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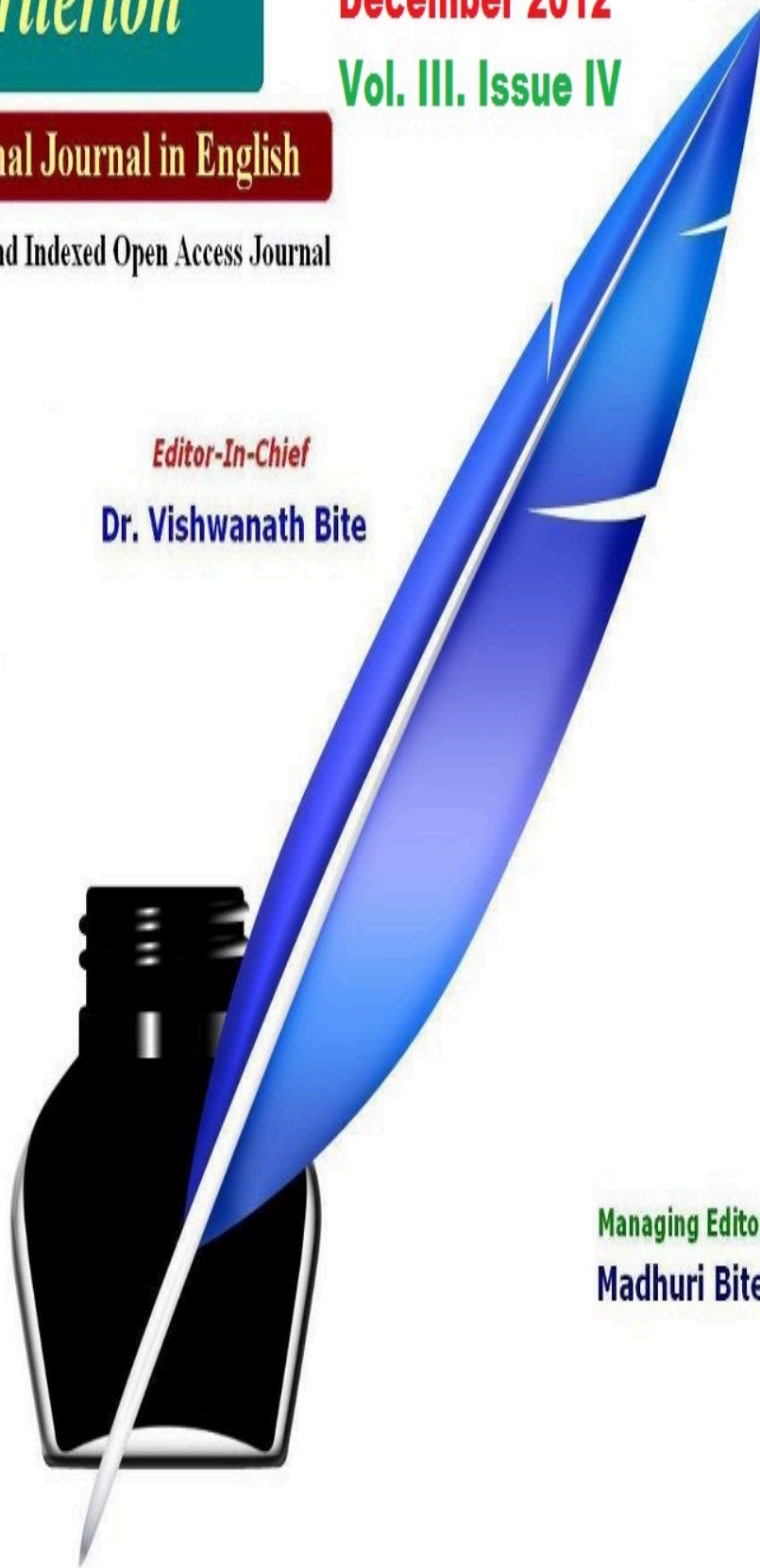
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Women Writers: In an Odd Place

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In this paper, I contend that women were still dealing with oppression in academic circles throughout the 20th century, and the position of the progressive woman writer has received a great deal of scholarly attention lately because of women's odd place in history and culture. I use the two autobiographical manifestos *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath to illustrate my points, as these two women experienced a break in reality because they simply could not reconcile the two halves of their being: the half of them that was woman, and the half that was writer. I look at similarities between the two texts: the wartime setting and politics, elements of captivity and suppression, women's place in the home, opinions about suicide, women's bodies and sexual freedom, and other topics, to make meaning out of the struggles of both women writers that is still useful in the 21st Century.

