

“If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one
and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell.”¹

The Fight Against Fragmentation and Reduction in the 1960s Female *Bildungsroman*:

O'Brien, Plath, and Lessing

Lauren Ogg

Honors Thesis

1 November 2019

Department of English

University of Colorado Boulder

Primary Advisor

Dr. Jeremy Green Associate Professor
Department of English

Honors Council Representative

Dr. Maria Windell Assistant Professor
Department of English

Outside Reader

Eric O. Klinger Senior Instructor
Department of Writing and Rhetoric

¹ Plath, Sylvia, et al. *The Bell Jar: a Novel*. Harper, 2013, 94.

Abstract:

In this project I have examined three novels dating from the early 1960s that coincide with the start of second-wave feminism. These novels are classified as female *Bildungsromans*, a genre of novel that is in place to offer a voice to the misrepresented women of the classic *Bildungsroman*, whose lives were expected to end in marriage or a curated happy ending. The cluster of novels that challenge the *Bildungsroman* expectations in both form and content are the following: Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Each of the novels pushes against various gender norms that have acted as regulators for women's behavior in patriarchal society. These norms include motherhood, marriage, mental health, intimate female relationships, and the objectification of the female body. In challenging these norms, the novels create an image of what the struggling mid-twentieth century woman looks like, and the importance of that depiction in second-wave feminism and the resistance of patriarchal traditions.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Literary Context and Definition of Terms	2
Chapter 1: “I’ll drink Lysol or any damn thing to get out of here:” Edna O’Brien’s <i>The Country Girls</i>	15
Chapter 2: “A girl who was crazy enough to kill herself:” Sylvia Plath’s <i>The Bell Jar</i>	30
Chapter 3: “It occurred to her that she was going mad:” Doris Lessing’s <i>The Golden Notebook</i>	51
Conclusion: The Intersection of Culture and History	70
Works Cited:	73

Introduction: Literary Context and Definition of Terms

I. The *Bildungsroman* Origins

The resistance to social cohesion present in the title quote that is taken from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* is an act of resistance against one of the major tenets of the traditional *Bildungsroman* form, conformity. Esther Greenwood, Plath's protagonist, refuses to be operate as a socially acceptable woman that conforms to norms, and this behavior is representative of an attitude that governs each of the amended *Bildungsroman* texts in discussion. However, to recognize the importance of the many adaptations that each of the female authors in discussion make, one must be aware of the *Bildungsroman* origins.

Moretti and critics declare Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795) as the form's original texts, and each novel presents ways in which an individual can achieve happiness, a condition that hinges on social cohesion.² However, the modern *Bildungsroman* makes a departure from its nineteenth century counterparts, as evidenced through James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Contrary to the original ideal of social cohesion, Joyce's novel encourages social nonconformity and art as a vocational option. This ideal of social rebellion influences and is embedded into the creation of the female *Bildungsroman*. Although the nineteenth-century form of the *Bildungsroman* differs greatly from its modern counterparts, many of the basic elements, such as a need to use the everyday as a device for social commentary, remains.

Moretti defines the *Bildungsroman* most simply as the “novel of formation,' 'of initiation,' 'of education' . . . in all of the major literary traditions.”³ In the first chapter of his book,

² Moretti, 64.

³ Moretti, 15.

The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture, Moretti identifies multiple tenets that he has determined are what make the *Bildungsroman* unique, and they are imperative in understanding the vague definition that is the “novel of formation.” While the short definition is accurate, the need to expand on this topic exists in order to fully understand the importance of the form’s manipulation.

The social commentary aspect of the *Bildungsroman* is one that I find of utmost importance, and it is an aspect that is heavily emphasized by Moretti. Aspects that contribute to the commentarial nature of the genre is rooted in “hostility towards the State—or at least indifference.”⁴ Norms are rebelled against in order to take a stand, but in order to understand such aversion and rebellion, Moretti notes that “the ideal reader of the classical *Bildungsroman* is, in a broad sense, a bourgeois reader.”⁵ This reader is educated and cultured, giving him or her the education necessary to understand the relevance of the social commentary present in the novel. This bourgeois reader is able to relate to what Moretti defines as the “bourgeois' dilemma: the clash between individual autonomy and social integration,”⁶ which is the conflict at the core of the *Bildungsroman* novel and essential to its purpose.

With the conflict of individual autonomy and social integration at the core of the form, the role of the protagonist is not to be understated. The youth of the protagonist is central to the form, as Moretti defines the bourgeois youth as the following: “rather than a *preparation for something else*, it [youth] becomes a *value in itself*, and the individual's greatest desire is to

⁴ Moretti, 52.

⁵ Moretti, 65.

⁶ Moretti, 67.

prolong it, [emphasis original]”⁷ thus prompting the creation of the “adolescent” category in the twentieth century and the explosion of the socially rebellious *Bildungsroman*.⁸ The novel revolves around this youthful character, but “everything takes place around him, but not *because of him* [emphasis original].”⁹ This character’s actions and behavior advance the plot, and the text is read from his perspective, but he appears as a passive figure who is facing various trials (that he must see as opportunity)¹⁰ in order to reach full social formation.

A form of relatability, “the [*Bildungsroman*] novel organizes and ‘refines’ this form of existence, making it ever more alive and interesting.”¹¹ The novel’s interest in the everyday is complemented by the need for a “happy ending.” This happy ending often exists in the form of a social contract and is “why the classical *Bildungsroman* ‘must’ always conclude with marriages....[it is a] ‘pact’ between the individual and the world.”¹² If not marriage, the character must present as fully socialized and therefore a functioning adult, a contributing member to society. Full socialization equates to a proper happy ending.

Aspects of Moretti’s definition are echoed by one of his contemporaries, Peter Freese. Freese writes of the “journey of life” in American fiction, a genre that echoes and has roots in the classic *Bildungsroman*. Freese quotes Bakhtin’s definition of the form, one he refers to as “the novel of human emergence” that is concerned with a character’s “acquisition of concrete

⁷ Moretti, 177.

⁸ i.e., Joyce.

⁹ Moretti, 20.

¹⁰ Moretti, 48.

¹¹ Moretti, 35.

¹² Moretti, 22.

experiences towards lucidity about himself and the world.”¹³ Moretti’s text is primarily concerned with eighteenth and early nineteenth-century texts, while Freese writes of more contemporary works—therefore, his succinct definition is equally as applicable for the discussion of the twentieth-century texts used in this project. I will be using both author’s definitions in conjunction to form a comprehensive definition of the *Bildungsroman* form, which I define as the following: the *Bildungsroman* is a novel that is traditionally rooted in male experience and is a novel of maturity and emotional development. The protagonist lies at the center, and the narrative revolves around his actions and reactions. He is met with trials along the way that shape him into the person he is destined to become, resulting in a matured adult that has successfully ingratiated himself into society. The recording of this character’s journey from innocence to maturity is often representative of a larger social commentary regarding some aspect of society or development.

Despite the differences in the character’s ages and location, the *Bildungsroman* form ties all three novels in question together. Specifically, each novel is a female *Bildungsroman*, and thus presents an urgent need to break from the traditional, male, conformist, form that is dictated by Moretti. The breakdown of the classic *Bildungsroman* form exists on a continuum, and the experimentation escalates in correspondence with the order in which I have placed the individual chapters relating to each novel. The progression begins with Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls* (1960), is followed by Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), and culminates with Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962). In a parallel structure, the progression of these novels also

¹³ Freese, Peter. "The "Journey of Life" in American Fiction." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 19, no. 2 (2013), 257.

corresponds with the age of the protagonists—as the novels become more mature (in both form and content) and experimental, so do the characters.

II. The Female *Bildungsroman*

Moretti and Freese's definition of the *Bildungsroman*, which have influenced my own working definition, is heavily gendered. When one examines the language used in each author's definition, it is evident that the genre has traditionally been male-centric. "Him," "he," and "his" are the preferred pronouns, and the women that are depicted in the form are most often expected to marry.¹⁴ In the case of *Jane Eyre*, Jane achieves agency and autonomy only to marry Mr. Rochester and create a suitable husband out of him. She becomes a rich wife living in a fantasy-like world, where the best possible outcome prevails. Jane struggles, but her struggles are dismissed once she achieves the highest reward—Mr. Rochester. Thus, the traditional *Bildungsroman* form is insufficient in representing the lives of females. Women's struggles do not dissipate upon nuptials, nor does every woman find her problems solved with an abundance of money. Women, as human beings, are far more complicated and deserve their own form that explores the struggle of what it is to exist as a female in a patriarchal world. This lack of a proper female account created the space for the female *Bildungsroman*, a term whose coining coincides with the advent of second-wave feminism: "In the 1970s, feminist critics used the term "female *Bildungsroman*" to describe coming-of-age stories featuring female protagonists."¹⁵ The cluster of novels in question, published 1960-1963, pioneer a modern movement in creating a female version of the form that properly explores the female experience.

¹⁵ Pressman, Laura. "The Frauenroman: a Female Perspective in Coming-of-Age Stories." The *Bildungsroman* Project. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 2013.

Feminist scholar Carol Lazzaro-Weis expresses the need for accurate representation of women's lives in her article: "the female *Bildungsroman* as a term proved most useful in analyzing the ways in which nineteenth century- and early twentieth-century women novelists had represented the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms."¹⁶ The inherent patriarchal structure of the world works against the representation of female autonomy. Thus, the creation of a novel that works to properly represent women's indoctrination into maturity is necessary for a myriad of reasons, but most importantly for reclaiming female agency. Critics have emphasized the importance of the female *Bildungsroman* due to its influence in "challeng[ing] the idea of [the] coherent self that a patriarchal society attempts to impose upon women by representing the protagonist in engaged in multiple roles and formulating multiple self-definitions."¹⁷ This statement reinforces the importance of the fight against fragmentation and reduction¹⁸ that I have raised as the central concern in this project. Novels of the female *Bildungsroman* genre, especially the three in question, are of utmost importance because they provide an alternative to the preconceived role of the 1960s woman. The accessibility of the *Bildungsroman* allows women to picture themselves in the positions of the protagonists, which provides women with an example to follow. The *Bildungsroman* is traditionally a novel of education, and these novels offer education to women in the form of taking a stance against patriarchal constraints. In the conclusion of her article, Lazzaro-Weis eloquently summarizes the need for such a genre to exist: "Is there such

¹⁶ Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. "The Female "*Bildungsroman*:" Calling It into Question." *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 1 (1990), 17.

¹⁷ Lazzaro-Weis, 18.

¹⁸ These terms will be defined in the following section.

thing as a female *Bildungsroman*? Probably not, which is why it has been necessary over the years for many women writers and critics to invent one.”¹⁹ O’Brien, Plath, and Lessing are vital members of this movement that aimed to give women a voice.

III. Second-Wave Feminism, Reduction, and Fragmentation

To properly understand the impact of each novel, one must first grasp the historical context. This cluster of novels was published at the onset of second-wave feminism, an occurrence that is more than coincidental. Women’s voices were projected and given more authority in the rise of second-wave feminism, and the need for realistic representation became of exigent importance. In adapting the *Bildungsroman* form—which I would venture to claim that in this modern era, is one of the most accessible and popular of novelistic forms—women authors created a genre that elevated women’s voices instead of actively repressing them.

Most scholars agree that second-wave feminism begins in 1963 “with the publication of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*. . . . [where she] has been credited with exploding ‘the myth of the happy housewife.’”²⁰ Friedan’s provocative publication offered an alternative to the traditional housewife, and women grasped onto this idea with vigor. Particularly in the United States, her text acted as a catalyst for women to voice their needs for new representation, a movement that engendered much of the legislation women still enjoy in the twenty-first century. The United States saw key legislation passed between 1960-1973, including the approval of birth control by the FDA in 1960, the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1963, Title VII in 1964, Title IX in 1972, and *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Women aimed to take agency over their bodies and sexuality

¹⁹ Lazzaro-Weis, 34.

²⁰ Gillis, Melissa, and Andrew T. Jacobs. *Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies: an Interdisciplinary Approach*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, 334.

while simultaneously demanding equal pay for equal work. Despite the backlash that modern day scholars have placed on second-wave feminism due to its problematic exclusivity, the weight of the movement's accomplishments cannot be ignored.

The countries represented in each of the novels are located in the Western world (Ireland, United States, Britain)²¹ and are primarily concerned with populations of white European descent. Each of the country's movements were primarily driven by "white, middle-, and upper-class feminist[s],"²² contributing to this exclusivity. This feeling of exclusivity created an overwhelming feeling of fragmentation among women, particularly in the United States and Britain.²³ The fragmentation of the movement in the United States stemmed from the "range of voices, from the intellectual moderates...to the extremes of small far-left or fringe groups, with all kinds of other voices speaking in between."²⁴ Each type of woman is fighting for rights that serve her specific role in society rather than the group at large. However, I believe this fragmentation to be inevitable when one considers the role of women in society. They are to play a specific role and occupy only that role as opposed to occupying a variety.

Many criticisms of second-wave feminism, particularly in the United States, speak to this problem of fragmentation. The middle and upper-class white women were encouraged to break out of the housewife role and "pursue meaningful work outside the home...[but] poor and working-class women knew from their experiences that work was neither personally fulfilling

²¹ For Reference: *The Country Girls* is set in Ireland, *The Bell Jar* in the United States, and *The Golden Notebook* in Britain.

²² Gillis, 318.

²³ Bassnett, Susan. *Feminist Experiences: The Women's Movement in Four Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2013

²⁴ Bassnett, 19.

nor liberatory.”²⁵ Neither group knew the experiences of the other, as they occupy different, fragmentary roles that do not intersect. For the poor woman, liberation may have been included “the freedom....to quit her job....[to] stay at home,”²⁶ the very thing the upper-class woman was trying to evade. Despite a woman’s socio-economic status, the purpose of second-wave feminism rings clear—women wanted the right to choose and the privilege of options.

