



UNIVERSIDAD
DE MURCIA

Escuela
de Doctorado

TESIS DOCTORAL

*La Construcción de la mujer escritora en la
posguerra estadounidense: autonomía, identidad y
creación en Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia
Plath*

*The construction of the
woman writer of postwar
USA: autonomy, identity and
creativity in the works of
Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers
and Sylvia Plath*

AUTOR/A Irene Rodríguez Pintado
DIRECTOR/ES Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez

2026



UNIVERSIDAD
DE MURCIA

Escuela
de Doctorado

TESIS DOCTORAL

*La construcción de la mujer escritora en la
posguerra estadounidense: autonomía, identidad y
creación en Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia
Plath*

*The construction of the
woman writer of postwar
USA: autonomy, identity and
creativity in the works of
Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers
and Sylvia Plath*

AUTOR/A

Irene Rodríguez Pintado

DIRECTOR/ES

Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez

2026



DECLARACIÓN DE AUTORÍA Y ORIGINALIDAD DE LA TESIS PRESENTADA PARA OBTENER EL TÍTULO DE DOCTOR/A

Aprobado por la Comisión General de Doctorado el 19 de octubre de 2022.

Yo, D^a. Irene Rodríguez Pintado, habiendo cursado el Programa de Doctorado Artes y Humanidades: Bellas Artes, Literatura, Teología, Traducción e Interpretación y Lingüística General e Inglesa de la Escuela Internacional de Doctorado de la Universidad de Murcia (EIDUM), como autor/a de la tesis presentada para la obtención del título de Doctor/a titulada:

The construction of the woman writer of postwar USA: autonomy, identity and creativity in the works of Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers and Sylvia Plath / La construcción de la mujer escritora en la posguerra estadounidense: autonomía, identidad y creación en Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia Plath

y dirigida por:

D.: Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez

D.:

D.:

DECLARO QUE:

La tesis es una obra original que no infringe los derechos de propiedad intelectual ni los derechos de propiedad industrial u otros, de acuerdo con el ordenamiento jurídico vigente, en particular, la Ley de Propiedad Intelectual (R.D. legislativo 1/1996, de 12 de abril, por el que se aprueba el texto refundido de la Ley de Propiedad Intelectual, modificado por la Ley 2/2019, de 1 de marzo, regularizando, aclarando y armonizando las disposiciones legales vigentes sobre la materia), en particular, las disposiciones referidas al derecho de cita, cuando se han utilizado sus resultados o publicaciones.

Del mismo modo, asumo ante la Universidad cualquier responsabilidad que pudiera derivarse de la autoría o falta de originalidad del contenido de la tesis presentada, en caso de plagio, de conformidad con el ordenamiento jurídico vigente.

Murcia, a 23 de febrero de 2026

(firma)

Información básica sobre protección de sus datos personales aportados:	
Responsable	Universidad de Murcia. Avenida teniente Flomesta, 5. Edificio de la Convalecencia. 30003; Murcia. Delegado de Protección de Datos: dpd@um.es
Legitimación	La Universidad de Murcia se encuentra legitimada para el tratamiento de sus datos por ser necesario para el cumplimiento de una obligación legal aplicable al responsable del tratamiento. art. 6.1.c) del Reglamento General de Protección de Datos
Finalidad	Gestionar su declaración de autoría y originalidad
Destinatarios	No se prevén comunicaciones de datos
Derechos	Los interesados pueden ejercer sus derechos de acceso, rectificación, cancelación, oposición, limitación del tratamiento, olvido y portabilidad a través del procedimiento establecido a tal efecto en el Registro Electrónico o mediante la presentación de la correspondiente solicitud en las Oficinas de Asistencia en Materia de Registro de la Universidad de Murcia

Esta DECLARACIÓN DE AUTORÍA Y ORIGINALIDAD debe ser insertada en la quinta hoja, después de la portada de la tesis presentada para la obtención del título de Doctor/a.

INDEX

List of Figures	iv
AGRADECIMIENTOS	vi
RESUMEN	x
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: CONSTRUCTING THE POSTWAR WOMAN	8
1.1. Introduction.....	8
1.2. Configuration of the postwar woman	9
1.2.1. A new “feminine” woman.....	9
1.2.2. Domesticity of the feminine woman.....	12
1.2.3. A feminine personality.....	20
1.3. Strategies for gender conformity.....	23
1.3.1. Formal barriers	24
1.3.2. Informal barriers.....	32
1.4. Popular Media: Creating and Representing Women	47
1.5. Conclusion	84
CHAPTER TWO: SELF-FASHIONING OF THE WOMAN WRITER.....	87
2.1. Introduction.....	87
2.2. Life writing in a multi-generic perspective.....	88
2.3. Life Narrative in Women Writers	102
2.3.1. Problems of marginalization of the woman writer.....	102

2.3.2. Life Narrative to overcome marginalization.....	115
2.3.3. Life Narrative to solve identity fragmentation	120
2.4. Life-Narrative through Aesthetic presentation.....	126
2.4.1. Clothing as a social phenomenon.....	126
2.4.2. Clothing in the shaping of identity	132
2.5. Conclusion.....	137
CHAPTER 3: A MUSE NO MORE	139
3.1. Introduction.....	139
3.2. The Problematic of Agency in Nin's <i>Diary</i>	142
3.2.1. "...weak, helpless, small:" Lack of Agency in Anaïs Nin.....	142
3.2.2. The diary as vindication: achieving agency through writing.....	159
3.3. Woman writer: A Divided Identity	166
3.3.1. Playing a feminine role and Identity fragmentation.....	166
3.3.2. Writing the Self: <i>The Diary</i> and identity configuration	173
3.4. The theatrical self-fashioning of a Woman Writer	180
3.4.1. A different kind of woman: dressing for Agency	180
.....	187
3.4.2. The writer's image: styling identity	187
3.5. Conclusion.....	194
CHAPTER 4: DIFFERENT AMONG THE DIFFERENT	196
4.1. Introduction.....	196
4.2. The autobiographical in McCullers	199

4.3. Agency and Identity in the Young Female Artist: “Wunderkind” and <i>The Heart is a Lonely Hunter</i>	207
4.4. A Queer Self-Fashioning: Androgyny and Artistry	223
4.5. Conclusion.....	233
CHAPTER 5: THE COLOSSUS	236
5.1. Introduction	236
5.2. The “courage to be unpleasant:” Sylvia Plath’s career as an assertion of agency	238
5.3. “A passionary, fragmentary girl”: Plath’s artistic exploration of Identity.....	255
5.4. Frivolity or Substance: Sylvia Plath’s complicated self-fashioning.....	263
5.5. Conclusion.....	273
CONCLUSION	276
BIBLIOGRAPHY	280

List of Figures

Figure 1. Advertisement for a kitchen display on page 7 of the August 1952 issue of Ladies' Home Journal where all people present in the kitchen and using it are women.	56
Figure 2. Left: Advertisement for complexion soap. Right: Advertisement for starch. Both from the July 1955 issue of Ladies' Home Journal.....	58
Figure 3. Page 209 of the August 1952 issue of Good Housekeeping where the content published has been reformatted to occupy a single column on the page while two thirds of it are filled with advertisements.	62
Figure 4. Adelaide Hawley playing Betty Crocker in the Betty Crocker Star Matinee, which aired from November 1951 to April 1952.....	66
Figure 5. Leave It to Beaver's opening image of the second season. June, the mother, is often shown going out of the house through the white door (kitchen) while the children and father descend from the stairs (bedrooms).....	67
Figure 6. June Cleaver, from Leave it to Beaver, waters the plants in pearls.	69
Figure 7. Lucy from I love Lucy and Donna from the Donna Reed Show in white, clean aprons.	70
Figure 8. Left: Hemlines in the mid-forties. Right: Dior's New Look's hemlines.....	74
Figure 9. Left: Wedding Picture. Right: Prom picture. All women photographed are wearing Dior's New Look's silhouette.	74
Figure 10. All-in-one brassiere, waist cincher and girdle.	76
Figure 11. Actress Jayne Mansfield wearing a bullet (or torpedo) bra.	77
Figure 12. Left: A crinoline from the 1860s, from the archive of the Fashion Museum of Antwerp. Right: Advertisement for petticoats of the 1950s.....	78
Figure 13. 1950s model in an accessory set of monotone jewelry, gloves and hat.	81
Figure 14. Dior model in the New Look with a saucer hat.	82

Figure 15. Nin in a dress à la Récamier	182
Figure 16. Typical 1940s attire.	182
Figure 17. Anaïs Nin's photograph on the back of her book <i>The Four-Chambered Heart</i>	186
Figure 18. Diane di Prima in black.	187
Figure 19. Portrait of Mary Shelley by Richard Rothwell. Circa 1831.	189
Figure 20. <i>The Governess</i> by Richard Redgrave. 1844.	189
Figure 21. Nin in her black cape.....	190
Figure 22. Nin dressed in black and holding the volumes of her diary in the back vault where she kept them.....	190
Figure 23. McCullers in her signature bob.....	227
Figure 24. Actress Lauren Bacall in a bob that has been wet set.	227
Figure 25. McCullers photographed with books.	230
Figure 26. McCullers writing.	230
Figure 27. Anne Sexton at her desk in pants and a shirt.	231
Figure 28. Sylvia with a tan and dyed blond hair.	263
Figure 29. Plath in a pageboy hairdo.	264
Figure 30. Plath and her upside-down rose.	268
Figure 31. Plath wearing her natural straight, brown hair.	271
Figure 32. Sylvia pretending to write in conventional 1950s attire.....	272
Figure 33. Sylvia reading her pages in her later, "serious writer" style.....	272

AGRADECIMIENTOS

Supongo que es lo propio empezar dándole las gracias a la educación pública, que representa el verdadero triunfo del pueblo y que me ha acogido y acunado durante toda mi vida, manteniendo navegables los caminos que ya había abierto la curiosidad.

A la Universidad de Murcia, por ser mi alma máter y concederme un contrato predoctoral de su Plan Propio, sin el que esta tesis no se hubiera realizado.

A los proyectos “PGC 2018-095393: Queer Temporalities in Contemporary Anglophone Cultures” y “PID2022-137592NB-I00: Queer Memory on the Margins of Contemporary Anglophone Cultures,” mi familia académica durante estos cinco años.

Más allá de las instituciones, tengo *personas* a las que agradecer, personas que me han sostenido (y aguantado) a lo largo de este tiempo, cuyas fuerzas y palabras me han servido de ejemplo y de apoyo.

A Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez, por aceptarme como alumna de TFM y después doctoranda, por guiarme profesionalmente y, sobre todo, calmarme personalmente (hito que se le resiste a muchas personas). Y también por saber ser sincero sin dejar de ser amable. Muchas gracias, de verdad.

A Juan Francisco Belmonte Ávila, por las comidas y paseos por Edimburgo y, más importante aún, por ser la voz del optimismo y el entusiasmo cuando el camino académico empezaba a saber amargo.

Hay dos personas que, tal vez sin saberlo, plantaron las semillas que hoy florecen y me convirtieron en lo que soy. Eric Reimer, que me obligó a leer *Al Faro* de Virginia Woolf, libro que odié y después amé tanto que cambió mi dirección para siempre. Y a Rosa

Periago, que dirigió mi TFG —efectivamente, sobre *Al Faro*— y fue la primera persona en decirme: “Irene, ¿has pensado en investigar?” No sabéis la que habéis liado.

A las doctoras Carole Jones y Katherine Fama, por supervisar mis estancias en Edimburgo y Dublín, que me permitieron conservar a mi adoradísima Carson McCullers dentro del proyecto y me dieron la oportunidad de verme en lugares a los que sentía que pertenecía.

A Sonia Martínez, mi amiga literaria, la otra chica de los diarios. Ojalá siempre sigamos caminando en paralelo y los caminos nos lleven, como casi siempre hacen, a una panadería y una librería de segunda mano.

Al mejor recuerdo que me llevo de mis años de tesis, mi Club del Chiste: Julia, Sophie, Fernando, Juan Pedro, Ani y Corpus. Nunca antes de vosotros había tenido un grupo de amigos que fuera una verdadera familia. Pasé de no tener amigos a pertenecer a grupos que me hacían daño y donde siempre parecía abocada a seguir siendo lo que había sido en la primaria: la rara. Vosotros sois mi experiencia de una amistad que celebra la individualidad y que siente orgullo de ella. Gracias, gracias, gracias.

A Fernando Casanova, chéri, por ser un hermano y siempre creer en mí. Por esperar y por permanecer a pesar de las dificultades. Gracias por sobrevivir conmigo.

A Julia García, por ser una amiga desde el minuto uno, hacerme reír tanto y conseguir lo que pocos consiguen: sacarme de casa. Gracias por tu talento para la risa.

A Sophie McBride, la eterna optimista que personifica la esperanza en mi vida. Gracias por tu resplandor.

A Juan Pedro Navarro, por siempre hacerme sentir brillante y especial. Gracias por tanta diversión y tan bello reflejo.

A Irene Oñate, la archienemiga que de algún modo se volvió mi mejor amiga. Gracias por estar siempre ahí cuando miro detrás de mi hombro, tanto en las aulas como luego en la vida. Y gracias por celebrar cada uno de mis logros como si también fueran los tuyos.

A Nuria Muñoz, que llegó como un rayo y me encendió cuando estaba a punto de apagarme. Mi amiga flâneuse de las tardes peripatéticas. Te echo de menos cada día. Sé que pronto nos volveremos a encontrar. Te veo en el Tesco grande a las cuatro.

A María José Ballester, que me arregla cuando estoy rota. Gracias por enseñarme a cuidar de mí misma, por —literalmente— aliviar mis dolores y por ser la mejor compañía que se puede tener tanto en la tristeza como en la alegría. Gracias, sobre todo, por regalarme tus sábados.

A María Piqueras, que me atrajo con galletas la primera semana de carrera y ya nunca dejó de alimentarme, de una manera u otra. Gracias por ser todas las amigas: la amiga viajera, la amiga con la que recitar a las Brontë y Jane Austen, la amiga con la que bailar, la amiga que te invita a tomar el té y también te sirve un gin tonic para desayunar. Gracias por tantas historias.

A Ani Galván, la Plath para mi Sexton, mi compañera de tesis por excelencia. Nunca compartir miserias ha estado tan lleno de risas e ingenio como en nuestra amistad. Gracias por nuestras tardes de martini en el Ritz.

A Corpus Navalón, que es amiga y ejemplo, la persona y la profesional que siempre aspiro a ser. Dicen que si eres la persona más lista de una sala es porque estás en la sala equivocada. Yo tengo la inmensa suerte de compartir la vida con alguien de quien siempre tendré cosas que aprender. You are better and best. Y yo soy la más afortunada al tenerte como hermana elegida.

A Rocío Rodríguez, por ser más yo que yo misma, por creer en mí más que nadie. Gracias también por recordarme que existe una vida fuera de mis libros y por nunca dejar que el mundo académico me consuma. Poca gente tiene la suerte de encontrar a su alma gemela en esta vida y justo la mía vino a nacer en la misma casa que yo.

Por último, pero no menos importante —nunca podrían ser los menos importantes—, gracias a mis padres. Gracias por cada sacrificio, por todo vuestro sufrimiento y por todas las superaciones que ocurrieron incluso antes de que yo naciera. Habéis hecho de mi vida un lugar seguro y privilegiado. Gracias también por llenar la casa de libros, por dejarnos ver todas esas películas para las que éramos demasiado pequeñas, por hacerme leer el diccionario y nunca dejar que usara palabras cuyo significado no conocía. Gracias por llevarme a cada aeropuerto y por siempre estar esperando cuando vuelvo a aterrizar en casa.

Brillo con la luz que vosotros me habéis dado.

RESUMEN

Durante las décadas de 1960 y 1970, la segunda ola del movimiento feminista da lugar a la Teoría Literaria Feminista. Uno de sus objetivos sería recuperar la aportación femenina a la literatura, la cual había sido ignorada en gran parte hasta este momento. Teóricas como Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar y Elaine Showalter han contribuido desde entonces a la creación de un compendio crítico de la literatura de mujeres y han explorado los lazos de unión entre identidad de género y creación literaria. Sin embargo, el estudio de la configuración de la identidad en la figura de la mujer escritora aún presenta lagunas, como es el caso en las escritoras objeto de esta tesis: Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia Plath. Estas escritoras, que precedieron a la segunda ola del feminismo, son de vital importancia para el conocimiento de la producción literaria femenina, ya que sus obras son ejemplo de la complicada relación entre políticas de género y las concepciones de feminidad y creatividad que han dificultado la existencia de la mujer escritora a lo largo de la historia. El estudio de la configuración identitaria que las autoras Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia Plath llevan a cabo en su escritura autobiográfica muestra la existencia de una línea de pensamiento feminista que precede al feminismo durante las décadas de la posguerra estadounidense, y que sin embargo apenas ha sido estudiada. Esta investigación del yo y de su articulación también se encuentra presente en las obras de otras autoras del periodo, como Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop o Judith Malina. No obstante, estas escritoras no se encuentran incluidas en el estudio debido a su gran similitud con otras autoras presentes —como es el caso de Anne Sexton, muy relacionada con Plath—, la gran cantidad de material inédito en su obra —en el caso de Bishop—, o la dificultad para acceder a escritos personales que se encuentran sin catalogar en sus archivos —como ocurre con gran parte de los escritos íntimos de Malina. Debido a esto, se ha elegido a Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia Plath como representantes de esta

subcultura femenina en la literatura de la posguerra. Como herederas de la influencia del modernismo y el psicoanálisis, estas escritoras llevaron a cabo una exploración de su propia subjetividad que generó en sus obras un extenso análisis autobiográfico de la relación entre identidad de género y creatividad. Como mujeres de la posguerra estadounidense, Nin, McCullers y Plath se enfrentaron a un periodo donde el concepto de feminidad era especialmente restrictivo y estaba basado en la domesticidad, separando la identidad femenina y la identidad creativa y convirtiéndolas en opuestas a los ojos de su contexto social y cultural. Durante este periodo, la creatividad se conceptualizó a través de características como la autonomía y la pasión, mientras que la feminidad se relacionaba con cualidades como la pasividad y la sumisión. De esta forma, se estableció un vínculo entre creatividad y masculinidad que alienó a las escritoras del periodo. Asimismo, no se han realizado muchos estudios que comprendan a las autoras de esta era como colectivo, ya que la mayoría están compuestos de análisis de sus biografías y obras individuales. Por ello, la relación entre sus identidades y obras resulta de gran interés a la hora de realizar un estudio exhaustivo de lo que cabría llamar un feminismo pre-feminista que, aún sin los referentes, el activismo y la teorización de la segunda ola, se configura durante finales de la década de 1940 y la década de 1950 y realiza una crítica profunda del sistema sexo-genérico —en términos de Gayle Rubin— de las esferas literarias del momento.

El objetivo principal de esta tesis es llevar a cabo un análisis exhaustivo del proceso de autoconfiguración de la escritora, entendiéndolo como consecuencia de la estricta división entre los conceptos de feminidad y creatividad de su contexto cultural, para así poder articular la existencia de una subcultura proto-feminista en la literatura de la posguerra estadounidense. Para esto, el estudio se divide en cinco capítulos que combinan la historia cultural, el análisis textual, el estudio de géneros literarios (los debates en torno a la escritura autobiográfica y *life writing*) y los *critical fashion studies*,

para desarrollar una exploración del periodo contextual de las autoras, de la escritura como instrumento para la autonomía y la autoconfiguración, de cómo estos motivos informan las obras de Nin, McCullers y Plath, y finalmente de cómo estas autoras utilizan el estilo personal y la articulación de su apariencia para abrir espacios de presencia y agentividad en una esfera pública—el sistema literario—dominada por perspectivas andro-céntricas.

El primer capítulo explora la configuración de la feminidad normativa durante las décadas de posguerra en Estados Unidos, articulada a través de una reinterpretación freudiana del ideal femenino doméstico del siglo XIX. El capítulo explora los mecanismos que se utilizaron para redirigir a la mujer al hogar tras la finalización de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Estos mecanismos se dividen en barreras formales —*formal barriers*—, como la legislación destinada a limitar el acceso al empleo y el potencial económico de la mujer, y en barreras informales —*informal barriers*—, que comprenden medios de persuasión, como las ciencias sociales y los medios de comunicación —películas educativas, televisión y tendencias de moda—, que se utilizaron para imponer los estándares de presentación y comportamiento femeninos del momento. Este análisis permite situar a Nin, McCullers y Plath dentro de su contexto sociopolítico y literario y determinar la forma en que este influyó en sus procesos de configuración del yo, sus producciones artísticas y sus presentaciones estéticas.

El capítulo dos lleva a cabo un estudio exhaustivo de los procesos de auto creación más accesibles para la escritora del periodo de posguerra: la escritura íntima y autobiográfica y la presentación estética. La primera sección sitúa los géneros autobiográficos que las autoras utilizan dentro de la Escritura de Vida—*Life Writing*. Esto agrupa diferentes géneros literarios utilizados por Nin, McCullers y Plath —como la ficción, el diario y la correspondencia— dentro un análisis más amplio de cómo las

autoras construyeron una narrativa de vida —*life narrative*— que utilizaron para reformular los conceptos de creatividad, identidad y autonomía. La segunda sección examina la construcción de la imagen como un método de construcción de la identidad. Aunque la conformación de un estilo personal y una imagen pública puede ser considerada secundaria a la creatividad literaria, es de gran importancia en la negociación identitaria dentro de un periodo marcado por el conformismo y la uniformidad estética. La escritura íntima de Nin, McCullers y Plath incluye numerosas referencias a su vestimenta y hábitos de arreglo, lo que indica que las autoras eran conscientes de la oportunidad que el estilo personal les ofrecía para asimilarse a o, en sus casos, rebelarse contra las configuraciones de feminidad impuestas por su contexto social y cultural. Por lo tanto, la segunda parte de este capítulo se centra en el uso del traje como una forma de resistencia tanto artística como personal para estas autoras.

Los siguientes tres capítulos se componen de estudios de caso específicos a cada una de las autoras que se analizan en esta tesis. El primero se centra en Anaïs Nin. La primera subsección de este capítulo versa sobre las dificultades de la escritora para mantener autonomía sobre su vida y obra y cómo dichas dificultades componen una representación de la animadversión social que se extendió durante el periodo de posguerra hacia la figura de la escritora, así como de la continua amenaza de marginación a la que Nin estuvo expuesta. Esta sección también explora la difícil relación de Nin con el mundo literario, ya que su diario evidencia la indiferencia crítica y comercial de la posguerra hacia sus escritoras y las consecuencias negativas que esto tuvo en sus producciones artísticas y su estabilidad económica. La siguiente sección analiza los problemas de autoconfiguración de Nin y su uso de la escritura de diario como una herramienta de negociación identitaria ante la división conceptual entre feminidad y creatividad que se propagó a mitad del siglo XX. El uso de la escritura revela que, para Nin, la creación

literaria era un método de autoconfiguración. Finalmente, la última sección realiza un análisis de la vestimenta de la autora como otro método de articulación de la identidad. El estilo personal de Anaïs Nin permite así realizar un análisis de las diferentes autoconfiguraciones de la autora a lo largo de su vida y relacionar su escritura y estilo personal como técnicas de narración del yo.

El cuarto capítulo se centra en Carson McCullers y su creación de su propia imagen pública y su legado artístico. Por una parte, el capítulo se compone de una revisión de la ficción de McCullers como ejemplo de auto narración que permite relacionar las novelas de la autora con su propia figura a través del concepto de la auto ficción — *autofiction*. Esto demuestra que las novelas de la autora se pueden entender también como escritura autobiográfica. Dos ejemplos de ello se encuentran en sus personajes femeninos adolescentes: Frances, de la historia corta “Wunderkind,” y Mick, una de las protagonistas en *El Corazón es un Cazador Solitario* — *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. La similitud de estos personajes con la biografía de McCullers evidencia la utilización que la autora hizo de ellas como trasuntos a través de los que representar las difíciles circunstancias de la artista durante sus años de desarrollo, cosa que ella misma había experimentado. En sus historias, las artistas luchan por su autonomía contra un contexto social que pretende separarlas de su creatividad e inculcarles los valores de pasividad y sumisión asociados con la feminidad del periodo. La caracterización de las protagonistas de McCullers se vuelve un reflejo de la lucha identitaria de la autora en su propio contexto. Por otra parte, este capítulo explora la rebelión estética de la autora contra la feminidad convencional de su periodo a través de su estilo bohemio y andrógino. Por ello, la rebelión estilística se considera una de las herramientas primordiales, junto con la escritura, que McCullers utilizó para crear una imagen pública fuera de las imposiciones de género de la posguerra.

El quinto capítulo versa sobre la escritura íntima —los diarios y cartas— y la única novela, *La Campana de Cristal*, de Sylvia Plath como ejemplos de la exploración de la autonomía y la identidad que esta tesis explora. Las obras de Plath crean una representación detallada de la censura social dirigida a las escritoras de la posguerra estadounidense. La primera sección del capítulo analiza las experiencias personales de Plath como una representación de la dificultad de la escritora para tener autonomía sobre su vida y obra. Esta parte examina los procesos de marginalización, patologización y supresión de la ambición creativa de la mujer artista y expone la terrorífica frecuencia con la que el contexto de posguerra atacaba a la escritora. La segunda sección, que versa sobre las representaciones de Plath de los procesos de indoctrinación de género, lleva a cabo un análisis de la división entre “mujer” y “escritora” en sus escritos personales, convirtiendo a Plath en una figura representativa de la fragmentación identitaria que resulta de la alternancia entre dos identidades aparentemente contrarias. La última sección continúa el análisis de la oposición entre los conceptos de feminidad y creatividad a través de la rebeldía de Plath contra la vestimenta femenina convencional de su era y su adopción de un estilo personal marcado por la intelectualidad y la seriedad que, para ella, debían acompañar a la identidad creativa. Este estudio de la vida y obra de la autora señala a la creatividad, una vez más, como herramienta a través de la que las escritoras de posguerra podían ejercer control sobre su propia configuración del yo.

Este proyecto de tesis examina a Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers y Sylvia Plath a través de su común análisis de los motivos de autonomía, identidad y creatividad, lo que permite agruparlas como representantes de una subcultura femenina dentro de la esfera literaria de la posguerra estadounidense. Este enfoque permite agrupar a las autoras examinadas como colectivo y trazar un pensamiento feminista precedente al feminismo que les permitió reconfigurar las imposiciones de género de mitad del siglo XX, así como

desafiar su exclusión de las esferas literarias. Además, el enfoque temático permite llevar a cabo este análisis colectivo sin invisibilizar las diferencias nacionales, étnicas y políticas entre Nin, McCullers y Plath. Finalmente, la exploración del estilo personal y la construcción de la imagen como métodos de autoconfiguración más allá de la creatividad literaria refuerza la relación entre estas escritoras, ya que señala cómo la creación de una imagen pública fue, para todas ellas, el resultado de un deliberado y cuidadoso proceso de auto-creación.

INTRODUCTION

*...the voice is unlike any other voice you have ever heard, and it is speaking directly to you,
communing with you in private, right in your ear, and in its own distinctive way.
It may be talking to you from centuries ago or from a few years back or, as it were,
from across the room—bang up-to-date in the here and now.
The historical details are secondary; **All that really matters is that you hear it.***
— Al Alvarez¹

It was in 1927 that Virginia Woolf introduced us to a not-so-young-anymore Lily Briscoe finally completing a portrait ten years in the making and laying down her brush to think: “I have had *my* vision.”² Women writers—perhaps all women artists—have been historically characterized as selfish and egotistical, too involved with their own selves to produce universality. But this self-obsession is not a coincidence, it is a direct result of how they have been dispossessed of their identity and, thus, instigated to spend their life asserting their own subjectivity by whatever means possible. Ironically, it seems to be this preoccupation with identity that has made them as universal as they have become. It was certainly what lured me into this topic. Like anyone who falls in love with the writers about to be discussed in this dissertation, something was true of me when I found this subject: I did not know what to do with my life. The fig tree scene in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, where a young woman watches figs representing all her possible life paths sprouting but is paralyzed by the number of choices for so long the figs start to spoil, seemed specifically written for me. I wanted to do literary research, to be a writer, to be a fashion expert. I was not going to let my figs rot, but all my pursuits were indeed divided into different branches: I had no research to speak of, my poetry and short stories were a

¹ Al Alvarez, *The Writer’s Voice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005): 15. Bolding is mine.

² Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1981 [1927]): 209. Italics mine.

secret affair, and as a feminist fashion historian and critic, I was building a social media presence that would allow me to share my new hyper fixation with retro fashion while keeping it strictly separated from the rest of my interests. I still maintain these pursuits, but I needed cohesion. Like Lily Briscoe, I wanted my own vision. It seems inevitable now that they would all come together into the project that has defined my 20s, linked together—as, looking back, they always were—by the tiny gold thread that runs through this dissertation and has allowed for its writing: the use of creativity as the only means of control over one’s own subjectivity.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of Feminism promoted the emergence of Feminist Literary Criticism as a way of recovering women’s writing from oblivion. From this moment, theorists like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar or Elaine Showalter have contributed to the notion of “women’s writing” and its critical body of work by exploring the connection between gender identity and creativity. However, the study of identity configurations in women writers still presents gaps. The female authors who preceded the advent of the second wave are of extreme importance, as their works are an example of the historically complicated relationship between gender politics, conceptions of femininity and literary creativity that have plagued the woman writer for centuries. The study of Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers, and Sylvia Plath’s autobiographical self-fashioning shows the existence of a pre-feminist, feminist thinking in women’s literature during the postwar decades, also represented in the works of other female authors from the period—such as Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop or Judith Malina. These have not been included in this study due to their extreme similarity to other writers examined—as many parallels can be established between Sexton and Plath—, the great amount of unpublished material—in Bishop’s case—and the difficulty in accessing uncatalogued private papers—as is the case with Malina. Thus, Nin, McCullers and Plath

are elected as representatives of a wider trend in women's writing of the Postwar. As inheritors of the influence of modernist literature and psychoanalysis, these authors focused greatly on the exploration of their subjectivity and, therefore, created a highly autobiographical body of work through which the relationship between gender and creativity can be analyzed. Women of the American Postwar are of special interest because their active years take place during a period where femininity became especially restrictive through the concept of domesticity, which further promoted the division between feminine and creative identities. During this period, the conceptualization of artistry was based on characteristics such as agency and passion while femininity was based on traits such as submissiveness and passivity, establishing a connection between artistic creativity and masculinity that alienated women writers. Furthermore, women writers of the Postwar have been largely ignored outside forays into their individual biographies and hardly explored collectively. Thus, the connection between their works and identities becomes of great interest for the comprehensive study of a pre-feminism feminist line of thought that seems to have congealed before the second wave and anticipated the theoretical tools of later writers and scholars through its exhaustive criticism of the sex/gender system—in Gayle Rubin's terms—within the literary spheres.

The aim of this dissertation is to allow for a detailed analysis of the woman writer's process of identity configuration as a direct consequence of the Postwar's strict division between the values of femininity and those of creativity and as part of a wider proto-feminist feminine subculture in the literature of the period. To achieve this, the project is divided into five chapters which will focus both on an exploration of the period in question; of writing as a means of achieving female agency and self-articulation; and of how these themes inform the work of Nin, McCullers and Plath. Chapter one will verse on the configuration of normative femininity and womanhood during the American

Postwar years, a femininity defined through the Freudian re-packaging of nineteenth century domesticity that was wielded. This chapter will examine the barriers erected during this time in order to push women into the private sphere. Some were formal barriers, such as a legislation detrimental to women's employment rights and economic independence, while others were informal, such as the widespread social messaging enforcing "legitimate" feminine behavior and presentation. In particular, social studies and popular media—including educational films, TV, and fashion—played a central role in the articulation and enforcement of postwar feminine ideals. Study of these means of persuasion will help situate the authors within their particular socio-political and literary context, and will aid in the understanding of the boundaries and identitarian struggles that characterized their output and self-presentation.