A professor of literature once told me that most novels and literary movements are highly influenced by the politics and national events that occur during their times, especially wars. However, this has not always been thought true of works written by women. Because of the sexual division of labor, a woman's place has been thought to be restricted to the home and social circles, not professional business places or political debates. However, women writers have snuck their way into these matters; As Virginia Woolf states: "fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners" (*A Room of One's Own*). Until recently, the myth about a woman's place has persisted. All of the archaic stereotypes about women; that they are the weaker, feeble-minded sex, that they belong in the kitchen, that their most important job is to raise children; built up to the myth that women's literature is not political and should not be read so. Sylvia Plath and Susanna Kaysen worked hard to discredit these myths in their autobiographical manifestos, and years of literary criticism have debated a woman's place, the relevance of their literary works to politics, and finally, the subversive techniques of exceptional women writers who blend radical new approaches to each of these perplexities in a way that advocates the freedom and relevance of women's opinions effectively. I contend that women were still dealing with oppression in academic circles throughout the 20th century, and the position of the progressive woman writer has received a great deal of scholarly attention lately because of women's odd place in history and culture. In this paper, I organize a range of research in a way that defines the plight of a woman writer in relation to Plath and Kaysen's autobiographical manifestos.

In my research, I have found several main currents of thought swirling around my primary texts, *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and feminist theory regarding women's writing along with its place in culture and politics. Perhaps the most relevant bits of theory on this topic are Virginia Woolf's essays "Professions for Women" and "A Room of One's Own." These pieces examine the practicalities of writing for women: whether it is a job or a "hobby," what conditions a woman must achieve in order to write, what obstacles a woman must overcome to be successfully published, and the lack of written history of previous woman writers. These pieces coincide with Germaine de Stael's "On

Women Writers,” which champions intellectual women and proclaims a need for them in French high society. Nancy Armstrong’s “Some Call It Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity” binds the two schools of thought in its title, politics and domesticity, in the woman writer, stating that she can be relevant to both. Finally, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s work examines the effects of 19th century women’s literature, and the efforts women writers took for their work to be taken seriously during that time. These texts together resonate that writing has put women in danger, and thus, they have needed to be subversive in order for their work to make a difference without public scorn and humiliation.

The natural conclusion in many of these texts, because of the woman’s lack of an artistic outlet, is for the woman writer to commit suicide or go insane rather than endure suppression. This relates directly to my primary texts because Kaysen and Plath were both institutionalized and attempted suicide. The realities that these women endured shaped the endings of their manifestos, as Kaysen’s heroine, explicitly self-titled, makes it back into the “real world,” and Plath’s heroine Esther leaves the reader as she interviews for release from the hospital. (For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the authors by their last names and the characters by their first names.) Virginia Woolf, a woman writer and feminist, states that “a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (*A Room of One’s Own*). Modern America touts freedom and equality for all, and as some of its own citizens have been extremely discouraged from their own pursuit of happiness as recently as the last fifty years, it is the duty of American scholars to study this hypocrisy and make it known to the public.

The novels by Plath and Kaysen are perfect candidates for textual research on the woman writer and politics, as they were both written by women and took place during significant wartimes in the United States: the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Appropriately, the role of women in society and in the home lurked in relation to national turmoil during both of these times, as I will explain. While the main focus of each is the author’s autobiographical narrative, the historical underpinnings are undeniably relevant to the main character’s lot in life, making them part of each novel’s message to the reader and contribution to literary discussion.

Esther Greenwood, Plath’s protagonist, is a guest editor for a month at *Mademoiselle Magazine* before her mental decline. She muses about how people must think of her: “Look what can happen in this country, they’d say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town...and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car” (Plath 3). She goes on to explain that her apparent success is not that simple; she is not comfortable with that conventional, professional lifestyle. Esther deals daily with the expectations of young women in the fifties, during a time when a cosmopolitan lifestyle was stylish, but the lifestyle of a homemaker was expected. The execution of the Rosenbergs, a communist American family who leaked national secrets to the Soviet Union, haunts her as a reminder of the consequences of straying from the American ideal from page one. For her, straying would mean having sex before marriage, moving to Europe to find a lover, and ultimately rejecting domesticity (Plath 137). The novel’s ending leaves the reader unsure whether Esther will conform or triumph; possible release from the mental hospital is her only victory.