The movement in Britain echoes these sentiments in a more severe manner. Feminist scholar Susan Bassnett writes that Britain’s class structure is more “archaic and rigid” than that of the United States, lending itself to a fragmented feminist movement, as each class was fighting for something different.²⁷ The upper and middle class women spearheaded the movement in Britain as well, as “the women principally involved in attempts to change [laws] ...were primarily individualists who used their class position to exert influence on the system.”²⁸ The working-class and upper-class women had different priorities in achieving liberation, leading to a fragmented movement that appears as exclusive as its United States counterpart. In Britain, the United States movement was revered and considered exemplary, as the United States was considered to be more progressive than Britain.

When compared to the United States and Britain of the 60s, the Ireland O’Brien describes in her novel feels anachronistic—the culture feels twenty years behind, despite a comparable publication date. This dated cultural state is represented in the dates alone of the Irish feminist movement, as it did not gain traction until the 1970s, fifteen-twenty years after its Western

²⁵ Gillis, 334.

²⁶ Gillis, 334-335.

²⁷ Bassnett, 132.

²⁸ Bassnett, 146.

counterparts—which serves to contextualize the antiquated nature of the novel. When comparing the dates of important legislation, it is glaringly evident that Ireland was far behind in women’s liberation. Birth control was not permitted until 1979, and the movement ironically began with a group known as the Irish Housewives Association in 1973. The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland, which prohibited women’s rights to abortion, despite health concerns, was not repealed until 2018, a far cry from the 1970’s permissions granted to women in the U.S and Britain.

The 1980s feminist movement in Ireland bears many similarities to that of the U.S and Britain, just occurring chronologically later. The Irish women were primarily concerned with breaking from the Catholic church, as the institution had “expend[ed] very considerable energy in the attempt to contain women within their traditional role” during the feminist movement.²⁹ The women wanted agency over their bodies (in terms of abortion and the epidemic of domestic violence) and sexuality, a request that targets the “two primary areas in which Irish women’s lives have traditionally been repressed.”³⁰ This repression was enforced by two closely intertwined, but separate patriarchal structures—the church and government. The church praised the dutiful housewife who was submissive to her husband, and government legislation expressed that “women’s ‘duties [were] in the home,’” a statement that was “constitutionally reinforced.”³¹ Irish women had to fight on two fronts, a system that most likely contributed to the delay in women’s liberation when compared to more progressive countries.

²⁹ Meaney, Gerardine. *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*. Dublin: Attic, 1991, 4.

³⁰ Ryan, Mary. "A Feminism of Their Own?: Irish Women’s History and Contemporary Irish Women’s Writing." *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 5 (2010), 93.

³¹ Meaney, 7.

For the purpose of this project, I have deduced two terms that I believe best describe the status of women in this time period, in all three countries: fragmentation and reduction. The terms are related and work together, but each serve a specific purpose. Fragmentation represents women both individually and collectively. Collectively, women were fragmented in the feminist movement, as supported by research done on both the second-wave feminist movement in both the United States and Britain. This fragmentation acts as a meta-narrative that lends itself to the individual female experience that is represented in the formal elements of each of the novels—fragmentation is at the root of women’s struggle for identity. Expected to fit a certain mold, women had to break off parts of themselves that served an extraneous purpose. For a contextual example, consider Esther Greenwood. A character that will be more carefully examined in chapter two, it is worth noting that she struggles with having to define herself as either a good girl *or* a bad girl, a mother *or* a career woman. The “or” is essential to the definition, as it represents a woman’s inability to fulfill multiple roles in society. She cannot perform both actions simultaneously or to their full potential, a sort of behavior that is unacceptable and unheard of for a woman of this time period. This fragmentation causes a woman to struggle with defining herself and creating an identity, as she is subject to ignore a part of herself in order to fulfill the single role that society has allowed for her.

The role that women are expected to fill is the point at which reduction, as a term, is to be introduced. Reduction is in reference to gender normativity and traditional feminine norms. A woman must reduce herself, must shrink her personality and passions in order to be the dainty, beautiful woman. She cannot be too loud, or too aggressive—she must be submissive and doting. In order to contextualize this term, I offer Anna Wolf from Lessing’s novel. Anna, like all

women, experiences menstruation. During an episode of menstruation in the novel, she feels compelled to compulsively cleanse herself in order to make sure there is no smell, as smelling is not ladylike. She is taking part in an action that is reductive to her existence—it is not beneficial to her to compulsively use the restroom, but is a gender norm that females do not smell, and in this circumstance, Anna adheres, thus reducing herself to fit the mold of a proper woman. Reduction occurs in many forms, but is most broadly defined as actions³² that are not self-serving but serve to keep a woman in adherence to gender normativity.

IV. Resistance to Fragmentation and Reduction

To assume that the entrenched traditions of patriarchal norms would be solved in the decades that spanned the second-wave feminist movement is to be naive. Second-wave feminism was not a cure-all for centuries of systemic oppression, and one could easily argue that despite obvious progression, the modern era (and third-wave feminism) is still working to move past these structures. However, the feminist movement of the 60s was not in vain, as evident progress was made, particularly in the realms of the body (abortion, birth control) and sexuality.

Considering this historical context while analyzing the cluster of novels, I claim that these novels both reproduce and often challenge feminine stereotypes in order to expose them. While this statement feels contradictory, it is representative of the struggle that women experienced while trying to define themselves in an existing patriarchy that provided plenty of pushback. Some attempts to rebel are more successful than others, and at other times, the alternate tool of presenting an exacerbated form of a norm works to expose its absurdity. To

³² Other actions may include: dieting, wearing uncomfortable clothes, abstaining from curse words, etc.

bring awareness to an issue is the first step in solving it, and that appears to be one primary purpose of these novels. Specifically, the norms challenged and explored by each novel are the following: motherhood, marriage, mental health, intimate female relationships, and the objectification of the female body. In terms of formal elements, each author reinvents the *Bildungsroman* form in order to create a narrative that dramatizes the struggles of mid-twentieth century women. These efforts work together for one common purpose: to expose the power dynamic of the patriarchy and its oppressive force on women.

Chapter 1: "I'll drink Lysol or any damn thing to get out of here."³³

Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*

In order to spearhead a feminist movement, women of Ireland had to persevere against two patriarchal structures, the church and government; women were controlled from all angles. Mary Ryan, a scholar of Irish feminism, states that this tradition of control is due to the "foundations of Irish culture—[the] state [had] control of women's reproduction, and [dictated] the nationalist and religious mythologies, [such as] Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland. [This placed women in a particular framework]...and therefore, limited Irish women."³⁴ Women were seen as symbols rather than functioning members of society. To exist as a woman in the era of "the repressive 1940s"³⁵ was to exist as mother (both biological and figurehead) for the country of Ireland. In pushing back against these norms, O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960) was censored and banned from Ireland, resulting in O'Brien's choice to leave the country. This censoring is representative of the extensive reach of both the church and government in regulating the community, giving them abundant influence over how the members of the community think and behave. O'Brien's chosen exile represents her unwillingness to be subjected to such controlling structures, an attitude that is expressed in her novel. In opposition to the stifling Irish community, O'Brien's novel offers an alternative: the ability to choose. These liberties concern a woman's sexuality, religion, clothing, education, family structure, body, and mind (a few of many).

³³ O'Brien, Edna, and Eimear McBride. *The Country Girls: Three Novels and an Epilogue*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017, 73.

³⁴ Ryan, Mary. "A Feminism of Their Own?: Irish Women's History and Contemporary Irish Women's Writing." *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 5 (2010), 92.

³⁵ Cahalan, James M. (1995) "Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish in Edna O'Brien, John McGahern and Brian Moore," *Colby Quarterly*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 1 , Article 8., 56.

O'Brien's stance concerning personal liberties was provocative and embraced sexuality—themes which caused the aforementioned censorship. However, the censorship of the novel only elevated its literary status, which was eventually published in Ireland in 1972, and created what is now an “era-defining symbol of the struggle for Irish women’s voices to be heard above the clamour of an ultraconservative, ultrareligious, and institutionally misogynistic society.”³⁶ The infamous censorship of the novel served only to further highlight the suffocating nature of Irish society and expose its consequences, making O'Brien's novel of utmost importance in the fight for women's rights in Ireland.

Fragmentation and reduction are issues that plague the female protagonists in this *Bildungsroman*, as well as the protagonists in the novels that will be discussed in the coming chapters. For the women in *The Country Girls*, the concept of reduction revolves around “Virgin Mary and Mother Ireland,” as these figureheads have “reduced [women] to symbols of the nation.”³⁷ These women must mold themselves to fit the appropriate gender norms—heterosexual, beautiful, child-rearing, God-fearing, polite and poised. By reducing herself to such a role, Cait, O'Brien's protagonist, is “handicapped by her inability to find a voice.”³⁸ Adhering to a restrictive gender role limits Cait's ability to voice her opinion in a way that makes any difference. The traditions of Irish society have standardized norms that govern the way a woman must behave in ways of purity and motherhood, and to survive, Cait must reduce herself to fit

³⁶ O'Brien, ix.

³⁷ Ryan, 92.

³⁸ Giorgio, Adalgisa. *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002, 105.

this mold. In the context of the novel, reduction revolves around the traditions of the church, an institution with potent influence on Irish society.

Fragmentation and reduction are related, but have slightly different applications. Fragmentation is most evidently seen in the life of Cait's mother, referred to as "Mama." Mama's life revolves being a housewife. This role evidently forces her to stay in the home and oversee the family farm, which limits her ability to form opinions about society, as she has limited exposure to the outside world. This creates a one-dimensional identity and her self-worth cannot be separated from her role as a housewife. As a young Irish woman, Cait faces fragmentation in different ways—the inability to be both a proper Catholic and a young girl exploring her sexuality, as an example. The reduction aspect is quite clear in Cait's life, as she painstakingly adheres to feminine dress and appearance standards, a characteristic that is representative of her compliance to gender norms.

Caithleen "Cait" Brady, develops from adolescent to woman within the duration of the novel. Cait's journey to maturity is characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*, and the novel is considered to be one of "the most celebrated *Bildungsromans* of the early 1960s.³⁹" Within this categorization, O'Brien has changed the form subtly in order to create a proper representation of the female protagonist. This change from the classic form is more apparent in theme than structure, as O'Brien takes a provocative stance concerning women's rights in a genre where "the implications of gender are conveniently ignored."⁴⁰ O'Brien refuses to ignore these implications

³⁹ Cahalan, 55. The novel takes place in the 1940s but was published in 1960, the beginning of the revolutionary period of women's liberation.

⁴⁰ Brown, Penny. *The Poison at the Source: the Female Novel of Self-Development in the Early Twentieth Century*. St. Martin's, 1992, 2.

and the consequences of being female are highlighted rather than dismissed. O'Brien's manipulation of the *Bildungsroman* is a way in which she can showcase her demand for women's social liberties in Ireland.

Cait's anxieties at the end of the novel are palpable, and her ever-present anxiety is contradictory to the fully-developed character that one often sees at the end of the classic *Bildungsroman*. To be a functioning member of society a character must experience "development of the whole personality..[and] the conflicts of life [are] seen as necessary growth points on the road to maturity."⁴¹ Cait has many "conflicts of life" throughout the novel, yet she ends the novel no more hopeful than she began it. The last line of the novel is indicative of this lack of change: "I came out to the kitchen and took two aspirins with my tea. It was almost certain I wouldn't sleep that night."⁴² At the novel's beginning she is anxious over her father, at the end, Mr. Gentleman. She fears her father's homecoming, as he is an abusive alcoholic. Her anxiety over Mr. Gentleman is quite different, as she desperately wants to run away with him and experience intimacy, actions that have a positive connotation for Cait, yet her state of being still depends on the presence or absence of men. Despite Cait's "conflicts of life" and flirtation with rebellion, she fails to develop in a way that allows her to bypass the need for a domineering male figure and overcome the power that men hold over her, a conditioning that has roots in a convoluted mother/daughter relationship.

One of the most central issues of Irish feminism concerns the relations between mothers and daughters. The notion of mother as figurehead "constructed highly ambivalent and restrictive

⁴¹ Brown, 1.

⁴² O'Brien, 175.

views of maternity,” and contributed to a strain on maternal relations in both the private and public sphere.⁴³ The patriarchal expectations regarding mothers and daughters created a stifling atmosphere that resulted in competition for the attention of men. In many relationships, both had the desire to become the perfect Irish woman in order to garner male attention. This is a role that Anne Fogarty’s chapter in the aptly named text *Writing Mothers and Daughters* deals with intimately. She writes about the various issues within Irish society and specifically highlights this relationship. However, she asserts that “the very turbulence of the mother-daughter bond becomes paradoxically the means by which feminine identity with all its painful intergenerational entanglements can be reimagined.”⁴⁴ Fogarty sees the mending of this female relationship as crucial in changing the societal perspective of Irish women as a whole. If mothers are taught to teach their daughters the consequences of reducing themselves to gender norms in order to attract men, the cycle can cease to exist. Women educating women is an empowering action in itself, one that is imperative in giving women agency.

While Fogarty’s observation holds truth, the influence of the church must first be addressed in order to change the present dynamics of mother daughter relationship. The church governs much of daily life in Ireland, dictating both the norms of social and familial conditioning. It is the patriarchal authority that demonizes female promiscuity while turning a blind eye to men that have affairs with girls half their age. When the girls return from the convent for Christmas, Mr. Gentleman comes to the Brennan’s home to socialize (and to see Cait). When he greets the girls, he does so in front of various adults—Mrs. Brennan, Mr.