Chapter two will focus on a comprehensive study of the processes of self-fashioning most readily available to the woman writer of the Postwar years: personal and autobiographical writing. The first section of this chapter inquires into autobiographical forms of writing within the wider field of Life Writing. This analysis will help enlist the different genres found in Nin, McCullers, and Plath's life works—fiction, diaries, letters—into a wider examination of the authors' construction of a *life narrative* of their own and, therefore, of the way they reformulated artistry, agency and identity in their own terms—against those imposed by the surrounding culture. The second part of the chapter examines one's personal image as a means of identity-construction. While the curation of a personal style and a public image has often been regarded incidental to literary creativity, within the conformist aesthetics of the Postwar it was an important means of identitarian negotiation and self-assertion for women writers. Nin, McCullers, and Plath's personal writings provide ample and frequent mentions of clothing, indicating that all of them were well aware of the possibilities personal style offered either to conform or, in

their case, rebel against postwar configurations of femininity. Thus, this second part explores both the use of dress as an indicator of indoctrination and countercultural sentiment *and* as a tool for rebellion—both artistic and personal.

The remaining three chapters consist of case studies on the specific writers being discussed in the dissertation. The first of these focuses on Anaïs Nin. The first subsection of this chapter focuses on Nin's struggles to maintain agency in her life and work as a sign of the social animosity against the woman writer and the threat of social shunning she was constantly exposed to. This part also explores the author's complicated relationship with the literary world, exposing the commercial and critical neglect of women writers during the Postwar, and the negative consequences it had for her literary production and financial stability. Secondly, Nin's identity struggles are analyzed through her constant resort to her diaries as a means of negotiating the split between values associated to artistry and those associated to femininity. Nin's use of writing clearly reveals artistic expression was for her a means of identity reconstruction. Finally, the analysis of Nin's aesthetic self-fashioning, traced through photographic and written evidence, indicates that style curation was another crucial means of self-configuration. Nin's clothing choices allow us to have a more complete assessment of the author's identity performances throughout her life and are integrated into her writing through their connection with self-narration.

The fourth chapter focuses on Carson McCullers' curation of her persona and legacy. On the one hand, the chapter contains a revision of McCullers' fiction as an example of self-narrative through the concept of *autofiction*. It demonstrates that this author's narrative can be understood largely as autobiographical writing. Two highly symptomatic examples are her adolescent female characters, Frances from the short story "Wunderkind," and Mick, from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; when contrasted with the

author's biography, they evidence McCullers' self-insertion into stories that allow her to present the reader with the plight of a young female artist—as she herself was. In them, the young female artist's struggle for agency is in open conflict against the social messaging that intends to separate her from artistry as she grows into an adolescent and becomes expected to ease into the submissive and passive values associated with Postwar femininity. The construction of McCullers' protagonists reveals the author's identitarian difficulties within her social and cultural context, presenting attempts at assimilation into femininity as ultimately hopeless, and androgyny as the result of the split between creativity and womanhood. On the other hand, the chapter tracks the concept of gender neutrality through McCullers' own self-fashioning, exploring the author's open rebellion against conventional femininity through her adoption of a bohemian, androgynous countercultural style. Thus, stylistic rebellion played a key role in Carson McCullers' life and fiction, integrating both writing and styling into the wider creation of her public persona.

The last of the case studies inquires into Sylvia Plath's intimate writings—her journals and personal letters—and into her only novel, the autobiographical *The Bell Jar*, as further articulations of the themes presented in this dissertation. Plath's work draws a detailed picture of the censorious messaging directed at women writers during the American Postwar. The first part of this chapter shows the extent to which Plath's experiences were representative of women writers' turbulent access to personal and artistic autonomy. This subsection analyzes the social shunning, pathologization and silencing imposed of the woman writer's artistic ambition to draw a terrifyingly complete picture of the casualness with which the woman artist was attacked by her environment. The second section, on Plath's thorough representation of processes of gender indoctrination, will open a path through which to discuss the woman/writer split in female

authors of the period, with Plath as a representative figure of the difficulty to manage the fragmentation that usually follows constant oscillation between two culturally contrary identities. The last part of this chapter follows the contrariness between the ideals of artistry and those of femininity to provide an examination of this divide through Plath's abrupt break with Postwar fashionability and her assimilation of a style of seriousness and intellectuality that she associated with the writer's identity. This examination of the author's life and work corroborates that artistry was the means by which women writers of the period could more easily access control over their own self-configuration.

This dissertation examines Anaïs Nin, Carson McCullers, and Sylvia Plath through the shared themes of agency, identity and artistry, situating them as representatives of a wider subculture of women writers in the literary sphere of the American postwar period. This focus allows me to avoid erasing the authors' national, political, and ethnic differences but include them within a shared collectivity that reveals the existence of a pre-feminism feminist thinking that enabled postwar women writers to carry out a process of self-configuration by which they could contest their period's gender impositions and their exclusion from artistic spheres. Finally, including personal styling as a means of self-fashioning beyond literary creativity further establishes a connection between Nin, McCullers and Plath that shows the articulation of these writers public personae to be the result of a lifelong, deliberate process of self-creation.

CHAPTER 1:

CONSTRUCTING THE POSTWAR WOMAN

1.1. Introduction

The postwar period is often thought of as a set of combinations that gave way to a re-installment of traditional gender roles and family values. However, it is also a difficult period to define and characterize in exact terms. It has been argued that it was an era of fixed principles but, at least when it comes to gender and gender relations, the Postwar proves itself extraordinarily strict while, at the same time, a period of constant change and contradiction. What's undeniable is that, during its early stage, the U.S. political and cultural climate was filled with anxiety over matters of gender.¹ Much has been written about the postwar preoccupation with a perceived crisis of masculinity in the works of theoreticians such as Beth L. Bailey, Matthew W. Dunne, Barbara Ehrenreich, Lary May, and Elaine Tyler May. However, many of these discussions often ended up pointing to a crisis of femininity as the root cause of the problem with masculinity. The change in gender roles that had been experienced from the Depression and, most of all, the advent of the Second World War promoted a climate of change. About this, Tyler May has stated that it was this rapid social change that motivated a growing "concern over the impending doom of the family"² which was heavily focused on the rapid change that female roles had undergone in American society.³ The figure of the mother came under attack and was deemed as the cause of the new softness in men and the spread of homosexuality.⁴ The

¹ Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 124.

² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (US: Basic Books, 1988), 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴ Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind*, 129.

notion that “women were turning the country into a matriarchy by upending the traditional gender hierarchy” resulted in the belief that an infantilization of their boys and the emasculation of their husbands had occurred.⁵ The previous emancipation of women started to be viewed as an issue that could lead to a battle of the sexes⁶ once men went back to the labor force. This perception of the danger this type of woman posed to society and to the role men were to play in the Postwar resulted in a profound preoccupation with defining what acceptable femininity would look like in this new period. These renewed standards were implemented through numerous techniques: a re-identification of what it meant to be a woman and to be “womanly;” a process of marketing of gender roles that involved both industrial and academic inputs; a set of complex political choices and social policies that pushed women into the desired roles for them; and a system through which rebellious femininities would become ostracized in various forms. This system would take over American society and influence the new gender division through various methods: education—through the influence of social studies as a tool to enforce conformity—, popular Freudianism—which greatly influenced the characteristics ascribed to the category of woman—, the rise of television, and the influence of popular media such as women’s magazines.

1.2. Configuration of the postwar woman

1.2.1. A new “feminine” woman.

Anxiety over a possible battle of the sexes once the War ended invaded the mid-twentieth century US. In most cases, this type of anxiety even developed into an apocalyptic

⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶ Emilie Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker: Debating Public Responsibility for Child Care after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 17.

hysteria which started to understand the emancipation of women as a plausible cause for the crumbling of American society:

...men in twentieth-century America really did worry about women invading their territory, and women worried about the consequences of that invasion. If men and women performed the same tasks, exhibited the same traits, what would differentiate them? What would happen to a society of “de-masculinized” men and “de-feminized” women?⁷

Nancy Woloch included this fear of competition between men and women into “the backlash against women” that motivated the call back to the home.⁸ Indeed, a good part of the main aspects of traditional femininity revived and endorsed during the late forties and the fifties were those associated with domesticity. The role of housewife and mother became the model for all women and was thought of as the root of true female enjoyment and fulfillment.⁹ In fact, mainstream media began to spread the opinion that the key to harmony in heterosexual dynamics was that married couples stuck to their proper roles—namely, women to the role of housekeeper and men to that of breadwinner.¹⁰ There even started to be a reversal back to the separation between masculine and feminine tasks or occupations. The logic was that the immediate consequence of the emancipation of women had been a kind of *role intrusion* on the part of women—who were now invading spheres previously reserved for men and, therefore, adopting the qualities that defined masculinity. Convincing the woman of the Postwar to go back to the home was viewed as a solution to this possible competition between the sexes, as the offer of having control

⁷ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 114.

⁸ Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience: A Concise History*. Third Edition. (New York and London: Routledge, 2024), 334.

⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 36.

¹⁰ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom & Social Change* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 31.

over the domestic sphere not only influenced women to choose marriage and childbearing instead of careerism¹¹ but also would “contain” women’s taste for independence inside the home.¹² Women were motivated to adhere to feminine personality traits, behaviors and, more importantly, to the ambitions associated with these characteristics, further developing what Bailey refers to as “the etiquette of femininity.” This “etiquette” of the gender roles was understood as the rules to which the sexes were expected to conform to strengthen their sense of gender identity.¹³

The return of sex separation came at the hands of a new revival of the nineteenth-century ideal of a sphere distinction between a public arena reserved for men and a private sphere where women remained contained to the home. According to Friedan, postwar ideology adopted a “separate-but-equal” attitude towards this division of male and female realms.¹⁴ Thus, the new ideal sold to the masses was that, yes, women were predisposed to be homemakers, but that this was not necessarily to say that they were inferior.¹⁵ This could be seen in relational structures, as the generation of the Postwar was the most marrying generation recorded¹⁶ and this new approach to what was named “the sexual roles” was put in place, supposedly, to make the domestic partnership between heterosexual couples as smooth as possible. What Weiss names the separation into “spheres of influence” was presented as an egalitarian measure to aid in gender relations but was in fact a return to traditional gender roles that equated the woman’s place to tendencies to submission and passivity in the marriage partnership. Indeed, Weiss states how “major decisions remained the masculine prerogative” but those deemed

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 97.

¹⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 284.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 20.

unimportant—the day to day running of the home—were left to the wives.¹⁷ In the dynamics of postwar marriage “sharing seemed perilously close to tipping the balance of power in an ‘unhealthy’ direction,”¹⁸ and women in those couples were destined to think of themselves as “members of a team” of which their husbands were both teammates and coaches.¹⁹

1.2.2. Domesticity of the feminine woman

The race back to the home—as it is often referred to—became one of the primary consequences of this new gender agenda. Feminine fulfillment started to be understood solely through the roles of wife and mother, so much so that the domestic ideal was turned into a kind of religion for the American public.²⁰ This is not to say, however, that the new family and couple dynamics of the postwar period were an absolute return to the split between male and female roles that had been established during the nineteenth century. During the forties and fifties, what had been a moral imperative for women of the earlier century started to be promoted as a personal choice—even when this “choice” was most forcibly implemented. Coontz described the new standard of domesticity as a service and a way in which women were told they would find fulfillment—which developed into a tendency amongst women to think of homemaking as their creative output, a way of expressing their personality.²¹ The new trend of the era was a new understanding of gender roles as *identities* and the new identity of the American woman would be entirely composed of her duties to the home. More importantly, this new domestic model aided in implementing new characteristics to the concept of femininity. Passivity and submission

¹⁷ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 42.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 41.

²⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 36.

²¹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 27.

became the standard of womanly behavior again, and the domestic ideal helped ensure women remained in an environment that fostered these traits socially. The conception of women being dependent on a male head of the household became engrained in the postwar idea of a “family wage,” which turned women from a middle-class background into economic dependents of their husbands.²²

Education against Domesticity

This was also applicable to education, which was considered at the time as a lead-up to “careerism”. Education of young women came under attack in public opinion and became a source of anxiety in the prescribed gender relations of the time. Tyler May writes on how the immediate consequence of this new outlook was that colleges and university educations started to be presented to young women as opportunities to find a mate rather than to further their own abilities.²³ The possibility of matrimony started to permeate young women’s aspiration and relegate everything else to the background: “The one lesson a girl could hardly avoid learning, if she went to college between 1945 and 1960, was *not* to get interested, seriously interested, in anything besides getting married and having children.”²⁴ Educational ambition and intellectuality themselves started to be discarded as unfeminine and undesirable traits for a woman.²⁵

The ideal of domesticity started to disrupt academic life for women and the anxiety over personal ambition getting in the way of suburban ideals started to reflect in the way women were raised. In the new consensus, it was inferred that too much education was the root cause of the dissatisfaction that women could experience in their future role as wives.²⁶ College girls of the period were heavily bombarded with the domestic ideal,

²² Barbara Ehrenreich. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1983), 7.

²³ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 140.

²⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 179.

²⁵ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 113.

²⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 10.

which resulted in them adjusting to the demands of society.²⁷ According to Friedan, all these factors contributed to creating a college culture in which education started to be considered as an obstacle for marriage²⁸ and where higher education was thought of as “suspect, unnecessary and even dangerous”²⁹ for women.

Finally, education started to be understood as a threat to motherhood itself, as it was thought to also derail women from their womanly, natural instincts,³⁰ which were heavily related to childbearing during this time. This was, in fact, not the case at all. Although the birth rates among women who had received a college education were only slightly lower than the average,³¹ non-college-educated women’s childbearing rates registered only a slight increase during the Postwar while birthrates among women with college degrees were the ones that experienced the greatest growth during the period.³² In spite of this, the idea that education would lead women away from the home continued to influence American society during the forties and fifties. According to Tyler May, it was widely believed that opportunities for education seriously damaged a woman’s potential for reproduction.³³ The rearing of children became once more a task left to the stay-at-home mother and, indeed, it was understood that even if a bride kept working after marriage, her duty after becoming pregnant was to leave the labor force and devote her energies to being a full-time mother.

Professionalization of domesticity

The response to these notions was the beginning of a campaign through which society would convince women to apply the discipline they had brought to their studies and

²⁷ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 337.

²⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 187.

²⁹ Ibid., 431.

³⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Expert’s Advice to Women* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 222.

³¹ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 334.

³² Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 139.

³³ Ibid., 137, 139.

prospective careers back into the home. Housewifery underwent a process of glamourization and glorification that started to tie the identity of American women to postwar notions of femininity. Goldstein referred to this process of equation between the home and womanhood as the way in which “exclusionary and constraining definitions of femininity are maintained and reproduced.”³⁴ American women of the period started to retract personal ambitions and to shape them into the roles of wife and mother. The domestic ideal prevented wives from taking an interest in paid work unless it was an economic necessity to the family unit.³⁵ Domesticity itself underwent a process of professionalization through which it was made into the one acceptable female ambition and, later, the duty of American middle-class, white women. Tayler May refers to this new focus of the young American woman’s role as an answer to a culture that sought to re-direct educated women into the home:

...many educated women “professionalized” homemaking and made it their career, investing it with skills, prestige, and importance. [...] many women poured their creative energies into their families. The same impulses that promoted college training for homemakers would seek to elevate child rearing to fit a quasi-professional model, complete with guidebooks and standards. Thus, women whose aspirations for personal achievement had little chance of realization in the wider world put their energies into full-time motherhood.³⁶

According to Friedan, the idea of “true feminine fulfillment” was only understood through the image of the suburban housewife³⁷ and the women who had previously been focused on self-actualization through career turned to “making careers out of having

³⁴ Leigh Goldstein, “Designing Woman!: Space, Affect and Femininity in Postwar American Public Affairs TV,” *Critical Studies in Television* 9, no. 2 (2014): 41.

³⁵ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 342.

³⁶ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 159.

³⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 5.

babies.”³⁸ This professionalization outlook was advised to women on various fronts.³⁹ Career and education started to be viewed as “narcissistic pursuits” that impeded women from realizing their feminine essence.⁴⁰ Working mothers started to be understood as undeniably unfeminine and, consequently, urged to abandon their careers and “give in to the instincts they had been fighting.”⁴¹

Another powerful argument to help steer women into committing to a professionalized version of the role of housewife and mother was to do with the psychological repercussions that a working mother was thought to cause in her offspring. The overwhelming advice clearly disregarded realities outside of a middle-class, white suburban family unit:

It was assumed, of course, that all women had husbands and that their husbands could support the family singlehandedly. The mass media poured out the same advice to women of all classes: women who worked, no matter what the reasons, were depriving and denying their deepest instincts.⁴²

The arguments backing this new idea were justified through an alleged concern with the healthy psychological development of American children. Dr. Spock, a renowned pediatrician, continually dismissed women’s reasons for working and advised young mothers to avoid employment for their children’s sake.⁴³ Similarly, pathologies in children started to be considered a sign of ill-parenting—parenting referring exclusively to the mother, as she was the one in charge of child-care duties. Psychoanalyst Reneé Spitz led academic work linking psychological pathologies in children to their mother’s

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Elaine Tyler May, “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 166.

⁴⁰ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 21.

⁴¹ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 224.

⁴² Ibid., 225.

⁴³ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 57.

personality and symptoms of mental health issues during infancy started to be blamed on the mother, who could damage her child just as easily through overprotection as through rejection.⁴⁴

Domesticity as National Duty

Another aspect of the domestic ideal was a re-structuring of the role of homemaker, wife and mother as part of women's "Americanism." Domesticity became not only the task that was thought to fulfill women emotionally but also their duty to their country, acquiring a patriotic tint to it. According to May, this was done "in order to provide this domestic quest with a sense of urgency."⁴⁵ During the Postwar, motherhood and homemaking became supposedly essential to the health of the nation and its capacity to face Communism and the possible advent of a nuclear holocaust. Consequently, a woman outside of the home started to be thought of as inherently dangerous:

Inside and outside the home, women who challenged traditional roles and restraints placed the security of the nation at risk. The experts warned that young women were drawn to public amusement areas, which would lead them to sexual promiscuity, while the employment of married women led to "unsupervised homes where both parents are working." The society [the Advisory Committee on Defense Activities] cited both trends as major causes for [...] a weakening of the nation's moral fiber at a time when the country had to be strong.⁴⁶

As stated by Emilie Stoltzfus, in 1953 Senator Margaret Chase Smith offered the possibility of two roles for American women in the democratic system of the Postwar, the most desirable of which was "explicitly gendered."⁴⁷ In a time where the dominant

⁴⁴ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 227.

⁴⁵ Tyler May, "Explosive Issues," 159.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 157

⁴⁷ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 1.

views started to be merged into the very idea of Americanism,⁴⁸ resistance to assigned gender roles became a threat more than ever before. The very idea of housewifery started to become tied to the idea of citizenship when it came to white, middle-class women.⁴⁹ This also became a new means of pressure in itself, as women who refused the race back to the home faced more than the social or moral prejudice women from the previous century had dealt with, being stripped not only of their gender identity, but also of their national identity: “The implication, of course, was that self-supporting women were in some way un-American. Accordingly, anticommunist crusaders viewed women who did not conform to the domestic ideal with suspicion.”⁵⁰

In conjunction to this new agenda, homemaking started to encompass a sense of preparedness in the event of a nuclear attack. Since the political duty of women started to be viewed in terms of domesticity,⁵¹ the home became a place of security and the homemaker had another layer of necessity added to her existence. As Tyler May describes: “In the years after World War II, female domesticity took a new form to fit the Cold War. [...], women’s homemaking duties would also be purposeful. One new requirement for the professional homemaker was expertise in dealing with the possibility of nuclear war.”⁵² This added a new layer of pressure to the figure of the housewife and mother and contributed to the idea that a woman who neglected her traditional role was indeed undesirable or even dangerous. According to May, “civil defense strategies infused the traditional role of women in the home with new meaning and importance” and this helped strengthen the belief that female domesticity was key to “fortify the homes

⁴⁸ T.J. Jackson-Lears, “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 51.

⁴⁹ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 31.

⁵⁰ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 19.

⁵¹ Susan M. Hartmann, “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 85.

⁵² Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 90.

as a place of security.”⁵³ Women’s role as housewives involved new expectations, including tasks such as learning first aid in order to be able to attend to members of the family,⁵⁴ or even stocking up medicines, food, and utensils that would aid in survival when a nuclear attack came.⁵⁵

The Cold War American preoccupation with defeating Communism also contributed to the centering of motherhood into this new area of domesticity. American mothers came under attack for the rearing of a weakened society⁵⁶ and their previous strives for independence were accused of having turned a generation of American men into emasculated husbands and infantilized sons.⁵⁷ Consequently, the new anti-communistic purpose of the home started to include a sense of duty through motherhood, urging women back into a nurturing, care-taker role as part of their service to the nation.

Reproduction was a key aspect of this role. The victory of the Cold War started to be seen as dependent on the availability of progeny.⁵⁸ Tyler May attributes this as a direct consequence of the dropping of the atomic bomb, which implemented the threat of nuclear annihilation in the consciousness of the American public and resulted into childbearing practically becoming a duty.⁵⁹ Part of this child-rearing obligation came at the supposed necessity of having available new scientists to aid in the conflict.⁶⁰ Mothers were also charged with the responsibility of rearing and educating the future of America through their children as potential future voters.⁶¹ All of this contributed to the notion that women’s most urgent duty as citizens was to be accomplished in rearing desirable Americans. It is because of all this that Friedan wrote about how the role of mother had

⁵³ Tyler May, “Explosive Issues,” 162.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 160.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁵⁶ Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind*, 129.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁸ Tyler May, “Explosive Issues,” 157.

⁵⁹ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 22.

⁶⁰ Tyler May, “Explosive Issues,” 163; *Homeward Bound*, 109.

⁶¹ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 1.

been used not only to drive women into the home, but to steer them away from political participation.⁶²

Thus, the domestic ideal started to become a key part of the “woman’s role” once more. Homemaking started to be understood as purposeful to the nation, not only in that child-bearing was considered patriotic or in that housewifery made complete sense in the new economic model based on family wages, but also in the fact that it that these new aspects of the mother-housewife role could be easily incorporated into the traits that became an essential part of postwar womanhood: dependence, passivity, submission, and renunciation.

1.2.3. A feminine personality

Domesticity was not the only trait of postwar femininity. Accompanying virtues such as passivity and submission were also theorized, encouraged and taught to women so they would more easily adjust to their new “sexual roles.” According to experts of the time, the reality of being a woman became more of a challenge after WWII.⁶³ In 1963, Friedan described the postwar mystique around womanhood as a conviction that “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity.”⁶⁴ This “mystique,” as Friedan dubbed it, infused the new sexual roles of the late forties and the fifties with a mix of pre-war feminine ideals and with a sexualized concept of womanhood and motherhood.⁶⁵ All of this preoccupation with the proper socialization of women denoted the great anxiety of the period and the cultural urgency to enforce sexual roles.

⁶² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 59.

⁶³ Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1947), 1.

⁶⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 35.

⁶⁵ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 246.

Consequently, describing exactly what “femininity” encompassed and which were the personality traits to be fostered in women became of the utmost importance. One of the main concerns during this period laid in the possibility of women becoming too dominant and aggressive. Beth L. Bailey described the ideas around masculinity and femininity during this time in the following terms during the late 80s: “Masculine men are powerful, dominant, aggressive, and ambitious; they are at home in the “world” and provide for their wives and children. Feminine women are dependent, submissive, nurturing, and belong in the home.”⁶⁶ Dependency and submission were highly theorized as inherent traits of true femininity during the postwar decades. Women were defined as highly adaptable,⁶⁷ and were expected to be submissive as a way of fostering good companionship with a man. During the Postwar, a great part of this submission was sexual,⁶⁸ but submission in all fields had to be cultivated too in order for one to be considered a successfully feminine woman. In hindsight, Bailey argues that women were urged to foster mental and physical dependence,⁶⁹ as submission and dependency became synonyms with the very concept of womanhood. In the 1980s, feminine submission would be understood as a performance rather than an inherent characteristic of women of the postwar period: “These traits were acted out in various rituals and customs of etiquette, through which the woman demonstrated her need for protection and the man his ability to protect her.”⁷⁰ The new rules of femininity stated that women “were to constantly demonstrate their submission and need of protection, avoiding acts they could perform perfectly well but that became ‘aggressive’ in the company of a man.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 98.

⁶⁷ Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1944), 191.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, *Woman*, 120.

⁶⁹ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 113.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

However, in the late 40s and during the 50s, Lundberg and Farnham understood submission not as performative or merely desirable, but as essentially female. Indeed, they described a feminine woman in the following terms: “She knows, at any rate, that she is dependent on a man. There is no fantasy in her mind about being an ‘independent woman,’ a contradiction in terms.”⁷²

Passivity was another of the key traits thrust upon women. Psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch described “a strong tendency towards passivity” as one of the characteristics of femininity.⁷³ She then went on to further explain that women have an inherent tendency to renounce the self and to identify with their partners in a passive way,⁷⁴ and characterized passivity itself as an essential part of a woman’s constitution, something she’s been naturally built for.⁷⁵ Not unlike submission, passivity was explained as a non-sexual trait that also had a sexual connotation.⁷⁶ The sexual component of female passivity was also supported by sociologists and psychologists of the late forties who described this inactivity as innate to womanhood as well:

The woman who has not built up psychic defenses against feeling the full surge of male power (as many have in our day) will freely concede that the male sexual act is one of power. [...] Women in the sexual act are not called upon for any demonstration of power; they are passive. What activity they have is directed inward. Not called upon for such a powerful demonstration as are men, they are not normally so concerned with the externals of power as are men.⁷⁷

⁷² Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 319.

⁷³ Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 190.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷⁷ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 85.

From the wording, passivity seems to be understood as an inborn trait in women, and its lack can only be attributed to “psychic defenses” or—in other words—psychological mishaps that are preventing the woman from standing in her full, “natural” femininity.

1.3. Strategies for gender conformity

At the end of chapter seven of her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan made a point to state that the fault of the race back to the home ultimately was the fault of women themselves,⁷⁸ which she stated after dedicating numerous pages⁷⁹ to describing the different political and social agents that endorsed and even *enforced* the postwar arrangement of gender roles. Mainstream culture was preoccupied with re-issuing the traditional gender roles and anxious to return to the division between a public male sphere and a private female sphere—a division that had characterized society during the 19th century. To this end, the American public was bombarded with messages trying to impose this old-fashioned distinction. Although some countercultural message still existed in pockets of resistance and nooks of unconventionality, a great number of cultural indicators and political actions made it almost impossible for women to ignore the gender expectations that became the norm. Stoltzfus signified some of the agents behind this discourse as “psychiatric, psychological, and social work wisdom, and cold war political goals”⁸⁰ while Gair also included publicists⁸¹—as did Friedan.⁸² These media were used to enforce desirable feminine traits in a widespread manner.

The strategies set in motion from the mid-forties to the end of the fifties in order to re-direct the masses into their desired gender roles can be characterized as “formal and

⁷⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 211.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14, 111, 112, 137, 145, 147.

⁸⁰ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 20.

⁸¹ Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 172.

⁸² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 177.

informal barriers.”⁸³ Their combination contributed to create a climate of extreme containment and conformity, rendering personal choice severely limited or, in many cases, almost impossible. This section will understand as “formal barriers”—the laws, policies and even corporate rules put in place or not abolished during the Postwar as a way of complicating the resistance of American women to their domestic roles. “Informal barriers,” are what Christopher Gair explained as the “dominant structures that make it hard for individuals to articulate discontents.”⁸⁴ As I will discuss further on, this second type of barrier was enforced through the input of social studies and the popularization of Freudianism. Finally, a subsection will be dedicated to the creation and reproduction of the ideal feminine image in the mass media of the period.

1.3.1. Formal barriers

For all the new gender ideals that started to permeate pop culture y postwar America, Joanne Meyerowitz points out that there were still “pockets of resistance”⁸⁵ that took the form of feminist networks or cells of labor and civil rights activists. This suggests that the change in attitudes that was taking place after the end of WWII might not have been as widespread as the generalized study of the postwar period might at first imply. Consequently, it is important to note the numerous processes through which the wartime advances in civil rights feminist agendas were stalled by not only the federal government but also state legislation and company policies. The red scare—a growing fear that soviet communists had infiltrated the American government—translated into a mass hysteria and allowed the government to enact loyalty programs and carry out investigations on suspected communists, often in violation of their civil rights. This environment of

⁸³ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Introduction: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 3.

⁸⁴ Gair, Christopher. *The American Counterculture*, 23.

⁸⁵ Meyerowitz, “Introduction,” 4.

suspicion and enforced conformity was used to question associations that carried out women's activism through the persecution of their leaders or the organizations themselves. Some of the women who were targeted were Dorothy Kenyon, the U.S. representative on the UN Commission on the Status of Women or Esther Caukin Brunauer and Kathryn McHale—who were the former and current directors of the American Association of University Women (AAUW).⁸⁶ The National Council of Negro Women also implemented a policy of performative patriotism by discouraging its members from associating with other organizations that might be facing loyalty investigations.⁸⁷ In 1952, the Democratic Party dissolved its Women's Division and, later in that year, the same happened in the Republican Party.⁸⁸ All these measures already prove a new wave of political action destined to redirect women into the private sphere and away from the political arena.

One of the strategies put into action was within the legal and policy-making system. In 1940, the Census Bureau had already characterized families with a man for a head who was cohabitating with a wife as the “normal” type of family.⁸⁹ Although the 1950s saw an increase of women going into the workforce,⁹⁰ there was space for legal discrimination against women resulting from the failure—deliberate or not—of the government to establish legislation that prevented private companies from discriminating on the basis of sex. According to Stoltzfus, the numbers of women in the labor force kept rising during the 1950s without preventing a rise in the numbers of marriages taking place and children being born, but this did not stop the US government from signaling the

⁸⁶ Hartmann, “Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal,” 85.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 247.

⁸⁹ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 182.

⁹⁰ Richard M. Abrams, *America Transformed: Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change 1941-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 142; Tyler May, “Explosive Issues,” 155.

desirability of the race back to the home through its policy making, which translated into a political structure that flagged the employment of women as undesirable.⁹¹ Goldin suggests that the new domestic ideal did actually succeed in creating structures that kept most white middle-class young women at home and that it was the employment of older women and teenagers that produced the increase in numbers.⁹² Furthermore, the employment of racialized, working-class women would also contribute to an increase in the numbers of women workers.

The beginning of the Postwar was rapidly marked by the advent of the Full Employment Act of 1946, established as a show of commitment on the part of the government to achieve “total employment.”⁹³ However, the word “total” still excluded large collectives of the American population—collectives that Richard M. Abrams refers to as “unemployables”: disabled persons, communities oppressed by racism, those without proper access to education or social connections, and single mothers.⁹⁴ Even more controversial was the wording of the Act itself, which in its drafts stated that it sought to provide equal employment opportunities for Americans “who do not have full-time housekeeping responsibilities.”⁹⁵ In the end, the wording was changed before the Act was passed and, though the new phrasing did not include what—at the time—was referred to as “the housekeeping exemption,” made deliberately vague:

Further, the bill’s opponents ceaselessly sought to weaken and generalize language that asserted any individual’s federally guaranteed right to paid work. In the end, the compromise legislation that emerged redirected the emphasis of the

⁹¹ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 18-19.