Susanna Kaysen focuses on the Vietnam War as she saw it from the television of a mental institution, and as it was preceded by interactions between the girls staying there (Kaysen 30); she also reflects on her time working in an office and her interactions with authority figures (Kaysen 131-133). Her observations revolve around violence and sexism, in the war and her own experiences respectively. This text also focuses on options available for women in the workplace, and how women trapped in an asylum interact with and are separated from society. Although these women are invisible to the public eye, they can follow current events closely and judge them by the way their lives will be affected once they are released. Kaysen's solution is strong and clear: she can make a life out of "boyfriends and literature" (Kaysen 155) and only peer at convention from a position of independence from it.

The characters' apprehensions and lack of agency are preceded by sexism already entrenched in American culture. This lack of voice is symbolized in the disabled female body, which is the topic of Marilyn Boyer's essay. She states that the girls' bodies "can be read as metaphors for a language that is interfered with, interrupted, manipulated, and deadened" (Boyer 221). This silencing on a personal level is compounded by the silencing of women on a national level, which is particularly problematic for women writers. The Cold War Era can be characterized by the entrapment of women in the home, as Esther fears she will be, and second-wave feminism came hot on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, just after Susanna Kaysen's time in McLean Hospital. Both novels take place during eras that are highly sensitive to gender norms and women's rights, or the private sphere. In these eras, it is risky for a woman's reputation and self-worth to step outside of her prescribed role and pursue public relevance. She must choose between two kinds of isolation, with conformity as the only way to be integrated with other people and minutely credible as a member of society. The authors include political commentary in their books to establish their female heroines as aware and educated in these matters, and the commentary itself as relevant and historically significant.

Esther reveals her opinion of the Rosenbergs' deaths before her institutionalization, when she discusses the issue with Hilda, another guest editor. Previously, Hilda is described as shallow, when Esther remarks "I don't know if Hilda could read, but she made startling hats" (Plath 31). She responds to Hilda's enthusiasm about the Rosenbergs, remarking that "at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat's cradle of her heart" (Plath 111). Again, the political is linked with the cultural by using a girl's game to describe an emotional response to a political discussion. It is almost impossible to read that quote with a separation of the two in mind, which Nancy Armstrong opposes in her essay. She writes, "To move beyond the impasse that prevents us from situating this work in history, we have, it seems to me, to toss out the idea that the gendering of vast areas of culture was a consequence of political events over which men had control" (Armstrong 1421). Therefore, if women have broken through the glass ceiling and become politically relevant, Sylvia Plath's novels can be read in a political context as well as a cultural one. Because Hilda is made human in her desire for the Rosenbergs to die, one can only infer that Esther sides with her in this patriotic matter. Her position is further clarified by Esin Kumlu, research assistant at Ataturk University: as a young girl taking part in an American society, where adults are encouraged to "[turn] back to the family in order to protect oneself from the so-called 'enemy within'" (Kumlu 136). It is patriotic to support the execution of traitors who might endanger the family by infiltration. In that historical event, the family was bound up in the political, making it a perfect element for a woman's novel. This confusing

negotiation of ideals endemic to her identity as a progressive American woman, however, leads to Esther's mental demise. Her patriotism and conformity in this matter conflict with her controversial opinions in other matters, for example: her desire for an unconventional profession and freedom of sexuality. A similar situation plagues Susanna Kaysen in the 1960s, but her voice remains silenced for the time being inside McLean Hospital.