⁴³ Giorgio, 87.

⁴⁴ Giorgio, 89.

Brennan, Mr. Brady, and the maid, Molly. To Baba, he “kissed the top of her head and patted her hair for a minute.”⁴⁵ To Cait, he “kisse[s her] on the lips,”⁴⁶ a gesture that is far more sexual than his behavior towards Baba. The adults present do not reprimand his actions or raise concern. Instead, Mrs. Brennan (Baba’s mother) facetiously asks “no kiss for me?”⁴⁷ As a woman, she should be concerned about a much older man showing interest in a vulnerable young girl. Instead, her language condones his actions and tells Cait that she should be proud of Mr. Gentleman’s desire for her. With her mother’s passing, Mrs. Brennan is the closest thing Cait has to a mother figure, making her approval all the more problematic.

The systemic societal oppression that creates strained mother daughter relationships contributes to other aspects of Cait’s life, such as her (as well as Baba’s) abortive decision making. To understand the power in the girls’ impulsivity, one must first consider the repression that forced women to be figureheads. At the convent, where the girls’ are trained to become nuns, the expectation that women are to play this role is exasperatingly clear. Modesty is central to one’s self-worth and obedience to the church is evidently central to existence.⁴⁸ The girls’ are desperate to escape such a stifling environment, with Baba hyperbolically declaring that she would “drink Lysol or any damn thing to get out of [there].”⁴⁹ To be forced to conform to such a role takes away a woman’s sense of identity and autonomy, and in a world with limited options, Cait chooses to reclaim her identity and autonomy through the act of impulsive, abortive decision making. However, these decisions are not without consequences. To make autonomous

⁴⁵ O’Brien, 87.

⁴⁶ O’Brien, 87.

⁴⁷ O’Brien, 87.

⁴⁸ O’Brien, chapter nine.

⁴⁹ O’Brien, 73.

decisions would seem to give Cait a sense of identity, but her lack of life experience, i.e, her youth (a traditional component of the *Bildungsroman*) coupled with a limited amount of societal support instead leaves her without foresight and overwhelmingly anxious at the novel's end. Her attempt to create a self that is more than a fragment results in instability of mind, an unfortunate situation that reaches its peak in Cait's suicide at the end of the trilogy. However, the decisions that Cait and Baba make in the first novel, the focus of this chapter, are not without a glimmer of hope. Rebellion is a crucial first step to liberation and one that must be further examined to understand the power that existed in Cait's impulsive decision making.

One of Cait's most rebellious moments lies in her relationship with Mr. Gentleman. To choose a relationship with an older, married man reeks of rebellion, the need for male attention, and a desire for an escape from the mundanity of everyday life. Cait is flattered by Mr. Gentleman's interest, and she pursues a relationship with him. To be with Mr. Gentleman represents a life that she does not have access to, a life of glamour and travel, money and sex. In their first intimate act, Mr. Gentleman appeals to Cait's rebellious nature, stating that she is a "bad girl."⁵⁰ He makes her feel validated, a feeling that she is unable to procure in her daily life. His validation gives her power and heightens her predilection for rebellious escapades. During their first unaccompanied meeting, Mr. Gentleman tells Cait that she is "the sweetest thing that ever happened to [him],"⁵¹ language that acts as reassurance for her gender-normative behavior (acting as a proper, *sweet*, woman) as well as an incentive to continue pursuing Mr. Gentleman's

⁵⁰ O'Brien, 165.

⁵¹ O'Brien, 56.

affection, which she does with renewed vigor, declaring that day “the happiest of [her] whole life.”⁵²

Eventually, the two make plans to escape together. Cait is ecstatic about the chance to escape, declaring that she “loved him [Mr. Gentleman] more than she would ever love a man again.”⁵³ Cait is smitten with Mr. Gentleman, but the chance to escape gives her the opportunity to experience life in a place that does not suffocate. She plans for liberating activities, such as “waltz[ing] before [getting] into bed,”⁵⁴ an act of sexual freedom that would never be permitted in her parochial home. She feels freedom in going off with an older man, as it is a decision that provides hope in a myriad of ways—most important of those is getting a chance to experience a world that does not revolve around Irish ideals. However, the plans ultimately fail, and Cait’s confidence dissolves. Each abortive decision that was made to arrive at this point now appears futile, as hope is gone.

Cait is susceptible to being taken advantage of by men, the pattern beginning with her own father: “Caithleen’s father is only the first in a series of men—including Mr. Gentleman, Jack Holland, and Eugene Gaillard—who abuse her.”⁵⁵ Cait has been convinced that she needs domineering male figures in her life through the behavior of various women through the text. The actions are subtle, but combine to convince Cait of the authority of men: when Cait goes off to Dublin, she is reprimanded for her behavior and is reminded to “mind your faith and write to your father,”⁵⁶ despite her lack of a relationship with him. Men always deliver news, giving them

⁵² O’Brien, 56.

⁵³ O’Brien, 163.

⁵⁴ O’Brien, 167.

⁵⁵ Cahalan, 60.

⁵⁶ O’Brien, 117.

an inherent air of authority,⁵⁷ they hold the most respected jobs (Dr. Brennan, Baba's father), they repeatedly objectify women's bodies, and are fawned over and allowed delicacies, such as using cream instead of milk in tea.⁵⁸ These repeated actions condition Cait to believe that men are superior and that their attention is desirable. The need for male attention is a phenomenon that scholar James Cahalan refers to as the "Cinderella Complex:....the deep wish to be taken care of....[and] waiting for something external to transform their lives."⁵⁹ Cait's wish to be taken care of begins in childhood, as her abusive father controls her mother, leaving her with compromised care. After her mother's death and her father's continued absence, it is of no surprise that Cait wishes to be taken care of. She finds this security in Mr. Gentleman, who has both the means and experience to provide Cait with stability and comfort. In endowing her protagonist with the "cinderella complex," O'Brien works to expose the issue of male dependency and its influence on even the most rebellious of adolescents. The longstanding tradition of male authority, in part influenced by the male hierarchy of the church, has conditioned Cait to believe that the presence of a controlling male in her life is commonplace. Despite her rebellious nature, she gravitates towards seedy men with resources because they are familiar. The nature in which the reader interprets the relationship between Mr. Gentleman and Cait—the lewd and the pure—is a deliberate attempt to highlight the indoctrination of authority that Cait has been subjected to. Cait's views on male authority stem from the influence of the church, but the church's influence does not conclude with this aspect of a woman's life. The fragmentation of Irish women's lives also has roots in the presence of the church.

⁵⁷ O'Brien, 40.

⁵⁸ O'Brien, 101.

⁵⁹ Cahalan, 60-61. Originally coined by social theorist Colette Dowling.

Gerardine Meaney, an Irish scholar, published a pamphlet concerning the nature of Irish women and the country's politics. On the status of women in Ireland, she remarks that "this inability [to be anything but "handmaids of the lord"] is the product of centuries of education and socialisation of women into acceptance of restricted lives and poor self-concepts and it is exacerbated in this country by the churches' continuing hold over education."⁶⁰ The series of rebellious events that eventually lead Cait and Baba to be expelled from the convent where they attend school exemplifies more than just a desire to rebel, it is representative of a larger allegory. The identity of Irish women was stifled by the church, and in order to be given the opportunity to become more than a single perfect fragment, that influence needed to be challenged and changed. This movement needed to start in the home, with the family and the institution of marriage.

The nuclear family was challenged in the Irish feminist movement, and eventually worked to "shatte[r] the view of the 'idyllic' Irish family."⁶¹ The issues with the nuclear family stem from patterns of domestic abuse that were ignored, leading women to suffer in silence. Ryan writes of this "Irish family," in its most simple terms, the nuclear family, but one would be remiss not to see the applications of this "Irish family" to Irish society as a whole. To shatter the structure of a culture's nuclear family is to make way for change, but can also create unintended consequences, such as diminishing the value of marriage, which Cait believes to be true as a result of seeing her father's inappropriate behavior toward her mother. Her aversion toward marriage stems from her mother's response to her father's behavior, as she tells Cait "she would

⁶⁰ Meaney, Gerardine. *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*. Dublin: Attic, 1991, 5.

⁶¹ Ryan, 98.

have liked [her] to be a nun, it was better than marrying. Anything was, she thought.”⁶² Cait’s life options are nunnery or marriage⁶³ and neither is an appealing option. It is arguable that other females in the novel feel similarly, such as Baba, which leaves breaking the conventional family as the only viable option to become something other than nun or wife. “Unconventional” families create new norms, which lead to acceptance and implementation. To shatter the Irish family is to shatter Irish society, and that is precisely the purpose and result of Irish feminism. In the same essay referenced above, Ryan writes explicitly of this movement and marks sexuality and domestic violence as points of special interest. Cait and Baba practice Irish feminism in multiple ways, but most radically in the form of sexuality.

Homo-eroticism is pronounced shameful immediately after the girls’ arrival to the convent: “Girls are requested to dress and undress under the shelter of their dressing gowns. Girls should face the foot of the bed doing this, as they might surprise each other if they face the side of the bed.”⁶⁴ The restrictive hold that the church had over Irish society is evident in this passage, as indoctrination of sexual shame begins at a young age. However, this also introduces the desire for sexual exploration among the adolescents. When permitted from an activity, the more they wish to participate. This strict conditioning works against the aims of the church, as evidenced by the homo-erotic relationships in the novel among the young girls.

O’Brien’s text gives young girls the opportunity to explore their sexuality in a way that was independent of men, provocative, and empowering: “Baba and I sat there and shared secrets,

⁶² O’Brien, 67.

⁶³ These are her options according to her mother. Had she stayed in school, her options may have been different and more promising.

⁶⁴ O’Brien, 68.

and once we took off our knickers....and tickled one another. The greatest secret of all. Baba used to say she would tell....[so] I [would give] her a silk hankie....or something.”⁶⁵ What has been denounced as explicit content is merely sexual exploration, yet the shame that accompanies the girls’ actions is as an inherent barrier to accepting this exploration. Lazzaro-Weis writes that “indeterminacy is part of the genre’s [*Bildungsroman*] theme and purpose, which is the representation of conscious human self-formation.”⁶⁶ In terms of sexual exploration, the privilege of confusion and lack of clarity is imperative to discovering one’s personal and sexual identity, and this is a practice that Irish society castigates. Cait’s increasing worry that the “secret” will be exposed presents a stringent social conditioning that has resulted in shame surrounding sexual exploration, a natural process in one’s adolescent development.

Cait and Baba’s relationship is an aberration from “sexual normalcy” (heterosexuality) in the novel, yet the relationship is never defined as explicitly homosexual, but rather offers the possibility—a theme that reoccurs in all three novels. The ambiguity of the particular female relationships in *The Country Girls* are rooted in safety and secrecy, as homosexuality is damned by the church, the ruling institution in Ireland. Exploration is among the girls’ motives for intimacy with same sex partners; however, the relationships appear more meaningful than that. The relationship provides comfort for the young girls in the distressing environment of the convent, and is also a form of rebellion against the oppression of the church. Cait and Baba have a history and are able to rely on each other, but Cait also has noteworthy interactions with Cynthia, another girl at the convent, that have intimate undertones. Cait admires Cynthia

⁶⁵ O’Brien, 8.

⁶⁶ Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. “The Female ‘*Bildungsroman*’: Calling It into Question.” *NWSA Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1990, 26.

immediately after meeting her, and eventually they become closer and their physical intimacy elevates: “That night, when I was going to bed, Cynthia kissed me on the landing. She kissed me every night after that. We would have been *killed* if we were caught [emphasis my own].”⁶⁷ Despite the risk, or perhaps because of the risk, the girls continue practicing physical intimacy. Like Cait’s relationship with Baba, these interactions are open to interpretation—it is unclear if the girls’ behavior relates to sexual feelings, the need for reassurance, the desire to rebel against the ruling institution, or a combination of all three. Regardless of motive, the intimacy of female relationships exists as an alternative to the need for intimacy with men, who have proved to be problematic throughout the novel.

Men constantly objectify Cait’s body throughout the novel without consequence, and the dressing rituals of the convent are evidence of yet another contradictory standard in Irish society. The various groups of men in the novel feel entitled to the admiration and objectification of Cait’s body (and the other females), despite her lack of interest or consent: “The country boys in the back of the hall whistled as we came in. It was their habit to stand there and pass remarks about the girls as they came in, and then laugh or whistle if the girls were pretty.”⁶⁸ In considering this passage, it is imperative to realize that these are boys. They are not men, but boys—the practice of objectifying women, in public, begins at a young age and is not reprimanded. The boys are allowed to gawk at the girls’ bodies, but the girls are prohibited from even glancing at one another while they are changing. Cait feels shame for admiring aspects of Baba’s appearance, but feels immense pleasure when her gaze focuses on Mr. Gentleman, not

⁶⁷ O’Brien, 78.

⁶⁸ O’Brien, 37.

because of what she sees, but because of his reaction: “I looked down slyly at his body and laughed a little. It was so ridiculous....When I got up to fetch my clothes, he fondled my bottom and I knew that our week together would be beautiful.”⁶⁹ Cait feels uncomfortable around Mr. Gentleman’s naked body, but she has no shame due to the “normalcy” of their heterosexual intimacy. However, his approval of her merely gazing upon him is enough to validate her and provides enough incentive for Cait to continue wanting intimacy. Cait’s sexuality is not validated until she returns the male gaze.