⁹² Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 152-153.

⁹³ Warren Susman and Edward Griffin, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 20.

⁹⁴ Abrams, *America Transformed*, 42.

⁹⁵ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 24.

government's responsibility from ensuring jobs for all Americans who were understood to be available for paid labor to the far more general goal of ensuring a growing economy.⁹⁶

Further proof of the new intention with limiting the access of women to paid work, was the fact that labor laws that had seen a nation-wide relaxation during the war years started to become re-enforced.⁹⁷ This was a clear sign of the back to the home agenda, and it affected the working conditions of all women in the country. Racialized women or women in economic need would have to continue working, now in jobs that had their earning power even more diminished. White middle-class women, however, were covered by labor legislation that "tied their [...] right to adequate wages and working conditions primarily to an idealized notion of the full-time stay-at-home mother rather than an ungendered notion of the rights of any working person within the official economy."⁹⁸

The number of employed women rising during the postwar years should be qualified through factors other than employment rates. Even if it is true that the number of working women actually increased during this period, there was a significant change in the types of jobs working women were allowed to access, the level of economic independence they could achieve through employment and their possibilities for career growth. Widespread sex-based professional segregation influenced the types of jobs women could access and, most importantly, the level of economic independence they could realistically aspire to. According to Stoltzfus, the jobs offered to women once World War II ended were mainly clerical or domestic in nature or became positions of repetition rather than skill.⁹⁹ Most importantly, the new types of jobs that were deemed

⁹⁶ Ibid., 27-28.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 29.

acceptable for women paid less than their wartime jobs.¹⁰⁰ New constraints were applied to hours and wage, facilitating the access to part-time jobs infinitely more than to full-time positions for women,¹⁰¹ to the point of—in some cases—applying maximum hour laws.¹⁰² The new cult of domesticity made work culture and public opinion hostile to women who desired to make a career out of their professions, as they were understood to be “a group that had little expected labor force involvement and insignificant desire for rewarding employment,”¹⁰³ implying once again that the true calling of women and the desire of a genteel and well-adjusted woman was—without doubt—staying home.

The new types of acceptable female employment were also intended to maintain an appearance of postwar, home-centered femininity. The sexual division in the job market was destined to provide those women who needed or, silently, wanted to work outside the home surface adherence to the postwar image of middle-class femininity.¹⁰⁴ This sex typification of employment subtly pushed women in the work force into the belief that outside employment was not desirable for women and only acceptable if in support of the family economy rather than personal ambition:

The over-whelming number of women working held traditionally low-paying, low-status “female jobs,” many of them part-time. Among the married women, their role remained the traditional one of backing up their husband’s career and social aspirations, in particular by supplementing the family income.¹⁰⁵

Thus, women’s jobs became those that came without the possibility of company growth or economic independence or, in short, the jobs that would be “encouraging women to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, 158.

¹⁰² Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 31.

¹⁰³ Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, 184.

¹⁰⁴ Abrams, *America Transformed*, 143; Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 341.

¹⁰⁵ Abrams, *America Transformed*, 143.

define themselves in terms of home and family *even* when they were working.”¹⁰⁶ These new measures sent a clear sign that the economic independence and personal fulfillment that women had been able to achieve through work during the war years were no longer possible, and this lawful sexual segregation would be upheld until the passing of The Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, with the Postwar came the disappearance of the marriage bars¹⁰⁸—company policies and state laws which had first appeared in the late nineteenth century with the intention of prohibiting the hiring of married women and ensuring the termination of employment for any woman who decided to wed. Although labor laws changed significantly because the decrease in the marrying age made it almost impossible to find young, unmarried women for part-time or “feminine” jobs after World War II,¹⁰⁹ no federal legislation banned the termination of women’s employment after marriage or pregnancy until 1978, when the Pregnancy Discrimination Act¹¹⁰ was passed. Consequently, the lack of a law barring this practice meant that it still could be, if not country-wide legislation, individual policy of different companies.¹¹¹ Non-white women were still banned from clerical work. According to Goldin: “As late as the 1960’s, the majority of black working women were domestic servants and agricultural workers.”¹¹² Even when there were no discriminatory federal laws to segregate workplaces, there was no legal protection against race discrimination in hiring. It is due to this that the end of

¹⁰⁶ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 31. Italics mine.

¹⁰⁷ Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, § 703(a)(1), 78 Stat. 241, 255 (1964). Title VII of this Act made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex in employment, terminating the job segregation that had been anchored on sex-based discrimination in the hiring practices of the USA during the postwar years.

¹⁰⁸ Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, 147; Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 52.

¹⁰⁹ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 52.

¹¹⁰ Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, Pub. L. No. 95-555, 92 Stat. 2076.

¹¹¹ Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap*, 161.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 154.

the marriage bar, while helpful for white, middle-class women, had no benefit for racialized women.

Another one of the official limitations on women's employment was closely linked to their cultural duty to motherhood. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 mentioned earlier meant that expectancy and child-care could be the object of discriminatory practices. The lack of protective legislation promoted what were socially known as "pregnancy bars," as young mothers were often turned away and female employees who became pregnant could be fired from their positions.¹¹³ The Lanham Act, which had been passed in 1940 and funded the provision of public child-care centers in view of the rising number of women workers, came to an end in 1946. Consequently, the subsidized public child-care facilities that had run all through World War II started to disappear.¹¹⁴ Although faced with great opposition from the women who had benefitted from public childcare facilities, the change reflected the idea that childcare was exclusively a duty of the family—personified in the mother. According to Ehrenreich, this conception also resulted in abortion and childcare into unattainable services.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the new individualist philosophy that permeated the U.S. during the Postwar was in many cases taken as one of the key reasons behind the decline of public daycare. General opinion and even court cases¹¹⁶ came to a resounding conclusion: that the end of wartime provisions indicated that childcare would be considered a *private* matter for which no public funding would be accommodated.¹¹⁷ Although some policies like the Revenue Act of 1954 highlighted some provisions made for working mothers,¹¹⁸ once the

¹¹³ Ibid, 176.

¹¹⁴ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 2.

¹¹⁵ Ehrenreich, *For Her Own Good*, 271.

¹¹⁶ According to Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 45-88: the early postwar years in Cleveland were full of opposition from organizations like the Cleveland Day Care Committee against the federal defunding of public daycare.

¹¹⁷ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 2, 82, 106.

¹¹⁸ Hartmann, "Women's Employment and the Domestic," 94.

wartime was over and women were expected to go back to the home, public support of their wage-earning work became slim unless they were in extreme poverty. The few daycare services that received public funding during these years were considered charities.¹¹⁹ This supposedly philanthropic and paternalistic outlook of charitable public childcare made it not only inaccessible to many women but also imprinted its use with a shameful connotation of failure in a new American society that valued individualism and self-reliance above everything else.

As a result of all the measures mentioned above, the political and social climate of the U.S.A. was successfully adjusted to the new ideals of the Cold War. By suppressing equal employment opportunity and red-baiting the groups of resistance that emerged during this period, the new political climate demarcated a very clear distinction between a male dominated political sphere and a female dominated domestic one. Furthermore, the powerful barriers put in place made resistance undesirable for women, as the new employment regulations made it almost impossible to achieve a level of economic independence that made the effort of defiance worth it. Most importantly, the intimidation tactics and persecutions carried out during the McCarthy Era framed even minor resistance to the new political wave as disloyal at best and traitorous at worst, severely hindering the possibility of opposition from both activist organizations and private individuals. However, these were not the only measures worthy of note, as the social, artistic and scientific circles of the country also started to adapt to postwar ideals, transforming commonplace routines and behaviors into a sort of religion; any deviation and defiance were to be punished with shunning, villanization or even pathologization.

¹¹⁹ Stoltzfus, *Citizen, Mother, Worker*, 9.

1.3.2. Informal barriers

Social studies: the era of the expert.

The postwar years were a moment when social science experienced a huge rise in output and authority. Social studies aimed at guiding the public and educating them to adjust to society or, rather, to postwar ideals. Social scientists often adopted a prescriptive aim instead of focusing on description. As discussed previously, estrangement from the norm was even considered to be a danger to American society during these years and, therefore, the social sciences became a means of upholding the functioning of society in the ways most desirable. In this context, experts were given a new, heightened authority and set to convince women that fulfillment was to be found in the passive roles related to motherhood and domesticity.¹²⁰

According to Tyler May, in the Cold War years Americans tended to trust expert advice more than ever before to decide how they would lead their own private lives.¹²¹ The trust in expertise grew to such a point that the author even calls the postwar years “the era of the expert.”¹²² Ball points to two main reasons for the rise of the social sciences, the first being a symptom of the socioeconomic and political environment of this period, and the second having to do with a change in the way the social sciences were understood.¹²³ The years of the Cold War were stressful and it seemed that citizens demanded a sense of direction but also of trustworthy leadership. It was because of this that new authority was conferred to the social sciences: “Their business was to identify

¹²⁰ Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 336.

¹²¹ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 21.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Terrence Ball, “The Politics of Social Science in Postwar America,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 78.

and describe social problems, discover their causes, trace their consequences, and analyze the effectiveness of alternative proposals and policies.”¹²⁴

American citizens seemed to embrace the figure of the expert whose authority to observe and describe social phenomena in order to later prescribe behavior was justified in their expertise. Indeed, the adjustment to those guidelines put forward by sociologists, anthropologists and behavioral scientists was used as justification for societal norms. Although this might seem too general a claim nowadays, the Postwar was a period of extreme conformity by the general public.¹²⁵ Difference and defiance to the status quo was not only undesirable but—as previously seen—could rapidly turn outright dangerous. About the generalized sentiments of the nation during this time, Abrams writes:

Ideological changes occur when enough contemporaries begin to reject the premises from which people customarily proceed to reason. Until the Sixties, American attitudes toward authority and tradition militated against challenges to basic social conventions and roles. Throughout the 1950s, intent upon enjoying material prosperity and cowed by the tensions produced by the Cold War abroad and anticommunist red-baiting at home, most Americans showed a distinct preference for stability over change.¹²⁶

The new authority conferred to the social sciences also came at the hands of a new way of thinking which planned to make use of social studies as a means of enforcing postwar norms not so subtly but very effectively. Friedan used her background in psychology to speak of the rise of functionalism in the social sciences as a tool for pushing the American population towards “adjustment to the status quo.”¹²⁷ In fact, this new wave of reverence for expert opinion and for fields such as sociology and anthropology was not

¹²⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹²⁵ Jackson-Lears, “A Matter of Taste,” 44,45; Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 121.

¹²⁶ Abrams, *America Transformed*, 148.

¹²⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 147.

only a matter of cultural shift. The social sciences became useful for politicians. There has been much debate about the influence the US government exercised on these fields, often suggesting that they may have greatly impacted their research not by supporting the spread of fraudulent data, but by influencing the types of inquiries that received funding.¹²⁸ In this way, the social expert was not only an agent of its time, but also a figure utilized to reinforce postwar morality. This new functionalist view in the social fields changed their research from ““what is” [...], or “what was,” to “what it should be.””¹²⁹ This turn from descriptivism to prescriptivism is also what May referred to when he wrote about the social science fields turning to “social engineering,”¹³⁰ as they adopted an element of instrumentality.¹³¹

The social experts of this period had much to do with redefining women’s roles in American society. May draws on the concept of cultural hegemony as something not necessarily to do with manipulation but with justification.¹³² Nevertheless, there was a great level of manipulation in the new social order that was possible by utilizing the allure of the “expert.” As Bailey states, “...the professionals had declared themselves the new arbiters of convention and morality.”¹³³ Americans were not simply reverting to 19th century values, they were following the advice of experts whose training gave legitimacy to the claim that adhering to traditional gender roles was a matter of personal and public health. The experts started to focus on the dangers of female careerism and the possible national ills that would accompany a rise in promiscuity,¹³⁴ prescribing marriage as a solution and, often, the younger, the better.¹³⁵ It is undeniable that a great deal of expert

¹²⁸ Ball, “The Politics of Social Science,” 85.

¹²⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 151.

¹³⁰ Ball, “The Politics of Social Science,” 83.

¹³¹ Ibid, 88.

¹³² Jackson-Lears, “A Matter of Taste,” 50.

¹³³ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 122.

¹³⁴ Tyler May, “Explosive Issues,” 157.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 158.

opinion was set on justifying the necessity for marriage and reproduction. Marriage educators started to appear¹³⁶ and offer courses whose main aim was to categorize and prove the difference between the sexes and to extensively show the behaviors that were expected from each of them.¹³⁷

Whereas the social experts claimed that one of their main objectives was to improve dating and marriage to make it easier for couples to adjust,¹³⁸ the reality was much more pointed. Marriage courses and the functional education towards marriage that Americans received during these years often focused on a re-issuing of conventional gender roles. Young married couples started to rely more and more on expert advice in their own marriages.¹³⁹ This advice was often to adjust into the designated behavior for each sex. Friedan already discussed this in *The Feminine Mystique*, where she pointed to social scientists as the inventors and justifiers of what she called the “mystique”¹⁴⁰ and wrote how women had been educated into their feminine roles.¹⁴¹ In this ideology, women outside the prescribed norms were a threat to public order.¹⁴² Therefore, the educators advocated for the division of emotional labor,¹⁴³ and legitimized the belief that women generally preferred submissive roles.¹⁴⁴

Furthermore, the sex educators not only enforced the gender division between grown women and men, but also stressed the importance of parents in instilling the appropriate gender traits and behaviors in their offspring. The necessity of parents to be examples of gender adjustment for their children was stressed in parenting manuals, which often stated that the best means of appropriately socializing children was through

¹³⁶ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 102, 122.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 102.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 119.

¹³⁹ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 33.

¹⁴⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 163.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 163, 165.

¹⁴² Meyerowitz, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁴³ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 247.

¹⁴⁴ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 40.

exemplary parental adherence to gender roles.¹⁴⁵ What Friedan referred to as the “sex-directed” education that had been put into place to embed ideal femininity into women¹⁴⁶ was also put in place for men. Women were directed to always project an attractive femininity in order not to “damage” their children,¹⁴⁷ as men were told to portray masculinity in the hours they did spend at home.¹⁴⁸ In fact, fathers were even discouraged from adopting a hands-on role with their children, as child-rearing was considered inherently feminine¹⁴⁹ and, therefore, became a negligence on the part of the father, who was supposed to be the example of healthy, well-adjusted masculinity to his children.

Finally, social scientists instilled the desirability of marriage and reproduction in the American consciousness by equating them to growth and stability—implying that those who deviated from these standards were psychologically and emotionally stunted.¹⁵⁰ Marriage became a rite of passage without which true maturity was considered impossible to achieve.¹⁵¹ In reality, what was considered the “normal” growth of a “healthy” member of postwar society was to do with how well-adjusted they were to their sex-roles and how successful they were in providing the country with offspring to pass them on to. According to Ehrenreich, the very concept of maturity soon came to be completely based on conformity.¹⁵² The enforcing nature of this conformity can be seen in the ways expert literature discussed the men and women who failed or refused to adapt. For men, failure to marry and become a breadwinner for the family implied a lack of maturity or masculinity.¹⁵³ In the case of women, those openly regretting or expressing distaste for

¹⁴⁵ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 246.

¹⁴⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 207.

¹⁴⁷ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 244.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 246.

¹⁴⁹ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 91.

¹⁵⁰ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 82.

¹⁵¹ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 23.

¹⁵² Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 17.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 20.

motherhood were considered to carry out a “major gender transgression,”¹⁵⁴ and those who failed to marry started to be called out as biologically inferior or even social discards.¹⁵⁵ This created a false dichotomy by which failure to comply was immediately punished by being robbed of one’s own concept of identity or, as Friedan called it, by being “desexed.”¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the language used—men being characterized as “immature” or “feminine,” while women are deemed “inferior” and “discards”—heavily implied that the social punishment for defiance or deviancy was much harsher on women.

Popular Freudianism: pathologization of inconformity.

The new interest in psychoanalytic theory was also used in the rearing of citizens to the new postwar ideals and roles. Freudian sexuality was added to the new standards of femininity and healthy motherhood,¹⁵⁷ and many aspects of Freud’s theories were appropriated by experts and public alike, especially those dealing with gender innatism¹⁵⁸ and the possibility of women not growing into their full, supposedly innate, femininity.¹⁵⁹ Psychoanalytic theory entered the zeitgeist and was used to reinforce the domestic ideal,¹⁶⁰ but it also entered the mainstream as a way of further pathologizing, shunning and shaming all those actions or attitudes that openly opposed or silently ignored the postwar status quo. Very importantly, Popular Freudianism became a tool to enforce conformity, as it became a justification for the social ostracism or even open punishment of all those who did not conform—regardless of if they didn’t want to or simply couldn’t. Tyler May writes of this period that:

¹⁵⁴ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 38.

¹⁵⁵ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 20.

¹⁵⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 165.

¹⁵⁷ Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 246

¹⁵⁸ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 101.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 102.

¹⁶⁰ Lorna Piatti Farnell, “‘At My Cooking I Feel It Looking’: Food, Domestic Fantasies and Consumer Anxiety in Sylvia Plath’s Writing,” in *It Came From the 50s! Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*, ed. Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy, and Bernice M. Murphy (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 200.

...individuals who chose personal paths that did not include marriage and parenthood risked being perceived as perverted, immoral, unpatriotic, and pathological. Neighbors shunned them as if they were dangerous; the government investigated them as security risks. Their chances of living free of stigma or harassment were slim.¹⁶¹

Thus, Popular Freudianism became the best arm against non-conformity, and it was used to turn all undesirable behavior into diagnosable pathologies. People who didn't fit the standard were heavily stigmatized, deemed defectives outside the system and much of the psychoanalytic literature of the time was dedicated to discerning which ailments were to be blamed for the different types of "undesirables." In the seminal text *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, Lundberg and Farnham described all women who were masculine, homosexual or simply celibate with the terms "distorted as personalities" who could actively harm American society simply by existing within it.¹⁶²

All behavior which didn't contribute to the development of a white suburban family started to be heavily villainized and, more importantly, medicalized. One of the main diagnoses which centered around women was that of the masculinity complex. In her second Volume of *The Psychology of Women*, psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch described the masculinity complex as "...characterized by the predominance of active and aggressive tendencies that lead to conflicts with the woman's environment and above all with the remaining feminine inner world."¹⁶³ Similarly, we see other sociological and psychoanalytic references to the masculinity complex in which Deutsch is quoted in her understanding of the masculinity complex as a possible diagnosis for the intellectual woman.¹⁶⁴ In Deutsch's work, a masculinity complex—or excess of activity as opposed to the innately feminine passivity—is similarly linked to undesirable traits for postwar

¹⁶¹ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 83.

¹⁶² Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 295

¹⁶³ Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 289.

¹⁶⁴ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 175.

women, specifically careerism. This came at the hands of deeming personal ambitions as perverted or destructive,¹⁶⁵ and psychoanalytic literature referring to women who didn't accept their place in the home as suffering of self-consciousness and bitterness.¹⁶⁶ The relationship between psychological issues and career ambitions is even explicitly outlined in Lundberg and Farham's *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*—published in 1947, only two years after Deutsch's book—where the authors state how the masculine traits necessary to succeed in a profession develop into a distortion of the feminine character that becomes a “conflict soluble only by psychotherapy.”¹⁶⁷

The other common diagnosis provided for women outside of the desirable postwar femininity was that of penis-envy. Lundberg and Farnham equated the concept of penis-envy to feminist ideology, which was considered itself a sign of illness.¹⁶⁸ At some point, even Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is said to be a perfect example of penis-envy.¹⁶⁹ As a consequence of the propagation of feminism, the authors seem convinced that most women are experiencing psychological distress:

Naturally, we do not say that every woman, without exception, is engulfed in psychic or psychosomatic difficulties. Just how many are leading a life that is, on the whole, satisfactory to themselves and their associated we do not know. We are fairly certain, however, that they do not constitute a clear majority.¹⁷⁰

From these lines, the authors are not only establishing an—at the very least—premature correlation between feminism, dissatisfaction and psychological disorders, but also proclaiming neurosis as so widespread that it could be attributed to a majority of American women. The line of thought is quite clear: most women are suffering from

¹⁶⁵ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 228.

¹⁶⁶ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 117.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

mental illness, and it is the fault of feminist ideology. Penis-envy is also blamed as a source for careerism in women and later called an “aberration” by the authors.¹⁷¹ From these statements, and considering that the relationship between undesirable social behaviors such as feminist militancy or careerism are strongly linked to penis-envy itself, it could be inferred that the authors are allusively categorizing dissident femininities as aberrations themselves.

Further undesirable behaviors are also heavily pathologized—singleness and childlessness especially so. For instance, singleness in the literature is always considered suspicious at least, both in men and in women. A man over twenty-seven years of age who remained unmarried was already cause for worry as far as psychology and psychiatry were concerned.¹⁷²

By the 1950s, and ‘60s psychiatry had developed a massive weight of theory establishing that marriage—and, within that, the breadwinner role—was the only normal state for the adult male. Outside lay only a range of diagnoses, all unflattering.¹⁷³

Still, the literature devoted to women’s mental ailments was even broader. In the case of singleness, it could be described as a sign of psychological disorganization at the very least¹⁷⁴ or even a symptom of public danger, stating that the woman should be banned from having contact with children altogether.¹⁷⁵ A woman of this time who had decided or had had no choice but to remain childless was indeed considered “an object of pity” or “something of a freak to the medical profession” as Ehrenreich and English wrote,¹⁷⁶ but

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 209.

¹⁷² Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 15.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 281.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 364-365. In these pages, the authors refer to unmarried women—“spinsters”—as being emotionally incompetent and thus, advise that they should be banned from positions like teaching since their psychological disorders might poison the children they encounter.

¹⁷⁶ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 285.

they could also be considered outright dangerous and even social defectives. Female sexuality was only deemed healthy and sane in the case of reproduction within the confines of marriage¹⁷⁷ and there was much pathologization of all other sexualities. Any expression of sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage and reproduction was considered delinquent.¹⁷⁸ In this procreation-centered society, the struggles for contraception and abortion became a sign of hysterics,¹⁷⁹ as childlessness became not a state or a choice for women but a symptom of, at the least, unhappiness and hostility¹⁸⁰ or, at worst, unambiguous deviancy.¹⁸¹

The issue was not only that defiant behavior was problematized, villainized or pathologized, but that the psychiatric and psychological literature of the time spent ample attention examining how the sex roles affected the happiness of American citizens. The massive amount of social theory produced during the postwar on the sex roles not only pathologized active deviation, but also policed the individual's thought and behavior. Social scientists had determined that a woman would be completely fulfilled by adopting the role of mother.¹⁸² It is not surprising, then, that this line of thought and generalization soon derived in a pathologization not only of those women who didn't have or didn't want children, but also of the mothers who didn't feel completely satisfied by the housewife and mother role. Unhappiness and neuroticism were considered synonyms¹⁸³ and dissatisfaction became a personal failure rather than a consequence of one's circumstances: "If a person is unhappy, it is his psyche and nothing else that is

¹⁷⁷ Elizabeth McCarthy, "Fast Cars and Bullet Bras: The Image of the Female Juvenile Delinquent in 1950s America," in *It Came From the 50s! Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*, ed. Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy, and Bernice M. Murphy (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 141.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 139.

¹⁷⁹ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 120.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 39.

¹⁸¹ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 121.

¹⁸² Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 221.

¹⁸³ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 52.

unhappy.”¹⁸⁴ According to Lundberg and Farnham, the only legitimate reasons to be unhappy were disease, poverty, imprisonment or mourning, and everything else was due to psychological maladjustment.¹⁸⁵

Motherhood was the most insistently discussed topic in the policing of women’s thoughts and ambitions. Women who felt anxious instead of excited at the prospect of becoming mothers were hardly judged:

So prevalent was the assumption that women were naturally fulfilled in motherhood that anxiety or ambivalence surrounding pregnancy was actually considered a pathological condition.¹⁸⁶

If ambivalence was pathologized, regret or dislike were even more so. Admitting to not feeling happy about one’s motherhood became a transgression¹⁸⁷ and mothers who didn’t enjoy raising their children were considered emotionally disordered¹⁸⁸ or neurotic.¹⁸⁹ To be considered sane, a woman not only had to adjust to the societal expectations of postwar femininity but also do it *happily*. Policing of thoughts went beyond the imperative for active conformity. The experts did not only want women to go through the motions of being successful and feminine, but also to be completely satisfied about it. This monitoring of the inner world can also be seen in how Lundberg and Farnham made a distinction between the careerist and the worker woman, stating that the first was suffering from prestige cravings while the latter was simply doing what was best for her family.¹⁹⁰ What was being controlled here was not only the possibility of a working woman or a working mother but of a woman who *wanted* to work. Working out of

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 58.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 132.

¹⁸⁷ Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 38.

¹⁸⁸ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 289.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 303.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 208.

necessity was not considered a symptom of emotional maladjustment but the self-ambition of building a career was. As Ehrenreich and English wrote:

It did not enter the experts' minds to question the theory or to be alarmed at the terrible solitude in which most women were now attempting to raise their children.

The theory was solid; the home was sacred; it was the woman who had failed.¹⁹¹

By pathologizing dissatisfaction and unhappiness, the experts could not only ensure adaptability to the status quo and outline sexual roles, but also protect them from even being questioned.

Finally, another important aspect of the pathologization not only of undesirable actions but of undesirable thinking was the very real threat that becoming a mental patient could signify during this period. Mental institutions became places where patients could be more easily monitored and where behavior—but also ambitions, desires and, in short, traces of individualism—could be altered.¹⁹² This was achieved through various methods, which will be touched on shortly. It was common etiquette that female “aggressiveness” should be socially shunned¹⁹³ but women who exhibited discontent with their homemaker and mother roles also started to be diagnosed with illnesses like neuroticism or even schizophrenia,¹⁹⁴ which made institutionalization or aggressive psychological treatment very real outcomes of voicing discontent. Dunne writes of postwar culture that, even in the rare instances where people expressed dissenting behavior, these individuals were “...forced to undergo therapy, medicated, and in extreme cases treated to shock therapy or even a lobotomy.”¹⁹⁵ According to Coontz, women could become subject to such treatments for daring to show any dissenting behavior, such as seeking an abortion.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 226.

¹⁹² Jackson-Lears, “A Matter of Taste,” 45.

¹⁹³ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 116.

¹⁹⁴ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 32.

¹⁹⁵ Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind*, 190.

¹⁹⁶ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 32.

If unjust institutionalization can be psychologically distressing, the aggressive treatments that had been taking place in earlier decades and were still used during the late forties and the fifties could not only be considered as oppressive pathologization of nonconformity but as a legal and medical means of effectively suppressing dissent by means of torture. Treatments used on mental patients could encompass hydrotherapy, which meant subjecting the patients to continuous baths ranging from cold to hot temperature. This treatment could last from mere hours, to overnight, to days.¹⁹⁷ Further taxing treatments were the shock therapies, which consisted of inducing a state of physiological shock in the body—through insulin treatments—or—in the case of Metrazol and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)—artificially causing seizures.¹⁹⁸ These treatments were understood as a means of helping patients adjust to socially accepted behavioral patterns: “From problems to their families and nuisances to themselves, from ineffectives and unemployables, many...have been transformed into useful members of society.”¹⁹⁹ This extract from a 1941 article could be used to question not only the means, but also the intentions behind these types of treatments, as the reasoning behind them seems to have more to do with making the patients forcefully adjust to society standards than caring about their individual well-being.

Although some modern authors like Braslow have stated that shock treatments were not used as a means of controlling mental patients,²⁰⁰ his opinion is questionable, since it is often cited how effective these procedures were at helping manage institutionalized persons. Already during the postwar era, hydrotherapy was sometimes

¹⁹⁷ Joel T. Braslow, "History and Evidence-Based Medicine: Lessons from the History of Somatic Treatments from the 1900s to the 1950s," *Mental Health Services Research* 1, no. 4 (1999): 232.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁹⁹ Waldemar Kaempffert, "Turning the mind inside out," *Saturday Evening Post* 231, no. 47 (1941): 18, quoted in G. J. Diefenbach, D. Diefenbach, A. Baumeister, and M. West, "Portrayal of Lobotomy in the Popular Press: 1935–1960," *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 8, no. 1 (April 1999): 65.

²⁰⁰ Braslow, "History and Evidence-Based Medicine," 235.

stated to be a substitute for chemical submission for people experiencing psychosis²⁰¹ and lobotomies started to be denounced as procedures that not only lacked a scientific basis but were also used to make the caretaker's job easier rather than to alleviate patients.²⁰² Lobotomies continued to be performed in spite of criticism—with a striking twenty thousand procedures performed in the U.S. in 1951.²⁰³ This popularity peak was due to Walter Freeman, who had introduced a new technique for lobotomizing patients by which the transorbital lobe could be accessed through the eye socket, resulting in the development of “ice pick” lobotomies during the Postwar. This type of lobotomy was specially threatening, as it could be performed outside the operating room, even at home. This latter version of the technique gained traction because it allowed patient-selection criteria to become laxer and, most importantly, it became popular especially in institutional settings to avoid overcrowding in state hospitals.²⁰⁴ These reasonings contribute to the inference that psychological treatment became more about simplifying the doctor's job and constraining the patient into adapting to acceptable behavior than actually *treating* the patient or even actually determining their underlying mental disorder, as the criteria for diagnosing kept loosening.

Finally, the serious ramifications of psychological diagnostics and the therapeutic techniques implemented could also help pinpoint a certain element of correction that was present in the psychological and psychiatric fields during the Postwar. Treatments like lobotomies were recognized to result in the patients becoming apathetic and indifferent to the world around them, which was not only not considered problematic but, in fact, *desirable* as a state that would increase patient's response to treatment.²⁰⁵ Once more, this

²⁰¹ Ibid, 232.

²⁰² G. J. Diefenbach, D. Diefenbach, A. Baumeister, and M. West, "Portrayal of Lobotomy in the Popular Press: 1935–1960," *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 8, no. 1 (April 1999): 65.

²⁰³ Braslow, "History and Evidence-Based Medicine," 236.

²⁰⁴ Diefenbach, Diefenbach, Baumeister and West, "Portrayal of Lobotomy," 67.

²⁰⁵ Braslow, "History and Evidence-Based Medicine," 237.

technique seems directed at breaking down the patient's will in order to make them more manageable. Articles dealt with the effectiveness of psychological treatment to eliminate negative emotions—showing a bias towards correcting nonconformity rather than determining the root cause of psychological ailments—and often failed to mention the potential side effects altogether.²⁰⁶ It was not until the late forties and early fifties that the potential for *loss of personality* started to be deemed a negative side effect.²⁰⁷ This loss of personality has also been regarded as the most potentially traumatizing side-effect of therapeutic intervention during the Postwar. One of the more troubling repercussions was memory loss, which often ended up causing personality issues as well. According to Ruiz, memory can be considered the central means of construction and unification of personal identity.²⁰⁸ Indeed, she discusses how a “memory-based concept of identity” becomes central in bestowing personhood and autonomy to human beings:

Memory is the fabric that holds an individual's identity together. Without memory, the other aspects of a person such as their beliefs and values have no coherence. Memory erasure punches holes in the coherent experiences which define a person's identity.²⁰⁹

Because of all these troubling consequences, treatments such as lobotomies can start to be viewed as a means of control and punishment, as they eliminate the patient's capacity for autonomy and discontent and, most importantly, rob them of the capacity to craft a sense of self and personal identity that steers away from social convention.