Kaysen observes parallels between happenings in the asylum and political news, which she and the inmates crave to be a part of. She assures the reader that "whoever it was, we knew about it already: the Bay of Pigs, the seared skin, the bare-handed killers who'd do anything. We'd seen the previews" (Kaysen 30). This establishes a political atmosphere inside the asylum, which is turned around when the inmates identify with Civil Rights rioters. The girls would "cheer them on, those little people on our TV screen...[They] thought eventually they'd get around to 'liberating' [them] too" (Kaysen 92). Though the girls are living outside of American society and are never liberated like the other subordinated groups, they can monitor American politics and feel involved. Armstrong eerily speaks to almost that exact passage, in that "we have to acknowledge as middle-class intellectuals we are not critical mirrors of a separate and more primary process orchestrated by others" (Armstrong 1425). Women must make historical progress themselves in order to build upon and interact with that of men, e.g. lawmaking and political commentary. By pointing out that the goings on of the girls in the institution are not repetitions of current events but their own events that happen to coincide with history, usually happening before the historical events, Kaysen empowers them. The girls are involved in two systems of politics: one within the hospital and one outside of it. The problem is that these systems are spatially separated. The girls see what is happening in both spheres, but their private facility keeps them invisible to the outside world. This mirage of involvement leads the girls to believe that, because they see the rioters on television and feel like active participants in the Civil Rights Movement, their own civil rights will be restored and they will no longer be invisible and stigmatized. Though she was kept in a mental institution during the sixties, Susanna could not escape from news of the war, and she used her experience of the oppressive and tense atmosphere in the institution to make sense of it.

Similarly, women were almost completely absent from the news that Esther and Susanna watched on television and read about in the newspapers, so encountering that news as a woman, and a mental patient to boot, confuses these heroines and makes them feel marginalized. Almost every scholar I researched had something to say about this topic: the absence of women in public and the strict boundaries imposed upon them. The rift this causes is described by Armstrong as a "sexual division of labor that underwrites and naturalizes the difference between culture and politics" (1419). In this skewed perception, culture is women's sphere, the private sphere, and politics is men's, the public sphere. As long as women embrace their duties in the home and the cultural sphere, the political and public sphere, in its dominance, will be left to men and men only. Women who are not active in the political sphere (all women) will not have a say in it, even if the political sphere holds sway over their lives. This phenomenon breeds anxiety and conflict, especially in women writers, because Woolf's webs of fiction that I mentioned in the beginning are spun by "suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (Professions for Women). As Plath and Kaysen are mentally unhealthy and do not have immediate access to money and a home, they have no viable voice in political matters, or cultural ones, for that matter. Because of this, they are

understandably confused about their personal identities. In this state, they have been infantilized and, indeed, dehumanized. Compounding these difficulties, their plight is much like that of 19th century women writers, as Gilbert and Gubar explain, who “were plainly much troubled by the fact that they needed to communicate truths which other (i.e. male) writers apparently never felt or expressed” (Gilbert 1534). If America maintains a patriarchal society and literary tradition, women will not only find it harder to be taken seriously and published, but they will also have to make their unconventional and unheard-of views easy for the public to understand and difficult for them to reject. This calls for serious literary engineering, with critical attention paid to acceptable characters and plotlines. It seems that Plath and Kaysen have done the impossible.

The titles of both of these books shed light on the disconnection that each girl has with her surroundings, and both titles appear inside the works. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther reflects that no matter what part of the world she may retreat to, she “would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air” (Plath 209). Esther moves from a hotel room in New York, back to her mother’s house, and in and out of state and private hospitals. The bell jar follows her, and the motion allows her to stay emotionally isolated, having no constant contact with any single person. Her cloud of stale air can follow her wherever she goes, and nobody will know her well enough to sense it. She characterizes her depression and anxiety as a stifling bell jar that skews her perceptions, but can be lifted by electroshock therapy, when administered correctly (Plath 271). She also fears that this “bell jar” of depression might descend on her again in the future, without warning (Plath 271). The key idea, as this image pertains to this essay, is that Esther’s condition isolates her and intensifies her feeling of displacement in society. It becomes instrumental to her actual displacement in society, when she is institutionalized. Susanna’s isolation is also explained in a metaphor of physical separation.