This early conditioning to desire male approval leads to competition and critique among women and their bodies. There are various instances through the novel where Cait’s body is scrutinized by Baba or other women. When at the dressmaker, Cait is told that she “ha[s] a bit of pot belly,” and Cait’s automatic reaction is that the woman “wanted to get some dig at me.”⁷⁰ Despite Cait’s distaste towards the woman's comments on her body, she feels confident because she has Mr. Gentleman’s approval: “he took his hand down from his eyes and looked shyly at my stomach and thighs....he kissed me all over.”⁷¹ Cait is concerned with the opinion of men, not the opinion of women, an idea that has been ingrained in her mind from the beginning of her adolescence due to the ogling boys in the town hall.

Cait Brennan observes what will later be coined as “housewife’s disease” in her mother as a fourteen year old and exhibits evident distaste. So, she rebels. She makes risky, sometimes autonomous decisions (others at the hands of Baba, but without the supervision of authority), disregards the church, and explores her sexuality in the pursuit of leading a life that is not

⁶⁹ O’Brien, 164-165.

⁷⁰ O’Brien, 113.

⁷¹ O’Brien, 164.

governed by a single fragment. However, the indoctrination of patriarchal and parochial rule is so established in Cait's world that her efforts are not enough to contradict centuries of social conditioning. Cait's journey is formatted in the traditional *Bildungsroman* form, but her lack of functionality at the novel's end leaves her in the same place that she was found at the start: helpless. In the text's most cyclical moment, Cait is "blotchy from crying....and [takes] two aspirins with [her] tea"⁷² before going to bed the night after Mr. Gentleman abandons her for their holiday getaway. These actions parallel Cait's helplessness at the novel's beginning after Mama dies, leaving her abandoned: "my knees began to sink from me....he made me swallow two white pills with a cup of tea."⁷³ Cait's lack of growth and ever-increasing anxiety contradicts the traditional *Bildungsroman* form and reminds the reader that gender cannot be ignored. However, O'Brien's novel plays an imperative role in liberating Irish women, because it provides potential. Cait may have not succeeded in her attempt to live as something other than a "country girl," but she extended her reach farther than the women before her, taking a crucial step in the fight for equality. She embodies rebellion and harnesses its power, qualities that are invaluable in liberation and serve as an example.

⁷² O'Brien, 175.

⁷³ O'Brien, 42.

Chapter 2: “A girl who was crazy enough to kill herself.”⁷⁴Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*

Critics have often discussed Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) in the context of its apparent autobiographical influence. While there are many similarities between Sylvia Plath and protagonist Esther Greenwood, I would argue the text was not created to be merely an autobiographical account—the novel’s larger purpose is to draw attention to the various social and cultural epidemics that plagued women of the time period. The connection between Sylvia Plath and Esther is well-established and has an abundance of commentary, but it is overstated and will not be analyzed in this chapter. Instead, the arguably more important, pervasive, problems of women’s reduction and fragmentation will be discussed in the context of protagonist Esther Greenwood’s struggle with mental health. This struggle manifests itself into the form of the novel, as the traditional *Bildungsroman* form is manipulated in order to properly represent the need for women to change their own traditional roles.

In her adolescence, a crucial time for self-development, Esther is taught the proper trajectory for a woman. Esther has many more options than her first-wave feminism counterparts, but the options are still stifling. In order to be a proper woman, sacrificing parts of one’s self is required. A woman cannot be fully present in multiple roles; she cannot be both mother and career woman or loving sister and loving wife. One may argue that a man must assume a single role as well, but the traditions of patriarchy make it much easier for men to fulfill such a role. Factors such as the absence of invisible labor and expectation to raise children are additional roles that men are able to avoid, whereas it is the assumption that women are

⁷⁴ Plath, Sylvia, et al. *The Bell Jar: a Novel*. Harper, 2013, 173.

responsible for these duties. The idea that a woman must break off parts of herself in order to be an acceptable member of society is an overwhelming source of stress for Esther. The connection of self to identity is nearly impossible for her to define due to the dismembered society in which she lives. Esther is forced to constantly dismember herself, separate into distinct identities, and then perform in a world that demands wholeness. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to this need for a woman to separate herself in order to adhere to societal norms as fragmentation.

Related to fragmentation is reduction, a term that I have derived from a particular scene in the novel. This incident occurs at the novel's beginning, while Esther is in New York for her internship with *Ladies' Day*. At one of the many luncheons she attends, Esther immediately notices that "almost everybody [she] met in New York was trying to *reduce* (emphasis my own)."⁷⁵ In this particular instance, Esther is referring to reduction in terms of caloric intake and the tendency for women to exist in a perpetual cycle of weight loss. However, the connotation of "reduction" extends far beyond one's caloric intake (or lack thereof). The women "reducing" are forcing themselves to be acceptable for the assumed gender norm; these women are reducing themselves in order to fulfill an expected gender role. The adjectives in the sentences that follow Esther's observations of reduction reinforce the stereotypical woman that reduction sets out to achieve: the girls are referred to as "the prettiest, smartest, bunch of young ladies," their applause is described as "a delicate, ladylike applause," and the notecards at the luncheon are "in lacy script with a wreath of frosted daisies around the edge."⁷⁶ These descriptions occur within the

⁷⁵ Plath, 25.

⁷⁶ Plath, 25.

three paragraphs that follow the statement concerning reduction; the descriptors speak directly to the type of decidedly feminine woman one must become through the process of reduction.

Fragmentation and reduction are at the core of both the novel and Esther's struggle to define her identity as a woman. She wishes to identify as more than one fragment, and pushes back against feminine ideals. These norms are the catalyst that drive Esther to mental instability; however, they also play a role in the construction of the text as a whole. Defined as a *Bildungsroman*, it is reasonable to suggest that *The Bell Jar* does in fact offer the basic tenets one often expects when reading literature from this particular genre: "both the aim and the object of the search are moved from the outer to the inner world, and a chronologically unfolding teleological plot with one strand depicts a young man's gradual growth into a well educated...and functioning member of society."⁷⁷ However, as one may notice in the language used, the *Bildungsroman* is traditionally a male dominated genre, a form that does not accurately depict a woman's journey from adolescence to adulthood, innocence to maturity. Freese's scholarship suggests that the protagonist is expected to become a functioning member of society. However, one may argue that J.D Salinger's Holden Caulfield sets a new norm for the struggling protagonist in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The scholarship on the *Bildungsroman* seems muddled, as Freese's analysis centers around mid-twentieth century novels. Regardless, for Esther Greenwood, the presence of social cohesion is in question by the end of the novel. The novel instead presents "a woman struggling to become whole, not a woman who ha[s] reached some sense of stable self,"⁷⁸ and one may suggest that to be a stable self was a privilege afforded

⁷⁷ Freese, Peter. "The "Journey of Life" in American Fiction." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 19, no. 2 (2013), 256.

⁷⁸ Wagner, 59.

to men, as Freese proposes in his definition. To mitigate the traditional sexism of the form itself, as it has been traditionally male-centric, and to draw attention to its limitations, *The Bell Jar's* narrative is fragmented in order to represent women's struggle in society.

Instead of “growing up” and becoming a functioning member of society, Esther experiences a “growing down.” Carol Lazzaro-Weis, scholar of the female *Bildungsroman* states that generally speaking, the genre of female *Bildungsroman* “provides women with models for ‘growing down’ instead of ‘growing up.’”⁷⁹ Esther's realization of her seemingly inescapable societal fate—the need to embrace fragmentation while also reducing herself to be a proper woman—causes her to spiral into mental insanity (a growing down) and the remainder of the narrative unfolds in a treatment center—a location that is representative of deliberate societal correction.

Complementing Esther's own fragmentation is the fragmented structure of the novel. Plath scholar Linda W. Wagner suggests that the novel is separated into two parts. The first half of the novel chronicles Esther's education in social cohesion, whereas the second half details her spiral into insanity as a result of the previously stated education.⁸⁰ In reading the text, there is a change in both narrative tone and Esther's lack of coherence at the beginning of chapter ten. Esther's mental state has slowly diminished through the first half of the novel, but takes a downward turn when she learns she has been denied access to a prestigious writing course at her university. In connection with Wagner's statement, this is the distinct point where the second section of the novel begins. The reader is now overwhelmed with the language of a character

⁷⁹ Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. "The Female "*Bildungsroman*": Calling It into Question." *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 1 (1990), 28.

⁸⁰ See Wagner.

who is struggling and unreliable. These changes affect the audience, as the reader must study and decipher the second half of the novel more closely than the first. Esther's gradual decline in sanity as well as her diminished ability to be a functioning member of society is precisely the notion of "growing down" and acts as the driving force behind the novel's characteristically fragmented mode of storytelling.

The fragmented self is a consequence of functioning in the oppressive world of patriarchal norms. This belief system has taught women how to view themselves, undoubtedly translating to the epidemic of the fragmented self, as seen by the multitude of female characters in *The Bell Jar*. No woman has outside "hobbies" or passions of her own, instead, each woman's life is hyper-focused on one specific fragment. In addition to a fragmented "self," many women, particularly Esther and Joan, experience a sort of "psychic fragmentation." The social pressure that the women experience lends itself to madness, as the need to adhere to gender norms while trying to create one's own identity is overwhelming and seemingly impossible.⁸¹ Perhaps the only redemptive female character is Esther's psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan. Doctor Nolan represents a well-rounded female; however, she is a role model that only a few have access to. She is a role model for Esther, and could be for other women, but they are unable to emulate her behavior because she spends her days inside a treatment ward. The reader knows nothing about her private life, which leaves her as a two-dimensional character with limited audience recognition and connection. Although promising, Doctor Nolan's limited character development in the novel is overshadowed by the multitude of other women that are left in fragmentation. The novel's female

⁸¹ It would be incorrect to state that all female characters in the novel experience this psychic fragmentation, but it is evident in many.

characters illustrate an ultimatum. One fragment must take priority over the others—a woman must choose between a career or motherhood,⁸² not both— and this provides many of the women with a single, unfulfilling sense of identity.

As a female character in the novel, Esther is not exempt from the gender stereotypes that influence her counterparts. Her first experience with reduction occurs during her stint at her *Ladies' Day* magazine internship in New York. Although selected because of intellectual prowess and a wish to be valued for that alone, Esther's worth is instead determined by her appearance and ability to conform to gender roles in order to sell magazines. Her unwillingness to adhere to these norms results in an interrogation with the magazine's editor, Jay Cee. The meeting leaves Esther feeling lost and helpless, unable to find where she belongs in the world around her. She feels isolated in her musings, and even remarks that she "was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls...all over America who wanted nothing more than to be [her] ...And when [her] picture came out in the magazine...everybody would think [that she] must be having a real whirl."⁸³ Esther is able to recognize the superficiality of the feminine world after processing her distaste for the assumed gender norms. Unlike the other girls, Esther feels unable to act as a proper representative of the magazine and tries in vain to convince herself otherwise: "Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy [(the conformist)] and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart."⁸⁴ She has been conditioned to believe this type of woman, women like Betsy, are most worthy, thus leading her to believe that any other type is inferior—a thought

⁸² This is not the only ultimatum, but it is one that is most prevalent in Esther's character.

⁸³ Plath, 2.

⁸⁴ Plath, 22.

process that contributes to her eventual downward spiral. The magazine girls are expected to be like Betsy: poised perfection; Esther feels none of these qualities.

In contrast to Betsy is Doreen, a rebellious, sexualized member of the *Ladies' Day* intern staff who presents a different sort of femininity. To Esther, Doreen's scandalous nature "suggested a whole life of marvelous, elaborate decadence that attracted [Esther] like a magnet."⁸⁵ Unlike Betsy, Doreen does not subscribe to norms. However, her decision to break the traditional mold of femininity comes with consequences, such as missing meetings and vomiting from intoxication on the hotel carpet—actions which establish her as problematic and cynical to both Esther and the other girls. She is different and stands out, behavior that is not in line with typical female subjectivity. Despite Esther's predilection for Doreen's lifestyle, she cannot commit to the role for fear of backlash. Esther cannot fully identify with either presented category of femininity—the norm or its antithesis—leaving her feeling "very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo."⁸⁶

Esther recognizes the internship as an invaluable opportunity, yet her inability to become excited about her prospective life as a traditional woman occurs in the epicenter of femininity, a beauty magazine written for women, and scholars have commented on the ironic nature of the situation. Critics have noted that it is "ironic that Esther stops believing in her self-promotion in the center of American advertising, Madison Avenue."⁸⁷ It is on Madison Avenue that Esther realizes the woman she is destined to become is not one that she wishes to be. The night before

⁸⁵ Plath, 5.

⁸⁶ Plath, 3.

⁸⁷ Alienation and Renewal in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Bloom's Literature*, 2019, 2.

she leaves New York, Esther stands on the balcony of the hotel and “piece by piece, fe[eds] [her] wardrobe to the night wind.”⁸⁸ Esther’s relinquishment of the clothing that she has worn through her stay in New York, where she was forced to adhere to proper norms, is an outright dismissal of the woman she is expected to become. Being recognized for her appearance is unfulfilling and repressive; however, being both intelligent and attractive in a way that is non-threatening to the status quo is not an available option. Supporting this dismissal of female ideals is the inordinate amount of vomiting that occurs among the girls at the internship. After a caviar luncheon, the girls fall victim to food poisoning, and this results in a sickness that has been given to them by the magazine, a symbol of all that is the feminine ideal. The reduction to female norms is making women sick in society in a way that is much less apparent,⁸⁹ but it is nonetheless represented by the vomiting the girls are subjected to after falling ill.