²⁰⁶ Diefenbach, Diefenbach, Baumeister and West, "Portrayal of Lobotomy," 65.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁰⁸ Amanda Anais Ruiz, “Generation Lobotomy: Kinase Inhibition Therapy, Memory Erasure and Identity Loss,” *Stance: An International Undergraduate Philosophy Journal* 2, (April 2009): 9.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 13.

1.4. Popular Media: Creating and Representing Women

Another important means of conditioning the U.S. population into conformity to the desired behaviors and identities of the postwar period was the growing media outlets such as the magazine industry and the rise of television. The suffocating expansion of mainstream media during the postwar period even came under scrutiny at the hands of those who questioned their power to oppress their audience through psychological tactics.²¹⁰ Many of these media outlets could be understood to have contributed to the rising attention given to the—at the time—so-called *sexual roles*. Certainly, many of the media destined for female consumers became plagued by gendered messaging. Media became the means through which society was represented and, therefore, influenced and shaped during this period. According to historian Roland Goldberg, television in the postwar decades did affect consumer culture, but also politics—through the dissemination of news—and family dynamics.²¹¹

Media outlets of the time became a great source of conformity-centered messages. Jessamyn Neuhaus has pointed out that the representations of womanhood of the period “spoke to the *expectations* or desires of society”²¹² more than they did the reality of the average American. Magazines, television programs and even advertisements and instructional films were devoted to telling the American public how to think, behave and identify. Media outlets attempted to diminish gender anxiety through a prescriptive approach to gender roles in pop culture,²¹³ and proper gender relations were inculcated through mental hygiene films, women’s magazines, and even the fashion world. These sources are of great interest to analyze not only the postwar construction of femininity

²¹⁰ Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind*, 153.

²¹¹ Ronald Allen Goldberg, *America in the 1940s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 96.

²¹² Jessamyn Neuhaus, “The Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s,” *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (Spring 1999), 537. Italics not mine.

²¹³ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 247.

but also how the mass media became a means of gender prescriptivism which was hard to ignore.

Social Guidance Films

One of the media uses which skyrocketed during the postwar years was the use of social guidance films in classrooms in order to help students “adjust” to societal standards of identification and behavior. The mental hygiene movement, which was the discursive matrix of these films, was not born during the postwar, as mental hygiene had been present in classrooms since the 1930s and the ideology itself had been born at the beginning of the century—based on the view that “...the survival of high civilization demanded severe restriction on the anarchic.”²¹⁴ A foundation of Freudian thought based the movement on the belief that personality was malleable²¹⁵ and that its maladjustments were the root for not only individual mental health issues, but also social problems.²¹⁶ However, the combination of Popular Freudianism and the rise in image-based media made the social guidance film a defining factor of postwar gender construction.

These films are now referred to as social guidance films, as their main objective was to integrate—or adjust—the individual person into their environment.²¹⁷ Nonetheless, at the time, these were generally referred to as “mental hygiene,” “attitude enhancement” or “emotional conditioning” films.²¹⁸ Indeed, the thought that adjustment to the status quo could benefit the individual as well as society was a direct consequence of the ideals of conformity that permeated the postwar United States. Cohen writes that the personality traits social guidance films usually targeted as undesirable were those of

²¹⁴ Fred Matthews, “In Defense of Common Sense: Mental Hygiene as Ideology and Mentality in Twentieth-Century America,” *Prospects* 4 (1979), 461.

²¹⁵ Sol Cohen, “The Mental Hygiene Movement, the Development of Personality and the School: The Medicalization of American Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1983), 142.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

²¹⁷ Matthews, “In Defense of Common Sense,” 477.

²¹⁸ Ken Smith, *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945-1970* (New York: Blast Books, 1999), 15.

“shyness, daydreaming, withdrawal, introversion, the ‘shut-in personality.’”²¹⁹ Social guidance was in direct relation with the postwar ideal of conformity and “undesirable” traits were against the ideals of group togetherness and adherence. The desirability of group-based mentality can be seen in the 1947 film *Shy Guy*²²⁰ where the main protagonist—who is having trouble making friends at a new school—is encouraged by his father to i) dress the same as the other boys, ii) pay attention to what activities and hobbies the other boys are interested in and iii) copy the behavior of the popular crowd at school. All this advice is clearly pointed towards adjustment to the group, as the protagonist is encouraged to leave behind clothing style, interests and behavioral patterns of his own in order to assimilate. A decade later, the film *Social Acceptability*²²¹ is still focused on the dangers of shyness, this time as a fourteen-year-old girl’s father worries that she is too quiet and studious and that she will end up being shy like her mother. The mother acts as a cautionary example as, to this day, she feels that her shyness has left psychological wounds in her personality, and she is the reason her family hardly ever gets invited to social functions. The final voice over of the film stresses this point with the words “lack of social acceptance can leave emotional scars.”

Already in the films discussed above, it becomes clear that the main objective of social guidance films was none other than encouraging assimilation to the group, whatever that may entail. As Smith points out, the main aim of mental hygiene, no matter their subject matter, is fitting in:

The commandment to conform, or to “fit in,” as educational film writers liked to phrase it, suffused practically all mental hygiene films. It lay at the heart of topics

²¹⁹ Cohen, “The Mental Hygiene Movement,” 129.

²²⁰ *Shy Guy* (instructional film; 1947; Coronet Instructional Media), directed by Ted Peshak, filmed in Illinois, 13 minutes, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pflh89f5KeM>.

²²¹ *Social Acceptability* (instructional film; 1957; Crawley Films), filmed in Ottawa, in *Adolescent Development Series*, 19 minutes, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9Bdngd1Db4>.

such as popularity, responsibility, family togetherness, manners, posture, cleanliness, citizenship. Its flip side—a gut fear of the abnormal—was evident in the postwar obsession with safety and security and was integral to films across a broad spectrum...²²²

This is the case of films such as *Habit Patterns*,²²³ where the main character—a high school girl named Bobby—is shown as an example of bad habit patterns, as she is incapable of keeping an adequate sleep schedule, constantly runs out of clean clothes due to poor planning, and doesn't ever get around to having a good nutrition due to her lack of care in meal organization. However, the narrator's voice is not focused on how this lack of an organized habit pattern is affecting Bobby's mental or physical state, but how all these affect her *socially*. This emphasis is made especially when the narrator talks to the protagonist in the following terms: "You knew this afternoon that you were making a bad impression and how easy it is not to be invited again, and how quickly you can be left out of the crowd." These words reaffirm, once again, the stress put not on personal grooming or habit patterning for the sake of the individual's well-being, but for their acceptance into the group. This type of cautionary tale-like admonishing framed the pictures in such a way that the audience walked away with the notion that the only alternative to conformity was solitude—if not outright danger. According to Smith, this was not the aim of mental hygienists, who did not wish to simply indoctrinate, but to help turn young men and women into "effective" and "efficient" members of society.²²⁴ Nevertheless, the tone and framing of the narration clearly makes these films feel more propagandistic than pedagogic. Matthews writes on this that, ultimately, this was a direct

²²² Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 35.

²²³ *Habit Patterns* (instructional film; 1954; McGraw-Hill Films), 14 minutes, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km4CR1uGYxA>.

²²⁴ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 21.

consequence of the therapeutic view of personality held by hygienists, which ended up inducing a “patient-like passivity” in the viewers.²²⁵

The scientific soundness of mental hygienists can be methodologically questioned. The film-based approach took precedence during the postwar because it was generally noted that audiences responded more actively to image-based or film-based learning than to lectures.²²⁶ Although most instructional films would seem goofy to a modern audience, the change from spoken word lectures to film-based classes was a defining factor in their success. Publishing houses like McGraw Hill and Encyclopedia Britannica contributed to the production and dissemination of these films. Nevertheless, Coronet was the first studio to outline the creation of social guidance films, focusing primarily on factors that would grab audiences’ attention. Therefore, the company took an approach based on character development in their advice films, which succeeded in grabbing the audience's attention more than previous productions.²²⁷

The films featured adolescent characters and were aimed at secondary school audiences because another important component for the rise of this movement was that mental hygienists understood schools as strategic places where detection and adjustment of psychological issues should be carried out.²²⁸ This demonstrates a coercive intent behind the pedagogic design, as criticism and resistance to the films’ messages might have been less likely to take place with pre-teens and teens than with adults. Cohen discusses how the mental hygienists of the time applied their techniques with the admission that they were prioritizing “healthy” personality development over any other educational aims.²²⁹ Further questioning of pedagogic soundness comes when we

²²⁵ Matthews, “In Defense of Common Sense,” 464.

²²⁶ Milton Miles Berger, “The Use of Films for Mental Hygiene Education,” *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 3, no. 2 (1957): 109.

²²⁷ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 89.

²²⁸ Cohen, “The Mental Hygiene Movement,” 124.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

examine *how* these films were put to use in order to judge how much critical thought they realistically endorsed. Smith notes how all of them were not only associated with an “educational collaborator”²³⁰ but also how they were *scripted* by psychologists, sociologists, PhDs, etc.²³¹ This aligns with the general ideology of the postwar, by which cultural authority was conferred to the “expert.” Therefore, it could also be inferred that by means of that very authority, audiences might not have been as inclined to question the teachings of mental hygiene films and might have taken the expertise of their endorses as a sign of their scientific soundness. Medical doctors like Milton Berger wrote in precise terms about their use of instructional films and gave advice on how they would be of most use to audiences. According to Dr. Berger, it was important that—prior to the viewing—audiences be directed to what to pay attention to during the screening.²³² This would attenuate possible opposition on the part of the audience, as their natural sensations and reactions to the film have already been tampered with. Although Berger utilizes the next page of his report to note that there must be “an opportunity to remind the audience that there are no exact rules or regulations or conclusions to fit every individual case at all times,”²³³ this point is challenged by the assumption that the emotions elicited by these films are the *rational* ones.²³⁴ The hygienist approach seems to be that viewers are free to debate and question the teachings of each film but that a healthy and rational individual will inevitably agree with them. Therefore, the space for disagreement is minimal and anything other than conformity becomes subject to pathologization.

The amount of screen time dedicated to outlining acceptable behavior for girls and young women is also questionable issue. While the themes of mental hygiene films vary

²³⁰ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 95.

²³¹ Ibid, 22.

²³² Berger, “The Use of Films,” 111.

²³³ Ibid, 112.

²³⁴ Ibid.

greatly from sexual education to road safety, it seems that there is a disproportionate amount of attention dedicated to defining and endorsing feminine behavior. Smith noted that an impressive 50% of mental hygiene films were dedicated to “defining the social limits of girls.”²³⁵ Appearance becomes one of the main subjects of films when it comes to female characters. For instance, the short film *A Date with Your Family*,²³⁶ which in theory seems to touch on the importance of family togetherness, quickly lays foundations for feminine appearance. While the son of the family studies, mother and daughter not only prepare dinner but prepare *themselves* for dinner by changing their clothing. This is explained with the following voice-over narration: “The women of this family seem to feel that they *owe* it to the men of the family to look *relaxed, rested and attractive* at dinner time.”²³⁷ The rise in femininity instruction is found in many guidance films dedicated to grooming. For instance, Mary Stuyvesant became a 1940s version of a beauty and etiquette influencer, with her filmed lectures such as *Good Grooming for Girls*.²³⁸ These did not only provide grooming tips but contained lessons in how to properly behave in a feminine way—even including tutorials on how to sit properly, get up with poise and walk elegantly.

Likewise, a great deal of emphasis seems to be put in young women’s behavior. Most of the films aimed at girls and young women had to do with the roles of wife and mother, as well as the importance of having good social skills.²³⁹ We can see the former aim in *Marriage is a Partnership* (1951),²⁴⁰ whose narrator constantly repeats the

²³⁵ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 53.

²³⁶ *A Date with Your Family* (instructional film; 1950; Encyclopaedia Britannica Films), directed by Edward G. Simmel, filmed in the US, 10 minutes, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQIGiE5vSSM>

²³⁷ Emphasis added.

²³⁸ *Good Grooming for Girls* (instructional film; 1946; Frances R. Denny Company), directed by Mary Stuyvesant, filmed in N.Y.C., 60 minutes.

²³⁹ Smith, *Mental Hygiene*, 56.

²⁴⁰ *Marriage is a Partnership* (instructional film; 1951; Coronet Films), directed by Ted Peshak, filmed in Illinois, 16 minutes, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ykwi_qoZ_Fo.

necessity for both newly-weds to adapt to their spouse but focuses primarily on the woman's adjustment, as she's the one who has to give up her job, move in with the groom's mother and—ultimately—move away from friends and family when her husband is offered a new job. The objective of guidance films for girls is also perfectly shown in *Are You Popular?* (1947)²⁴¹ Although the film sets out to deal with the concept of popularity and the social skills to have in order to attain it, the narrator quickly turns to the girl protagonist as an example of *good* popularity: she is attractive, helpful, pays attention to boys and girls alike and doesn't behave inappropriately during dates. This is contrasted with the character Ginny, who is not allowed to sit with the popular crowd during lunch, is sarcastically called "Miss Popularity" by the boys and acts as a cautionary tale for inappropriate sexual behavior when the narrator explains why she's alone during lunchtime: "No, girls who park in cars [alone at night with their dates] are not really popular, not even with the boys they park with. Not when they meet at school or elsewhere." Further failure on the side of young women to assimilate into the group are exemplified in many other instructional films, such as *The Snob* (1958) or *The Outsider* (1951), whose main characters are both girls—played by the same actress, even—and make the point that it is *she* who is failing to adjust.

It is true that social experts might not have had the word indoctrination running around their minds when these films were made and put to use in the classroom, but their general pathologization of perfectly sane personality traits—such as shyness—,along with the methodology by which kids were directed towards what to pay attention to and which was the tone of each social guidance film—if not by their teacher, by the films' narrators themselves—ended up creating an atmosphere where anything other than

²⁴¹ *Are You Popular?* (instructional film; 1947; Coronet Instructional Films), directed by Ted Peshak, filmed in Illinois, 10 minutes, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDzNiVsKWIs> .

conformity became a cause for psychological concern, further stigmatizing any type of resistance or critical thinking.

Women's Magazines

Women's magazines became one of the main carriers of the feminine ideal, as their readership kept steadily rising during the postwar period. *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Mademoiselle*, *Good Housekeeping* or even publications such as *Life Magazine* helped to determine both the standards of femininity during the late forties and the fifties; the literature, journalism and advertising that is found in these types of periodicals effectively influenced the aspirations of their readerships. These publications were not universally enjoyed and there was indeed resistance and criticism directed at the domestic and gender-based content of these magazines. Nevertheless, as theoreticians such as Beth L. Bailey have pointed out, they had a *didactic* intent.²⁴² This contributes to the idea, put forward by writers such as Moskowitz or Neuhaus that women's representation in these publications were more aspirational than realistic.²⁴³

In the introduction to her book, *Women's Magazines 1940-1960*, Walker discusses the most significant change in women's magazines during the postwar era as a distinct shift in their image of women's roles from national and public purpose to enclosure in the home.²⁴⁴ A great part of these publications is concerned with home life: cleaning, decorating, feeding the family. Their world is purely domestic, with women at the center of all things related to the home. (Figure 1). Claims made by Friedan that magazines for women made no mention at all of the world outside the home²⁴⁵ were not accurate. There

²⁴² Bailey, *From Front Porch*, 14.

²⁴³ Eva Moskowitz, "'It's Good to Blow Your Top': Women's Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 66; Neuhaus, "The Way to a Man's Heart," 537.

²⁴⁴ Nancy A. Walker, "Introduction," in *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 16.

²⁴⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 27.

is coverage of political and social issues; for example, in the May 1958 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* there is a piece listing the accomplishments and failings of the Soviet Union²⁴⁶ and periodicals like *Mademoiselle*—for teenage girls—included sections on colleges and career prospects. Nevertheless, their prime topic *is* domestic work. As a consequence of a reactionary positioning against career women after the end of the war,²⁴⁷ most of the roles we see women portrayed in have to do with the role of housewife. Advertisements feature products for the home, washing, cleaning and cooking equipment. According to Rice, the image of the “happy housewife” permeated the magazines,²⁴⁸ which created a representation of womanhood where domesticity was the *only* choice.²⁴⁹ The preoccupation with pushing domesticity becomes unmistakable in these magazines, as the women portrayed in them—and the contents of the magazines themselves—make it so that careerism is hardly ever present and, therefore, easily forgettable.



Figure 1. Advertisement for a kitchen display on page 7 of the August 1952 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* where all people present in the kitchen and using it are women.

²⁴⁶ Dorothy Thompson, “What Price Liberty?,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1958, 11,14.

²⁴⁷ Margaret Bailey, “The Women’s Magazine Short-Story Heroine in 1957 and 1967,” *Journalism Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1969): 366.

²⁴⁸ Alison M. Rice, “The Rise of ‘Good Reading’ over ‘Good Writing’: how and why women’s magazine fiction changed in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Media History* 6, no. 2 (2000): 140.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

Another point of concern in women's magazines was how preoccupied with gendering their contents seemed to be. Magazines directed at women were filled with images and articles on perfect appearance, domesticity, and even behavior. In this way, they turned more into a manual on American femininity, instructing young women on how to adapt to their feminine roles. For instance, a quiz entitled "How Feminine Are You?" in *Woman's Home Companion* gave points for interest in clothing and makeup and subtracted for career interests,²⁵⁰ not showing a truthful representation of the possible personalities contained in their readership and clearly establishing boundaries around femininity. A great part of the construction of womanliness in these publications had to do with appearance, as none of the magazines show women—even around the house—not made up for the day and the only two appearances allowed were those of maternal domesticity or glamorous elegance. This was also implemented into advertising. Indeed, images of domestic women were often used to sell household items while portrayals of poised and neatly made-up women became useful as a selling point for fashion and cosmetics.²⁵¹ (Figure 2).

²⁵⁰ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 106.

²⁵¹ Linda J. Busby and Greg Leichty, "Feminism and Advertising in Traditional and Nontraditional Women's Magazines 1950s-1980s," *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (1993): 256.



Figure 2. Left: Advertisement for complexion soap. Right: Advertisement for starch. Both from the July 1955 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*

These magazines reinforced the understanding of masculinity and femininity as complementary roles²⁵² and the images and stories of men that can be found in them are also heavily gendered. In the whole of the August 1952 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, there is only image of a man by himself, and it is contained in two small columns about home repair²⁵³—one of the few domestic chores traditionally associated with masculinity. We find very few examples of non-traditional gendering in these magazines. For example, in the May issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* of 1958, there is a story submitted by a male writer—B. T. Milan—who, for a period of time, exchanged roles with his wife and became a homemaker while she went off to work.²⁵⁴ Throughout the testimony, Milan

²⁵² Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 245.

²⁵³ *Good Housekeeping*, August 1952, 34-35.

²⁵⁴ B.T. Milan, "A Father's Place... Is in the Home?," *Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1958, 4.

writes that male bodies are more suited for housework than office work, as it requires more strength and that he found the new arrangement much more productive. Although the piece seems very progressive for the time, the article concludes by stating that both spouses eventually returned to their assigned roles, even if they thought they were better off before. In this way, the piece once again reinforces the “naturalness” of the wife-homemaker and husband-breadwinner dynamic, as the writer and his wife go back to them even if their efficacy has been somewhat disproven.

Marriage and homelife feature prominently in women’s magazines, which further fortify domestic norms. The magazines promoted marriage as an aspiration and an ideal, as well as the path towards psychological well-being for both children and parents. Even in these publications, the reach of the expert made itself known. According to Walker, magazines became a means for marriage counselors, pediatricians, psychologists, etc. to dispense pseudo-scientific advice on daily issues.²⁵⁵ *Ladies’ Home Journal* regularly featured a column by Dr. Benjamin Spock—pediatrician—on different issues regarding parenting and child development. This publication also featured a section entitled “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” in which readers were given space to relay their marital problems and were offered advice. Although this provided a new means of expression for feelings of discontent, it is necessary to acknowledge that the nature of these columns was not so much to provide earnest advice but to promote *adjustment to marriage*. These sections, common in several publications, made a point to encourage women to adapt their expectations to the reality of marriage and warned about the effects of unhappy marriages and marriage dissolution.²⁵⁶ Because of this, discussions of childrearing and—particularly—marriage quickly transformed into a tool for imposing the domestic

²⁵⁵ Walker, *Women’s Magazines*, 10.

²⁵⁶ Moskowitz, “It’s Good to Blow Your Top,” 79.

ideology.²⁵⁷ In the July 1954 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, a section entitled "Making Marriage Work" published a piece on the adjustments that were necessary for happiness in partnership. It is soon made clear that adjustments on part of the husband are *desirable* while they become *necessary* on part of the wife. In this case, the author urges young brides to adjust to their husbands' understandings of sexual relations and their libido. In Adams' words, "She will do so, not because it is her duty or his right but because sex is the physical means of expressing love."²⁵⁸ The nineteenth-century justification of "wifely duty" is dropped, but the fact remains that an expectation for the wife's sexual availability remains constant—even if now under the pretense of emotional well-being. Jackson-Lears writes that postwar publications redefined the limits of debate in order to construct a new realm of social acceptability²⁵⁹ and, in cases such as this, it is clear that marital advice columns only exposed domestic discontent with the intention of burying it under a load of advice which amounted to one ideal: marriage was not to be questioned and the people in a marriage—especially the wife—were expected to alter their personality needed to be lost to fit the norm.

Contrary to Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, women's magazines did feature content about issues outside the home. In the January 1957 issue of *Mademoiselle*, there are both a college board contest and a writers contest, as well as articles on socioeconomic class division in America. In the August 1952 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, we can see that the magazine had a monthly section on progress in medical science. Moreover, most all publications aimed at women made it a point to publish fiction and nonfiction by women²⁶⁰—most of the time submitted by their own readers. However, this type of

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 84.

²⁵⁸ Clifford R. Adams, Ph.D., "Making Marriage Work: How a Bride Adjusts to Marriage," *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1954, 16.

²⁵⁹ Jackson-Lears, "A Matter of Taste," 49.

²⁶⁰ Walker, *Women's Magazines*, 8.

content is significantly smaller than the content focused on appearance and home, spread far and wide throughout the publications and seemed to disappear in between pages upon pages of advertisements—which only portrayed women in domestic and decorative roles. In some cases, literary or journalistic content is relegated to a small column on the page while publicity engulfs two thirds of it. (Figure 3). The literary content that *does* appear in these magazines was heavily restricted. According to Rice, the main problem in the fiction published by women’s magazines was that the criteria for acceptance started to lean more on the concept of “reader identification” than anything else, causing the fiction inside women’s magazine to rarely delve outside the domestic environment.²⁶¹ Franzwa contributes to this by stating that not only was the setting usually domestic, but that the protagonists themselves were portrayed in one of four options: “...single and looking for a husband; housewife-mother; spinster; widowed or divorced—soon to remarry.”²⁶² Bailey further contributes to the characterization of the magazine protagonist by determining them to be

...an attractive, married woman in the 26-35 age group. She lived in a house in a city, had one or two children, and though she had been to college, her main occupation was housekeeping. She was in the middle economic level and her goals were love oriented.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Rice, “The Rise of Good Reading,” 139.

²⁶² Helen H. Franzwa, “Working women in Fact and Fiction,” *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (June 1974): 106.

²⁶³ Bailey, “The Women’s Magazine Short-Story,” 365.



Figure 3. Page 209 of the August 1952 issue of *Good Housekeeping* where the content published has been reformatted to occupy a single column on the page while two thirds of it are filled with advertisements.

Although Friedan was correct in her judgement that the reader identification principle was more of a reflection of male editor's beliefs of what constituted female interest than an accurate reflection of women's actual interests²⁶⁴—as also attested by Walker²⁶⁵—she was mistaken in the statement that this ended up “divorcing” women from the world of ideas.²⁶⁶ Not only were they not separate from it, but a number of women openly protested against the change in women's magazines content after the war. This was the case of Elizabeth Bancroft, who already in 1946 wrote to *New Republic* to complain that editors were now taking it upon themselves to decide which “should be

²⁶⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 49.

²⁶⁵ Walker, *Women's Magazines*, 4.

²⁶⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 64.

woman's *proper* interests."²⁶⁷ Consequently, it could be argued that magazines directed at women during the postwar *did* turn from public affairs to private ones and did become tools for the dissemination of the new domestic ideology. Nevertheless, this was not an unnoticed change, nor was it universally supported—further showing the difference between flesh and bone women and the female representation we find in the media during the postwar period.

Television

Television became the home companion par excellence during the postwar period, and it impacted home life in a profound way. The link between the postwar construction of femininity and television itself is in the home, as both housewife and television became common fixtures of the idealized suburban life. Indeed, television quickly turned into a marker of economic stability and even changed the layout of suburban living. It became considered in “good taste” to place the TV at the center of the home, turning it from entertainment source to furniture.²⁶⁸ As Joey Tribbiani, from the sitcom *Friends*, expressed some decades later: “You don’t own a TV? What’s all your furniture pointed at?”²⁶⁹ Television not only became furniture but *the* central piece of daily life. According to Erin Lee Mock, the television set became synonymous with family togetherness and re-designed home interior from a kitchen-centered to a living-room centered space.²⁷⁰ Because of that very relationship between the home and television, the medium started to be understood as domestic and, therefore, women became the main audience in the eyes

²⁶⁷ Elizabeth Bancroft Schlesinger, “The Women’s Magazines,” in *Women’s Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998), 229. Originally published in *New Republic*, March 11, 1946, 345. Italics mine.

²⁶⁸ Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sitcoms and suburbs: Positioning the 1950s homemaker,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 69.

²⁶⁹ Greg Malins, “*The One in Barbados*” (TV episode; *Friends*, season 9, episode 24; Burbank: Warner Bros. Television, 2003).

²⁷⁰ Erin Lee Mock, “The Horror of “Honey, I’m Home!”: The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 41, no. 2 (2001): 32.

of executives.²⁷¹ Daytime specifically was allocated to programs designed for women, as housewives were considered the main demographic who might be at home during those hours.²⁷² This made broadcasting start to actively channel homemaker's attention,²⁷³ which ended up not only affecting programming but also actively contributing to gender segregation during the postwar.

Thus, broadcasting became preoccupied with the reinforcement of ideal femininity in various ways. Due to a general concern that television might distract women from their domestic duties, early daytime television was designed to be able to be listened to—rather than watched—while doing chores.²⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the support for gender segregation and domestic femininity was most seen in the programs offered to women. Television executives became preoccupied with attracting women to their television sets during the day through heavily gendered shows that fostered audience identification. This had a flattening effect on the identities shown to women and aided in promoting gender segregation:

...broadcast schedules, popular television and radio programmes and media advertisements participated in the enforcement and reproduction of gender norms, locating women in the home and distinguishing their interests and activities from those of men.²⁷⁵

Although studies have shown that women of the time did not simply watch what was offered during daytime just because it was convenient in terms of schedule and most of

²⁷¹ Sarah Arnold, *Gender and Early Television: Mapping Women's Role in Emerging US and British Media, 1850-1950*. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 157.

²⁷² Ibid., 158.

²⁷³ Ibid., 168.

²⁷⁴ Rowan Howard-Williams and Elihu Katz, "Did television empower women? The introduction of television and the changing status of women in the 1950s," *Journal of Popular Television* 1, no. 1 (2013): 13; Inger Stole, "Televised Consumption: Women, Advertisers and the Early Daytime Television Industry," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2003): 69.

²⁷⁵ Goldstein, "Designing Woman!," 41.

them would rather wait for shows they actually enjoyed and make time for those,²⁷⁶ it is important to note what kinds of programs were specifically designed *for women*—as it helps understand what vision of femininity networks held and purposefully planned to reproduce. Programming for women becomes, therefore, not an accurate reflection of the internal interests of the female audience of the time, but a reflection of the ideals that were revered. Television was another instrument of reinforcement for the domestic qualities attributed to healthy and desirable femininity.

Marsha F. Cassidy cites some of the programs aimed at women as audience participation shows, variety-vaudeville, films shortened to be shown on television and—importantly—homemaking shows.²⁷⁷ These were another carryover from radio, where homemaking shows had already been dedicated to providing women with cooking tips and recipes.²⁷⁸ Their televised versions were dedicated to the same thing, often presented by a female host dedicated to providing the female audience with domestic advice. (Figure 4). In its adaptation to television, the homemaking show became even more comprehensive and spoke on themes such as home decor, gardening, grooming, clothing

²⁷⁶ Arnold, *Gender and Early Television*, 182.

²⁷⁷ Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005): 5.

²⁷⁸ J. Steven Smethers & Lee Jolliffe, “Homemaking Programs: The Recipe for Reaching Women Listeners on the Midwest’s Local Radio,” *Journalism History* 24, no. 4 (1999): 141.

and family bonding,²⁷⁹ responding to the new professionalization of homemaking²⁸⁰ and the ample amounts of time women were now dedicating to it.



Figure 4. Adelaide Hawley playing Betty Crocker in the Betty Crocker Star Matinee, which aired from November 1951 to April 1952.

Nevertheless, the most prominent of daytime television shows was—undoubtedly—the domestic sitcom, which was designed around the audience identification principle and supposedly dealt with everyday situations of the average suburban family. Significantly, prime-time comedic shows as *Leave it to Beaver*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* or *The Honeymooners* often spend most of their screen time at the family's residence. Thus, the narrative space became synonymous with domestic environments.²⁸¹ Most of the action was set in the family home, with only some deviations to other daily situations such as shopping. While it is often understood—if not outright shown—that children and husband leave the house to attend school and work, the mothers only seem to leave home to do shopping or deal with something related to their children—like attending parent-teacher conferences. All TV housewives of the

²⁷⁹ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 29.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁸¹ Haralovich, "Sitcoms and suburbs," 75.

postwar are homemakers and only shown doing non-domestic activities that did not interfere with their homemaking.²⁸² This not only positioned the image of womanhood within domestic bounds but also confined female characters in terms of storylines. Haralovich speaks on the importance of the gender-specificity of home space in domestic sitcoms, where the kitchen is a space reserved for women.²⁸³ Indeed, many of these shows often show the mother within kitchen bounds or continuously going in and coming out of the kitchen. (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Leave It to Beaver's* opening image of the second season. June, the mother, is often shown going out of the house through the white door (kitchen) while the children and father descend from the stairs (bedrooms).

Authors such as Tasha Oren have described 1950s sitcoms as “sites of ideological pressure” presented as an ideal.²⁸⁴ It is certain that almost all domestic comedies of the period center around middle-class, white, suburban families. This norm is only contested in certain sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*, which breaks the mold of suburban whiteness through the character of Ricky—played by Desi Arnaz, a Cuban American actor. *The*

²⁸² Daniel Delis Hill, *Dress and Identity in America: The Baby Boom Years 1946-1964*. (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024): 146.

²⁸³ Haralovich, “Sitcoms and Suburbs,” 64.

²⁸⁴ Tasha G. Oren, “Domesticated Dads and Double-Shift Moms: Real Life and Ideal Life in 1950s Domestic Comedy,” *Cercles* 8 (2003): 78.