Kaysen gets the title *Girl, Interrupted* from a rare Vermeer in the Frick, called “*Girl Interrupted at her Music*,” which Susanna visits at key moments in the text. She sees it for the first time with her English teacher, who she knows has a romantic interest in her. She interprets that the girl in the painting “had looked up from her work to warn [her]” (Kaysen 166). She explains that she didn’t heed that warning and proceeded to fail biology but still graduate high school, and suffered mental illness (Kaysen 166). This episode came before any clinical treatment, and Susanna was only beginning her break with reality. She was indulging in promiscuous behavior, though she denies that label to a point, when she dates her teacher. Susanna may have known that it was wrong, and used the picture to make sense of her moral dilemma. In that case, she went on to kiss her teacher even though she knew it was not right. The second time she views the painting, she is with her rich, unnamed boyfriend. This time, the girl is sad, young, distracted, and “looking out, looking for someone who would see her” (Kaysen 167). She consciously applies the painting to her own life, through projection, as she had been “interrupted in the music of being seventeen...snatched and fixed on canvas” (Kaysen 167). When Susanna recognizes the girl in the painting, saying “I see you” (Kaysen 167), she recognizes and comes to terms with herself. Susanna is still dissatisfied with her life; her boyfriend does not understand her and she wants to be with someone who does. She also wants to finally move past the label she earned during her seventeenth year: a patient suffering “borderline personality disorder.” Legitimizing the girl in the painting helps her realize that she should advocate for her own unique desires and work towards the goal of a life she can enjoy. Eventually, once she finds her niche, she can look at the painting and only appreciate the glow that it has (Kaysen 168). She realizes that she is not

the only one who wants others to see her “glow,” but that this is part of the human condition, especially for a woman writer. Acknowledging the girl in the portrait breaks the fourth wall of the painting, as well as the physical barrier between the surface of the canvas and the real world that symbolizes Susanna’s break with reality.

The metaphors of isolation both apply to the main characters’ gendered restriction as well, as women of their times remained chaste, on a pedestal of virginity. They are expected to remain “pure” while young men are allowed to engage in sexual activity. This phenomenon is established and historical, reaching back to Virginia Woolf’s hypothetical Elizabethan woman, Shakespeare’s sister, whose maddeningly prescribed life inspires Woolf to comment that “chastity...has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest” (*A Room of One’s Own*). Her life had been mapped out for her the moment her X and X chromosomes came together. In English society, the topic of sex was able to remain so taboo because of tradition so strong that it could remain unspoken. Sexual misbehavior (any sexual behavior at all, in this case) had to warrant ostracism and isolation, because there was simply no formula for dealing with it. If a woman could not remain isolated as a virgin, she would remain isolated as an alleged whore. This precedent is a sneak preview of the sexual protocol for 20th Century women.

This restriction of sexual freedom pulls at the rift between male and female expectations in both books, and distresses both heroines. Esther is lectured by her mother on the importance of chastity, and she sends her an article that explains how “the best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren’t pure, they wanted to...teach their wives about sex” (Plath 89). Esther decides that “if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one [she] might as well forget about staying pure [herself]” (Plath 90). Esther is finally justified in her decision when a positive female influence, Dr. Nolan, refers Esther to a doctor in town for a diaphragm fitting. Esther worries that what she is doing might be illegal, and considers telling the doctor that she is engaged in order to seem innocent (Plath 248-251). All of the prescriptions and beliefs Esther hears from her mother and conventional authority figures make her feel so guilty for her natural human urges that she would deny them of herself if Dr. Nolan never intervenes. This act, however, allows Esther to “make her own language by freeing herself from the symbolic order...she uses her body for her own expected pleasure by entering into the world of sexual relations” (Boyer 219). This is only one step in the process of self-actualization, which will allow her to begin writing again. Esther’s fixation on chastity provided a creative mental block, and this problem can be projected onto women writers throughout history, Shakespeare’s sister, for example (*A Room of One’s Own*). Combined with psychological distress, women were denied an array of experiences and subject matter to put into their works of literature. The naivety this caused in women was another reason for their works to be disregarded.

Susanna was similarly defensive about her sexual desires because she was labeled “promiscuous” in her medical file. She puzzles over how many girls “a seventeen-year-old boy would have to screw to earn the label ‘compulsively promiscuous’...and for seventeen-year-old girls, how many boys?” (Kaysen 158). She muses that she had never heard of a man diagnosed with compulsive promiscuity. This is the exact same issue that Esther had; she was warned about the dangers of premarital sex while the article’s author admitted it was permissible for men. One major difference is that *Girl, Interrupted* took place years later, during the sexual revolution of