Because she is surrounded by women that embrace their fragmentation, Esther has no access to role models that are able to demonstrate a woman that fulfills something of a “double” role in society. To be intelligent and considered attractive are two fragmented strands that are not able to fuse together—a woman must choose one or the other. Jay Cee, the editor of *Ladies’ Day*, embodies the inability for women to be both. Esther remarks that “Jay Cee had brains, so her pug-ugly looks didn’t seem to matter....[She] tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit....and in bed with her fat husband, but [she] couldn’t do it.”⁹⁰ Supplementary to the declaration that women cannot be both intelligent and attractive, Esther has simultaneously, if even subconsciously, stated the inability for a woman to be both career oriented and a wife that

⁸⁸ Plath, 111.

⁸⁹ i.e, mental illness.

⁹⁰ Plath, 6.

meets her husband's sexual desires—ideas that she has been conditioned to believe are mutually exclusive. American society in the 1960s was inundated with these types of mutually exclusive ideals, forcing women to choose.

Traditionally, most women were expected to be mothers and only mothers. Motherhood is a fate that Esther despises. Her introduction to the process of human birth is alarming, as she is forced to observe a live birth with her boyfriend, Buddy, a medical student. Her sole focus during the ordeal revolves around the mother's pain during labor and delivery, and she becomes fixated on the morphine that is used to assuage the pain. She remarks on the patriarchal conditioning of the drug, stating that it "sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent...[the woman] would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been."⁹¹ The birth scene forces Esther to recognize the reproductive priority of a woman's role in society and she is repulsed by the inherent fragmentation of the role. The image of the woman as a child-bearing machine is supported by a subsequent image of the mother in labor. After giving birth, she fails to "answer or raise her head"⁹² after the doctor announces the gender of the baby. The baby does not belong to her, it instead belongs to a future generation that will reinforce the status quo of the ruling patriarchy, a society that leaves woman too weak to be anything but child-bearer.

After seeing the mother as a child-rearing robot, Esther is unable to see women that desire to have or have children as anything else. After the oppressive internship in New York that acts as her introduction to the stifling nature of womanhood, Esther isolates herself and takes to

⁹¹ Plath, 66.

⁹² Plath, 67.

watching the world from her bedroom window. From this window she makes caustic observations about Dodo Conway, a mother that lives in her neighborhood. Esther describes Dodo Conway as “a woman not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach....[yet] a serene, almost religious smile lit up [her] face....she smiled into the sun.”⁹³ Dodo’s signifiers are not that of facial beauty or a womanly figure, rather she is defined by her decision to bear children. Dodo’s subsequent “smile into the sun” is reminiscent of the patriarchal conditioning present in Plath’s description of an epidural as “the sort of drug a man would invent.”⁹⁴ Despite Esther’s belief that Dodo’s life is miserable and incomplete, Dodo knows no different. It is likely she has grown up believing motherhood is all she was made for and has been conditioned to view it as life’s greatest achievement. Esther sees Dodo’s version of motherhood as a well-trodden path within society, and she recognizes that it is a way of life that is defined by “the swelling size of [one’s] family.”⁹⁵ Albeit extreme, it is one of the few models of motherhood given, and it is contrasted with Esther’s complicated relationship to her own mother, a representation of motherhood that is no more enticing.

Despite Esther’s undeniable aversion towards motherhood, she exists in a “world of competition, conformity, consumerism, and commodification”⁹⁶ that exerts an enormous amount of pressure on women to adhere to norms and become a mother. Best representing patriarchal conformity is Buddy, an arrogant medical student and Esther’s love interest. Buddy comes from “a fine, clean, family....[and] was the kind of person a girl should stay fine and clean for.”⁹⁷

⁹³ Plath, 116.

⁹⁴ Plath, 66.

⁹⁵ Plath, 117.

⁹⁶ "Alienation and Renewal in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Bloom's Literature*, 2019, 1.

⁹⁷ Plath, 68.

When one views marriage as a woman's greatest success, Buddy Willard is an example of the type of man a woman should marry. He represents an acme, a way for a woman to prove her worth—and Buddy lives as if this is true, and his mother reaffirms these beliefs. Esther describes Mrs. Willard in an unflattering light, depicting her as a woman who has been trapped by the following stereotype: “a man showered on a woman before he married her, [but] what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mr. Willard's kitchen mat.”⁹⁸ Buddy regurgitates remarks that his own mother has been conditioned to believe. He suggests that romantic relationships ought to follow (an almost identical) following formula: “What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security....What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from.”⁹⁹ The woman must be solid, stoic, and serve a single purpose: to be the stability for the man. Buddy sees women as assistants to men, not individuals. In a marriage to Buddy, Esther would not have the opportunity to be anything but homemaker. She would always be his arrow, “his possession, his security.”¹⁰⁰ In a world where her identity is reduced to a single fragment, a life with Buddy results in the fragment that best serves his needs.

Patriarchal conditioning leaves Esther unable to function, as she exists in a world where her ability to choose is severely limited. The concept of choice is one that is prevalent through the *Bildungsroman* form. Choice is complicated, but functions as the initiation from adolescence to adulthood, as the prospect of “growing up” gives one the ability to make autonomous

⁹⁸ Plath, 85.

⁹⁹ Plath, 72.

¹⁰⁰ Wagner, Linda W., “Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman,” *Women's Studies*, 12:1, 57.

decisions instead of being subject to the control of an authority figure. As portrayed in Esther's "growing down," women in the *Bildungsroman* tradition are not given the freedom of choice. Instead, their "initiation [is] less a self-determined progression toward maturity [and more] a regression from full participation in adult life."¹⁰¹ Instead of progressing into adult life, the woman either retreats into alienation or surrenders to marriage.¹⁰² Both limit one's quality of life and take away a sense of independence.

After failing to be accepted into a prestigious summer writing program, Esther feels her chance for a fulfilling life is over. The failure to be accepted into the writing program is the final catalyst needed to incite Esther's downward spiral. She has been conditioned to focus on one fragment of her life, as a woman that is not fragmented is too much for male society. Esther's fragment, academics, is something she now feels inadequate at (after being denied entrance into the program), making life feel meaningless. Panic sets in and Esther mentally evaluates a variety of possibilities to save her academic career, but none are deemed worthwhile. The novel's sharpest turn occurs here and illuminates Esther's true struggle with mental health.

Denied entrance into the writing program makes Esther lose the ability to function. She turns to sleeping pills in order to feel rested, neglects basic hygiene and daily tasks, and eventually "tak[es] the silk cord of [her] mother's yellow bathrobe" and attempts to hang herself.¹⁰³ In believing her academic career is over, Esther immediately goes to the opposite extreme and sees herself as a housewife, a future she finds despicable. The myriad of ways in

¹⁰¹ Goodman, Charlotte. "The Lost Brother, the Twin: Women Novelists and the Male-Female Double *Bildungsroman*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 17, no. 1 (1983), 29.

¹⁰² Goodman, 29.

¹⁰³ Plath, 158.

which she stops caring for herself is evidence of woman's need for choice, for the ability to choose a representative identity. When presented with a lack of acceptable options, Esther's willingness to put forth effort into life is nonexistent. Without choice, life becomes a series of unattractive checkpoints that have been decided by patriarchal standards. Choice allows for a woman to become her whole self,¹⁰⁴ and if not given this choice, the effect on one's life, as seen in Esther's trajectory, is catastrophic.

Esther's inability to make a choice leads her to believe that there is one final choice that is within her power—suicide. In her decision to end her life, Esther feels peace:

The earth seemed friendly under my bare feet, but cold....Wrapping my black coat round me like a sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills....The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision....it rushed me to sleep.¹⁰⁵

The particular diction used in such a distressing scene—friendly, sweet, silence, and sleep—creates the feeling that Esther's decision to commit suicide is not representative of sadness but rather of freedom, a romanticization of suicide. The freedom Esther wishes for is to escape both physical and psychic fragmentation, a path she believes is only accessible through death.

However, Esther's suicide attempt is in vain and she is found by her mother and rushed to the hospital. Esther's decision to commit suicide is rooted in the right to choose her own future, and in a sense, it is ironic that her own mother, a cog in the machine of patriarchal society, finds her and forces her to return to the life she desperately wants to escape. Esther's mother feels no malice in her decision to send Esther away to treatment, citing that she should "have behaved

¹⁰⁴ This idea is admittedly related to the bourgeois and second-wave feminism.

¹⁰⁵ Plath, 169.

better” if she wanted to continue living a “free” life.¹⁰⁶ The irony of such a statement is humorous, as life inside or outside a mental facility lacks any sort of freedom, as a woman’s trajectory is decided long before she is presented with any type of choice.

Despite the framing of Esther’s suicide attempt as a personal catastrophe, the accessibility of treatment that will return Esther to proper female form presents a systemic issue in addition to a personal one. In Esther’s case, this correction comes most harshly in the form of shock therapy. A compelling parallel to Esther’s shock therapy is the Rosenberg trial and the couple’s execution by electric shockwaves. Such a mode of correction exists due to the United States Cold War world “atmosphere of paranoia”¹⁰⁷—non-conformist behavior is seen as threatening and must be corrected.

When considering the time period of the novel, the Rosenberg Trial is historically relevant, but superficially seems unrelated to the subject matter discussed in *The Bell Jar*. To place the Rosenbergs in such a dominant position in the novel supports the need for further analysis. The first sentence of the novel mentions them by name, establishing an ominous tone from the novel’s onset: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs.”¹⁰⁸ Esther is immediately sympathetic towards the pair, and there is evident foreshadowing in her statement that she is “stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted ma[de her] sick.”¹⁰⁹ The purposeful nature of the analogy is most evident when one recognizes that both parties being subjected to societal correction (Esther and the Rosenbergs) in

¹⁰⁶ Plath, 176.

¹⁰⁷ Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of “Deadlock”." *SAGE Open* 4, no. 3 (2014), 2.

¹⁰⁸ Plath, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Plath, 1.

the form of electrocution are those that are outsiders refusing to conform. The Rosenberg trial is historic for various reasons, but the surrounding controversy is what makes the trial most infamous. In an uncanny parallel to Esther's own shock treatment, the convictions were made due to the belief "that the refusal to answer questions was an admission of guilt and involvement with the Communist Party."¹¹⁰ It is also without proper explanation and understanding that Esther is given shock treatment. One may argue that among the multiple shock treatments she receives, there are some positive results. Although accurate, it would be negligent to suggest that Esther requested or displayed anything but apprehension in the face of these treatments. However, Esther's recalcitrant attitude toward conventional standards is unacceptable, such as her unwillingness to adhere to the traditions of female appearance, such as the outfit she coins "Pollyanna Cowgirl," complete with "two diagonal lines of dried blood that marked [her] cheeks."¹¹¹ This nonconformist behavior is seen as cause for immediate correction. The blatant disapproval of Esther's behavior leaves her wondering "what terrible thing it was that [she'd] done,"¹¹² which lends itself to the mistreatment of mental health in this time period. What Esther's mother (and the patriarchy as a whole) cannot understand, they must correct; what American society cannot grasp, they must correct. For Esther, the "fix" concerns a forced obligation toward the standards of typical gender norms and disregarding unrelated demonstrations of femininity. When first arriving at the hospital after her suicide attempt, there is an emphasis on cooperation,¹¹³ an archetypal characteristic of femininity. A woman is to be

¹¹⁰ "The Rosenberg Trial." Atomic Heritage Foundation. April 25, 2018.

¹¹¹ Plath, 112, 113.

¹¹² Plath, 143.

¹¹³ Plath, 179.

obedient and submissive, an attitude which Esther does not embody. For the Rosenbergs, the “fix” was using electrocution to rid the state of communist impurity. Both alternatives are condemnable, unnerving topics, and neither is well-accepted. The two situations appear to have little in common, but both represent deep-seated fears in American society. These non-conformists have the potential to wreak havoc on the status quo if left untreated. Non-conformity is central to the novel, and exists in various forms—one of the most important being homo-eroticism.

Homo-eroticism in the frame of female friendship makes its way into the second half of the novel, mirroring the discussion of Cait and Baba in *The Country Girls*. As a theme that is present in all three novels, one would be remiss not to acknowledge its importance. In the context of *The Bell Jar*, the risk for homo-eroticism appears to be heightened, as the one homosexual character in the novel commits suicide shortly after she is introduced.

Esther (formally) meets Joan during her stay at the psychiatric treatment center. In both an ironic and allegorical sense, Joan is another one of Buddy Willard’s past girlfriends—two women, whom have both dated the man who is most representative of the domineering patriarchy, end up in psychiatric treatment. Joan’s description of Buddy’s character makes the idea of female exclusivity appealing: “I never really liked Buddy Willard. He thought he knew everything. He thought he knew everything about women.”¹¹⁴ Joan’s aversion towards Buddy is replaced with affection for Esther. Aside from the possibility of romantic attraction, Joan feels a bond with Esther. She notes that reading about Esther’s suicide attempt enlightened her to make a decision about her own struggle with mental health: “I read about you....I put all my money

¹¹⁴ Plath, 219.

together and took the first plane to New York...I thought it would be easier to kill myself in New York.”¹¹⁵ Despite this alarming statement, the two create a unique bond that allows Esther a sense of comfort and familiarity. Joan is “associated with a potential for intimacy that seems more positive than negative,”¹¹⁶ and this intimacy stems from both women understanding their lack of identity and the constant struggle that the young women, as a whole demographic, face.