Honeymooners is another sitcom that doesn't completely fit the standard, as it centers around a working-class family. However, it still reinforces middle-class desirability by focusing often on the financial struggles of the main couple. The rest all fit into the norm. This had a flattening effect on the characters and the storylines, as the domestic comedy family became representative of aspirations rather than reality. Not only did this provide a limited range of social types, but it spoke to the eradication of identitarian difference in the American ideal. In the pursuit of audience identification and wholesomeness, television programs that depicted unhappiness—especially in female characters—began to be considered in “bad taste”²⁸⁵ and renditions of family life became rather repetitive. Even *I Love Lucy*, the most irreverent, often treats the issue of money as a source of problems in the Ricardo marriage, but it also paints the idea of Lucy working as something laughable and hints at temper trouble on part of the husband. None of these issues are acknowledged further than in one-liner jokes or simple storylines by which Lucy inevitably goes back to her homemaker role. The need for quick resolution contributes to the image of family cohesion and dismisses possibilities of dissatisfaction. Thus, the idealized family the 1950s sitcoms masks family and marriage conflict²⁸⁶ and endorses a set of proper behaviors.²⁸⁷ All these characteristics of the domestic comedy made it effectively impossible for the medium to provide spectators with a rounded portrayal of personal subjectivity.

Finally, the aesthetic portrayal of women in these shows was also designed as an ideal representation of femininity. TV mothers of the postwar, in an attempt to reinforce the desirability of family life, are always impeccably made up even in the most mundane situations. (Figure 6). This costuming choice not only represents a wider idea that

²⁸⁵ Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 215.

²⁸⁶ Mock, “The Horror of “Honey, I’m Home!”,” 30.

²⁸⁷ Oren, “Domesticated Dads,” 89.

appropriate presentation was key to femininity, but also a correlation between the housewife character and the home itself. According to Hill, an integral part of the homemaker persona was that both woman and house were to be clean and tidy.²⁸⁸ This is certainly the case in TV mothers, who can always be found in long, flowing dresses which are always spotless and wrinkle-free—even if the women themselves are doing chores. This is also the case for another staple of homemaking gear: the apron. Although female characters during the postwar are tirelessly at work in the home, their aprons—just like the rest of their clothing—are never stained. (Figure 7)



Figure 6. June Cleaver, from *Leave it to Beaver*, waters the plants in pearls.

²⁸⁸ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 147.



Figure 7. Lucy from *I love Lucy* and Donna from the *Donna Reed Show* in white, clean aprons.

TV mothers became a representation of the ideal suburban life to aspire towards, and their attire was by no means trivial. Theorists like Milford-Cottam have attested that one of the central traits of feminine dressing at the time was modesty.²⁸⁹ Clothing is meek and discrete; it conformed to the ideal hourglass silhouette but maintained an image of middle-class gentility. Heels were worn throughout the day, even during housework hours and only sometimes changed for flats. The star item of housewife costuming was the shirtwaist dress or a combination of blouse and flowy skirt, changed to something smarter only in the case of company.²⁹⁰ Nonetheless, most TV mothers were so made up for their chores that the only difference the audience usually sees is the addition of accessories like hats and gloves and a change from apron to coat in the rare occasion the mother leaves the home. Consequently, aesthetic constructions of femininity became another means of strengthening and further dividing the gender roles of the period. This representation of

²⁸⁹ Daniel Milford-Cottam. *Fashion in the 1950s*. (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Shire, 2017), 15.

²⁹⁰ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 147.

femininity, however, was not spontaneous and was not only found of TV, but the result of careful engineering on part of the fashion industry after the end of World War II.

Images of fashion: the aesthetics of the domestic woman

It has been said that changes in fashion reflect changes in the attitudes towards women.²⁹¹ Fashion is one of the key factors in the construction and strengthening of identity. This was particularly the case during the postwar due to the high anxiety experienced in the period regarding gender—or what they referred to as “the sexual roles.” As stated by Elizabeth Wilson, fashion can construct identity—including gender—and can reinforce both individuality and group identity.²⁹² This is particularly important after the Second World War and the identitarian struggles it brought about.²⁹³ Wilson explains that women of the period were urged to categorize themselves within “types” of woman and dress accordingly,²⁹⁴ and that appearance itself became mixed up with the concept of identity.²⁹⁵ Thus, the anxiety surrounding personal identity made the world of fashion a necessity, a tool through which the self could be categorized and the absence of identity could be concealed by adopting a role—costume included. Much of the concept of femininity during the postwar era had to do with beauty and fashion, and these became instruments to blend into the ideal womanhood. Anne Fogarty, a famous designer of the 1950s, stressed in her fashion guide that women should change the way they dressed when they got married in order to “dramatize” their new role.²⁹⁶ These words are essential in understanding that, already during this period, women were aware of the importance of

²⁹¹ Anne Beth Presley, “Fifty Years of Change: Societal Attitudes and Women’s Fashions, 1900-1950,” *The Historian* 60, no. 2 (1998): 307.

²⁹² Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 12, 117, 122.

²⁹³ Frederick R. Karl, “The Fifties and After: And Ambiguous Culture,” in *A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture*, ed. Josephine G. Hendin (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 32.

²⁹⁴ Wilson, *Adorned In Dreams*, 124.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 123.

²⁹⁶ Anne Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife*. (London: V&A Publishing, 2011), 5.

their aesthetic presentation in the construction of identity—even if identity was to be replaced with a role. Thus, it is of the essence to discern not only which fashions women of the postwar adopted but also what these fashions represented within the model of womanhood that permeated society at this point.

Ideal femininity was part of every aspect of a woman's life after the end of the war. One of the most important parts of the new way of dress had to do with a return to traditional values—even though now the concept of perfect wifehood and motherhood had a bonus of sexual desirability. Marriage and desirability were inextricably linked during the postwar era. Women were expected to remain slim and attractive for their husbands²⁹⁷ and this was also considered a pivotal part of their role as mothers as well, as their failure to retain their mate would damage their children psychologically.²⁹⁸ Importantly, none of the fashions of the day were regulated (as they had been in other social contexts, like we see in the case of sumptuary laws in Europe or the rationing of clothing material during the war) but the shadow of conformity made unwritten rules of style seem unimpeachable. Milford-Cottam writes thusly on the relationship between clothing and wifehood:

Even if not explicitly ordered to dress a certain way, women were shown examples of ideal housewives or young, soon-to-be-wed secretaries declaring their desire for fitted kitchens, [...]. These personifications of ideal womanhood dressed in a fresh, neat, feminine and modest manner that reflected their dutiful, wifely qualities.²⁹⁹

In this way, the two most defining roles of womanhood—wife and mother—became heavily impregnated by an aesthetic imperative. Attractiveness to men remained both a

²⁹⁷ Karl, "The Fifties and After," 40.

²⁹⁸ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 244.

²⁹⁹ Milford-Cottam, *Fashion in the 1950s*, 15.

staple of femininity and a setter of trends, even to the point of relegating personal style to a secondary place in order to be appealing to men. Designer Anne Fogarty wrote in her 1959 fashion guide for wives: “Remember that it’s your husband for whom you’re dressing. Keep him in mind when you shop.”³⁰⁰

Another reintroduction of traditional values was sensed across the fashion world in the late forties. Although hemlines had been progressively rising during the war years—motivated by the shortage in fabrics—Balenciaga promptly put an end to this. Already in the fall collection of 1945, the house featured designs with the hemlines dropped to fifteen inches (thirty-eight centimeters) from the floor.³⁰¹ Far from an abnormality, the trend continued. A new taste for covering up swept in and once again hid the legs of every woman who had dared rise their hemlines during the war. (Figure 8). In early 1947, Christian Dior introduced his Corolle line,³⁰² which would later be known to the world as Dior’s “New Look.” The New Look was the designer’s response to the end of the war, and it was designed to recapture femininity at its most traditional. Not only did he further drop the hemlines—to twelve inches, or thirty centimeters, from the floor—³⁰³ but he also rescued the hourglass ideal that had not been in the spotlight of American fashion since the disappearance of the Gibson Girl. The New Look captured the American imagination, and its silhouette took over every aspect of dressing: it was worn around the house, for shopping, to go out, even to get married in. (Figure 9).

³⁰⁰ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well-dressed Wife*, 12.

³⁰¹ Daniel Delis Hill, *As Seen In Vogue: A Century of American Fashion in Advertising*. (Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 75.

³⁰² Kristina Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women with Values: The 1950s & 60s*. (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1997), 9.

³⁰³ Hill, *As Seen in Vogue*, 75.



Figure 8. Left: Hemlines in the mid-forties. Right: Dior's New Look's hemlines.



Figure 9. Left: Wedding Picture. Right: Prom picture. All women photographed are wearing Dior's New Look's silhouette.

The curvaceous silhouette imposed by Dior attracted the return and re-invention of another nineteenth-century staple: the corset. During the War, foundation garments had

to be comfortable and loose-fitting.³⁰⁴ When the war ended and the New Look took over, its shapely design turned foundation garments into instruments for figure engineering.³⁰⁵ The corset had been demonized by fashion magazines after the twenties, so now they had to give it a new name to be able to sell it to the public: the waspie.³⁰⁶ This re-branding was introduced by Marie Lebigot,³⁰⁷ and consisted of a tight, shorter, belt-like corset, which could be used to accentuate the waist of an already slim constitution but was not enough for those with a fuller figure.³⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the queen of foundation garments of the postwar era was not to be the waspie, but a new competitor: the girdle. Although boning and lacing had been revived,³⁰⁹ the girdle attracted attention due to its newness, which set it aside from the tarnished reputation of the corset and was incorporated into the sense of modernity that people in the postwar era so wanted to portray.³¹⁰ The new availability of lycra permitted girdles to retain their elasticity³¹¹ and contain the figure more effectively. Additionally, it could be altered to necessity. The girdle could be made into an “all-in-one” by attaching it to a brassiere and a waist-nipper³¹² (Figure 10), it could be made into a roll-on (which made it sturdier),³¹³ or it could even be attached to a petticoat to make the hips seem bigger and the waist even smaller by comparison.

³⁰⁴ Mike Brown, *The 1950s Look: Recreating the Fashions of the Fifties*. (Kent: Sabrestorm Publishing, 2008), 105.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.; Cassidy, *What Women Watched*, 19.

³⁰⁶ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 10.

³⁰⁷ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 104.

³⁰⁸ Milford-Cottan, *Fashion in the 1950s*, 41.

³⁰⁹ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 159.

³¹⁰ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 25.

³¹¹ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 179.

³¹² Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 26.

³¹³ Milford-Cottan, *Fashion in the 1950s*, 41.

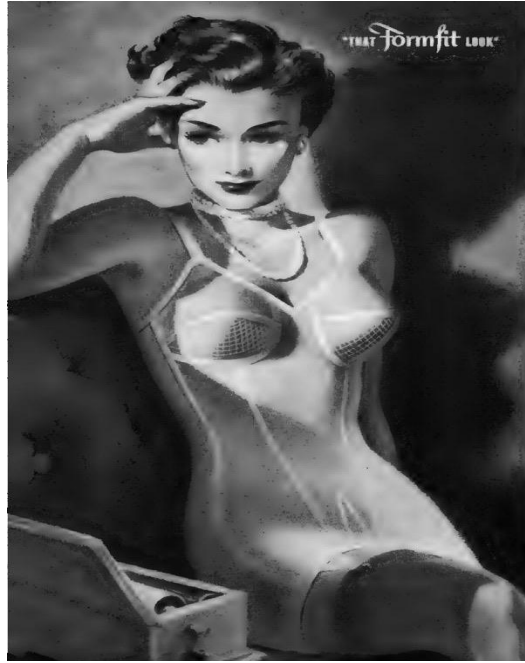


Figure 10. All-in-one brassiere, waist cincher and girdle.

Another sign of both the focus on motherhood and the imperative for sensuality in feminine clothing came in the other essential parts of Dior's New Look: the bust and the hips. In Harris' words: "...women of the fifties romanced the world with clothes that exposed little, but emphasized all."³¹⁴ Brassieres emphasized sensuality *and* maternity. The new invention of boned brassieres emphasized the bosom and slimmed down the waist at the same time, and bust enlargers—like in the nineteenth century—became vogue.³¹⁵ This focus on the chest made the bra a "fashion-defining construction" during the postwar era.³¹⁶ The torpedo bra—also called bullet bra—gave the breasts a conical shape which projected the bosom against the girdled tiny waists of the period. (Figure 11). It has been said of this type of bra that it aircraft design combined with Freudian eroticism.³¹⁷ Indeed, it seems to be the perfect combination between the obsession with motherhood and the focus on sensuality, making both inextricably linked while also

³¹⁴ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 11.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹⁶ Hill, *As Seen in Vogue*, 153.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

reminiscent of other Cold War preoccupations through the pointy shape of the bra, which evokes both missiles and spacecrafts. Indeed, the uplift provided by the brassieres of this period—achieved through padding and conical stitching—³¹⁸ further contributed to the sexualization of women through what has been called “the perky look.”³¹⁹



Figure 11. Actress Jayne Mansfield wearing a bullet (or torpedo) bra.

For the enhancement of the hips, the New Look brought back the full skirt. Petticoats became everyday foundation garments. They recalled nineteenth century femininity, which had inspired postwar femininity. Although a change had occurred in how the skirt was given volume and 1800s crinoline was not in use anymore, the petticoats of the time were often called crinolines. In fact, the garments were fundamentally different in that crinolines had been comprised of steel hoops intertwined with fabric while petticoats of this period were purely made of fabric, usually tulle. (Figure 12). The petticoat was all the rage in the early 1950s³²⁰ and became essential in the voluminous skirts that made the hourglass figure of the New Look possible. Although

³¹⁸ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 25.

³¹⁹ Karl, “The Fifties and After,” 40.

³²⁰ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife*, 91; Jonathan Walford, *1950s American Fashion: The American Clothes that Defined the 50s*. (London: Shire Publications, 2012), 9.

petticoats for everyday were usually light and kept the volume to the necessary circumference, they became more accentuated for night looks.³²¹ The rounding of the hips also had to do with a supposed desire to attract men, as it was generally accepted during this time that a nod to a womanly figure was desirable.³²² In fact, this was the main reason why some mid-fifties fashions did not make it into the zeitgeist as soon as in some European countries. Balenciaga's sack dress started off as a failure in the U.S. due to its boxy look which de-emphasized the waist. Although it would make its return due to the modernity of its lines during the 1960s, the American consumer of the 1950s was not ready for it. According to Milford-Cottam, this failure—or delayed success—had to do mostly with the fact that men hated the design and continued to prefer highlighted waists and busts.³²³ This opinion was also held by Fogarty who, in discussing men's disinterest in fashion, made it clear that the sack design had failed due to the strong masculine opposition towards its shape. In her words: "Paris started it. American men finished it."³²⁴



Figure 12. Left: A crinoline from the 1860s, from the archive of the Fashion Museum of Antwerp. Right: Advertisement for petticoats of the 1950s.

³²¹ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 22.

³²² Hill, *As Seen in Vogue*, 78.

³²³ Milford-Cottam, *Fashion in the 1950s*, 21.

³²⁴ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife*, 121.

The economic affluence of the Postwar was also represented in its fashion ideal, as the heavily adorned look became a marker of well-to-do middle class and, therefore, of the standard of womanhood. However, it is important to note that—even when his silhouette was taking over the American imagination—most women did not wear Dior’s actual designs. In the United States, ready-to-wear replicas of Dior’s designs inundated the mass-consumption market.³²⁵ Manufacturers imitated the silhouette,³²⁶ but were forbidden from naming the houses their lower-end designs were imitating due to licensing requirements.³²⁷ In some cases, couturiers and manufacturers made deals to allow mass-manufacturing of couture patterns and—after a while—the American preference for quickness and reduced prices made couturiers open ready-to-wear stores in the United States.³²⁸ Indeed, the new American affluence seemed different than in Europe, not so focused on having expensive or quality clothing but in having as much clothing as possible. Anne Fogarty’s *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife* insists that women dispose of the clothing that has gone out of style.³²⁹ She does not take the time to address whether it may be worn out or shabby or perfectly functional. In her mind, it must be thrown out when out of style—a stark contrast to the war years’ “make do and mend” attitude. Another conclusive sign for the new taste for affluence and economic prosperity had to do with the amount of fabric that the New Look necessitated. Hill describes the change from war to postwar fashion with the words: “After nine years of masculine, narrow L-85 and Utility clothing, women were suddenly provided an indulgence [...]”³³⁰ The new economic reality of the postwar made it possible for the new silhouette to be extravagant and a time for excess and consumerism to begin in the fashion world. The

³²⁵ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 161.

³²⁶ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 10.

³²⁷ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 162.

³²⁸ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 12.

³²⁹ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife*, 8.

³³⁰ Hill, *As Seen in Vogue*, 75.

new abundance of fabric³³¹ gave birth to the New Look's flowy skirts. Furthermore, the fashions of the day became obsessed with detailing in the fabric: peplums, drapery, flounces, layers, and bows.³³² This new design promoted further consumerism, as it could not be achieved except by shopping. Indeed, Hill states that the fashions of the forties had been so boxy and utilitarian that the amounts of fabrics in an outfit were insufficient to adapt to the New Look.³³³ It is safe to assume then that the New Look not only celebrated the new indulgence in materials, but that it also was directly correlated with more buying on part of the women whose clothes had become obsolete and impossible to adapt into any of the new trends.

An additional sign of how the fashion of the postwar glorified middle-class gentility was the new importance of accessories. Wilson writes that people may dress for two reasons: sex appeal or status.³³⁴ The new American feminine ideal was solidly buttressed by middle and upper-middle class financial strength. The New Look was heavily accessorized, sometimes in cohesive pieces and colors, as many accessories such as hats, gloves or, especially, jewelry could be bought in sets during this time. (Figure 13). An important part of the postwar fashion conservatism was to be found in the return of the hat. While many women had taken to wearing turbans, flowers or headscarves during the war years—both due to a lack of materials and for utility in their new industrial environment—the late forties and early fifties were inundated with hats. According to Harris, the hat became more prominent than ever and not wearing one could only be excused in the most casual of occasions.³³⁵ Hats became an essential part of the new “designer look” and took on many forms such as: the cloche, the pillbox, the bandeau,

³³¹ Hill, *Dress and Identity*, 171.

³³² Hill, *As Seen in Vogue*, 76.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 92.

³³⁵ Harris, *Vintage Fashions for Women*, 28.

etc.³³⁶ Another staple of Dior's New Look was specially the saucer hat (Figure 14), which was featured in most of the photographs of his Corolle collection and represented a deep contrast between the headscarf-wearing industrial workers of the forties and the new affluent middle-class woman.



Figure 13. 1950s model in an accessory set of monotone jewelry, gloves and hat.

³³⁶ Ibid, 29.



Figure 14. Dior model in the New Look with a saucer hat.

Finally, it is worth noting that the element of performance is what most closely defines the New Look and the prevalence it achieved in American postwar society. Not only did it exalt attributes such as matrimonial and heterosexual sensuality—catering to the male more than to the female gaze—but also emphasized physical attributes that had been traditionally associated with motherhood. Fogarty’s perspective as a female designer who lived and worked in the period helps to understand the New Look’s performativity. In her fashion guide for wives, she stresses the need for discipline and control of the mind, body and emotions as a way of successfully constructing one’s own identity.³³⁷ However, Fogarty’s notion of identity is rather a role that her readers must learn to embody. This is

³³⁷ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife*, 6-7.

highlighted specifically in the pages where Fogarty makes it a point to frame a woman's style *within* the confines of the home. In her mind, a woman's natural setting is the kitchen and clothing becomes a prop that helps her fit in into her destined role.³³⁸ The same thing happens when the author opens chapter seven—about at home clothing—with the sentiment that a woman must be part of the furniture of her own home and, therefore, her style must not clash with the rest of the house.³³⁹ The construction of the housewife persona becomes more and more apparent in Fogarty's book—even if the author herself does never make any mention, or seems to even be aware, of the fact that roles have taken over identity in her idea of womanhood. The woman in Fogarty's world is a piece of art herself more than a real human and seems to be destined to be looked at more than anything else. According to her guide, at-home clothing must presentable enough to receive unexpected visitors.³⁴⁰ This extends to husband and children, for whom the woman is also performing. At some point, the designer even relates the mother's togetherness to her offspring's psychological state.³⁴¹ All of this becomes the perfect exemplification of what Wilson considers the main fashion ideology of the twentieth century: the merging of appearance and identity.³⁴² This defines the main function of clothing during the postwar period, which ended up becoming more of a prop in the part of housewife-mother than anything else. Cold War society was so preoccupied with defining gender roles, that fashion became just another instrument for enforcing conformity. It became a reflection of the pillars of postwar femininity: consumerism, sexuality, motherhood and marriage.

³³⁸ Ibid., 33.

³³⁹ Ibid, 67.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 109.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 123.

1.5. Conclusion

The growing anxiety during the last of the war years over women's place in society and a possible "battle of the sexes" that would take place when the men came home after the conflict heavily affected the social landscape of mid-forties America. A reconfiguration of femininity had to be carried out in order to push women into their desired roles once again and define a new era of uniform conformity.

The main objective of this chapter has been to determine the set of social circumstances and the discourse that originated and spread this panic over the role of women in postwar society, and to analyze the various obstacles erected in the late forties and early fifties to steer their ambitions and self-image back into the domestic landscape. Domesticity was made central to the feminine ideal, and infused with a sense of national duty and the discipline of a career. This permitted the old molds to reshape themselves around new concepts of modernity while re-issuing a concept of woman whose main role was that of childbearing, childrearing and management of the home. Older notions of passivity and submission were interwoven with sociological and psychological theories and discourse to turn nineteenth century standards of feminine behavior to essentialist conceptions of womanhood, making a lack of desired traits no longer a fault in behavior but in the women who exhibited it.

Three methods of enforcement have been discussed. The first two are divided into the nomenclature provided by Joanne Meyerowitz: formal and informal barriers. Formal barriers have been identified as the laws and regulations that were enforced to redirect women back to the home, such as laws and policies implemented—the laws allowing for sex-based discrimination in the workplace—or terminated—the elimination public funding of childcare services—to steer women away from the labor force. Among the

informal barriers were the heavy output of sociological, anthropological and psychoanalytic literature used to theorize and frame the domestic and reproductive role of women as intrinsic to healthy womanhood. This, while not so directly relevant politically as the formal barriers, created a veil of conformity that threatened to pathologize resistance.

Finally, the new ideal femininity was enforced through the popular media: women's magazines, television programs, educational skits and even the fashions of the day. Although the contents of women's magazines were not completely reduced to domestic and fashion advice and we do find political and scientific contents inside them, it is also true that these subjects are buried under a multitude of housework and childrearing representations of women. Educational films represented only desired femininity or openly condemned undesirable behaviors. Furthermore, these videos were usually played in classrooms—for younger, more impressionable audiences—and contextualized by the teacher beforehand. This resulted in a serious limitation of the opportunity for critical consideration and set clear boundaries to the conclusions that could be drawn from them. Television programs became an extension of the new domestic ideal, mostly entrapping their female characters in domestic settings: the kitchen for cooking shows and, for family sitcoms, sometimes the rest of the house. Finally, the intrusion of Dior's New Look in the cultural set of the Postwar, just two years after the end of the conflict, became a physical and daily manifestation of the values traditionally associated with femininity through its hourglass shape, amount of fabric and restricting undergarments—reminiscent of nineteenth century womanhood

These ponderings on the characteristics of the new femininity that took hold over the American people after World War II, their reach and the means through which they were implemented and solidified have helped create a concrete representation not of the

average postwar woman, but of the ideal woman which every living one was measured against. In this way, this chapter has offered a portrait of the physical and also psychological limitations placed on women's individuality and their freedom and opportunity to develop their own self-concept and identity. This portrait of ideal postwar womanhood and the specter of conformity and immobilization it placed upon women of the time becomes of the essence in determining the social, political and psychological realities within which Nin, McCullers, and Plath were raised and against which they grew, carried out their work, and developed their creative identity. Thus, the next chapter will deal with the methods of self-fashioning, such as writing and personal styling, women writers of the era implemented in order to question and rebel against the gender impositions explored in this chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:

SELF-FASHIONING OF

THE WOMAN WRITER

2.1. Introduction

The woman writer of the postwar era could make use of different processes of self-fashioning to effectively contribute to the design of her own identity. The main one is certainly autobiographical writing. I will start out by exploring the usually unreliable and incomplete critical reception of autobiographical forms, often understood as sub-literary. Subsequently, the more recent work of theoreticians like Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and Leigh Gilmore will help to rehabilitate past critical dismissal of autobiographical forms, which will simultaneously help to establish the relevance of autobiography in the study of literature by women. Autobiographical writing will also be interpreted within different genres such as the novel, poetry and letter-writing, as well as memoir, confession and diary—which will be encapsulated within life-narratives through their common concern with the author's experience, identity and self-analysis. Autobiographical accounts have been subjected to the vicissitudes that have historically plagued the woman writer, who has been subject to impositions and attacks both from her social background and from the literary sphere. Scholars such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Elaine Showalter, along with creative writers such as Adrienne Rich and Johanna Russ, have pointed out the implied split between femininity and creativity in conceptions of identity from the nineteenth century and into the Postwar. These contributions will help us to analyze the conditions that created identity fragmentation in female authors. This fragmentation can

be linked to their connection to writing and their use of creativity as a tool to revise and reconstruct their own identities, as well as a means to assert their agency over their own existence. Finally, and since this chapter will be concerned with the creative processes related to self-determination and self-fashioning, I will study how life narration was also channeled through dress and the curation of personal style. Both processes may speak to an author's inner world and contribute to her ability to negotiate socially caused divisions in her identity by means of aesthetic rebellion. To this end, this chapter will integrate the history of dress and critical fashion studies to determine clothing as a social phenomenon, as well as a personal matter. This will connect the individual dissent of Nin, McCullers and Plath into a collective discourse around creativity and gender and, in my subsequent case studies, will show that the connection between image and identity, though not formally theorized into gender politics until the start of the women's liberation movements of the 1960s, was already taking place in the individual acts of Nin, McCullers and Plath.

2.2. Life writing in a multi-generic perspective

In their 2001 book, *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson defined life writing "as a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer."¹ This definition becomes of importance in the rhetoric surrounding life narratives, as distinct genres within life writing are bound by more fundamental and definitive distinctions. Throughout literary history, autobiography has been the privileged genre of life writing. Nevertheless, scholars have focused on its unreliability and authenticity. Philippe Lejeune has written extensively on autobiography and contributed greatly to this

¹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.

focus on authenticity through his concept of the “autobiographical pact”: autobiography extends a contract between writer and readership through which the latter group is assured that writer and protagonist are the same person and that the account they are about to receive is truthful to the writer’s personal story.² From this pact, Lejeune established a clear distinction between autobiography and fiction.³ This pre-requisite for transparency and authenticity has been the focal point of much theoretical discussion surrounding autobiography. But such preoccupation with truth and authenticity can be considered highly problematic on two counts: firstly, it bases the validity of life writing purely on reliability and, secondly, it hinders the creative process within life writing forms.

Regarding the first charge—authenticity as an obstacle to validity—Felski identifies one of the problems in defining autobiography in that it is conferred a “truth-value”⁴ which immediately ties the form to at least an *intention* of providing the reader with honest self-representation.⁵ This truth-value can be considered problematic in that there is no certainty as to which parts of the narrative are factual and which are fictional. Furthermore, the idea that the author at least maintains the intention of accuracy is also controversial in the scholarly literature. For authors such as Roy Pascal, two factors hinder this truthful intention. The first is what the author refers to as “the inner censor” that is always at work, even involuntarily. This inner censor participates in the writing process and hides even memories that the author is fully aware of either because of shame or for fear of consequence.⁶ Lejeune also touches on this factual limitation when discussing

² Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 14.

³ Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, ed. Theo D Haen and Hans Bertens, *Postmodern Studies* 33 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003), 3.

⁴ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Roy Pascal, *Design And Truth In Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 61.

another form, the diary, stating that authenticity is unattainable even in that more private form of life writing:

It is easy to raise objections based on principle (sincerity is impossible), and to make a *de facto* list of cases of censorship, self-indulgence, making mountains out of molehills, wallowing in pain, etc., which keep the diary from being a likeness of the person. It gives a partial and “deformed” view of the writer, an anamorphosis or caricature.⁷

Self-censorship, therefore, renders the pre-requisite of authenticity practically impossible. The second hindrance to veracity that Pascal identifies has to do with memory itself. Other theoreticians have identified life writing forms such as the diary as “sites of memory.”⁸ But the presence of memory processes in life writing adds another layer of problematization: “It cannot be maintained that these memories are reliable, either in their factual truth or in regard to their relative importance.”⁹ This is also asserted by other authors like Shari Benstock, who immediately finds life writing suspect due to its ties to recollection and, consequently, to the faults and difficulties associated with memory. Due to this, Benstock goes so far as to call life writing futile and faulty.¹⁰

The second objection to associating life writing with truth and authenticity is related to the creative constraints that affect its process and end result. For instance, Lejeune describes the diary as a way of writing that has no form—as it cannot be composed or corrected—¹¹ and does not involve work.¹² Life writing forms then seem to

⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 153.

⁸ Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, ed. Andrew Hoskins and John Sutton, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 23.

⁹ Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 71.

¹⁰ Shari Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 27.

¹¹ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 182.

¹² *Ibid.*, 154.

be confined solely to the expectation of authenticity, which trumps any other literary requisite. Regarding the “autobiographical pact,” Aija Sakova states that its call for authenticity makes some writers shy away from experimenting with this form, as the need for veracity diminishes the space for literary creativity.¹³ This adherence to the biographical pact is also cited as a source for dismissing, at least in part, the creative process involved in forms of life writing. The pact differentiates, for example, between autobiography and novel,¹⁴ and complicates the relationship between autobiographical writing and fiction even further. The exclusion from literary creativity is also supplemented by accusations of formlessness.¹⁵

Several theoreticians have charged against life writing genres due to their supposed lack of artistry. Lejeune classified the diary as allusive,¹⁶ as well as discontinuous, fragmentary—opinion also shared by writers like Felski¹⁷—and repetitive.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in Lejeune’s case, this attitude leads him to dismiss the diary as an activity rather than a work of literature and to automatically categorize it as non-artistic.¹⁹ This attribution of formlessness is also shared by theoreticians like Burr, who does not even distinguish between diary and autobiography or even letter writing, unifying all forms of personal writing.²⁰ Finally, the reluctance to consider forms of life writing artistic is also due to claims about their triviality. These claims are usually classified in two categories. One reason behind accusations of triviality is the

¹³ Aija Sakova, “Fighting Fear with Writing: Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* and Ene Mihkleson’s *Ahasveeruse uni* (The Sleep of Ahasuerus),” in *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, ed. Gabriele Rippl, Philipp Schweighauser, Tiina Kirss, Margit Sutrop and Therese Steffen (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 213.

¹⁴ Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁶ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 41.

¹⁷ Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 3.

¹⁸ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153, 182.

²⁰ Rita Felski, “On Confession,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 86.

understanding of life writing forms as essentially unimportant. Jane Marcus wrote of the lack of attention paid to autobiography due to its perceived mediocrity within the literary tradition.²¹ This is supported in opinions like Lejeune's, who characterized diary writing as immature²² and ultimately worthless.²³ Hayes also contributes to this view, describing the history of biography through accusations of banality,²⁴—also the case with “persona-centered” poetry.²⁵ Furthermore, the author touches on how life writing texts have been generally considered undeserving of critical attention.²⁶

Finally, allegations of triviality rest on self-centeredness, since the main preoccupation of any form of life writing is personal experience—if not the self itself. Patricia Meyer Spacks refers to this as “the problem of egotism,” and notes that it plagues the writers with worry about coming across as self-absorbed.²⁷ This apprehension is understandable in light of the fact that other theoreticians—such as Georges Gusdorf—refer to authors of autobiographical texts in the following terms: “The man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believed himself worthy of a special interest.”²⁸ This line of thought is further extended into unimportance by writers like Lasch, who remarks on the banality of confessional writing and states that the knowledge derived from it can only amount to a superficial form of insight.²⁹ Critically, the tide did not change until the 1970s to mid-1980s, when the status of autobiographical writing as a

²¹ Jane Marcus, “Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 120.