the 1960s. Susanna and the girls discuss the difficulty of having sex on five, ten, and fifteen minute checks (Kaysen 65-67). They openly use the words “fuck” and “screw,” signaling that this topic is not taboo by any means, but as said screwing is not allowed inside the institution, it still has consequences. Nancy Armstrong argues that domestic fiction “laid claim to the right to privacy on the behalf of each individual. Yet this class set in motion the systematic invasion of private life by surveillance, observation, evaluation, and remediation” (Armstrong 1425). This idea mirrors the paradox evident in Kaysen’s story: a woman could have her privacy as long as she kept herself in check; a woman considered too promiscuous or mentally unstable has her privacy ripped away and is subject to constant surveillance. Women’s rights had progressed from a minimal level for every woman to all or nothing, depending on the woman’s level of conformity to “sane” behavior. This observation is relevant to history, as it shows the state of women mental patients in the 1960s, but it can also be read as commentary on the sexuality of women in general. They are expected to “save themselves” until marriage, and as long as they at least keep up that appearance, they are left alone. However, once a woman is exposed as “impure,” she is labeled for life. Only women who can show that they amount to more than these one-dimensional stereotypes can be truly successful and thought of as whole human beings, though there is no room for it in tradition.

The woman authority figures in both novels provide positive, progressive role models to the young heroines and are more trustworthy and virtuous than the men, much as Plath and Kaysen would like to be after the publication of their books. Esther was administered electroshock therapy by a male doctor, Dr. Gordon, without anesthetics (161), but was assured by the female Dr. Nolan, that ““that was a mistake...it’s not supposed to be like that”” (Plath 213). During her session with Dr. Gordon, she feels “with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I though my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant” (Plath 161). Dr. Nolan goes on to give Esther effective electroshock therapy, with anesthetics, which seems to work miraculously and helps her improve quickly (Plath 242). Dr. Nolan was able to calm Esther enough to trust her with the procedure after a terrifying experience with electroshock therapy. Germaine de Stael argues that “women are the ones at the heart of everything relating to humanity, generosity, [and] delicacy” (De Stael 295). She believes that “enlightening, teaching, and perfecting women together with men on the national and individual level...must be the secret for the achievement of every reasonable goal, as well as the establishment of any permanent social or political relationships” (De Stael 295). Men have the advantages of societal approval and education (which are slowly becoming available to women), while women have the emotional insight to put this knowledge and power to use in a healthy, effective way. Dr. Gordon waived the importance of anesthetics because he lacked empathy. Dr. Nolan, with the knowledge of a doctor and the heart of a woman, had to make up for his mistakes and administer the therapy with extra attention paid to Esther’s comfort before, during, and after the procedure. However, this woman professional still remains on the fringe of morality because she prescribes birth control for Esther, keeping Dr. Nolan in and “odd place.” Her justification is that she has achieved a position in a field predominated by males and provides Esther with a positive female influence. Similarly, Susanna experienced neglect from male doctors and understanding from female ones. She dwells on the fact that a male doctor she had never met “decided to put [her] away after only fifteen minutes,” and assured her she only needed a short rest (Kaysen 39). Susanna recovered during her time in the hospital; “he tricked [her] though: a couple of weeks. It was closer to two

years” (Kaysen 39). At the time, Susanna does not feel that her behavior merits two years of institutionalization. In contrast to this man, “Valerie [the nurse] was strict and inflexible and she was the only staff person [the girls] trusted” (Kaysen 83). Valerie is not a doctor, analyst, or psychiatrist, but she works with the girls all day, in between their other appointments, and provides down-to-earth stability. Susanna’s analyst Melvin has a rather small effect on her recovery, as “it calmed me to sit in his office without having to explain myself. But he couldn’t leave well enough alone” (Kaysen 116). Once, awkwardly, “‘you want to sleep with me,’ he crowed” (Kaysen 116). He never molests her or does her wrong as a doctor, but he is ultimately boring and lets her apathy about recovery slide. He also views his patients through the lens of sexism, which is not conducive to recovery. One scandalous line from De Stael’s work states that “men are quite willing to tolerate women’s degradation of the heart, so long as it is accompanied by mediocrity of the mind” (De Stael 293). Historically, women have been viewed by men as hysterical and insane for displaying characteristically feminine emotions; this quote implies that men only look for controlled, “rational” behavior, no matter how a woman fares emotionally. As I quoted earlier, De Stael wrote that women have the “humanity, generosity, [and] delicacy” (295) that men lack. That is why Susanna never feels threatened by any of her female attendants, strange as they may be, but Melvin is the one to make a sexual advance. All Melvin is looking for in his therapy sessions with Susanna is evidence that she remains outwardly normal. Valerie is with her in the ward during the day, and she is able to have real conversations with her outside of an office or therapy setting. Though Valerie is strict, she deals with what’s actually going on inside Susanna’s head. It is interesting to me that these books delineate such a divide between men and women, between agency and emotion, while they champion the integration of male and female prescribed roles in the name of equality and women’s rights. The very traits that make women better doctors in these books can also be used to prove that they belong in the private sphere, which is the problem that Susanna and Esther struggle with.

