes being repeatedly held under an icy shower by her mother's iron grip to teach her not to express anger. On one occasion she vomits

into her soup from fright at her mother's convincing impersonation of the rag collector, whereupon the enraged mother compels her to eat her own vomit. Later, during psychoanalysis, the protagonist is able to reassemble the diverse fragments of her experience and shape a recognizable whole. With recognition also comes understanding:

> J'avais été entièrement façonnée pour ressembler le plus possible à un modèle humain que je n'avais pas choisi et que ne me convenait pas. Jour après jour, depuis ma naissance, on avait fabriqué: mes gestes, mes attitudes, mon vocabulaire. On avait reprimé mes besoins, mes envies, mes élans, on les avait endigués, maquillés, déguisés, emprisonnés. Après m'avoir décervelée, après avoir vidé mon crâne de moi, on l'avait bourré de la pensée adéquate qui m'allait comme un tablier à une vache. Et quand il s'est avéré que la greffe avait bien pris, que je n'avais plus besoin de personne pour refouler les vagues qui venaient du tréfonds de ma personne, on m'a laissée vivre, librement.
>
> (p. 195)

This statement, which ends with the ironic "librement," is only the first of a number of stinging indictments made against society and its socializing agents, here, the mother.

In *The Bell Jar* the role of socialization is less well apprehended and articulated by the protagonist. At the opening of the book, Esther Greenwood is about eighteen, so the reader sees only the results of the socializing process. Esther's slowly festering internal wound rises to the surface during the summer she spends in New York as the guest student editor of a fashion magazine. She and the other eleven young women invited to participate are wined and dined in a glamorous but superficial way for several weeks. But somehow Esther feels different from the others. "I knew something was wrong with me that summer," she writes, "I was supposed to be having the time of my life . . . I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus. . . . I couldn't get myself to react, I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel."[6] Esther's uneasiness mounts during the weeks in New York and climaxes when she returns home. The prison imagery that began forming in New York (when she looked into the mirror, "the face that peered back . . . seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell") is repeated in the car ride home: "the gray, padded car roof closed over my head like the roof of a prison van, and the white, shining, identical clapboard houses with their interstices of well-groomed green proceeded past, one bar after another in a large but escape-proof cage" (p. 94). Esther rejects the glittering but empty world offered her in New York; however, she can find no alternative to it. After nineteen years of "running after good marks and prizes and grants of one sort and another," she stops to ask herself why and is profoundly shaken when she can find no answer.

Socialization is carried out by adults, usually adults of the child's family, and specifically, it is the mother upon whom this task devolves. This fact has strange results for the mother/daughter relationship, for as Elaine Showalter has observed in another context (namely in discussing Grace Pool's role in *Jane Eyre* as Bertha Mason's jailor), "the feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny."[7] The mother becomes the socializing agent for the patriarchal society. Thus, when the daughter rebels against the social strictures, she also rebels against her mother. "It is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations," Adrienne Rich writes:

> The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed 'mothering,' even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive. Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever comes.' A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. . . . The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter.[8]

In this important passage from *Of Woman Born,* Rich puts her finger on several crucial characteristics of the mother/daughter relationship in both Plath's and Cardinal's novels: the "anxious pressure" to conform, the "rage at their mothers," the "mother's self-hatred and low expectations," the "binding-rags" of the daughter's psyche. In both novels, the protagonists' fathers are absent, in *The Bell Jar* due to death, in ***Les Mots pour le dire*** because of divorce. The result is twofold: a claustrophobic intensifying of the mother/daughter bond, and a sense of loss and anguish at the father's absence, which is construed as desertion. In *The Bell Jar,* this loss is mixed with bitterness. "I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave," Esther claims, and one day sets off to find the cemetery where her father was buried. Her cry, "I couldn't find my father anywhere," has a double meaning: both concrete and cosmic. It is as much the alternative possibility of the male which she misses as the person, whom she barely knew.

The protagonist in ***Les Mots pour le dire*** is similarly confused about what her father represents. Thus, she is involved for several years in an uneasy and very ambivalent relationship with her divorced father. Only upon his premature death does she realize what he has

represented in her life: "je ne l'avais que très peu vu. Mais il était pourtant mon seul allié, sans que je le veuille. Je n'avais jamais compté avec lui et maintenant je devais compter sans lui, cela faisait un grand vide inexplicable. Quelque chose de subtil avait disparu pour toujours" (p. 75). Later in life she understands what was lacking in her life following her father's death: "Je n'avais plus la certitude de plaire à quelqu'un en toute circonstance et j'étais privée de tendresse" (p. 76). The extent of the loss that the father's death constitutes for the daughter is, of course, directly related to the mother. If the protagonist in ***Les Mots pour le dire*** is deprived of "tendresse" at her father's death, it signifies a need which the mother does not fulfill. In *The Bell Jar,* Esther "howls [her] loss into the cold salt rain" at his grave in part because her mother never cried at his death. It is the mother who determines the daughter's relationship with the father—even after his death.