²² Lejeune, *On Diary*, 150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁴ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life-Writing*, 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁷ Patricia Meyer Spacks, “Female Rhetorics,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 179.

²⁸ Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 29.

²⁹ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 86.

peripheral and unimportant genre began to shift and life writing started to receive attention.³⁰

Smith and Watson already established that the concept of autobiography was insufficient to encapsulate the wide array of autobiographical forms and proposed the use of the term “life writing” as an umbrella for writing that revolves around personal experience and also introduced the term “life-narrative” as a more limited practice that is still self-referential.³¹ According to their 2001 book, *Reading Autobiography*, authors of life narrations make use of memories as an “archival source” and use different types of personal writing—letters or diaries—along with visual materials such as photographs as evidence for their writing.³² In essence, life narrative could be understood as the construction of a narrative *through* life writing texts. This concept is of great importance in this analysis because: i) it allows for the inclusion of a wide sample of textual genres in the construction of life narratives of the authors to be discussed, and ii) it will permit the conceptualization of these different types of life writing forms not as mere textual evidence of self-fashioning, but as a thematically-coherent and *literary* body of work.

The concept of life writing includes a wide array of genres dealing with what Smith and Watson refer to as “processes of self-knowing,” within which the authors include novels, memoir, confessional writing, and testimonios.³³ These different modes of self-representation—or even self-creation, as will be discussed when dealing with the relationship between life writing and identity—create an archive that can be used to trace the personal and the persona-centered narratives of women writers. This amalgamation

³⁰ Domna C. Stanton, “Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?” in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

³¹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70.

goes in conjunction with the traditional understanding of autobiography as a genre defined by theme rather than its form, as Stanton points out.³⁴

In the case of the novel, several arguments have been made for its inclusion into life writing. Its literary worth was much debated during its infancy, but is not generally disputed nowadays—as there is an undeniable element of composition and fictionality. Fiction is what connects this genre to life writing, as it considered to be always present in autobiography³⁵—which, as seen above, has been used to discredit it as a truthful account, but it further justifies its inclusion into life *narrative*. Gusdorf points out that the real worth of autobiography is not truth but *artistry*.³⁶ This is, its literary function is more important than historical and accurate recording. For Pascal, literary purpose helps connect the novel to autobiographical writing, stating that both are intertwined through the common objective of searching “for one’s inner standing.”³⁷ According to the author, the novel can be included in autobiographical writing because its objective is the examination of a character, and the artistry of this fictional form allows a novel to build on *personal* experiences of the author while using these experiences to build a story.³⁸ The link between the novel and life writing also takes its most concrete form through the confessional novel,³⁹ or even through the inclusion of whose purpose is to serve as a proxy of the author within the story.⁴⁰ These ties not only align with previous charges against

³⁴ Stanton, “Autogynography,” 7.

³⁵ Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines*, 6.

³⁶ Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” 43.

³⁷ Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, 182.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

³⁹ Rosalind Coward, “Are Women’s Novels Feminist Novels?” in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press Limited, 1986), 232.

⁴⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert, “A fine, White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath,” in *Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilberts and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 259.

autobiography on the grounds of fictionality,⁴¹ but help encapsulate novel writing—or, at least, certain novels—within the larger genres of life-narrative and, therefore, life writing.

The search for and construction of self connects different genres within life writing, even though some are more self-explanatory than others. The diary has generally been included within the concept of life writing, even if its literary merits have been debated historically. Lejeune, for instance, has written extensively on the notion that the diary is not to be considered as literature but as an activity.⁴² Nevertheless, this assumption has been disputed afterwards as part of the discussion on how patriarchal literary canons have been dismissive of genres traditionally associated with female authors,⁴³ which seems to be the case in Lejeune's writings as they outright refer to the diary as "feminine" when discussing its lack of literary value.⁴⁴ Furthermore, much work has been done on the connection between diary writing and literary creativity. In her 2000 book, *Daily Modernism*, Elizabeth Podnieks demonstrates the direct connection between the diary, autobiographical writing, and the novel due to their shared concern with character building.⁴⁵ According to this logic, there is a fictional element in diary writing. Moreover, as Podnieks has shown, authors like Virginia Woolf used their diary to discuss matters of literary composition,⁴⁶ as well as personal issues. These interconnections in the critical study of the diary not only prove both the relation to personal experience that life writing necessitates, but also the connection to creative composition and, therefore, literary endeavor.

⁴¹ As also stated by Stanton, "Autogynography," 9.

⁴² Lejeune, *On Diary*, 153.

⁴³ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Mapping Women's Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces," in *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016), 346.

⁴⁴ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 150.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Podnieks, *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anaïs Nin* (Montreal & Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 13.

⁴⁶ Benstock, "Authorizing the autobiographical," 17.

Poetry is often included in life writing as a genre that—like the novel—generally ties itself to autobiographical writing because it acts as an agent of revelation of the writer’s consciousness.⁴⁷ The arguments against the literary worth confessional poetry often came from the hands of language poets, who insisted it banalized the experiences it depicted.⁴⁸ Indeed, poets like Eliot and Pound condemned all poetry related to individual emotion.⁴⁹ The New Criticism also contributed to this stance, popularizing distaste for personal literature. In fact, this critical current has been named as the source for the assumption of the impossibility of knowing oneself, which helped delegitimize autobiographical writing even during the postwar period.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, much feminist criticism also ties this dislike of emotion or individual-centered poetry to a gender bias. As Showalter explains, these critiques are often aimed at the types of poetry not only written by but thrust upon women.⁵¹ Gilbert and Gubar also contribute to this line of thought, stating that women’s poetry has often been excluded from the canon, mostly on the grounds of superficiality and melodrama.⁵² Therefore, it could be assumed that lyricism and the depiction of one’s inner world are only dismissed due to their centrality in women’s poetry. The critiques posed by language poets and the New Criticism help make an even broader case for the inclusion of poetry written by women into life writing, given its ties to the author’s personal experience and emotions. The value of poetry within life writing is to do with that revelation of the inner world. Showalter talks of poet Genevieve Taggard’s struggle with the relegation of personal poetry—which she

⁴⁷ Nancy Walker, ““Wider Than the Sky”: Public Presence and Private Self in Dickinson, James and Woolf,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 273.

⁴⁸ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life-Writing*, 134.

⁴⁹ Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (Oxford and New York: The Oxford University Press, 1994), 109.

⁵⁰ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life Writing*, 67.

⁵¹ Showalter, *Sister’s Choice*, 109.

⁵² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edition (New Haven and London: Yale Nota Bene and Yale University Press, 2000 [1979]), 191, 542.

considered valuable not only for exploring the individual, but also for revealing the feelings of a community, when put into context.⁵³ Indeed, this can be seen in how much has been written by women about their feelings of anxiety related to the strong male paradigm in poetry,⁵⁴ and Felski further poses the relationship between the importance of confession and collective representation for women.⁵⁵ From this perspective, genres of personal writing such as confessional poetry not only reveal the inner life of one particular poet, but also the experience of a community—such as women writers—when comparative analysis reveals common anxieties, struggles and sentiments. Finally, the inclusion of poetry within life writing and the construction of life-narratives responds to the search for or construction of the self that poetry often necessitates or, at least, facilitates. Gilbert and Gubar have stated that the very *assertiveness* of poetry as a genre has complicated its relationship with women authors and made their position in the poetic canon precarious.⁵⁶ When discussing lyric poetry, they further attest to this relationship between poetry and the self by linking the writing of lyric poetry to “the utterance of a strong and assertive ‘I.’”⁵⁷ Thus, the necessity for this assertive identity not only makes poetry a valuable genre to analyze within the construction of life-narratives, but also a means of discerning similarities in the authors to be studied.

As another central form of life writing, correspondence contributes to create a more rounded understanding of both the personality of the female author and of her literary output. Many arguments have been made against its value as literature. Once again, Lejeune characterized letter writing, like he did with the diary, as not art but an

⁵³ Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 113.

⁵⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 188.

⁵⁵ Felski, “On Confession,” 85.

⁵⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 582.

⁵⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, “Introduction: Gender, Creativity, and the Woman Poet,” in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), xxii.

activity.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, letters have been deemed valuable when it comes to exploring the writing of women. Showalter defined correspondence as crucial for the literary criticism of second-wave feminism, as it was concerned with the rediscovery of a female literature and letters can help us enclose the individual work of singular authors within a broader tradition women's literature.⁵⁹ Correspondence, like other forms of private writing, is instrumental in this endeavor because it is both accessible and undeniably private, so letters provide infinite aid in helping gauge the female writer's vision.⁶⁰ Thus, Feminist Literary Criticism helps us advocate for the importance of women's correspondence, as it aids in creating a nexus between the writer's consciousness or daily experience and their literature. This is further emphasized by writers like Woolf, who insisted on the necessity of first reconstructing the daily lives of women and their societal circumstances to assess their creative output—or lack thereof.⁶¹ Catharine Stimpson also contributed to this line of thought, discussed how Woolf herself made use of letters as safe spaces in which to test out ideas and how she used correspondence as an art in itself.⁶² The only way to access information which has not been recorded historically is through the private communications or private recollections written by women that do remain. It is here, Laura Marcus argues, where the value of letters lies, as they reflect women's lives and indicate their differentiation both from androcentric literary traditions and from one another.⁶³ Letter-writing can help discern the components of a person's life and how they

⁵⁸ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 152.

⁵⁹ Elaine Showalter, "Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press Limited, 1986), 6.

⁶⁰ Walker, "Wider than the Sky," 273.

⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, *Virginia Woolf: Women & Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (London: The Women's Press, 1979), 23.

⁶² Catharine R. Stimpson, "The Female Sociograph: The Theater of Virginia Woolf's letters," in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 172.

⁶³ Laura Marcus, "Feminist aesthetics and the New Realism," in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 23.

impact their consciousness, as well as provide a refuge where the assertion of self becomes possible. Much has been discussed about Virginia Woolf's letters as a *sociograph*, that is, an autobiographical reflection of both of herself and her environment.⁶⁴ Woolf herself referred to letters as the gateway into the mind of the artist, as it provides a place of reflection seldomly granted to women authors.⁶⁵ Moreover, Liz Stanley argues that an articulation of *self* can be found in intimate writing such as letters.⁶⁶ This line of thought is also adopted by other theoreticians. Meyer Spacks poses that correspondence is a historical tool for women to devise "ways of understanding themselves"⁶⁷ and Walker claims that for women writers letters are "a way of defining and presenting themselves to a world outside the self—a world that they could suppose to be alien or hostile to their experiences and aspirations."⁶⁸ Thus, the analysis of correspondence acquires literary value not only through Feminist Literary Criticism but also from a life writing-centered perspective, since the understanding of letter writing is widely accepted as a crucial tool for the construction of self.

The memoir is an ambiguous genre. Theoreticians like Lejeune and Pascal have pointed out that the line between memoir and autobiography is far less precise than between other life writing genres but, generally, they both agree that memoir is more concerned with the writer's environment than with the story of one particular life.⁶⁹ This distinction has also been contested; authors such as Hayes have pointed that, from the 2000s onwards, memoir has been an umbrella and blurry term applied indiscriminately

⁶⁴ Stimpson, "The Female Sociograph," 168.

⁶⁵ Woolf, *Women and Writing*, 45.

⁶⁶ Liz Stanley, "From 'self-made women' to 'women's made-selves'?" in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, theories, methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 42.

⁶⁷ Meyer Spacks, "Female Rhetorics," 178.

⁶⁸ Walker, "'Wider Than the Sky'," 278.

⁶⁹ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4; Pascal, *Design and Truth*, 5.

to various forms of personal writing.⁷⁰ None of those understandings of the memoir undermine its belonging to autobiographical practices and, therefore, a subgenre of life writing. The literary worth of the memoir has also been questioned: it has been historically dismissed as insincere and phony at least up until the advent of modernism. Modernists started to question the rules of artistic creation that had condemned gaps in memory or breakdown of linear time and homogeneous space.⁷¹ Subsequently, the 1950s and 1960s also saw an increase in the publication of women's memoirs⁷² and of memoir writing itself during the 1960s and 1970s, in what Hayes has referred to as "the 'memoir boom.'"⁷³ This vogue also poses a substantial argument for the inclusion of the memoir in the analysis of Nin, McCullers and Plath's literature in this study. As with other forms of personal writing, the dismissal of literariness in the memoir has often been linked to the predilection women writers seemed to show for this genre. In this way, dismissal of the genre was a dismissal of the gender that favored it, and this is often seen in the ways arguments against memoirs, arguments against women and—especially—arguments against women writers seem to align. Smith and Watson have written on how traditional histories have condemned any self-portrait of a woman as unworthy and self-absorbed due to its personal character.⁷⁴ The charges against women's personal writing are widely examined by Joanna Russ, who writes that the application of the term "confessional" to women's writing is a way of dismissing it for the lack of artistic worth or the inappropriateness of the personal disclosures⁷⁵—arguments, she continues, that are not

⁷⁰ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life Writing*, 192.

⁷¹ Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical," 20-21.

⁷² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices (1998)," in *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016), 7.

⁷³ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life Writing*, 191.

⁷⁴ Smith and Watson, "Introduction: Mapping women's self-representation," 346.

⁷⁵ Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018 [1983]), 34.

used to accuse male autobiographical accounts of self-centeredness.⁷⁶ Russ indicates that another “method of discouragement” to women writers is “belittlement of the work.”⁷⁷ However, it is precisely this supposed mediocrity of the genre what Marcus cites as the main reason for the interest of Feminist Literary Criticism in it. Its presumed lack of value has displaced women writers into it and, therefore, unwittingly created a safe space of connection between women writers and readers.⁷⁸ Furthermore, memoir has also been praised for its necessitation of agency and identity. Felski describes the memoir as facilitator of agency in that it helps women take the lack of control they feel in their everyday lives through anecdotal, non-linear and episodic writing.⁷⁹ Smith and Watson see memoir—as well as the previous genres discussed—as a way of “presenting processes of self-knowing”⁸⁰ and describe how self-narration can become a process of assertion.⁸¹ This aligns with one of the goals of Feminist Literary Criticism, which Rita Felski describes as the examination of the “process of critical self-understanding.”⁸² Stanley goes a step further and determines that women’s sense of self—whether absent, emergent, contested or asserted—is not only expressed but actively constructed through life writing.⁸³ Memoir then has provided a space for female self-assertion and the expression of identity, which makes it of incalculable value in order to analyze the processes of self-creation and literary creativity in women writers.

⁷⁶ Russ, *Suppress Women’s Writing*, 35.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁸ Marcus, “Invincible Mediocrity,” 120.

⁷⁹ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 87

⁸⁰ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 70.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸² Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 88.

⁸³ Stanley, “From ‘self-made women’ to ‘women’s made-selves’?” 42.

2.3. Life Narrative in Women Writers

2.3.1. Problems of marginalization of the woman writer

In their 1979 book, *Shakespeare's Sisters*, Gilbert and Gubar state that women poets “have known very well that they are *women* poets.”⁸⁴ They go on to write: “Readers, critics, and sometimes even friends have reminded them that to attempt the pen has historically been a subversive act for a woman.”⁸⁵ This sentiment is present in much of the literature recovered and analyzed since the advent of Feminist Literary Criticism in the 1970s. The idea of the woman writer has been historically fragmented into two separate selves: that of the writer and that of the woman. This is due mainly to a historical process of separation between the social constructs of woman and artist, which are—for the most part—based on opposite ideals. This creates a problem of marginalization for the woman writer, a state of being in which she is the anomaly among both women and writers. When looking at female authors we must dismiss purely personal frames of reference, as an emphasis on individualism disregards the importance of mandated social identities and ignores the role they play within the self.⁸⁶

Gilbert and Gubar dedicate their volume *The Madwoman in the Attic* to problematizing the figure of the nineteenth-century woman writer. Although this period is not the one framing the authors discussed in subsequent chapters of this study, it is important to note the different moments in which artistry and femininity were already understood to be separate identities according to the gender configurations. This is the case with the split between private femininity and public masculinity that took hold during

⁸⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *Shakespeare's Sisters*, xvi.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 34, 35.

the nineteenth century and would be re-issued during the postwar era through kindred arguments and with similar intent—at least as far as the literary exclusion of women goes. In their book, Gilbert and Gubar argue that artistry was understood as a male talent and, therefore, that it was opposed to the behaviors and sensibilities of femininity.⁸⁷ Indeed, this aligns with Showalter’s idea that it has been historically taken for granted that a writer must be male.⁸⁸ In their discussion about femininity and creativity, Gilbert and Gubar pick on the contradictions arising from the notion of female assertiveness. Historically, women considered aggressive or assertive tended to be categorized as monstrous.⁸⁹ These traits, which are invaluable to the artist, are considered inherently male. Therefore, art itself is considered masculine. In their own words: “...social requirements, [...] obliged every woman in some sense to enact the role of Nobody.”⁹⁰ That self-effacement related to perfect femininity stood in opposition to creativity. Thus, there was already a division between the characteristics of the perfect woman and the perfect writer, fragmenting the identity of the woman writer during the nineteenth century and far beyond. This fracture into seemingly opposed identities is one of the main conceits Russ discussed in *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, where the author states that a particularly harsh mode of discouraging creativity is through a cultural messaging that effectively splits the identity of people who society deems to be *non*-creators.⁹¹

This split between femininity—associated with self-effacement—and masculinity—associated with activity—was also present in the gender roles of the postwar period and contributed greatly to the marginalization of female authors in the literary world. The idea of femininity during the Postwar was also constructed against the

⁸⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 3, 8.

⁸⁸ Showalter, “Introduction,” 3.

⁸⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 588.

⁹¹ Russ, *How To Suppress Women’s Writing*, 17.

pillars of assertiveness and aggression, and popular Freudianism greatly contributed to pathologizing any behavior to the contrary. This also impacted the literary world and the literary woman. Helene Deutsch wrote not only that femininity equaled passivity⁹² and that the only activity to be found in women was child-rearing, *not* intellectual pursuits.⁹³ Lundberg and Farnham also located women's "activity" in their capacity for reproduction, stating that a woman not procreating was the same as an artist not creating.⁹⁴ This phrasing not only places a woman's "activity" solely in reproducing, but also implies the identity of the artist as 'not a woman' once again. These authors also established a link between masculine self-realization through external activity and feminine self-realization with emotional pursuits—such as the roles of wife and mother.⁹⁵ The juxtaposition masculine and public vs. the feminine and private was re-issued during the postwar years—impulsed by the intellectual authority of Freudian psychology—and employed in pathologizing expression and creativity in women. During the Postwar, this took shape in the "masculinity complex," which Deutsch applies directly to more creative or learned women: "More complicated and veiled is the masculinity complex in those women who have brilliantly succeeded in sublimating their masculine activity but are not aware of the fact that they have paid a high price for it in their feminine values. Woman's intellectuality is to a large extent paid for by the loss of valuable feminine qualities."⁹⁶ From these words, not only is it made clear that intellectual accomplishment is considered an illness in women but that the very concept of true womanhood is inimical to intellectuality. During this time, one is either an intellectual and creative, or a woman. This adds to the sense of fragmentation in the identity of literary women of the time. The language and justification

⁹² Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 224-225.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁹⁴ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 122.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹⁶ Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 290.

changed since the nineteenth century, but the impossibility of reconciling femininity and creativity was still very much a problem for postwar women writers.

Another alienating experience for the female writer was to be found in the literary world, which—both during the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth—was overwhelmingly male. What’s more, the relationships between female authors and their male counterparts proved to be professionally taxing. Of this, Adrienne Rich wrote in the 1970s:

...the specter [of this kind] of male judgment, along with the active discouragement and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival.⁹⁷

Indeed, the nineteenth century could already be categorized as a period of great conflict between male and female authors—or, more precisely, of anxiety and attack from male writers. This proved damaging to women writers—both personally and professionally—as the male-dominated literary world not only became a place of individual attack but also quickly constructed a narrative through which literary and creative authority was sealed around a masculine identity and kept in the hands of men of letters. Although Gilbert and Gubar describe the nineteenth century as a period of growth for women writers in the commercial and critical arenas,⁹⁸ they also describe the great anxiety male authors, editors and critics felt over this change. The stronger female presence in the literary market during this period was seen as an “invasion” and a threat to the masculinity

⁹⁷ Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” *College English* 34, no. 1 (Women, Writing and Teaching) (Oct. 1972): 20.

⁹⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The War of the Words*, vol. 1 of *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1988), 141.

of male authors⁹⁹ and, thus, the myth of American literature as feminized and of female authors as aggressive was born.¹⁰⁰

As a response to this perceived invasion, two lines of attack quickly emerged. Firstly, the male-dominated literary world focused on attacking female authors personally. These attacks took the form of isolation by active neglect of their writing on the part of critics and other authors,¹⁰¹ or slandering of character. Many unflattering stereotypes were created around the woman writer. Pejorative tropes like “the hag,” “the monster,” “the witch” or “the madwoman,” were used to villainize the entrance of women in the world of letters as something unnatural and frightening.¹⁰² Russ called these “diminutive personae” and listed them in terms such as “crazy,” “whore,” or “spinster.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, Russ has written extensively about the use of sexuality as a threat to the woman writer’s character. Indeed, this was particularly harsh during the nineteenth century and its tight boundaries and anxieties around female sexuality. We find examples of both accusation of sexlessness¹⁰⁴—namely, being quite literally de-sexed through the masculine trait of literary ambition—and the looming threat of being “unchaste.”¹⁰⁵

In addition to personal attacks and attempts at character assassination, the professional arena also became a field of conflict. In the literary sphere, the anxiety of male critics¹⁰⁶ towards the newly found commercial success of female writers started to translate into the creation of a new literary standard which would be used to remove female authors from literary authority and maintain a male hegemony over the world of letters. Women’s

⁹⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 143.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 61.

¹⁰² Ibid., 79.

¹⁰³ Russ, *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰⁶ As described by Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 143.

writing started to be scrutinized purely through the lens of gender, as it was widely understood that a woman was more defined by her sexual roles than her male counterparts. In the masculine literary world, a woman could never achieve true universality, as she was always a woman first.¹⁰⁷ Thus, a system of criticism was created by which there was a division between high and low art,¹⁰⁸ and women's writing was always deemed second-rate—¹⁰⁹ be it through accusations of superficiality and melodrama¹¹⁰ or commercialism.¹¹¹ This meant that no amount of success would be able to surpass the limits by which women's writing was bound in the world of letters. Cultural authority became synonymous with male culture.¹¹² Parrinder states that creative accomplishments and critical authority remained in the hands of men during the nineteenth century, in a literary world where women did take part but were always subjected to male judges.¹¹³

However, another—even more potent—impact of this new understanding of literary authority was also felt *inside* women authors. The literary world created a division between female writing and pure writing that was hard to shed, and this became another source of fragmentation for women writers. According to Leigh Gilmore, “women writers, even when they are on the apparently common ground of language and literature, experience their desire to write as trespassing.”¹¹⁴ This feeling is linked to the critical understanding of art as inherently masculine. Indeed, authors like Parrinder have pointed

¹⁰⁷ Friedman, “Women's Autobiographical Selves,” 44.

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 143.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, “Introduction,” xviii.

¹¹¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 143.

¹¹² Sandra M. Gilbert, “What Do Feminist Critics Want? *A Postcard from the Volcano*,” in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press Limited, 1986), 33.

¹¹³ Patrick Parrinder, *Authors & Authority: English and American Criticism 1750-1990*. (London: Macmillan, 1991), 327.

¹¹⁴ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 63.

to the fact that the mockery and suppression that female writers started to experience—even when they were commercially successful—often translated into practices of self-censorship and self-effacement.¹¹⁵ This hostile literary environment is what Gilbert and Gubar also point to as the source of what they call the literary woman’s “concealment”¹¹⁶ as a tactic for survival, which altered their manner of writing and often made them present their works in an apologetic tone to avoid the attacks that a woman attempting the pen was bound to receive.¹¹⁷

Similarly, the literary landscape of the Postwar was overwhelmingly male, which affected the output and reception of literature written by women. The very notion of the “man of letters”—a commonly referenced figure during this time—was indicative of the male domination of the literary world.¹¹⁸ The question of women entering the literary arena remained a source of anxiety for male writers of the time,¹¹⁹ but writing was not the only area of the world of letters that remained a male prerogative. Criticism was also a predominantly male pursuit,¹²⁰ which made sure that a great deal of power remained in the hands of male tastemakers. This, once again, impacted the attention, recognition and conservation of literature written by women during this time. In *Recasting America*, T.J. Jackson-Lears writes of how critics acquired greater influence than ever before,¹²¹ and Lary May on how the advent of the New Criticism promoted a cultural atmosphere in which texts were now completely divorced from contextual readings.¹²² This was highly detrimental to marginalized groups—including women—whose writing was focusing

¹¹⁵ Parrinder, *Authors & Authority*, 331-332.

¹¹⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 74

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁸ Parrinder, *Authors & Authority*, 326.

¹¹⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 160.

¹²⁰ Parrinder, *Authors & Authority*, 327.

¹²¹ Jackson-Lears, “A Matter of Taste,” 46.

¹²² Lary May, “Introduction,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.

more and more on their personal experience and adding to a compendium of collective identities within each group. The lack of attention paid to the relationship between culture and public discourse¹²³ eventually resulted in certain groups being completely ignored and systematically marginalized from culture.¹²⁴ In Jackson-Lears' own words, "... some groups had [...] the power to set the boundaries of permissible debate, to legitimate some ideas and values while declaring others 'tasteless' or 'irresponsible.'"¹²⁵ This climate made the literary world of the postwar era very detrimental to women writers who—once again—became easy targets of attack in an environment that was suspicious and hostile towards them.¹²⁶

In the Postwar, the exclusion of women from the literary canon and the oppositional conceptions of creativity and femininity were still as present as they had been during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, now these were also supported by Freudian thought, Russ states that psychological experts of the time even advised women out of artistic pursuits,¹²⁷ and this is exactly what we find in psychoanalytic writing of the time. Dr. Helene Deutsch described intellectuality as essentially non-feminine¹²⁸ and both intellect and creativity as masculine traits.¹²⁹ This was due in part to a belief that femininity was cultivated through dependence, both psychological and physical¹³⁰ but also through the belief that creativity was, essentially, a masculine trait at heart. That is, psychoanalysis understood that for a woman to engage in creative endeavors she had to suppress—or she was already lacking—her essential femininity.¹³¹ Due to this Freudian twist, femininity

¹²³ Jackson-Lears, "A matter of Taste," 49.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 50.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 49.

¹²⁶ Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 45.

¹²⁷ Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, 15.

¹²⁸ Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 292.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 314.

¹³⁰ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 113.

¹³¹ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 170, 175.

became associated once again to inactivity or “activity directed inward.”¹³² That is, the only action outside dependence or pure passivity, was *private* activity. In *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, Lundberg and Farnham go so far as to claim that female success is quite different from societal success.¹³³ A successful woman stays within the confines of the home, within a private sphere. This psychoanalytic perspective also further pushed a pathological discourse around deviations from domestic femininity. Expression was forbidden by all means, encapsulated as part of a “masculinity complex,”¹³⁴ which made all creative or accomplishment-driven endeavors by women “abnormal and disturbing” and in direct conflict with a woman’s feminine essence.¹³⁵ In this way, thanks to Freudian influences, creativity ceased to be merely demonized as it had been during the previous century and became pathologized instead, lending its self-proclaimed scientific authority to discourses aimed at expelling women away from the literary world.

We find similar examples of attack against female writers to the ones during the nineteenth century: mostly based on either personal accusations or on the construction of a literary canon designed to exclude and ridicule female writers. In the personal realm, women were faced with a multitude of issues and the hostility against them created a climate in which the woman of letters was either stripped of her gender identity and femininity—seen as deficient in her womanhood—and/or socially punished for her perceived intrusion into the literary world. Women writers were often accused of sexual incapacity, sentimentality or evilness.¹³⁶ Personal attacks towards women writers of the period were either to do with their failure to adapt to domestic femininity or related to the supposed unhappiness and mental unbalance this failure encompassed. One of the main

¹³² In terms of Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 130.

¹³³ Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 202.

¹³⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 185.

¹³⁵ Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 281.

¹³⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 157, 231.

consequences of this outlook was, of course, a social mockery and ridicule of women writers.¹³⁷ This ridicule not only acted as a suppressant of women's writing but also contributed to the public discourse of presumptuousness that had already formed around the female authors of the nineteenth century. The other price to pay was complete alienation from both labels: woman and writer. The decision to become an artist was considered countercultural in the Postwar, as American society became highly skeptical towards artists in general, and the danger was greater for women.¹³⁸ Another deterrent against an artistic life for women was the threat of loneliness and ostracism, which a woman could incur into just for refusing to conform to her womanly role.¹³⁹ This was also a real threat within the literary sphere due to the animosity of male writers and critics

In the professional sphere, the link between female and minor art was renewed. Showalter explains how this association was made through the powerful critical arena and how it left women without the possibility of expressing individuality in their works in the same ways male authors did.¹⁴⁰ Ideas of femininity were linked to the writings of women and became a stifling presence in not only what women wrote but, most importantly, what they were allowed to print and *how* it was received. Furthermore, postmodern male writers often tried to distinguish themselves from women writers, whom they described as literarily incompetent or hysterical.¹⁴¹ In this mindset, the association with traditional standards of femininity—or lack thereof—is made obvious. References to hysteria were common and even applied to the type of language used by women in their writing.¹⁴² Other accusations against the literary works of women had to do with

¹³⁷ Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 107.

¹³⁸ Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 40.

¹³⁹ Podnieks, *Daily Modernism*, 60; Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 251.

¹⁴⁰ Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 112.

¹⁴¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 157.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 235.

their supposed weakness and sentimentality,¹⁴³ or the idea that women were incapable of expressing ideas in writing in the same concise and cohesive way that male authors did.¹⁴⁴ This argument was used to diminish the authority of women as both writers and critics and linked clichéd notions of femininity in relation to melodrama and rambling discourse to the works of women writers of the time.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, this helped weaken the status of female authors and dismiss their contributions to the world of letters, consigning them to being critically ignored when not outright attacked.

Another obstacle to the integration of women into the literary world was due to their symbolic incarceration within the figure of the muse, which only permitted women into creative spaces as inspirations of art instead of its creators. Rich makes the point that men have only “contributed” to female creativity as judges, while women artists have facilitated male art in many ways: “...woman has been a luxury for man, and has served as the painter’s model and the poet’s muse, but also as comforter, nurse, cook, bearer of his seed, secretarial assistant and copyist of manuscripts.”¹⁴⁶ This role not only restricted women to menial tasks devoted to aiding in male creativity but effectively erased their own creative endeavors. In many instances, the work of women artists was even assimilated into the work of their male counterparts. Thus, histories of literature and critical assessments have often mis-categorized women artists as simply the “mothers, wives, daughters, or lovers of men who are artists.”¹⁴⁷ Gilbert and Gubar provide a thorough examination of the muse as a paragon of femininity during the nineteenth century, establishing a link between this figure and the cultural conceptions of

¹⁴³ Showalter, *Sister’s Choice*, 107.

¹⁴⁴ In Parrinder, *Authors & Authority*, 327, the author describes the critical assumption established during the 20th century that “...men of letters think in straight lines, [...] whereas women, however gifted, flap around in circles.”