The positive effects these doctors have on the girls’ mental health are not quite enough; they cannot help the girls to find their odd niche in a uniform society. In her longing for freedom and excitement, Esther contemplates going to Europe to find a lover, putting off college for a year to be a pottery apprentice, and working as a waitress in Germany to become bilingual (Plath 137). A few pages later, she decides that none of this is practical and that she should “go to work for a year and think things over” (Plath 140). This presents another complication, because she does not know shorthand. She muses, “I could be a waitress or a typist. But I couldn’t stand the idea of being either one” (Plath 140). Esther is clearly cut out for more than housewifery, as she has accumulated many scholarships and a guest editorship. However, the greatness she wants to pursue is virtually out of her reach. She is missing one crucial step in her pursuit of a meaningful career: abandoning the ideals that she has been raised to strive for. Virginia Woolf calls this “killing the Angel in the House,” which is “part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Professions for Women). The Angel in the House represents the enforcement of 1950s homemaker ideals, emphasizing meekness and silence. She is the embodiment of the forces that freeze Esther in place during this sultry, infamous summer. Esther is institutionalized before she can make any decisions about her career, or kill her own Angel in the House, and the end of the book leaves the reader wondering what she will do next.

This signals that there is progress yet to be made before women can make their own life decisions, and furthermore, opt for unconventional careers. Gilbert and Gubar write, in “The

Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” that “an extraordinary number of literary women either eschewed or grew beyond both female ‘modesty’ and male mimicry” (Gilbert 1533). They discuss how the only subversive, and thereby successful, ways progressive women writers could communicate their ideas were by staying within the bounds of accepted female plotlines and mirroring their subversive ideas in a monstrous double of their heroine, or mimicking already accepted male plots (Gilbert 1533, 1537). Plath does neither one of these things, in her refusal to follow prescribed literary patterns. Her heroine is not proven to be successful in pursuit of her ideals, and she does not reveal what happens to a truly contrary woman to reveal the unfairness in the treatment of women. In this case, she puts herself in an odd place, because of her dissatisfaction for conformity, which she ends up embracing. She leaves her ending open for the reader to decide Esther’s fate, which will say something about the reader’s own character, much like gothic literature does. Therefore, Plath foregoes her true convictions in exchange for literary acceptance. Though the open ending may empower the reader, it also translates as an easy way out for Esther, who never really asserts herself, as Susanna does.

Susanna is painfully in tune with her perceptions and opinions throughout the book, which keeps her from permanent insanity, and helps her find her seemingly impossible career. She does not like her social worker; she comments “she didn’t understand that this was me, and I was going to be a writer; I was not going to type term bills or sell au gratin bowls or do any other stupid things” (Kaysen 133). At this point, it is not yet a matter of attaining greatness, but only of doing something worthwhile with her time. Later, Susanna finally learns how to make a life of “boyfriends and literature...as far as [she] could see, life demanded skills [she] didn’t have” (Kaysen 155), until she realizes that there is a way around those skills. She sums up that none of the “keepers” at the hospital could help the girls with their life decisions, when she remarks “as for finders—well, we had to be our own finders” (Kaysen 91). One crucial step in the acquisition of independence is finding solutions for oneself, so if the “keepers” helped the girls do their finding, they would never survive outside of the hospital. This applies to Susanna especially, since her niche did not fit into their cookie-cutter idea of success. Susanna had to learn to be satisfied with looking at the world as if distracted, living in her own space with her own glow. Virginia Woolf justifies this in “A Room of One’s Own”, as “money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for.” Susanna could not find the value in her writing previously, though she knew that it was her calling all along, because she was not getting paid for it. Once she finds a way to do that, her lifestyle is suddenly acceptable. Susanna Kaysen turns her personal success into progress in the genre of women’s literature.