In both works the mother is represented as very strong, cold, unemotional and unreachable—in the French novel even as untouchable. The protagonist in ***Les Mots pour le dire*** describes her mother as a beautiful peacock in a cage at the zoo; one wants to stroke it, but it pecks. As a young child she is desperate with the desire to embrace her mother: "si seulement elle m'avait laissée m'approcher d'elle, si j'avais pu la consoler, l'embrasser, la caresser. Mais elle ne le voulait pas. Seulement les baisers du bout des lèvres, des bonjours et des au revoir, rien de plus" (p. 144). Both mothers are martyrs, both rigidly attempt to fit their daughters into preconceived female molds, and both instill guilt in their daughters for unacceptable behavior. They also encourage selflessness in their daughters. The mother in ***Les Mots pour le dire*** admonishes her daughter: "Quand on a la chance d'avoir ce que tu as on n'a qu'une ligne à suivre: louer le Seigneur, aider les autres et ne pas s'occuper de soi" (p. 113). Similarly, Esther reports in *The Bell Jar,* "my mother said the cure for thinking too much about yourself was helping somebody who was worse off than you" (p. 132). Both mothers manifest little understanding for their daughters' psychic sufferings and demonstrate no comprehension of their daughters' creative needs. "My mother kept telling me," Esther explains, "nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter" (p. 61). But the mother's attempt to teach her daughter shorthand is a disaster. "The trouble was," Esther analyzes her failure, "I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters." (p. 62). Esther's vision for her life lies beyond the boundaries of her mother's imagination. Both daughters grow away and apart from, but also *beyond* their mothers in the same kind of psychic and intellectual transcendence that Simone de Beauvoir details as a mother/daughter barrier in *Une mort très douce.*

Significantly, the mother also represents repressed sexuality to the daughter. Esther's mother sends her an article from the *Reader's Digest* entitled, "In Defense of Chastity." After reading the article Esther notes perplexedly, "Now the one thing this article didn't seem to me to consider was how a girl felt" (p. 66). Esther finds a double standard of virginity galling and rejects it: "I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not." Obsessed by "pure" Buddy Willard's impurities with a waitress the previous summer, Esther concludes: "if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either" (p. 66). Her humorous tone belies a profound concern with sexuality, which her self-conscious mother treats distantly in terms of rules and restrictions. In ***Les Mots pour le dire*** the mother's aversion to sexuality is even more pronounced; she appears to be almost asexual herself. But in evenings alone in the living room, the mother dances, and her overt sensuality shocks the voyeur-daughter. The protagonist cannot understand what connection there possibly could be between her mother and the strange jazz rhythms emanating from the record player: "C'était de la musique qui venait du ventre, des reins, des cuisses, toute une région du corps que ma mère ne pouvait pas connaître, ne devait pas connaître" (p. 302). Referring to the numerous nineteenth-century English legends of imprisoned madwomen, Elaine Showalter points out that, "the legends themselves express a cultural attitude toward female passion as a potentially dangerous force that must be punished and confined."[9] In both of the twentieth-century novels, this observation is also applicable; sexuality is a force that supplies contention between mother and daughter and with which ultimately the daughters must deal in facing their madness.

Moreover, both daughters actively seek their first sexual encounters and view their "loss of virginity" as an act *against* the mother. Esther claims that her virginity "had weighed like a millstone" around her neck ever since she learned of Buddy Willard's corruption. "It had been of such enormous importance to me for so long," she continues, "that my habit was to defend it at all costs, I had been defending it for five years and I was sick of it" (p. 186). Essentially she seeks revenge on an ersatz mother-figure, Mrs. Willard, in plotting to seduce the United Nations interpreter, Constantin. "And there would be pleasant irony," she thinks, "in sleeping with a man Mrs. Willard had introduced me to, as if she