However, the comfort that Esther finds in Joan’s shared experience ends abruptly when she discovers Joan in Dee Dee’s (another patient at the treatment center) bedroom, and the text suggests the two have been intimately involved: “As my [Esther’s] vision cleared, I saw a shape rise from the bed. Then somebody gave a low giggle.”¹¹⁷ After this incident, “Esther’s treatment of Joan begins to be marked by a blatant cruelty.”¹¹⁸ Esther has never been shy about her ambivalence towards Joan, but previous to the incident her behavior appears reminiscent of how one regards a bothersome sibling: “The story sounded rather involved for Joan to have made up...but I led her on, to see what would come of it.”¹¹⁹ The tangible notion of a lesbian relationship appears to frighten Esther and forces her to confront her own sexuality, as the two “were close enough so that [Joan’s] thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of [Esther’s] own.”¹²⁰ Despite Esther’s rebellious attitude towards aspects of gender normativity, she appears bothered by homosexuality, an issue that has been raised by many critics as problematic. The doubling that occurs between Esther and Joan—previous romantic partners to

¹¹⁵ Plath, 199.

¹¹⁶ Bonds, Diane S. "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 111, Gale, 1999. *Literature Resource Center*, 13.

¹¹⁷ Plath, 218.

¹¹⁸ Bonds, 13.

¹¹⁹ Plath, 196.

¹²⁰ Plath, 219.

Buddy, university students, aversion to gender norms, and struggles with mental health—suggests that Joan’s suicide is indicative of Esther’s own refusal to both accept and further explore the possibility for intimacy in female friendship.

Scholars have proposed various reasons for this resistance to homosexuality, some theories concerning Plath’s own beliefs, but most plausible is the idea that Esther’s mental health recovery hinges on “splitting off an unacceptable portion of the self. . . . [despite the idea that] *splitting off* appears to be a major symptom of the disorder from which Esther suffers.”¹²¹ Homosexuality is not appropriate if one is adhering to gender norms, and Esther’s treatment is rehabilitative in that it reinforces gender norms rather than actively contradicting them. Thus, Esther’s resistance to homosexuality may be indicative of successful psychiatric restoration, but such correction is evidently conformist in nature and denies exploration into anything considered non-traditional. The tension regarding homosexuality speaks to the larger limitations of second-wave feminism. Despite being a movement where “sexual fulfillment seemed extraordinarily important,”¹²² means for sexual liberation appear limited due to existing social constructs, such as the overwhelming importance of the role of woman as mother. The inclusion of anyone besides white, heterosexual females is a historic point of contention that led to fragmentation within the United States women’s movement as a whole, and appears to be a problem when considering sexual liberation. These women were concerned with their roles outside of the home as opposed to sexual exploration, and this demographic’s evident influence is represented through one of the era’s most defining texts, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan’s

¹²¹ Bonds, 17.

¹²² Bassnett, Susan. *Feminist Experiences: The Women’s Movement in Four Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2013, 32.

text centers around the “critic[ism of] the idea that women could find fulfillment only through childrearing and homemaking,”¹²³ a privilege that is often argued to belong to economically stable white females, making sexuality less of a priority. Second-wave limitations are not exclusive to understanding sexuality, as this particular era of feminism also struggled in normalizing the female body, which is depicted through Esther’s coupled loss of virginity and hemorrhage at the end of the novel.

Virginity, to Esther Greenwood, is of great importance: “When I was nineteen, pureness was the great issue....I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t.”¹²⁴ Virginity is at the forefront of Esther’s mind through much of the novel and acts as a breaking point in her relationship with Buddy. Esther is unsure how to feel about virginity and the risk of losing of it, but she is repulsed by Buddy’s “affair” with Gladys. Yet, it simultaneously makes her feel unworthy, as if her worth as woman has been challenged because Buddy has chosen to be intimate with a woman that is not her—a thought pattern that is symbolic of women’s societal sexualization and the worth one is expected to derive from it. This sexualization is prevalent in various aspects of society, but perhaps the most compelling is the woman’s body and how she chooses to adorn it: “In any case, and even in the most austere circles, women’s sexual attributes will be emphasized....indicating through the attention to her physical charm that she accepts her female role....[and also through the] integration of eroticism into social life.”¹²⁵ Accepting and performing sexuality is imperative to traditional female

¹²³ Drucker, Sally Ann. “Betty Friedan: The Three Waves of Feminism.” *Ohio Humanities*, April 27, 2018.

¹²⁴ Plath, 82.

¹²⁵ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. NY: Vintage Books, 2011, 652-653.

standards, and it is a pressure Esther is well aware of. Buddy's intimacy with Gladys causes Esther to project the idea that she is sexually unattractive, an idea that leads her on a mission to lose her virginity in order to validate her worth.

Before the novel's end, Esther succeeds in losing her virginity. She "met Irwin on the steps of the Widener Library...[He was] rather ugly and bespectacled."¹²⁶ After being invited to coffee in his home, she determines that this is the man she is going to seduce. In the attempt to become a woman who embraces her sexuality, Esther is punished with a hemorrhage, a result of sexual intimacy that is rare, "one in a million."¹²⁷ Previous to her decision to seduce Irwin, Esther takes precautionary measures and goes to the doctor to begin birth control. Esther's situation is ironic, as the moment that she takes agency over her body and sexuality, she is punished with the release of exorbitant amounts of blood—and is no longer in control of her bodily functions. The female body is not to be controlled by the female herself, it is instead a vessel of sexual attraction that the man commands—evidenced by Irwin's willingness to leave Esther in a state of emergency, despite his direct participation in the action that caused the hemorrhage. A female's agency of her own body is a conflict unanswered by second-wave feminism, and when one considers the modern era, is a battle women are still fighting in the twenty-first century.

More than half a century has passed since the publication of *The Bell Jar*, but it remains a novel that is both relevant and unconventional. Breaking the *Bildungsroman* form and challenging the realist representation of women was revolutionary at the time of publication, and

¹²⁶ Plath, 226.

¹²⁷ Plath, 233.

the novel is still a jarring text that engenders valuable discussion about gender normativity and the slowness of historical change. Plath's prose is provocative and meaningful, giving it staying power and resonance with a twenty-first century audience. Esther Greenwood would be delighted to know that today she could be both a mother and successful career woman, but holding both of those demanding jobs does not come without biases and judgements.

Fragmentation still exists for women, and *The Bell Jar* presents this phenomenon in a way that is still applicable decades later. Perhaps the largest accomplishment of the novel is its representation of mental illness—which contributes to the provocative nature of the text. To discuss the repercussions of fragmentation and reduction is bold and traverses new territory; however, the acknowledgment of women's mental health creates a conversation for change and gives struggling women the voice that they deserve.

Chapter 3: “It occurred to her that she was going mad.”¹²⁸

Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*

A number of novels woven into one, *The Golden Notebook* (1962) depicts the affliction of women in the 1960s: fragmentation. Fragmentation is apparent in both the form and content of the novel, as the novel itself is separated into four separate notebooks, all kept by protagonist Anna Wulf. Although considered a *Bildungsroman*, the novel deliberately breaks the classic form through the obliteration of the traditional representation of women. The *Bildungsroman* places emphasis on the everyday, and this interpretation, before the introduction of the female *Bildungsroman*, produced a representation of women that is not accurate of women in reality. Doris Lessing’s novel acts as the antithesis to this antiquated notion of female existence and depicts the various consequences that reduction places upon women in society. Reduction and fragmentation will be used in the same context as previous chapters, as they are terms that represent a pattern of oppression in all three novels. In its simplest form, women have historically been encouraged to embrace a single role, an issue that is most often present in the middle and upper classes. They must choose career or motherhood, beauty or brains, virgin or whore—they cannot be both. The vocabulary has not yet been developed that allows a woman to encompass various roles. *The Golden Notebook* recognizes the struggle of the 1960s woman and her attempt to embrace fragmentation in order to survive. Despite its overwhelming chaotic fragmentation, the novel challenges patriarchal norms in order to define a new vocabulary for the “free woman.”

¹²⁸ Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. Perennial Classics, 1994: 621.

Although not analyzed in this project, Lessing's earlier series, *Children of Violence*, acts as a contrast to *The Golden Notebook* and is important when considering the choices Lessing makes in *The Golden Notebook*. The *Children of Violence* series is a traditional female *Bildungsroman*, and Lessing declares it as such: "Lessing appended [a note] to the fifth and last volume of her series, in which she refers to it as a *Bildungsroman*: 'This book is what the Germans call a *Bildungsroman*. We don't have a word for it.'"¹²⁹ Lessing's declaration of the novel's genre is sufficient for categorization, and examining the aspects of the novel confirm her statement. The novel's protagonist, Martha, is written into the familiar *Bildungsroman* trajectory of adolescence to adulthood and the loss of innocence. The novel-sequence examines conventional themes such as Martha's relationship to family and friends, marriage, and gender roles. The majority of the novel-sequence, save the last addition, adheres to realist tenets of consciousness and experience, depicting Martha in a quantifiable time, place, and consciousness. Critics often suggest that the material for *Children of Violence* and *The Golden Notebook* is quite similar, yet the way in which the material is presented is vastly different and is indicative of separation from the traditional *Bildungsroman* form.

Moretti views realism as the prioritization of aspects of existence, which functions as a device to both ground the text to a specific moment in time while simultaneously driving the plot forward.¹³⁰ This stylistic composition avoids chronological confusion and works to posit a central conflict within the protagonist's storyline. Lessing explicitly challenges this characteristic

¹²⁹ Brändström, Camilla. "'Gender and Genre': A Feminist Exploration of the *Bildungsroman* in A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man and Martha Quest." *University of Gävle, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2009, 29.

¹³⁰ Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1995, 42.

of the *Bildungsroman* through Anna Wulf's consciousness. Unlike the traditional realist form, *The Golden Notebook* does not take place in a specific time, place, or consciousness, which are defining tenets of realist literature. The novel is often guided by Anna's memory, a choice that has the potential to manipulate the reader's sense of time and space. Although the reader is situated in a specific time period, the lack of linearity in narrative coupled with various documents, diary entries, and observations obscures the sense of reality. One may argue that documents often anchor a text, but the lack of cohesion within Anna's documents as well as the complicated subject matter acts instead to blur memory and reality. These factors make consciousness the most abstract of the three defining tenets of realism, and while Anna does not lose consciousness, it is often muddled. Her inability to perfect fragmentation, as evidenced by the physical disarray of the notebooks themselves, leads to fragmented consciousness: "Anna is dissolving, and as she dissolves the boundaries between what she has defined as her own consciousness and the consciousness of others become blurred....[this allows her to] receive so many impressions."¹³¹ Anna exists on multiple planes in a single moment, a theme which is reinforced through the decision to compartmentalize her life through notebooks. As Anna's lines of consciousness blur, the *Bildungsroman* form blurs simultaneously. Through the meticulous explanation of Anna's inner-most thoughts, Lessing "beg[ins] to point out in a variety of notes of disillusionment and betrayal, that the 'free women' were not so free after all."¹³² The result is a

¹³¹ Kaplan, Sydney Janet. "The Limits of Consciousness in the Novels of Doris Lessing." *Contemporary Literature* 14, no. 4 (1973), 541-542.

¹³² Mohamed Abd El Aziz, H. (2018). Female Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 9(1), 150.

novel that is rebellious and fragmentary in both form and content, making it a cornerstone text of the feminist movement.

Lessing challenges the conventions of the realist form most visibly in the creation of the various notebooks that govern both the form and content of the text. Anna's need to separate herself into multiple notebooks speaks to both realist conventions as well as her struggle with fragmentation. Each notebook Anna keeps is a different part of herself: "I keep four notebooks, a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary."¹³³ The notebooks "symboliz[e] [Anna's] relation to herself, her body, to other people, and to society in general,"¹³⁴ a way of thinking that lends itself to the intended separation of consciousness that Anna strives to achieve throughout the novel. However, consciousness, as well as the notebooks, inevitably become blurred. It is impossible to separate one's self so meticulously without being driven to insanity, as identity is severely compromised in such a situation. Anna grasps for a language to describe herself that is not fragmented in nature. She attempts to embrace chaos through the purchase of a golden notebook, an effort to reclaim the self she has lost in a world of reduction. She sees the power in having a single notebook, recognizing that "if I could write in it Anna would come back, but I could not make my hand go out to take up the pen."¹³⁵ Anna cannot write her life in a manner that is analogous to a single notebook form because she does not have the proper vocabulary available to define herself. She has been subjected to a life that requires separation to survive.

¹³³ Lessing, 455.

¹³⁴ Kaplan, 539.

¹³⁵ Lessing, 571-572.

Despite her attempt to be a cohesive self, Anna ultimately gives the golden notebook away. She gives this notebook to none other than Saul Green, one of the few heavily caricatured Americans in the novel, whose reason for wanting the pretty new notebook is: “I need it. That’s all.”¹³⁶ Anna’s willingness to give the notebook away to a man, it being the only semblance of unity she has associated with herself, is an undeniable expression of who controls societal conditioning. Anna sacrifices her sense of wholeness in order to please a man, an interaction with metaphorical implications for society at large. The presence of the notebooks is also a statement of the shortcomings of the *Bildungsroman* form. The structure of *The Golden Notebook* is akin to five separate novels—the typical arc of the *Bildungsroman* is not sufficient in representing the female in society. To fix this, Lessing writes a novel that contains many novels, a structure that is the antithesis to the traditional structure of the realist novel. A *Bildungsroman* that depicts a lack of effective character development while also being composed of many shorter novels is iconoclastic; a woman that refuses to be reduced to a single fragment is equally as iconoclastic.

Reduction and separation of the self into various parts is at the core of Lessing’s novel. Characters block parts of themselves off in order to meet a societal standard and consequentially “become virtual caricatures....or, alternatively, [become] so ‘cracked’ and ‘split’ that existing conventions seem wholly inadequate to portray them.”¹³⁷ This characterization is not unique to protagonist Anna. Rather, it is a technique that Lessing has incorporated into the fundamental qualities of each major character. Marion, a prominent female figure, is caricatured as a harebrained housewife and her husband, Richard, is depicted as a bigoted buffoon. The reader is

¹³⁶ Lessing, 610.