Kaysen’s manifesto is progressive in a different way than Plath’s, as her heroine finds her niche and lives on somewhat happily. Gilbert and Gubar state that 19th and 20th century women writers “have been especially concerned with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature” (1536). The integrated woman is very new, historically speaking, which explains why the 1960s heroine achieves her goal and the 1950s heroine does not. Virginia Woolf paints the integrated woman as a “worm winged like an eagle” (A Room of One’s Own). Susanna achieves this kind of beautiful monstrosity by surviving in society (the worm) while maintaining poetic beauty (the eagle). All of this points to the formula of success for a woman writer: a little bit of everything.

The three classic images that men’s works usually confine women to are the pure, naive virgin, the whore, and the loving matron. Rather than choose one of the three stereotypical personas for

herself or subvert all of them in staunch opposition, as in *The Bell Jar*, Kaysen blends them all into her vulnerable, promiscuous, and finally, wise heroine. She remains vulnerable after her transformation because, regarding her sanity, she says “I’ll always have to think about it” (Kaysen 159). She realizes that “promiscuous” is only a relative term, in that it is ““more commonly diagnosed in women,”” (Kaysen 157) rather than more commonly occurring. She achieves wisdom in being able to view herself in “the fitful, overcast light of life, by which we see ourselves and others only imperfectly, and seldom (Kaysen 168). Susanna pieces together the fragmented picture of herself, at the same time discrediting stereotypes and representing all women in literature. There is more to any real woman than strict innocence, promiscuity, or maternity, and Susanna Kaysen brings this integrated woman to life in her own recovery and in her record of it.

Both endings, resulting in some kind of freedom, symbolize the response to the repression of women in their respective time periods. Esther approaches her interview to be released at the end of *The Bell Jar*, yet the reader does not know where she will end up, and with what career. Her life virtually ends, as so many women writers including Sylvia Plath herself, fictitious or real, committed suicide to escape their prescribed fate. Real women in the 1950s showed little resistance to the perfect housewife ideal and often strove to achieve it, taking pride in such minor careers as that of a stenographer. In short, it was a much more difficult job for women in that time to kill Virginia Woolf’s *Angel in the House*. Women could be writers because “the family peace was not disturbed by the scratching of a pen” (*Professions for Women*), but the family peace still had to be kept after the work was published. The ugly communist picture of Russia scared Cold War women into their strict roles and kept them there as a matter of patriotism. Though there is a ray of hope in this inconclusive ending, it is just that: inconclusive.

In contrast, Susanna’s unconventional but happy return to independence symbolizes the defiance of young people in the 1960s, who delighted in divergence from the acceptable. Susanna’s story ends after she has been released, though on a marriage proposal, but she has established a meaningful career and perception of her own life. Her success is even greater in the fact that she once thought of her ideal as impossible, but now possesses it. Kaysen succeeds in Virginia Woolf’s ideal truth in writing, by “letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being” (*Professions for Women*). Susanna elaborates on boyfriends, smoking, sex, her parents, her doctors, and other topics, from tame to taboo, openly. The national climate finally allows for a woman not only to speak her mind, but also to explore her mind publicly, perhaps with the threat of judgment, but without the fear of it.

Despite their difference in fate, both main characters endure captivity and achieve freedom. Gilbert and Gubar argue that “imagery of enclosure reflects the woman writer’s own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, [and] her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places (1540). Esther fears the “alien and incomprehensible” so much that she must reject both of her options, that which is alien to herself and that which is alien to society, in order to avoid it. She takes the consolation prize of almost-certain approval based on her clinical sanity and return to the outside world, where her occupation is still left to be determined. The “alien and incomprehensible” is diminished for Susanna, because she is no longer trapped in McLean, but she still relishes her independence, unconventional career, and choices of love interests. Armstrong empowers each of these endings as historically relevant because “we must read

fiction not as literature but as the history of gender differences and a means by which we have reproduced a class and culture specific form of consciousness (Armstrong 1432). This responds to the enigma I wondered at earlier: why women make better doctors than men for inherent reasons, but those reasons can also be used to assign them to the private sphere. Fiction, especially when it is based on facts, is a reliable, in-depth way to learn about suppressed demographics throughout history, especially during wartimes. It can also help us learn how to deal with problems that still exist, pertaining to equal rights and equality, which are so important to our American principles. In short, it helps us make sure that history does not repeat itself. Women's rights had not progressed to the point that Esther could achieve her ideal. However, through the turbulence of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, both of which occurred during Kaysen's time, women writers were able to come out of their alien places and embrace their differences and capabilities, shattering androcentric stereotypes and liberating their readers.

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