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 19.

¹⁴⁷ Russ, *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, 59.

womanhood during this period. According to these authors, male artists' conception of femininity was linked to ideals of selflessness and "contemplative purity."¹⁴⁸ These qualities effectively ban women from the self-possession and active creativity that are crucial for artistry. In Gilbert and Gubar's words: "...women [...] are denied the status of artist because they are supposed somehow to become works of art themselves."¹⁴⁹

This predicament extended into the twentieth century, when Virginia Woolf already questioned the marginalization of women to inspiration of or characters portrayed in art rather than creators.¹⁵⁰ In previous paragraphs, the Postwar has been discussed as a moment of ample hostility from male writers and critics towards the woman of letters. On the one hand, this had to do with their open challenge to traditional standards of femininity—to which the role of the muse was still heavily linked. Within the new Freudian framework for gender division, women were actively discouraged from pursuing intellectual, corporate or artistic success. Indeed, physicians like Deutsch endorsed femininity to the point of self-effacement. In *Psychology of Women*, she states:

If gifted in any direction, they preserve the capacity for being original and productive, but without entering into competitive struggles. They are always willing to renounce their own achievement without feeling that they are sacrificing anything and they rejoice in the achievement of their companions, which they have often inspired.¹⁵¹

From her words, we can see that the postwar prescription of femininity not only actively discourages ability and achievement in women, but that it thoroughly fits into the role of

¹⁴⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 21.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 450.

¹⁵⁰ Rachel Bowlby, "Walking, women and writing Virginia Woolf as *flâneuse*," in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 28.

¹⁵¹ Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women*, 192.

the muse. This is also prescribed by Lundberg and Farnham who advised women to only be as intellectual as needed to provide companionship to their male counterpart.¹⁵² Whether as a supporter of a corporate husband trying to climb the company ladder or a muse inspiring the works of a male artist, femininity is described purely as a supporting role, rather than an equal or competitor to the achievements of men. Moreover, this logic further supports the idea of a battle of the sexes, as it seems that any pursuit of female ability directly becomes an attack on men, rather than a wish for self-actualization. This greatly impacted the psychological state and the artistic output of many women writers, as many felt divided between their own aspirations and the role of the muse that had been so ingrained into their personalities.¹⁵³ On the other hand, the conflict was also related to the feelings of attack and abandonment male artists seemed to be experiencing towards these female counterparts. From the modernist period onwards, the twentieth century saw more women who openly questioned the figure of the willing muse and this created feelings of resentment in literary men.¹⁵⁴ During the postwar period, there was an abundance of men of letters expressing anger at having lost their muses.¹⁵⁵ This translated into the open attacks and the shunning of women's literature via literary criticism previously discussed. Indeed, the general feeling of anger seemed to be deeply related to the emancipation of the muse.

In light of the above, we could say that the postwar critical arena—which had already began forming a strong association between female artists and low-brow art—confined women writers once again to the claustrophobic and impassable position by which they were attacked literarily for being too feminine in their styles—and, therefore,

¹⁵² Lundberg and Farnham, *Modern Woman*, 8.

¹⁵³ Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 110.

¹⁵⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 130.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

second-rate artists—but, at the same time, attacked personally for their lack of femininity and effectively dispossessed of their sense of womanhood. Gair writes that this situation affected women artists, placing their creativity within a framework of guilt which impacted both their work and their health.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, it is possible to infer that this state of anxiety and attack around female creativity not only impacted how much women wrote but also *what* they wrote. It is because of this fragmentation of the woman writer's identity that we see a special focus on life writing and life narrative in women authors of the Postwar, which they could use both to examine their own fragmented identity and to effectively seize control over it.

2.3.2. Life Narrative to overcome marginalization

Life writing as a whole can be considered a key tool for overcoming marginalization and fragmentation of the self through personal control of one's own narrative and experience. Indeed, there is a great sphere of personal writing that arises during the postwar period because of the strict identity politics enforced at the time, which easily alienated any group that could not or chose not to conform to the heterosexual, white, middle-class standard dominant in the period. Although testimonial narratives about racial and sexual discrimination would not take the spotlight until the 1960s and 1970s,¹⁵⁷ marginalized groups had been practicing this type of writing earlier as a way of coping with feelings of alienation and fragmentation in their identities and as a means of gaining some control over their circumstances. This type of writing was largely ignored during the late forties and the fifties due to critical stances in favor of divorcing text from context. Nevertheless, the 1960s provided an environment where personal forms of writing proved of use to empower marginalized communities.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, Hayes states that life writing during the

¹⁵⁶ Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 45.

¹⁵⁷ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life-Writing*, 191.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 193.

postwar period is often a revision and reimagination of the time's ways of conceiving identity,¹⁵⁹ and that it can be used as a way of reasserting and legitimizing the self.¹⁶⁰ In this way, life writing becomes a testimony, a way of deliberately recording painful realities for marginalized groups.¹⁶¹ The importance of recording these experiences is expressed perfectly by Smith and Watson: "...the diary leaves a testamentary trace of the everyday lives of the silenced, the dispossessed, the overwritten and overdetermined. In this way it registers the claim of the authority of experience."¹⁶²

Life writing also creates an opportunity to revise and negotiate normative configurations of the self.¹⁶³ Although theoreticians like Lejeune deride forms of life writing or personal writing such as the diary for their cowardice and insincerity,¹⁶⁴ it is arguable that, even if not factually accurate, the narrative constructed by an author around their own persona and personal experiences can be helpful for those groups whose realities are often belittled, ignored and marginalized. In fact, this is the subject behind most of the twentieth century's autobiographical writing, which Smith and Watson characterize as a "reworking of the Bildungsroman to account for the lived experience of formerly subordinated subjects."¹⁶⁵ Life writing then provides a space to reassemble the self, to construct a narrative around the formation and the challenges of the author's person and one's own perceptions. In this context, where the author has been historically silenced, the very intimacy which Lejeune dismisses as "cowardice" protects the writer

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶¹ Aija Sakova, "Fighting Fear with Writing, 215.

¹⁶² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Memory, Narrative, and the Discourses of Identity in *Abeng and No Telephone to Heaven* (Smith 1999)," in *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016), 642.

¹⁶³ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 148, 179.

¹⁶⁵ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 71.

from societal censorship and allows them a means to articulate and analyze their discontent and fragmentation, and then reassemble the self in a desired manner.

Overall, this type of writing became of use for women during the Postwar as a tool to explore their own configurations of the self and as a space in which non-conformity to societal standards was allowed. Life writing conferred a new creative authority to women,¹⁶⁶ and allowed for modes of writing with which women could reclaim and defend their right to creativity.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, life writing was essential in the process of revising and redesigning gender roles,¹⁶⁸ as it allowed for self-exploration outside of the public arena and, therefore, provided intimacy and privacy—which promoted self-awareness. In fact, it became popular among women writers due to its facilitation of introspection.¹⁶⁹ Thus, this genre was indispensable in providing a space and a framework for the questioning and—later—reconstruction of the woman writer’s persona. Consequently, it becomes of necessary to analyze the ways in which life writing conferred a new sense of agency and provided opportunity and a vital framework for renegotiating and creating of a more cohesive sense of identity.

Life narrative as a tool for Agency

Writing about oneself and one’s experience proves a key factor in developing identity and asserting oneself against cultural and social norms. The act of writing provides one of the key elements for self-questioning and self-representation, namely, the space where the self can be explored in a safe manner. The women of the Postwar were dealing with a hostile and limiting environment they needed a respite from. Robert Sayre stresses the

¹⁶⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity,” 32.

¹⁶⁷ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 46.

¹⁶⁸ Hayes, *The Oxford History of Life-Writing*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ Julia Straub, “Richard Wollheim’s *Germs*: Life Writing as Therapy, Despite Theory,” in *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, ed. Gabriele Rippl, Philipp Schweighauser, Tiina Kirss, Margit Sutrop and Therese Steffen (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 91.

necessity for the creation of a safe space through the very personhood of authors of autobiographical writing, who are—in his terms—understood to generally be “people who have been different from their family, friends, and the people around them. They also offend or risk offending...”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, intimate types of writing or writings focused on the self were a great aid in helping them navigate their personal and professional landscapes without the risk of retribution. The intimacy of these genres is of special importance, as one of the main necessities for a writer is to escape their outside reality long enough to examine it.¹⁷¹ The choice of life writing helped female authors of the era to navigate lack of personhood, since they provide not only a refuge but also a stage where the unapologetic questioning of the self could become the main theme.¹⁷²

Most of this discourse is centered specifically on the importance of autobiographical writing as a giver of agency and a tool for empowerment:

...if writing and being able to express yourself freely and independently can change your life, autobiography must offer that kind of liberation as well, since it is the ultimate tool for self-representation: telling your own story, giving birth to yourself, and thereby claiming agency and uniqueness.¹⁷³

By writing about one’s life, the female author can gain authority over her own self,¹⁷⁴ impose order to outside experience,¹⁷⁵ and reconcile the fragmentation between internal conceptions of identity and imposed, external roles.¹⁷⁶ In fact, Stanton makes it a point to

¹⁷⁰ Robert F. Sayre, “Autobiography and the Making of America,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 165.

¹⁷¹ In Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines*, 129, the author stresses how women writers view becoming a writer as a means of escaping the female role and to retreat from their cultural background into a place where they can safely question it.

¹⁷² Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” 129. According to Gilbert and Gubar, *The War of the Words*, 67, this centrality of the woman self specifically was a defining characteristic of women’s writing during the 20th century.

¹⁷³ Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines*, 128.

¹⁷⁴ Stanley, “From ‘self-made women’ to ‘women’s made-selves’?” 47.

¹⁷⁵ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 86.

¹⁷⁶ Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” 11.

emphasize that the choice of autobiographical writing implies a self-assertion in itself and a conscious reversal of women's status in society.¹⁷⁷

Another way in which agency is achieved through writing is by using writing as a means of justification and authorization to the self.¹⁷⁸ This authorization of one's own writing can be individual or collective. Individually, by gaining authority over one's own creative identity and work.¹⁷⁹ And collectively, autobiography also helps raise awareness and authority of women writers as a group. Mainly, this can be done through autobiographical forms of writing because they focus on the relationship and tensions between the public and the private,¹⁸⁰ illuminating the points of struggle that can cause fragmentation in the personhood of someone who is both woman and writer. This can be aided through Smith and Watson's concept of "politics of agency," which examines how autobiographical writing proves powerful not only in asserting the individual within themselves, but also assert their *cultural* agency.¹⁸¹ That is, to confer themselves power over their self-representation and, therefore, get to exercise control over the cultural representations of their identity.

Finally, this cultural realm of agency gives way to a collective autonomy that can be reached through writing as well. Autobiographical writing has been theoretically understood as a way of extending individual experience into universality.¹⁸² According to Felski, this is one of the main steps in successfully raising a collective consciousness.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁷ Stanton, "Autogynography," 14.

¹⁷⁸ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 46; Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 207; Smith and Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity," 19; Smith and Watson, "Introduction: Mapping women's self-representation," 346.

¹⁷⁹ Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures* (London: Prentice Hall and Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), 6; Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," 48; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 160.

¹⁸⁰ Walker, "'Wider Than the Sky,'" 273.

¹⁸¹ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 45.

¹⁸² Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines*, 6.

¹⁸³ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 93.

Friedman points out that this sense of collectivity can also help in disproving the idea of a single, unifying female experience: “In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely individual. Nor is it purely collective.”¹⁸⁴ This is of special relevance, as autobiography can help take female experience into the public realm and promote identification amongst women without flattening the concept of female experience to the point of ignoring other social influencers on agency and identity—such as class, sexuality, or ethnicity. This, in turn, has political ramifications, turning writing into a site of negotiation for agency.¹⁸⁵ Authors like Smith and Watson have also highlighted the importance of writing in breaking with imposed silence and stepping out of marginalization.¹⁸⁶ It is due to all of this that feminism has insisted on the understanding of autobiographical writing as a direct enactment of transitioning from the private into the public.¹⁸⁷

2.3.3. Life Narrative to solve identity fragmentation

The issue of fragmentation

One of the first issues that arise in the writing of autobiographical texts by women of the postwar is split identity between the woman self and the writer self. According to Felski, one of feminist confession’s primary themes is that of women’s difficulty to define their own identity.¹⁸⁸ This is certainly the case in the Postwar, as the cultural image of womanhood is so detailed, rigid, and removed from the realities and experiences of female authors that it causes great division inside them. In fact, this fragmentation between the imposed self and the experienced self is present in much theory about the woman writer and always linked to the conflict between gender and creativity or, as

¹⁸⁴ Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” 52.

¹⁸⁵ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 80.

¹⁸⁶ Smith and Watson, “Introduction to *Getting a Life*,” 181, 183.

¹⁸⁷ Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines*, 100.

¹⁸⁸ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 108.

Friedman refers to it, the conflict of “a dual consciousness—the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription.”¹⁸⁹ Gender imposition is explicitly referenced as the source of this duality by a number of theoreticians. Podnieks insists that gendered codes are one of the primary influences on selfhood.¹⁹⁰ And Felski presents the thematization of gender as a source of division between the individual and the social spheres for women and the fact that female authors seem to *consciously* write as women as examples of the centeredness of gender codes in conceptions of identity.¹⁹¹ Culturally defined roles are also important to Benstock, who emphasizes the “gaps in time and space or *between the individual and the social*,”¹⁹² and to Gilmore, who conceives of female autobiographical practices as personal accounts of the struggle between the self and the roles imposed by its culture.¹⁹³ In both cases, cultural definitions of selfhood could be applied to gender roles, whether implicitly—as is the case with Benstock—or explicitly—as with Gilmore.

Although there is no universal consciousness that can be traced back to every female identity, we do find that there is a sense of collectivity in the analysis of identity fragmentation, which ultimately distinguishes autobiographical writing by women from that written by men in this period. Nancy Chodorow states that processes of individuation are different for girls and boys due to a difference in upbringing, linking these to gender differentiation.¹⁹⁴ Stanford Friedman establishes a general division between autobiographical writing by men and women which is related to the level of concern they show with expressing individuality. Critically, most studies of autobiography place a great

¹⁸⁹ Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” 39.

¹⁹⁰ Podnieks, *Daily Modernism*, 42.

¹⁹¹ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 94, 122.

¹⁹² Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” 11. Italics mine.

¹⁹³ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 307.

¹⁹⁴ Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 167.

importance in the definition of individuality, which is not as central to the autobiographical writing done by women or minorities.¹⁹⁵ In autobiographical writing by these groups, there is certainly a sense of searching for individuality but this search is common to the group and usually motivated by similar factors—which brings about a sense of collectivity. The distinguishing factor seems to be that centering on individuality *completely* disregards the importance of cultural impositions in defining the self.¹⁹⁶ Thus, gender can once again be noted as a defining influence on autobiographical writing by women, as the culturally imposed identity can become the source of inner struggle and—therefore—impact what is written and why. On this, Stanford Friedman notes that the individualist model is actually inapplicable to women because “the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.”¹⁹⁷ Consequently, even if we do find a search for individuality in confessional or autobiographical writing by women, we often also note that the writing itself is shaped by the struggle between individuality and gender identity, creating a commonality between many women writers.

Due to this, autobiographical writing can be viewed as a way of dissecting the formation of identities and getting to the root of the fragmentation between the contradictory elements of the “woman writer” self. Felski writes that this struggle between the socially constructed self and the inner self creates an ambivalent self-image that reveals how gender is internalized.¹⁹⁸ The dissection of this ambivalence—or fragmentation—is one of the main aims and preoccupations of autobiographical writing by women. Podnieks writes that the lack of representation of that inner self is often the

¹⁹⁵ Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” 34.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁹⁸ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 104-105.

defining feature of modern autobiography,¹⁹⁹ so it could be inferred that autobiographical writing by women is often explicitly motivated by a need to reconcile the fragmentation between the inner and the cultural selves. Stanford Friedman also supports this: “...alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silences imposed by male speech.”²⁰⁰ Thus, the writing is motivated by the necessity to justify the inner alienation from gender roles, the inability to relate to external prescription, and it also is a tool for breaking with that prescription through self-exploration. Furthermore, Gilmore also points out the role of autobiography in offering an inner narrative within the inscription of societal roles.²⁰¹ Consequently, the very need to write about the self reveals the power of cultural roles and their influence on the conformation of identity, which once again justifies the widespread theme of identitarian fragmentation in women writers.

One common thread in autobiographical writing theory—whether it be related to autobiography, diary or confession—is the idea of *discovering* the self. However, much of the literature on autobiographical writing by women disputes this conception when related to questions of identity in the woman writer. It is expressively posed by Gilmore, who writes that the idea of the coherent and fixed self is common in the case of male autobiography.²⁰² This is also implicitly acknowledged by Smith and Watson in *Life Writing in the Long Run*, where the authors discuss that much of the theory around autobiographical acts assumes that there is an inherent interiority of the author that can be unlocked through this type of writing, but they proceed to dismiss this assumption in

¹⁹⁹ Podnieks, *Daily Modernism*, 60.

²⁰⁰ Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” 41.

²⁰¹ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 157.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 80.

relation to autobiographical writing of women.²⁰³ On this, Felski writes that the very idea of an authentic self is ever-elusive, even though there is an ample acceptance of it within theoretical frameworks for life writing.²⁰⁴ The problem with the “discovery of oneself” is its essentialism: the assumption that there is an already-existing interiority to be dug out. This conception of identity problematizes notions of deconstruction and reconfiguration, as it still operates under a deterministic paradigm and therefore does not allow for autonomy in self-articulation. Consequently, lines of research not focused on a fixed conception of identity prove to be more helpful in deconstructing prescribed roles and affording autonomy and self-possession, which links back to the specific necessity of women writers to find methods to construct alternative versions of the self.

From the contextual perspective of Nin, McCullers and Plath, it becomes of much more interest to explore autobiography not as a reflection of an essential self, but a method of constructing said self or—more accurately—the selves of the woman writer. On this concept of identity, Smith states:

...the “self so often invoked in self-expressive theories of autobiography is not a noun, a thing-in-itself, waiting to be materialized through the text. There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and “true.””²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Sidonie Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance (Smith 1995),” in *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016), 261.

²⁰⁴ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 88.

²⁰⁵ Sidonie Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance (1995),” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 108.

Following Smith, the act of writing is then not considered an act of self-discovery, but an act of creation through artistry. Writing becomes a tool to take apart and examine the societal codes implicit in identity and a tool for banishing or incorporating them into the subject's sense of self. In writing, there is no essential, discovered self, but only the created self. This is linked to another central concept in studies of women's life writing: the understanding that the self is not immutable. This is stated by Smith and Watson, who describe identity as "contextual, contested and contingent,"²⁰⁶ and as "discursive, provisional, intersectional and unfixed."²⁰⁷ It is in this discursive mode of creation that autobiography helps women reconcile the fragmentations in their identity—or in their seemingly contrary *identities*. Other authors have also contributed to this understanding of autobiography as the construction of identity and of identity as non-essential entity. Gilmore describes the process of autobiography as "a process of self-invention in which the content of a life—the very subject of autobiography—is not impassive but mutable."²⁰⁸ Even Gusdorf, who has been traditionally rebutted in Feminist Criticism of autobiography for his discourse around the "discovery of the self"²⁰⁹ and the idea of a coherent self,²¹⁰ acknowledges a process of self-construction—even if just in certain genres like confession.²¹¹ Indeed, it is this idea of construction that clearly links feminist ideology and feminist criticism to women's life narratives. Felski also poses a lack of sense of self as the source of writing,²¹² and writing itself as the way to fulfill the need to break with imposed gender roles through the creation of one's own identity.²¹³

²⁰⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity," 37-38.

²⁰⁷ Smith and Watson, "Introduction: Mapping women's self-representation," 352.

²⁰⁸ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 84.

²⁰⁹ Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," 32.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹² Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 111.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 126.

2.4. Life-Narrative through Aesthetic presentation

Finally, another important factor in the processes of self-fashioning widely available to the female writer is creating a persona through the power of fashion and self-styling to communicate conformity or rebellion. In her book *Functions of Dress*, Penny Storm writes:

Collective taste does not develop in a vacuum but within the context of a culture and an era. It is because of this contextual relationship that fashion seems to be able to reflect the general lifestyle, the values of a people, and the spirit or essence of their era and culture. Whether or not a specific fashion actually embodies this essence, it will reinforce the *Zeitgeist* by promoting more commonality of experience.²¹⁴

Thus, as opposed to the section on attire in Chapter 1—which dealt with the culturally prescribed feminine dress of the Postwar and its aesthetic representation of the Freudian spin on the sexual roles of the time—this section will focus on the role that clothing and styling can have in the shaping of individual identity, as well on how this self-fashioning shows either conformity, rebellion or alienation from the individual's cultural background.

2.4.1. Clothing as a social phenomenon

Clothing and the styling of that clothing are not merely personal choices or the result of an industry of fashion but rather glimpses into the culture of a specific society and can be used to send messages within that environment. A few theoreticians have already posed the question of clothing as a means of communication and practically a language in

²¹⁴ Penny Storm, *Functions of Dress: Tool of culture and The Individual* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 290.

itself.²¹⁵ This is proof that fashion codes are widely shared, since certain styles and even items of clothing would have to signify very clear meanings in order for them to express a specific message within a group. Betty Luther Hillman writes about fashion as a set of both political and cultural statements in the following terms:

Contemporary fashion theorists have described a “language” or communicative aspect of fashion. Clothing and dress signify racial, class, and gender identities, and social norms are both constructed and challenged by individual choices of dress.²¹⁶

Thus, dress is both a reflection and a source of information about the culture it is worn in and we can use it to ascertain the values present in a certain environment.²¹⁷ As the analysis of the values attached to the aesthetics of the Postwar was already shown in the section “Images of Fashion,” we can now focus on the general relationship between culture and dress and, most importantly, on the individual’s reaction to it. One important thing to note about the relationship between dress and culture is that it is never fixed, which is why, when trying to ascertain the meaning behind a fashion ideal or examples of resistance against it, we must clarify which social groups we are discussing and the period when particular fashion ideals have been formed and are in use. If fashion codes are completely dependent on context, as Davis notes,²¹⁸ this means that they must inevitably change as the predominant values of any given culture shift. Nevertheless, even if precise social and temporal setting are essential when analyzing clothing as a cultural

²¹⁵ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 27; Keith Gibbins. “Communication Aspects of Women’s Clothes and their Relation to Fashionability,” *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 8, no. 4 (December 1969): 301; Storm, *Functions of Dress*, vii; Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 3.

²¹⁶ Betty Luther Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style & the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s & 1970s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), xvi-xvii.

²¹⁷ Storm, *Functions of Dress*, ix.

²¹⁸ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 8

indicator, context-dependency does not annul the idea that at any given time, fashion and style do communicate on the basis of widely shared significations.

If clothing, therefore, is inherently communicative within a culture, it sends a non-verbal message. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman explores the concept of performance within society and establishes that individuals in a group often engage in a dramatization of their chosen roles.²¹⁹ This dramatization must be *apparent* to others rather than explained.²²⁰ Self-presentation is a major component in these performances, as choices of dress and personal styling can mobilize visual codes to compose a look. Daniel Boorstin speaks of this in terms of images—which, like Goffman’s performances, are devised to convey a particular meaning or make a desired impression²²¹—and insists on the power of the image to induce conformity.²²² Fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson also notes how this power increases in media-intensive societies.²²³ Therefore, aesthetic ideals enforce desirable images or performances of the self that the individual can convey through their personal styling.²²⁴ Especially during the postwar period, this would have been a significantly powerful tool for persuasion into conformity, but also for revolt against it.

In correlation with the communication system of clothing and its connection to conformity, there is a moral aspect that must also be addressed when discussing clothing, as the messages that are sent through our self-presentation will inevitably be perceived as adherence, dismissal or direct challenge to the cultural status quo. Wilson declares that

²¹⁹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1959]), 28.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²²¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Random House, 1992 [1961]), 185.

²²² *Ibid.*, 192.

²²³ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 12.

²²⁴ Gibbins, “Communication Aspects of Women’s Clothing,” 302.

the moral aspect attached to clothing is not only strongly instilled in our communities but that dress always indicates some characteristics of the group, whether the wearer intends it or not.²²⁵ These significances can be seen in what styles are considered dignified or improper in a certain society. For instance, we find that in the dressing guide *The Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife*—which was commented in the earlier section “Images of Fashion”—the author dismisses certain items of clothing such as shorts as communicating “lack of self-respect.”²²⁶ The same thing happens with tight dresses which are either classified as unflattering—and, therefore, ridiculous—or as flattering, which makes them much too sexual to be appropriate.²²⁷ In these passages—which already belong to a self-proclaimed guide and, therefore, a book that acknowledges its prescriptive nature—the reader can see very clearly how standards of body image and presentation are described and enforced. The fact that a tight dress might result in ridicule if it’s unflattering not so subtly leads us to reinforcing beauty standards around body size. However, the part about tight dresses creating problems when they are flattering points directly at the postwar constraints around female sexuality. Thus, the longer and puffier skirts of the time become signs of modesty by comparison and keep female sexuality within the confines of the home. Demureness is quickly attached to reproductive sexuality rather than sensuous sexuality.

The link between morality and dress amplifies the latter’s use in enforcing conformity, as breaking with or simply ignoring the dress codes prescribed by one’s environment becomes a declaration of difference. Goffman describes how outward performances can end up directing even private behavior based on group norms.²²⁸ In his

²²⁵ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 6, 57.

²²⁶ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife*, 65.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 87.

words: “The individual may privately maintain standards of behavior which he does not personally believe in, maintaining these standards because of a lively belief that an unseen audience is present who will punish deviations from these standards.”²²⁹ Thus, due to the moral standards related to clothing codes, dress quickly becomes a matter of *having* to fit in instead of simply *wanting* to. The fact that there may be consequences to the act of dressing—whether explicitly stated as they are in Fogarty’s book or silently internalized like Goffman suggests—disproves the idea that dressing is merely a matter of personal taste and choice, as choices will either be rewarded or punished and the individual will not be allowed the opportunity to choose freely.

Finally, and for the purposes of this dissertation, we will focus on the “sexual roles,” as they would be called in the Postwar, and how dress rules were used to uphold the period’s strict gender division. Storm notes a division between achieved and ascribed roles, the latter containing sexual roles and being decisive in which other roles we can have.²³⁰ She states that sex has become the most pervasive role and dress is one of the main ways in which differences between the sexes are expressed.²³¹ Nevertheless, and as also discussed in an earlier section, the postwar era was not merely a moment of aesthetic *expression* of the sexual roles, but also a period in which dress and design were effectively used as prescriptive methods to guide American citizens into gender conformity. Not only were dress and makeup a sign of conformity in the case of women,²³² but the shape and silhouette of the garments was directly correlated to domestic sexuality and reproduction, as well as the hourglass fashions of the previous century—when the concept of female rule over the private sphere was established.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Storm, *Functions of Dress*, 124.

²³¹ Ibid., 124, 127.

²³² Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 104, 112.

Therefore, fashion cannot be seen merely as expression of gender, but also as a training method in role play. Davis writes that not only is difference in dress between the sexes a code deliberately constructed to foster gender division, but that dress as a means of social engineering can be traced back even to the eighteenth century.²³³ This can be certainly seen in lawmaking after the French Revolution, when visible class distinction was abolished through the annulment of sumptuary laws by means of an act that clearly stated that citizens were “free to wear whatever garment and style *of their sex* they please.”²³⁴ This becomes a legislative example of the power of dress in inducing role taking, which was especially potent during the Postwar, when there were still legal prescriptions and taste for non-conformity was also socially subdued through the threat of pathologization and shunning. Even *Mademoiselle Magazine*, which had been a key publication for young women during this period and often induced this feminine role through garment prescription, printed a retrospective piece in the year 1969 on the fact that women were “trained” into femininity from youth.²³⁵ But examples of this are not reduced to legislation from the eighteenth century and retractions from the gender reconfigurations that came about during the 1960s and 1970s, it can also be seen in the wording of postwar books. For instance, works such as *The Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife* inherently make a craft out of creating the wife’s identity. Indeed, the author implicitly states the importance of *dressing the part* when comparing dressing to table manners²³⁶—from which we can infer that dressing can be as much of a performance as etiquette—or when she refers to the importance of dressing in the following terms: “Discipline results in a clear-cut picture of your own identity as a person.”²³⁷ Although

²³³ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, Identity*, 40.

²³⁴ Anne Higonnet, *Liberty, Equality, Fashion: The Women Who Styled the French Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024): 74. Italics mine.

²³⁵ Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 67.

²³⁶ Fogarty, *The Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife*, 69.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

referring to “identity” and not performances, images or roles, the fact that discipline is cited promotes the idea that identity is a construction rather than a natural phenomenon and, therefore, does not really contradict the fact that dressing is part of the process of constructing the self.

From these instances related to the role of dressing in communication within a group, morality standards and social performance, it becomes clear that clothing is a polyvalent social phenomenon. It can function as a tool for social engineering but also as a means of rebellion against the status quo, as it helps create, embody or disintegrate different social roles. However, it can also have personal ramifications in the individual’s life and their particular quest for differentiating oneself from the rest of the group, which is what we will examine hereafter.

2.4.2. Clothing in the shaping of identity

Clothing contributes to the development of an inner self as well as performing all the social functions which have been studied above. In his 1930 book, J.C. Flügel, an influential psychoanalyst of the early twentieth century who worked at the crossroads between Freudian social psychology and the formation of identity, spoke of clothing as part of our very being and contributed what he believed to be the three main purposes of dress: decoration, modesty and protection.²³⁸ Nevertheless, and according to his own idea of clothing as a psychological factor, there exists a possibility of clothing serving outside these objectives. Clothing can become a means of self-assertion—which goes beyond decoration, morality or mere functionality. It can help in the processes of reconfiguration of self and construction of personae. Therefore, clothes have a role in how the individual relates to their environment and reconciles themselves in accordance with it. Furthermore,

²³⁸ J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1971), 16.

dress is one of the main tools through which the individual can create a statement about the self, equal to those they can utter vocally or through writing.²³⁹ Within this paradigm, and taking into account that fashion and its subsequent trends can be used to direct identity formation²⁴⁰—like we suggested in the previous section—this part will deal with personal style and styling, as these are not subject to constant change in the same way fashion trends are and speak to the interiority of the individual.

The importance of styling when it comes to the woman writer's persona should not be underestimated, as clothing has historically been the most accessible means of self-expression for women²⁴¹ and, most importantly, is a very efficient tool to deal with ambiguity within the self. We are introduced to the concepts of personal ambiguity and ambivalence in fashion through Davis, who speaks of the division between masculinity and femininity as one of the great sources of ambivalence.²⁴² Furthermore, he connects those feelings of ambiguity towards the self to the experimentation with contradictory values in fashion that will give way to new interpretation of both femininity and masculinity.²⁴³ Thus, it could be said that clothing becomes a way of circumnavigating fragmentations in the self-concept and renegotiating the differences between personal identity and social imposition: "...we may view the fashionable dress of the western world as one means whereby an always fragmentary self is glued together into the semblance of a unified identity."²⁴⁴ Once more, this becomes especially necessary to the woman writer of the Postwar, as the fragmentation of the self turns into a given once the

²³⁹ Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, 3.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

²⁴¹ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 66.

²⁴² Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 18.

²⁴³ Ibid., 22.

²⁴⁴ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 11.

social identity constructed around womanhood and the artistic identity are pitched as oppositional in her environment.