¹³⁷ Hite, Molly. *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018, 71.

guided through various illustrations and circumstances, forcing her to see these characters as their caricatures and nothing else—they are reduced to their appropriate gender roles and unable to perform any other role. The repetition of this pattern designates a point of contention.

Lessing's ability to wrestle with one's place in society by exposing the pervasive quality of reduction is what makes the novel inherently feminist. The consequences of reduction affects various aspects of Anna's life, and as she rebels against these norms, the novel itself rebels against the constraints of realism,¹³⁸ all in order to prove that women can exist outside of a singular role.

To be a mother is perhaps the most traditional view of the adult woman, as the belief that “it is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her psychological destiny”¹³⁹ is seemingly unrivaled. This role is reductive in nature, as a woman's primary signifier turns from “woman” to “mother.” Life now revolves around the child, and she is expected to disregard all notions of life before motherhood. These traditional ideas ground Anna's relationship with her daughter, Janet. Unlike the novels previously discussed, *The Golden Notebook* offers a different perspective on the relationship between mother and daughter. Instead of being told from the perspective of the daughter, Lessing's novel provides the perspective of the mother—a point of view needed to fully understand the complexity of maternal relationships.

Anna's attitude toward Janet is different than her behavior toward any other character in the novel. She is ambivalent toward Janet; she both loves and resents her. She finds it difficult to separate motherhood from romantic relationships, and feels compelled to “divid[e] herself.” The

¹³⁸ Hite, 26.

¹³⁹ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. NY: Vintage Books, 2011, 597.

two personalities—Janet’s mother, Michael’s mistress, [were] happier separated. It [was] a strain having to be both at once.”¹⁴⁰ She has internalized the notion that she is inadequate at both roles when she attempts to perform them simultaneously, thus forcing her reduction to a single role depending on the specific circumstance. Anna mentions that Michael is uncomfortable watching her mother Janet, a blatant representation of sexist control. In the reductionist society of the patriarchy, men expect women to fulfill their needs without compromise. Thus, Michael does not approve of Anna being both mother to Janet as well as his lover. Anna feels inadequate because Michael feels uncomfortable—she is actively reducing herself to please the domineering patriarchal system. The two personalities must be split in order to be acceptable. The myth that to be mother is a death sentence of one’s sexuality is perpetuated in the novel in order to draw attention to its lunacy, and it ultimately aids in driving Anna to insanity.

The sacrifices Anna makes to be a proper mother include more than her own sacrificial fragmentations. Anna’s sanity dwindles as the novel progresses, and she compromises her own mental health in order to be a mother for Janet. She refers to the fragment of herself that is a mother as “that personality,”¹⁴¹ an evident separation of the self. To separate one’s self so frequently contributes to a lack of identity, and that functions as the catalyst to Anna’s eventual insanity. The various personalities she sees as parts of herself are vastly different and are a cause for concern: “inside I am flat, nervous, [and] dead...[but] for Janet, [I am] calm, responsible, [and] alive.”¹⁴² In order to be a proper mother, Anna must become a different person while ignoring her own struggle. The expectation is child before self, regardless of one’s own health.

¹⁴⁰ Lessing, 321.

¹⁴¹ Lessing, 475.

¹⁴² Lessing, 475.

This notion is derived from the anachronistic statement exposed in various pieces of feminist literature that motherhood is revered as the most important job in a woman's life: "From childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung...all [is] justified by this marvelous privilege she holds, that of bringing children into the world."¹⁴³ For Anna to behave in a manner that disagrees with this sentiment is unconventional. The issue is not unique to Anna, but rather is a widespread epidemic: "lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them. The quality they all had: self-doubt. A guilt because they were not happy."¹⁴⁴ Anna recognizes she is not alone, yet it feels as if this fate cannot be escaped. Women are made to feel inadequate in whichever fragment they are subjected to, and this inability to have a self-selected identity is unfulfilling.

The Golden Notebook posits mental health as a central topic, as Anna's descent into madness functions as the common thread through the fragmented chaos of the notebooks; the only constant within the novel is that Anna "had decided she was very likely mad."¹⁴⁵ Evidenced by the multiple references to psychiatrists as "witch-doctors" throughout the novel, mental health was still associated with a negative stigma despite the influx of theory about mental health. In the yellow notebook, where Anna creates fiction out of her own experience, Ella (Anna) dates a psychiatrist, Paul. Paul is domineering and condescending, belittling Anna despite his proclaimed understanding as a mental health professional. Eventually, Anna comes to realize that his career does not translate to reality: "You're a psychiatrist, you say, a soul-doctor, and you don't

¹⁴³ De Beauvoir, 605.

¹⁴⁴ Lessing, 159.

¹⁴⁵ Lessing, 485.

understand the simplest things about anyone.”¹⁴⁶ As a general trend, the representation of males and mental health is negative in the novel, which is perhaps a statement in itself. The argument that women were inferior, less intelligent beings may have contributed to the barrier surrounding women and their own mental health, as well as their exclusion in the cumulation of research and knowledge in the field.

To rebel against this notion and attempt to reclaim her own mental health, Anna seeks the help of a female therapist who she refers to as “Mother Sugar.” Mother Sugar is far more progressive than Paul or Freud, and engages in themes of female homosexuality and women’s oppression. Mother Sugar recognizes the crux of women in this era, that “the resentment, the anger [of women] is impersonal. It is the disease of women in [this] time. [It is seen] in women’s faces, their voices, every day....The woman’s emotion: resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison.”¹⁴⁷ Mother Sugar offers an alternative to the hysterical woman: frustration that stems from oppression and forced fragmentation. She provides Anna with vocabulary to describe her current state, such as the ever-present “housewife’s disease.”¹⁴⁸ Her introduction of vocabulary does more than give Anna words to describe the way she feels, it also provides reassurance that she is not alone—that this is an epidemic affecting women everywhere. Mother Sugar, understands the desired future for women’s mental health awareness and action. She instills awareness and recognition of patriarchal oppression in her clients, giving them the tools needed for liberation—she helps oppressed women become free women.

¹⁴⁶ Lessing, 186.

¹⁴⁷ Lessing, 318.

¹⁴⁸ Lessing, 318.

The free woman challenges traditional notions of femininity. The idea of the free woman is central to the text, an importance that is evidently marked by the titles of each chapter—“Free Women 1-5.” Progressively defining what this type of woman is, Lessing uses these chapters to acknowledge various aspects of traditional womanhood, marriage being of clear concern. Marriage functions as the precursor to motherhood and is expected for women to participate in once they reach the appropriate age. Simone De Beauvoir argues that “marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to th[e] institution,”¹⁴⁹ and this sentiment is echoed in the novel. Anna recognizes the stigma attached to her single lifestyle, and notes “they [society] still define [women] in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them.”¹⁵⁰ Anna and Molly’s own failed marriages creates ambiguity in the relationship between the women, as they treat each other as pseudo-partners. Similar to female relationships in *The Country Girls* and *The Bell Jar*, the ambiguity of the female relationship is deliberate. Homosexuality is never explicitly stated, but the nature of the relationship is deliberately open ended. Lessing never explicitly classifies the sexual orientation of the two women, making the women’s relationship, despite its romantic context or lack thereof, a valid alternative to the typical male/female relationship. The novel begins and ends with a nod to the consistency of the women’s relationship. The first sentence of the novel is as follows: “The two women were alone in the London flat.”¹⁵¹ Seemingly simple in nature, the introductory sentence carries weight. There are no men present, no children—both common denominators in the life of a traditional woman. In this absence of stereotypical signifiers that serve to define a

¹⁴⁹ De Beauvoir, 502.

¹⁵⁰ Lessing, 4.

¹⁵¹ Lessing, 3.

women's existence (men, children) in the first sentence of the novel, feminine norms are challenged and provide foreshadowing for the events to follow. Circular in nature and with "content [that] folds back in on itself,"¹⁵² the novel ends with a sentence that links back to the introductory one: "The two women kissed and separated."¹⁵³ The sentences are parallel in structure, both beginning with the identical phrase: "the two women." The repetition of such a phrase represents consistency and is grounds for exploration into the complexity of female friendships. Anna has various, non-committal relationships with men, but Molly remains as her constant, safe place of return. Anna sees the idea of "lesbian" as less concrete than most others around her, going as far to state "that two women, friends on a basis of criticism of men, are Lesbian, psychologically if not physically."¹⁵⁴ Modern in thought, as the current era has defined sexuality as fluid as opposed to fix, Anna's statement complicates the notion of what defines sexual orientation. The term that is traditionally used to describe homosexual relations is no longer relevant and concrete. Blurring the line between friendship and intimacy, the relationship between the two women explores the importance and complexity of female companionship in relation to the feminist agenda. The relationship between the women exists as an alternative to the traditional male/female relationship while still offering the comfort and trust that is often associated with monogamous marriages. Both women are divorced and have abandoned the idea of marriage, further reinforcing the alternative that their ambiguous relationship offers.

¹⁵² Krouse, Tonya. "Freedom as Effacement in *The Golden Notebook* : Theorizing Pleasure, Subjectivity, and Authority." *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 3 (2006), 39.

¹⁵³ Lessing, 635.

¹⁵⁴ Lessing, 435.

Anna has ephemeral relationships with many man in the novel, but Molly serves as her constant. This brings the women closer together, but the true intimacy of the women's relationship derives from their shared experience of motherhood. The women band together in the face of adversity, most notably in the wake of Molly's son's attempted suicide, behavior that speaks to both the longevity and strength of their relationship. For the women, motherhood is collective. Without men as partners, they act as pseudo-partners to one another, helping to shoulder the burden of childcare. In the wake of Tommy's attempted suicide, Anna takes equal responsibility for Molly's feelings of failure: "they talked [about Tommy], through briefly....since the points in question were so familiar to them both, of Molly's care of Tommy, Anna's relationship with him, to pinpoint the event or the moment where *they* had definitely failed him (emphasis my own)."¹⁵⁵ The shared responsibility mimics parenting, a type of relationship that is traditionally associated with heterosexual couples. However, feminism has long argued for a redefinition of the "nuclear" family, and the women's shared parenting style echoes this argument. This interaction creates an intimate bond between the women that resembles that of partners in marriage. The friendship between the women goes far beyond superficialities and instead exists as a bond that is strong enough to challenge the need for men, but ultimately falls short.

Despite the women's aversion towards men and marriage, they are painfully aware of the shortcomings present within their exclusively female relationship. Perhaps most bluntly stated by Anna near the end of the novel, she recognizes that "a woman without a man cannot meet a man,

¹⁵⁵ Lessing, 355.

any man, of any age, without thinking, even if it's for a half-second, Perhaps this is *the* man."¹⁵⁶ The idea of marriage is so heavily ingrained in the minds of women that dismissing the thought of a heterosexual relationship is a conscious struggle. Anna is outspokenly feminist in all aspects of her life, yet she cannot escape men or her heteronormative thoughts. Scattered throughout the text are various moments such as this, where Anna finds herself succumbing to the comfort of the familiar—men. When Janet reaches schooling age and is gone for the majority of the day, “Anna discovered she was spending most of her time doing nothing at all; and decided the remedy for her condition was a man. She prescribed this for herself like a medicine.”¹⁵⁷ The medical connotation of the diction present in this statement: “remedy,” “condition,” “prescribed,” and “medicine,” work to emphasize the pervasive epidemic that plagues many women (and Anna)—the desire for a man. It is a condition for which the feminist movement aims to find a cure, and appears to constantly fall short of. One may argue that in this is the unsolvable problem of both feminism and the novel, and while a valid statement, the struggle in solving the problem is indicative of the desire for change. The struggle provides space for conversation and allows for the entrance of alternative perspectives and potential solutions.

In complementing the desire to live a non-traditional life that takes place outside of the home, Anna takes interest in social justice. Communism is a crucial component of Anna's identity, making it a driving force behind many interactions in the novel. The preoccupation with communism is an evident parallel that exists in both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Bell Jar*. However, as Plath writes of communism from the perspective of a social threat, Lessing writes of

¹⁵⁶ Lessing, 624.

¹⁵⁷ Lessing, 618.

communism as a means to equality. Communism gives Anna and Molly a voice. Specifically, the Rosenberg trial is mentioned in both novels and is of great interest. As discussed in a previous chapter, Plath focuses on the shock treatment used in the Rosenberg trial, a situation that foreshadows Esther's own shock treatment. Anna discusses the trial from a different perspective, as she is concerned with protecting the Rosenbergs due to her communist interests. She writes that she was "help[ing] with a petition for the Rosenbergs [and it was] impossible to get people to sign it, except party and near-party intellectuals."¹⁵⁸ After the electrocution, she describes her disgust, feelings that bear close resemblance to Esther's. Anna experiences instability in her own mental health, but never faces shock treatment, making her disgust far more political than Esther's. Her maturity is showcased in this perspective and the novel itself functions as a more advanced and mature version of *The Bell Jar*. It is a further revelation of the shortcomings of both the *Bildungsroman* form and the reality of society.

In the aftermath of World War II, concern for marginalized populations emerged as a topical issue as Hitler blatantly "assum[ed]...that some human beings [were] better than others because of their race."¹⁵⁹ To substitute the word "race" for "gender" is to expose the logic of the patriarchy (albeit, a very simplistic substitution for a complex manner), making Anna's interest in communism clear and intelligent. Her own novel, *Frontiers of War*, is "simply, about the colour bar."¹⁶⁰ Although this statement is a reduction in itself, it provides relevance and context. Anna writes an entire novel about the racial struggle in South Africa—the battle for equality, in various forms, is a priority in her life. Although the novel falls within the dates of second-wave

¹⁵⁸ Lessing, 151.