were, in a roundabout way to blame for it." She later blames her entire situation (read: psychosis) on the same surrogate mother, and claims that the "lady in the brown suit," whether she knew it or not, was responsible for the wrong turns and wrong paths and "for everything bad that happened after that" (p. 110). In ***Les Mots pour le dire*** the first sexual experience is plotted with equal deliberation. "Ce garçon, je l'avais choisi pour son habileté, il avait la réputation d'être un tombeur, un amant. . . . Il avait accepté gravement de jouer son rôle d'initiateur" (p. 58). Again there is the feeling of an encounter that has ramifications beyond the boundaries of the purely personal experience. In making love with a man whom she does not love and who does not love her, the protagonist protests against the "principles of her class, the prejudices of her family, and certainly against the laws of her mother." Later, in admitting that the most important thing for her was to do everything that had been forbidden, she realizes the extent of her rebellion against her mother.

Patriarchy, non-individualized socialization, and the mother are all implicated in the daughter's madness, but they alone are not the culprit, rather it is the value system which they represent and particularly the female role which they uphold. Psychologist Jean Baker Miller has clearly identified in studies of psychoanalytic treatment gender-specific causes of women's madness, "the belief that women could or should accept and adjust to the stereotyped role has been a cause, not the cure, of their problems."[10] The female role referred to also has a class assignation: bourgeois. There is something peculiarly rigid and inflexible about middle class values which has devastating results for both protagonists and for their already strained relationships with their mothers. Vivian Gornick reports on a poignant real-life case in her essay, "On Trial for Acting Like a Man." Gabrielle Russier, a talented, progressive-thinking, "different" young schoolteacher from Marseille, fell in love with one of her high school students, was imprisoned, persecuted and viciously pursued by the authorities who were determined to make an example of her. Verging on madness at the end of her ordeal, she committed suicide in September, 1969. Gornick writes:

> She was an educated woman of the most unbending middle class in the Western World, a middle class of the most vicious self-importance, a middle class that operates with extraordinary skill and talent inside a rigid set of behavioral rules and plays the Queen of Hearts without mercy when those rules are challenged, especially if they be challenged by a woman.[11]

Marie Cardinal echoes Gornick's evaluation of French society's values throughout her novel. Her narrator says that the entire universe is definitively labeled, ordered, and classified: "Surtout ne pas raisonner, ne pas réfléchir, ne pas remettre en cause, ce serait du temps perdu puisqu'il était impossible d'aboutir à une autre classification." The rigidity of the value system is paralleled only by its comprehensiveness:

> Les valeurs bourgeoises étaient les seules qui étaient bonnes, belles, intelligentes, elles étaient les meilleures. A tel point que je ne savais même pas qu'elles s'appelaient valeurs bourgeoises. Pour moi elles étaient les valeurs, tout court.
>
> (p. 286)

Esther in *The Bell Jar* has a similar problem in identification; she does not name the values which she rejects as bourgeois. The middle class values are represented principally by the mother whom Esther "[makes] a point of never living with for more than a week." Practical, unemotional, and conformist to an extreme, the mother particularly reveals her middle-class attitudes in response to Esther's mental disintegration. After Esther returns from her first shock treatment and announces she is through with Doctor Gordon, her mother smiles: "I knew my baby wasn't like that. . . . Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital. . . . I knew you'd decide to be all right again" (p. 119). When Esther misbehaves at the asylum, her mother's mouth "tightens" in disapproval, and she constantly admonishes her daughter to be grateful. The mother is martyred for having a mad daughter. Madness is also scandalous in the French bourgeoisie. Cardinal emphasizes the class factor:

> [la famille] avait secrété de nouveau son cocon autour de moi, de plus en plus serré . . . Non pas seulement pour me protéger mais aussi pour se protéger elle-même. La folie se porte mal dans une certaine classe, il faut la cacher à tout prix. La folie des aristocrates ou du peuple est considérée comme une excentricité ou une tare, elle s'explique. Mais, dans la nouvelle classe des puissants, elle ne s'admet pas.
>
> (p. 21)

As Cardinal makes clear in this passage, it is not only the patriarchal system as a whole but also the family unit that demands the sacrifice of the individual to ensure collective survival. Madness poses a threat, not least of all to the family. Laing, for example, "sees psychosis at least partly as a revolt against the claustrophobic element of the traditional nuclear family."[12] The mother feels doubly threatened by madness because the daughter is an integral part of her self-identity. Thus the mother/daughter conflict comes full circle.

Throughout the novels we see that both protagonists have, at best, problematic relationships with their mothers. The conflict becomes, in fact, so acute that the