¹⁵⁹ Lessing, 63.

¹⁶⁰ Lessing, 271.

feminism, it is worth noting that Anna's political stances are quite modern and are reminiscent of third-wave feminism. Feminist scholar bell hooks, whose work focuses on intersectional feminism, states that the "feminist revolution alone will not create such a world [of equality]; we need to end racism, class elitism, imperialism."¹⁶¹ In recognizing both the historical trends and context for both the color bar and feminism, one is forced to recognize the slowness of historical change, which is an issue Anna is constantly grappling with in both fiction and reality. Her novel features various encounters that expose the monstrosity that is racism, and this provides a frame for the novel in that it mirrors the challenges of advancing feminism. The banal cliché that "change takes time" is often true, and the case of women's liberation is no exception. Anna finds herself on the cusp of what she defines as the "new woman," the "free wom[an],"¹⁶² but such a seemingly revolutionary idea has difficulty becoming commonplace in society. For Anna, part of being a free woman is the ability to participate in social movements, yet she often feels as if motherhood obscures her ability to participate, providing another example of fragmentation.

Anna expresses the inescapable responsibility of motherhood in regards to her desire to participate in and understand various social issues: "She knew that Janet's mother being sane and responsible was far more important than the necessity of understanding the world."¹⁶³ The most telling diction in Anna's statement is her concession of knowing. To say "she knew" confirms that forgoing social awareness is a forced action that she must take in order to be a proper mother, and this action exposes a societal trap. To be a mother is to have one's sole focus on the

¹⁶¹ hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008, x. While Anna does deal with what she defines as "the color bar," the issue of class is rarely, if ever, addressed.

¹⁶² Lessing, 4.

¹⁶³ Lessing, 621.

child, thus taking away time and energy from understanding the workings of politics and social movements. Yet, politicians and societal systems routinely make decisions that impact women's lives, and women are ignorant of said decisions because of their expected dedication to remain dedicated to the child. This cycle reinforces women's oppression, as their role inside the home leaves them subjected to a narrow, incomplete view of the world as a whole and allows for the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals. This struggle is at the foundation of the novel's form and is what poses the most serious threat to the traditional *Bildungsroman* form, as "the basic powerlessness of individuals who are determined by their personal and cultural histories make the kind of search for 'freedom' which characterizes the *Bildungsroman* difficult to achieve."¹⁶⁴ The reduction of women to mothers limits freedom and makes them forcefully ignorant, allowing the patriarchal system to continue dismissing women as inferior, less intelligent beings while simultaneously encouraging them to embrace traditional gender roles. As is consistent with the novel as a whole, the novel embodies the phrase 'the personal is political.'¹⁶⁵

Second-wave feminism made significant contributions to the feminist movement,¹⁶⁶ but had undeniable shortcomings, which are most evident in the treatment of women's bodies and sexuality. The most compelling intersection of the female body and sexuality in the novel occurs in the midst of Anna's menstrual cycle. Despite her seemingly progressive attitude towards casual sex and sexual fluidity, Anna still subscribes to the belief that she should be ashamed and secretive about her menstrual cycle. Her secretive behavior is reminiscent of a pre-teen who is

¹⁶⁴ Kaplan, 538.

¹⁶⁵ Watkins, Susan. "Remembering Home: Nation and Identity in the Recent Writing of Doris Lessing." *Feminist Review* 85, no. 1 (March 2007), 98.

¹⁶⁶ Refer to introduction for further explanation.

experiencing menstruation for the first time: “I roll tampons into my handbag, concealing them under a handkerchief....I begin to be conscious of the possibility of bad smells.....the faintly dubious, essentially stale smell of menstrual blood I hate.”¹⁶⁷ Scientifically speaking, it is understood that the menstrual process is a natural, necessary process for women’s health. However, Anna equates female menstruation to female defecation, stating that men do not wish believe women participate in such activities, as they “would not like to have that romantic image, a woman, made less romantic.”¹⁶⁸ Anna’s awareness of the absurdity of such statements is present in this particular train of thought within the text, yet she feels inferior and behaves in such a way that adheres to the idea that menstruation does make her less sexually or romantically attractive. Anna is preoccupied with how her menstruation affects the males around her rather than embracing the workings of the female body and recognizing the biological necessity of such a process.

Anna has difficulty viewing her body in a way that is not sexualized because the world in which she lives has not provided alternative vocabulary to do so. In continuing with the notion of sexualized bodies, the novel makes an allusion to John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* (1748). A novel written about female prostitution from a man’s perspective, one could make a valid argument that *Fanny Hill* is quite sexist. Although the novel permits female sexual pleasure, it dedicates much of its content to the astounding male “machine.” Anna writes of Fanny in a diary she composes from the perspective of a young American male. In this male voice, she writes that he “thought of Fanny. My God, those thighs of hers, like the white necks of swans.”¹⁶⁹ By writing of the

¹⁶⁷ Lessing, 324-325.

¹⁶⁸ Lessing, 325.

¹⁶⁹ Lessing, 416.

novel in this context, Anna evidently recognizes the blatant sexism that exists within Cleland's novel as well as the long-standing patriarchal tradition of female objectification. The feminist movement has given her the ability to recognize the objectification of the female body in her own life and that of literature, but she does not appear to know how to rebel against objectification, exposing the limitations of second-wave feminism.

All challenged norms in *The Golden Notebook*—the *Bildungsroman* form, fragmentation, motherhood, marriage, mental health, social justice, and the female body—work to fight against traditionally understood notions of the one-dimensional female figure. Anna is a provocative protagonist whose struggle fighting the established mold of the proper woman is indicative of progression in the movement for women's equality. The theme of fragmentation is apparent in both Anna's struggle of identity as well as the form of the novel itself, but to succinctly define the novel's stance on fragmentation is quite difficult and somewhat ambiguous. Lessing's manipulation of the traditional *Bildungsroman* form through fragmentary notebooks forces the reader to grapple with the problem, and drawing attention to such an issue may be the intent. However, Anna's quality of life in the face of fragmentation suffers. She lives in chaos, trying to fulfill multiple roles while keeping the specifics of each separate. She lives in multiple states of consciousness—being mother, lover, writer, and party member when each is appropriate. Creating a unified identity becomes difficult and uncomfortable, and she continually circles back to the conclusion (most evident in her giving away of the golden notebook, a representation of encompassing identity) that fragmentation is necessary for a woman to exist within the patriarchy. This consolation speaks to the condition of society as a whole; women must exist in fragmentation and the novel exposes the mental hardship that accompanies such an existence. To

survive women must embrace fragmentation, but to live a full life they must rebel against it, and the novel exposes this dichotomy. *The Golden Notebook* offers both as a means to survival, and the confines of second-wave feminism and the contextual background propose fragmentation as a women's best option. Recognition comes before change, and Lessing's bestowal of consciousness to a pervasive female issue allows for discussion to begin, which creates space for change. This is a reality that is confronted and challenged in the progression of the feminist movement—a challenge that is dependent on women like Lessing who created worlds where the idea of a cohesive self presented as a potential option.

Conclusion: The Intersection of Culture and History

The fight against fragmentation and reduction that each author has offered is invaluable to women of the twenty and twenty-first century. Each novelist discussed in this project, as well as female *Bildungsromans* published beyond the 1960s, such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), have created space for women to see themselves properly represented in the literary world. Both the female authors and protagonists discussed in this project found themselves at the beginning of a movement both in society (second-wave feminism) and literature (proper female representation). In recent years, the advent of third-wave feminism has extended far beyond the white bourgeois, which is an issue of representation that is evidently present in this project. Representation for white bourgeois females exists within these novels, but fails to venture beyond that point. The limitations present in this project corresponds with much of the criticism around second-wave feminism has received; however, the movement initiated changes in both society and the literary world that should not be dismissed. The increase of published female *Bildungsromans* that are not about white, middle-class women has been overwhelming in the face of third-wave, intersectional feminism. Authors such as Cisneros and Tan, but also Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston¹⁷⁰ have published material that allows women of all backgrounds to see themselves in the literature they read, an experience that is empowering and creates space for change. The legislation passed during second-wave feminism, such as the Equal Employment

¹⁷⁰ Hurston's novels were published before 1960, but have experienced a deserved resurgence posthumously. In this reference, the novel I have in mind is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Opportunity Commission (1965) and Title IX (1972),¹⁷¹ represent the power that literature has in speaking to humanity and creating change, a pattern that has continued into the modern era in the wake of increased publications by, about, and for women.¹⁷²

However, despite its strong appeal and accessibility, the classic *Bildungsroman* form is not without problems. Its formatting simplifies and dismisses much of the nuance, complication, and struggle that impacts one's life. The form is one I have gravitated toward for many years, and one that is still employed regularly, most often in the form of Young Adult (YA) novels. This application to YA novels showcases the simplicity of the form, as it is easily consumed by a younger audience. The female *Bildungsroman* does help to mitigate some of this simplicity, as the discussion in this project has showcased; the characters are complicated and not without their own flaws. The novels are categorized as feminist, and with that, the expectation is that men are depicted as the source of evil and corruption, while women are perfect and the solution to the world's problems. This hyperbolic formula is problematic in itself, and the novels in discussion recognize that assumption. This is not to say the men are depicted in a flattering light—because the majority of them are not. However, neither are the women. Cait's character frustrates the reader when she succumbs to Mr. Gentleman's desires, Esther's behavior is immature and problematic at the end of her novel, and Anna's consciousness is so blurred that she allows parts of Paul, Ella, Molly, Tommy, and Saul to influence her decisions and thinking, behavior that is troublesome and should not be emulated. Yet, I would venture to say that is the purpose of

¹⁷¹ Burkett, Elinor. "Women's Rights Movement." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica, inc., July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/event/womens-movement>.

¹⁷² This is not to say that literature and legislation are directly correlated (as that would be a bit of an overstatement), but I do believe literature has the power to expose current social issues and inspire people to make changes.

challenging the typical *Bildungsroman* form. The simplistic nature is not representative of the reality of human existence. It is not a straightforward trajectory from A to B, but rather a journey that goes from A to D to Z and back to A again. The account is often messy and not easily categorized, but it represents reality—an accessible narrative that provides a worthy addition to the complicated nature of social theory.

Works Cited

- Alienation and Renewal in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Bloom's Literature*, 2019
- Bassnett, Susan. *Feminist Experiences: The Women's Movement in Four Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2013
- Bonds, Diane S. "The Separative Self in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 111, Gale, 1999. Literature Resource Center
- Brown, Penny. *The Poison at the Source: the Female Novel of Self-Development in the Early Twentieth Century*. St. Martin's, 1992.
- Bulger, Allison. "Bildungsroman." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 17, 2019. <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/bildungsroman>.
- Burkett, Elinor. "Women's Rights Movement." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica, inc., July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/event/womens-movement>.
- Brändström, Camilla. "'Gender and Genre': A Feminist Exploration of the *Bildungsroman* in A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man and Martha Quest." *University of Gävle, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2009, 1–61.
- Cahalan, James M. (1995) "Female and Male Perspectives on Growing Up Irish in Edna O'Brien, John McGahern and Brian Moore," *Colby Quarterly*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. NY: Vintage Books, 2011
- Drucker, Sally Ann. "Betty Friedan: The Three Waves of Feminism." *Ohio Humanities*, April 27, 2018. <http://www.ohiohumanities.org/betty-friedan-the-three-waves-of-feminism/>.
- Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of "Deadlock"." *SAGE Open* 4, no. 3 (2014): 215824401454718. doi:10.1177/2158244014547180.

Freese, Peter. "The "Journey of Life" in American Fiction." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 19, no. 2 (2013).

Gillis, Melissa, and Andrew T. Jacobs. *Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies: an Interdisciplinary Approach*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Giorgio, Adalgisa. *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002:

Goodman, Charlotte. "The Lost Brother, the Twin: Women Novelists and the Male-Female Double *Bildungsroman*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 17, no. 1 (1983)

Hite, Molly. *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018.

hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008.

Kaplan, Sydney Janet. "The Limits of Consciousness in the Novels of Doris Lessing." *Contemporary Literature* 14, no. 4 (1973): 536-49. doi:10.2307/1207471.

Krouse, Tonya. "Freedom as Effacement in *The Golden Notebook* : Theorizing Pleasure, Subjectivity, and Authority." *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 3 (2006): 39-56.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/>

Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. "The Female "*Bildungsroman*": Calling It into Question." *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 1 (1990).

Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. Perennial Classics, 1994

Meaney, Gerardine. *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics*. Dublin: Attic, 1991

Mohamed Abd El Aziz, H. (2018). Female Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.

Advances in Language and Literary Studies, 9(1), 149-159.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London:

Verso, 1995

O'Brien, Edna, and Eimear McBride. *The Country Girls: Three Novels and an Epilogue*. New

York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017

Plath, Sylvia, et al. *The Bell Jar: a Novel*. Harper, 2013

Pressman, Laura. "The Frauenroman: a Female Perspective in Coming-of-Age Stories." The

Bildungsroman Project. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 2013.

Ryan, Mary. "A Feminism of Their Own?: Irish Women's History and Contemporary Irish

Women's Writing." *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 5 (2010).

"The Rosenberg Trial." Atomic Heritage Foundation. April 25, 2018.

Wagner, Linda W., "Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female *Bildungsroman*," *Women's Studies*, 12:1

Watkins, Susan. "Remembering Home: Nation and Identity in the Recent Writing of Doris

Lessing." *Feminist Review* 85, no. 1 (March 2007): 97–115. doi:10.1057/[palgrave.fr](https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400321).

9400321