Another important function of dress is its role in helping to define and create a self-concept while also using it as a means of differentiation between the self and the environment. A configuration of the self-concept can take place through aesthetics in that dress “serves as a frontier to the human body and as a determinant of the individual’s inner consciousness,”²⁴⁵ effectively acting as a means of negotiating between the psyche and external social messaging. Clothes are tools that can be used for personal expression or to impact one’s own self-concept,²⁴⁶ including the intention of re-building it.²⁴⁷ Thus, part of the examination and re-configuration of the self-concept can be done through the adoption of a new image, using clothing as a means of outward expression of the values and conceptions that the individual may not yet know how to or feel ready to articulate but can still communicate outwardly. In this way, image can become a pipeline to the adoption of new ideas, morals and—eventually—personality.

Moreover, re-building the self is also related to a process of “differentiation” that makes use of aesthetic expression as well. According to Hartmann, the true value of a piece of clothing is directly proportional to the measure in which it helps an individual differentiate themselves from their setting.²⁴⁸ Storm, however, is the theoretician who contributes the most to the concept of differentiation, explaining that:

Differentiation is accomplished when an individual asserts or expresses her uniqueness. She may consciously assert her individuality by being aware of the

²⁴⁵ Storm, *Functions of Dress*, viii.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 267.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 261.

²⁴⁸ George W. Hartmann, “Clothing: Personal Problem and Social Issue,” *Journal of Home Economics* 41, no. 6 (June 1949): 296.

norms and choosing not to adhere to them. This individual is more apt to be counter society, and her behavior might be evaluated as delinquent or abnormal.²⁴⁹

This certainly aligns with the figure of the woman writer and the existence of artistic temperament within womanhood, which has historically been marked by transgression in dressing, such as the androgyny of 1930s actresses like Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn or Marlene Dietrich or the use of black in the clothes of 1950s Beatnik women—opposing the colorful femininity of the housewife and mother identity. Storm also underlines that aesthetic differentiation is more commonly found in members of marginal groups within society, as they already deal with a lack of social approval.²⁵⁰ By analogy, a more individualistic self-fashioning is to be expected in the women authors to be analyzed, as they not only transgress postwar conceptions of femininity in the mere act of writing, but in cases like Nin and McCullers' are further marginalized due to their ethnicity or their sexual and gender identity.

Another concept that supports the use of dress in a re-building of the self is that of the “ideal self” and its direct relation to aesthetic self-fashioning. Storm describes this projection of the ideal self as an indivisible part of the self-concept and poses that the individual often chooses clothes in accordance with their model self.²⁵¹ Hartmann goes a step further and suggests that the mere act of *liking* certain clothes implies interest in specific identities: “Liking for particular clothes is positively related to the degree of similarity between the impression conveyed by the clothes and the judges’ ideal self-image.”²⁵² Due to this, a postwar woman looking to incorporate characteristics that are associated with masculinity in her environment—such as intellectuality or creativity—

²⁴⁹ Storm, *Functions of Dress*, 327.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 329.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵² Gibbins, “Communication Aspects of Women’s Clothes,” 302.

might incorporate certain elements of masculine attire such as neutral colors and the use of flat footwear or trousers in order to reconcile those two seemingly opposite ideals that live within her and create a new identity outside of this division. Thus, dressing can be taken not only as a *reflection* of one's identity, but also as a tool for its *construction*. The ambiguity that the individual might feel towards divisions like the one between masculinity and femininity in the fashion world can be directed towards the self as well,²⁵³ which opens aesthetic design of one's identity to new alternative interpretations that are outside the pre-established values.²⁵⁴ Once again, this ambivalence and ambiguity towards one self can be analyzed by means of clothing, which Wilson describes as the most accessible and flexible way for a person to navigate the struggles between self and body, as well as the ones between the self and its environment.²⁵⁵

Finally, it is important to note that fashion and styling, even when worn individually, generate a political message that directly involves identity and gender politics. Indeed, fashion itself can be used as an image-based form of activism that can contribute to social change, as it involves both the body and the negotiation of identity.²⁵⁶ In the case of Nin, McCullers and Plath, personal advocacy expands into collectivity—however accidental. For this reason, choices against the prescribed image of femininity that was presented in Chapter 1 of this dissertation are important as a common trait of the writers to be studied here and speaks to the self-conceptualization of these women as apart from the general norms of womanhood—whether consciously or not. Although Nin, McCullers, and Plath did not take part in the theories about fashion and identity politics that would accompany the advent of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, their

²⁵³ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 24.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵⁵ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 15.

²⁵⁶ Paul Jobling, Philippa Nesbitt, Angelene Wong, *Fashion, Identity, Image* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022): 5.

dress habits reflect a rebellion against widely accepted values around womanhood, making them examples of the use of self-presentation as a means of liberation even before this was collectivized and theorized in later decades.

2.5. Conclusion

Self-fashioning became imperative for the woman writer of the Postwar and this process was carried out on two fronts. On the one hand, female authors made use of their writing as a way of accessing their own identity. The construction of a personal narrative around their own lives was done through various genres that were unified through the intention of acquiring agency over their own lives and of constructing a creative realm through which identity could be analyzed and re-designed. This process was especially critical for the woman writer as her environment created a sense of division in her psyche between femininity and creativity that made the justification and assertion of her self a necessity, effectively turning it into one of the main purposes of their writing.

On the other hand, curation of the woman writer's clothing in her everyday life also contributed to and became another means of self-narration—and, therefore, self-assertion and self-creation. Dress was a means to negotiate the divisions between feminine and creative characteristics by incorporating elements of both into the curation of a personal style. The use of an image as a means of deconstruction, rebellion and re-building acted as an instrument that not only reflected identity negotiations in an individual but also a collective self-fashioning. This way, the vicissitudes of this social type can be ascertained through a common use of styling in the process of reconciliation between social and personal perceptions of the self, common to various women writers and certainly to the ones analyzed in the three subsequent case studies. Thus, curation of style becomes another means of self-narration, common to all Nin, McCullers and Plath,

and proves how these women were already—if sometimes unintentionally—making use of dress within personal and gender politics in the same way that would only be theorized and instrumentalized in the liberation movements of the 1960s.

CHAPTER 3: A MUSE NO MORE

3.1. Introduction

Anaïs Nin remains an ethereal image in the literary imaginary. A diarist since her early teens and trained in psychoanalysis as a young woman, her interest in the inner world derived in the writing of a multi-volume journal that expanded decades and novels more in tune with the mind explorations of Modernism than mid-century America's literary trends. Nin's diaries would eventually be published during the 1960s and 1970s in expurgated versions, and then re-published unabridged after the author's passing. They became analogous to Nin's public image, surpassing her fiction—which had been generally disregarded for most of her life and remains to be thought of as secondary to her intimate writing. Anaïs Nin continues to be understood primarily as a diarist, as this was the genre where she carried out her deepest assessments of her own identity and creativity. Her profound understanding of artistry differentiated her from the corporate world she lived in as a young woman married to a banker, turning Nin into a target of constant ridicule and questioning. For a time, her self-concept as an artist was heavily questioned, even pathologized, and she was urged to stop writing by husband, friends, even therapists. However, Anaïs did not accept the idea that she could not be feminine and artistic simultaneously, as she considered her penchant for poetic and imaginative writing highly feminine. She continued to gravitate around artistic circles and cultivate friendships—however fleeting—with critics like Edmund Wilson or Gore Vidal and other writers like Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell.

However, Nin also experienced a massive critical disregard. Her style was considered too experimental, poetic and apolitical for the times and this impacted her

commercially as well. One of the main problems for Nin became that she was regularly praised in private and a source of comfort and influence for her friends, but these friends often failed in paying respect to her in the public sphere. Most of her artistic relationships with men often turned parasitic. Her diary attracted attention and many other artists got close to Nin for a chance to be able to read it and use it for inspiration in their own writing. Still, their advice to Nin was often to *destroy* her diary. In the world of letters, Nin seemed destined to remain a creature of influence, a lover of artists, an artistic person, but not an artist herself. This would remain the case until the literary and academic trends born in the 1960s, which rescued Nin and her contributions as a representative figure of the plight of the woman writer. At this time, Nin took full advantage of the new wave of thought to assert herself out of the confines of the figure of the muse, defining herself within her most beloved identity: the artist.

The study of Anaïs Nin during her years of activity in the postwar era can be easily approached through matters of agency and identity, a direct consequence of the problematization Nin's environment created around her artistic aspirations. In her intimate writing, the author often attests to the difficulties that come from being a woman writer during the late 1940s and 1950s, speaking to both personal and professional conflicts around publication and reception, but—more importantly—around the villainization of the very act of writing in a woman writer. Thus, the volumes of Nin's diary during this period of her life are of great interest, as they offer a first person account of everyday occurrences and difficulties around the woman writer's persona in the postwar era. The *Diary* is a door into Nin's psyche, providing us with the opportunity to compare factual reality to perceptions, and also to encounter and analyze both the professional and personal damage incurred in by woman writing in postwar culture.

To assess these experiences and the author's reactions and mechanisms of resistance against them, this chapter will be divided into three main sections. The first will address matters of agency. This will be done firstly by analyzing instances where the woman writer is deprived of her autonomy, be it professionally—by being critically, commercially and academically ignored due to her gender—or personally—through pathologization of, threat or attack to her writing. Secondly, Nin's writing will be discussed as a tool that the author used in order to regain agency over herself. To this end, the *Diary* offers examples of Nin using her writing as a way of voicing discontent, questioning her milieu and, eventually, constructing a new reality in which she can live more peacefully and from which she can actively rebel.

The second main section will focus on the identity of the woman writer. It will analyze the cultural constructions of femininity and artistry along with Nin's firsthand account of difficulties the artist/woman division caused her personally and professionally. This will allow us to ascertain how and why the woman writer of the Postwar often found herself in a position of fragmentation, having her identity divided between two main characters that had been constructed and were understood to be oppositional during this period. During this section we will also inspect how the concept of identity is addressed by Nin and how the author used her writing to deconstruct this cultural division in order to arrive not only to a new understanding of identity that allows her to discard the idea of fragmentation, but that effectively allows her to constantly question and reconstruct the self as needed.

Finally, the last main section will look at how self-styling played an important role in Anaïs Nin's life, both as a means of achieving agency and of constructing her identity. To this end, I will examine pictorial representations of Nin as well as her own reflections on clothing and styling. This examination will be contrasted with the author's account of

her use of clothing as a means of self-expression and with the normative aesthetic impositions of femininity during the postwar era. Through this analysis, we will be able to discuss how Nin used dress as a tool to achieve agency—as a communicative method that allowed her to express externalized otherwise—and to construct a coherent but flexible identity—through its use for the self-fashioning of her persona.

As a result, this chapter will allow the construction of a postwar-centered portrait of Anaïs Nin that can be used to analyze the instances of lack of autonomy and fragmentation of identity that were specific and common to the experience of the woman artist during the American Postwar. Furthermore, an analysis of Nin's writing and dressing through the lens of personal emancipation and the construction of public personae will speak directly to how her art became an instrument that allowed her to circumnavigate this difficult position as a woman writer and eventually permitted her to gain control over her experience, her writing, and her self-concept.

3.2. The Problematic of Agency in Nin's *Diary*

3.2.1. "...weak, helpless, small:"¹ Lack of Agency in Anaïs Nin

Nin's diaries are full of moments in which she reports that her creative endeavors and even her private creativity and writing were consciously attacked by the people around her, which not only made her suffer in everyday relations but also negatively impacted her productivity due to self-consciousness, lack of energy and a sense of threat. She usually had trouble with her therapists—to whom she had turned to in order to deal with her feelings of abandonment after her father left the family when she was a girl—around the issue of writing and leading the artist's lifestyle. She often refers to Martha Jaeger, a

¹ Anaïs Nin, *Mirages: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1939-1947* (Ohio: Swallow Press and Ohio University Press, 2013), 277.

psychoanalyst she consulted briefly in the 1940s as a source of negative input: “She says she would have had my kind of life and experience if she had had my ego and narcissism.”² There are also mentions of Otto Rank, one of Nin’s major therapists throughout her life, taking an interest in Anaïs abandoning the writing of her diary as one of the objectives of her therapy sessions.³ Indeed, Rank—who famously had a more “creative” approach to psychoanalysis—targeted Nin’s writing immensely. Both he and Allendy—Nin’s other major therapeutic influence—questioned her need for turning inward through the diary, pathologizing it and defining it as a symptom of arrested development.⁴ Rank even attempted to make Nin stop writing her diary in order to become an editor and copyist of *his own* writing.⁵ Clement Staff, another one of her therapists, reads her diary and clearly tells her that she is using it to construct a fantasy world because she is in danger of being considered inadequate in reality.⁶ This makes Nin immediately aware of the fact that hers is a precarious position: “If what I write here is fantasy then my life itself is in danger.”⁷ Her relationship with Staff lasts longer than with Jaeger, but this does not mean that his rulings on her creativity are any less severe or damaging. He often refers to Nin as a destructive woman and tells her that this the cause for the romantic rejections she sometimes suffers.⁸ Her analysts’—who were all psychoanalysts of the Freudian school—imposition of traditionally feminine standards of interests and behavior is clear in these statements and leads to a pathologized view of her behavior and artistry. Her therapists attacked her art even in the intimate and supposedly safe space of a

² Ibid., 278.

³ Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Others: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1955-1966* (Pennsylvania: Sky Blue Press, 2021), 153.

⁴ Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulous, “Anaïs Nin and the Feminine Quest for Consciousness: The Quelling of the Devouring Mother and the Ascension of the Sophia,” in *The Critical Response to Anaïs Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996): 32.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nin, *Mirages*, 313.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 338.

therapeutic relationship, which contributed greatly to the pathologizing and disparaging of Nin's creative qualities and ambitions.

The berating of her artistry, as well as the inherent threat that came with it, did not only happen in therapeutic environments. She also had to face them in her personal relationships, whether in friendships, affairs or both. Her acquaintance Cornelia—named only in passing in her diaries—attacks her and her writing as decadent and later admits to being jealous of Nin's affair with Gore Vidal.⁹ Vidal himself tries to wean her off the diary and expresses that *he* should be the one Anaïs confides in instead.¹⁰ Gonzalo Moré, another one of her loves, is said to have wanted to *destroy* her writings¹¹ and to have attacked her books when the couple were in the midst of an argument—which, in turn, made Nin close off and not discuss her writing with him anymore.¹² It seems that even when in “friendly” circles, her writing is constantly attacked and unappreciated, even commonly used as a means of hurting her during a fight or even as commentary on her supposed personal failures. Even the possibility of writing becomes a personal threat to her relations—who feel replaced by her diary—or is understood as proof of her frivolousness. Later on, in a 1966 interview, Nin would reflect: “Those who misunderstood the diary were the ones who were obsessed with the fact that any introspection, any regard of individual growth, any concern with one's personal conflict, was a narcissistic crime.”¹³ Nin, however, does not touch on the fact that this might have been due to gender discrimination. Nevertheless, it is important to note that her diary does

⁹ Ibid., 335.

¹⁰ Ibid., 325.

¹¹ Ibid., 391.

¹² Ibid., 395.

¹³ Anaïs Nin, “Interview for Sweden,” in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 20.

not record similar accusations against the male artists in her life, and that these accusations of self-centeredness are routinely directed towards female writers.¹⁴

The constant questioning and threatening which contribute to paralyzing Nin's writing is also found in Nin's closest relationships. Her being a writer and the very act of writing always seem to be threatened in the diary through her relationships with the most important men in her life and their censoring of her artistic endeavors. She reports that her first husband, Ian Hugo,¹⁵ dislikes when she acts assertively and is said by Nin to love her "...weak, helpless, small."¹⁶ This is very much due to her artistic pursuits, as they are understood as a form of detachment by the men she is in relationships with. Hugo is said to be jealous of her artistry,¹⁷ so much so that Nin becomes aware that he is jealous of her diary and of the fact that it provides her with an opportunity to take her own space away from him.¹⁸ This is a constant source of conflict in the marriage, as Hugo often complains about her writing and artistic life and understands them as factors that are taking his wife's time and attention away from him. This is something he communicated to Nin frequently, telling her even at one point that he was jealous of everything she wrote about.¹⁹ By 1952, even Nin herself seems to have accepted that Hugo has "sacrificed" himself in "letting" her be a writer throughout their marriage and that he has not been given what was due to him as a husband.²⁰ Through this relationship, it could be inferred that artistic pursuit, or even just the act of writing—as Nin's diary was not yet being published and, therefore, constituted only personal writing—are threatening to Hugo and, therefore, in need of

¹⁴ Russ, *Suppress Women's Writing*, 35.

¹⁵ Originally, Anaïs Nin's first husband was named Hugh Guiler when he worked as a banker. He would take the name Ian Hugo later in his life when he became an experimental filmmaker. Since he is already going by the latter at the point where Nin's diaries start to be analyzed here, he will be referred to as "Hugo" in this dissertation.

¹⁶ Nin, *Mirages*, 277.

¹⁷ Anaïs Nin, *Trapeze: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1947-1955* (Ohio: Swallow Press and Ohio University Press, 2017), 82.

¹⁸ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 39.

¹⁹ Nin, *Mirages*, 284.

²⁰ Nin, *Trapeze*, 82.

censorship and destruction. Anaïs seems well aware of this: while considering making her will in 1955, she writes in her diary that Hugo may not be trusted with the diary after she has passed.²¹

This constant threat and the relationship troubles derived from her writing are also discussed in her relationship with Rupert Pole, her second husband.²² By the time the couple starts dating in 1947, Nin is self-conscious of her writing and hides it from Pole at first due to her sense that he could find it unattractive: “I had been so careful not to overwhelm him, not to reveal the stature of my work.”²³ Although at first Pole does not seem to react negatively, Nin’s writing becomes a problem soon enough: Rupert hides it from his colleagues because it embarrasses him that his partner is a writer²⁴ and his parents oppose the relationship with Nin not only because she is older and a foreigner, but mostly because she is an artist and they consider her egocentric and too sexual.²⁵ These instances reveal not only that artistry in a woman was threatening to men but also that women who pursued artistic paths were tainted by accusations of selfishness and unchastity—which, as also seen in the diary, makes Nin self-conscious and instigates her to downplay or even hide her writing. In her diaries before the Postwar, Nin had already written about how love and creativity usually clashed in her world, and being creative often put her in a position where love, companionship and desire would be denied to her.²⁶ This trouble continues in her relationship with Pole in various forms: he makes her keep

²¹ Ibid., 323.

²² Anaïs Nin famously had two husbands at a time, committing bicoastal bigamy when she married Rupert Pole in March of 1955 while she was still legally married to Ian Hugo. For the remainder of her life, she would keep a home in New York with Hugo and a home in California with Pole. Therefore, Hugo and Pole will be referred to as the first and second husbands due to the order of marriage but it is important to note that from ’55 to her death she was married to both of them simultaneously.

²³ Nin, *Trapeze*, 6.

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 57.

²⁶ Sharon Spencer, ““Femininity” and the woman writer: Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and the *Diary* of Anaïs Nin,” *Women’s Studies* 1 (1973): 248.

away from writing and reject other artistic projects to spend time with him instead,²⁷ only provides her with writing material of dubious quality such as paper that cannot sustain carbon copies—and, therefore, cannot be easily reproduced and sent out for publication—and constantly scolds her “extravagance.”²⁸ Pole picks fights when she goes away for work, accusing her of just wanting “to have a good time,”²⁹ and makes her completely responsible for the housekeeping, to the point that, by 1955, Nin complains in her diary that she can only write on the bus on the way to doing other things³⁰ and—in 1956—protests that she has only been able to produce 84 pages of writing in the previous two years.³¹

These relationships with the two main men in her life show how Nin’s quotidianity consisted of a constant battle not only to run away but, most importantly, to *carry out* her writing. They are examples of one of the main threats imposed by society upon the woman writer: loneliness. Podnieks described this plight: “...women’s options remained loaded ones, so that in choosing to be alternative or radical or different, a writer was still threatened with ostracism, castigation, and criticism.”³² This was also the case for any woman who stepped outside middle-class boundaries around femininity and feminine behavior. In an earlier section, I have discussed how social guidance techniques such as mental hygiene films often indoctrinated young women to believe that they had to choose between two distinct options: conformity or solitude. This was something that Nin was aware of, and that often motivated her to trade and give up her artistic independence in exchange for company. When discussing her life and how people around her judged it, she states: “But I feel alone, alone, alone. The great beauty of my life was that I lived out

²⁷ Nin, *Trapeze*, 140.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁹ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 109.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45, 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

³² Podnieks, *Daily Modernism*, 60.

what others only talk about, or dream about, or analyze. I want to go on, living out the uncensored dream, the free unconscious.”³³ Even when considering leaving both Hugo and Pole, she writes: “So I will aim for that. Paris, Houseboat. It may mean alone [...]. So there is my choice.”³⁴ Nevertheless, we also find instances in which the price for independence seems too high to her, which she relates to her innate feminine dependence—another Postwar idea.³⁵ In the end, this was a much too high a price that she could not pay.

Nonetheless, loneliness is not the most urgent threat to Nin’s artistic independence. Her inability to sustain herself economically and her consequent reliance on others makes her writing and herself more vulnerable to their wishes. When her relationship with Hugo is already souring and he is becoming wearier of her writing, Nin documents in her diary that she wants to be able to support herself to “unburden Hugo” but, most importantly, “to be free of reproaches.”³⁶ This is especially true of her relationship with him, who had worked as a banker and would remain her primary source of economic support throughout her life. Nin acknowledges that Hugo’s money was what allowed her to live an artist’s life and be able to write: “I owe him all, my writing too, an *objet du luxe*.”³⁷ In this way, Nin is aware of the privilege that being the wife of a banker gave her, especially during the first years of marriage; as she did not make enough money from her writing to support herself for much of her life, she would have had to work and, therefore, would have had less time to write. However, she grows increasingly aware of how this economic dependence impacts her writing as she ages. In her relationship with Pole this becomes immediately apparent, as she starts to complain that he controls the

³³ Nin, *Mirages*, 277.

³⁴ Nin, *Trapeze*, 236.

³⁵ Nin, *Mirages*, 290.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁷ Nin, *Trapeze*, 82. Italics not mine.

money in the relationship, even the money *she* brings in.³⁸ In 1953, while living her bicoastal life, she experiences personal and financial issues with both of her husbands and regrets not being economically independent. About Rupert specifically, she writes that he has forbidden her from hiring a maid and demands that she be both in charge of the house and contribute money from her writing-related jobs in New York.³⁹ Finally, she confesses to her therapist at the time, Bogner: "...what I really want most is not to feel dependent, helpless, or to be a victim of both men's neuroses."⁴⁰ With Hugo, the couple comes to an argument about which Nin writes: "I am terribly tired of the enormous price one pays for protection. [...] The status of wife is worth nothing. If I had worked, I would be free and not afraid to stand alone."⁴¹ These instances contribute to the sentiment of precariousness that keeps Nin away from her artistry, as she is inevitably forced to abide by the rulings of her husbands when it comes to her writing—sometimes by obeying, sometimes by compromising, and—in fewer occasions—by rebelling as she ages. This takes a toll on her opportunities to write, and on the energy she is capable of devoting to it. For instance, she herself expresses that she wastes less time and energy just by accepting the fact that she is in charge of the housework and devoting half the day to cleaning and cooking and the other half to writing than the amount she would waste fighting Rupert about it.⁴² Her lack of sovereignty over her own time and attention would continue to influence her personal conflicts with Pole.

This lack of agency is also related to her inability to support herself economically through her writing which, had it been possible, would have probably impacted both on her personal relationships with Hugo and Pole and on the amount of work she produced.

³⁸ Ibid., 58.

³⁹ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 236.

⁴² Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 46.

She is well aware of the fact that her inability to provide for herself makes her incapable of rebelling in her relationships, but a great part of her diaries is also related to the dire economic situation that comes with her lack of commercial success in the literary world.

In 1950, she would write:

From my writing I received perhaps \$250 a year, the advance of each book, and no more. I never get paid for my lectures. My records don't sell, and if they did, Louis and Bebe Barron, who recorded them, would not pay me, not out of dishonesty, but out of mismanagement. The magazines reject my stories. Those who read me or are devoted to me are concealed from me, a secret society who will not buy the books.⁴³

In 1952, she tries to organize a reading and complains that not only did she not make any money but that she in fact ended up losing \$25.⁴⁴ In the same volume of her diary, she constantly laments that her art does not allow her the economic freedom to live life as she pleases.⁴⁵ In this way, both her literary pursuits and even her day to day are dependent on those who sustain her economically. This, in turn, continues to affect the writing, as the men who support her are not too keen on allowing her to completely devote herself to the work. Even by the end of the 1950s, when Nin is finally getting more critical, academic and commercial attention due to cultural changes that would eventually lead into the activist and political landscape of the 60s, Pole is still interfering with the opportunities that arise for her in New York. At some point, he even forbids her from returning to the city for months in an effort to control her whereabouts.⁴⁶ Even if Nin would eventually do as she pleased, she states in her diary that this was clearly a sign of how Pole was inconsiderate of her writing and intent on trapping her in the domestic role he wanted her

⁴³ Nin, *Trapeze*, 63.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁶ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 115.

to play.⁴⁷ Due to all of this, a significant amount of Nin's time and energy is spent circumnavigating the problems that come with economic dependence, which clearly affects her writing.

The lack of economic agency is also due to her precarious situation in the American literary landscape for much of her life. The lack of critical and commercial attention to her writing due to a gender bias is constantly represented in the diary and speaks to another area where autonomy was denied to women writers: their publication and reception. Nin experienced great opposition to her writing and several conflicts with other artists, especially male ones. For instance, Henry Miller—who remained in Nin's life even after their affair, which had taken place from the early 1930s and during much of the decade—has now been said to have stolen ideas from her then unpublished diaries for his own work⁴⁸ while, at the same time, remained a source of questioning about the diary, both instigating Nin to publish it and, at different times, to give up writing it completely.⁴⁹ We see problems with other relations of Nin's as well, like Gore Vidal, who also becomes parasitic to Nin. In 1947, while having dinner with her, Gore told Nin that they should write a book together because he had a tendency to underwrite while she tended to overwrite and told her “I have all you lack.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, Nin tells that she became disappointed with Gore when she saw the way he had portrayed her in his work, which she described as “...a caricature, a cheapened, superficial, distorted image, in his own terms.”⁵¹ These two instances introduce Gore's tendency to use Nin's writing—and even person—to contribute to his own. Years later, she writes about that he deliberately ignores her in his literary criticism in spite of being amply familiar with her work, a

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lynette Felber, “The Three Faces of June: Anaïs Nin's Appropriation of Feminine Writing,” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 309.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 314.

⁵⁰ Nin, *Mirages*, 389.

⁵¹ Ibid., 386.

neglect she found humiliating.⁵² In a conversation with Gore himself in 1957, Nin told him that she broke the relationship with him when she was being critically dismissed and attacked and he deliberately ignored her writing in his essays.⁵³ Importantly, Nin tells that, if she had been ignored due to her being a woman, she would not have been offended because she expected that male critics would respect and relate to male writers more. It was Gore's attention to other female writers—like Carson McCullers—and not her what made her angry.⁵⁴ In these words, we can appreciate several characteristic workings of Nin's literary world: she assumes that female writers will be ignored by male critics—indicating this was a common and *expected* occurrence—and also gives the readers of her diary a sense of how few women were invited into the literary canon. Women writers were greatly affected by tokenism; it could be inferred that her anger at being “displaced” by McCullers is another indication that there was no possibility of *two* women being discussed at once in critical writings. In an interview by William McBrien in 1974, Nin would characterize Vidal's critical treatment of her writing as a step beyond disregard: “...when he is criticizing writers he is ruthless. He tried his best to destroy the diary. [...] He signed the release. But then he attacked the diaries in the *Los Angeles Times*. And lied.”⁵⁵

The mixture of neglect and attack characterized her relations with other critics and editors as well. In 1952, Nin writes a letter to Coley Taylor of Pellegrini & Cudahy, complaining that critics respond “emotionally” to her literature instead of analyzing it objectively and questions the authority of editors as a group:

⁵² Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 134.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ William McBrien, “Anaïs Nin: An Interview,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1974): 283.

Your letter was insensitive rather than honest, destructive and irresponsible if it had been addressed to a beginner who believed that publishers are impartial, objective, mature critics, men of taste capable of evaluating writing.⁵⁶

This continues with other men in a position of authority in the literary world. In 1953, when she is already focusing on the diary, she has a meeting with Dr. Rosen—a man interested in translating her diaries to German—and she finishes the evening completely demoralized, as she realizes from the meeting that Rosen’s only interest in the diary has to do with its sexual segments.⁵⁷ This is a constant problem for her, as her books are often reviewed only due to their sexual scenes, which Nin considers distracts the reviewers from the artistic merit of her writing.⁵⁸ Years later, Erica Jong would write about Nin’s lack of critical attention as a symptom of the Whore/Madonna complex that permeated the literary world during the Postwar and which only regarded writing by women as “acceptable” when it focused on domestic settings and stories.⁵⁹ Nin would also be asked about the role of relationships in her writing in an interview by Molyneux and Casterton, in which she also stated that women writers who were concerned with these plot devices had been usually frowned upon during her time.⁶⁰ All of this becomes evidence of the precariousness that women writers faced during the Postwar, with a literary scene that seemed obsessed with their sexuality whether as an excuse to critically dismiss them or, even worse, as an opportunity to take advantage of them.

⁵⁶ Nin, *Trapeze*, 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁵⁹ Erica Jong, “A Story Never Told Before — Reading the New, Unexpurgated Diaries of Anais Nin,” in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996); 206.

⁶⁰ Maxine Molyneaux and Julia Casterton, “Looking Again at Anais Nin,” in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996); 222.

There was no one, however, who better represented the danger of the literary status quo in Nin's life than Edmund Wilson, who was the most important critic she ever came across and had a relationship with, and who would become, in her eyes, the personification of a literary scene that didn't care for her at all. This relationship with the famous writer and critic is a threat from the very beginning, when Wilson immediately starts to make use of Anaïs as an editor for his own stories⁶¹ and then to criticize her own work and try to convince her to adapt it to the forms which he believes are truly valuable.⁶² Wilson's weariness of the woman writer is first seen when he asks Nin "You are a friend of man's, aren't you? You don't demolish him?"⁶³ letting the reader know that he is somewhat admitting to the fact that he sees women writers as potential threats or enemies. This continues to be seen in their exchanges, in which Wilson often refers to Nin strictly in sexual terms, telling her that he had never liked her writing until he became enamored with her or that there is an inhuman quality to her.⁶⁴ The situation soon turns to Wilson actively trying to control Nin's writing, separating it from Nin as an individual while also wanting to "educate" her on how to write.⁶⁵ Wilson goes so far as to lure Nin into his house with the excuse of discussing her writing just so he can sexually assault her:

He wants to shape my writing. Beneath his interest lies tyranny. When I went Saturday afternoon under his pretense of talking about my writing, I went determined not to be possessed, and he would not accept my excuses (no time, etc.) but forced me, imposed his lust, afterward asking my forgiveness.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Nin, *Mirages*, 288.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

Once more, Nin is deprived of her agency—both professionally and personally—and the literary world—with Edmund Wilson as a spokesman—shows its ugly face to the woman writer, who is now not only exposed to dismissal and ridicule but also to physical and emotional attack. When, because of the rape, Nin decides to end all professional and personal contact with Wilson, he uses his power within the critical scene to punish her for this rejection, about which Nin states:

I began to space our meetings. I did not enjoy them; they were a strain. I was not natural with him. He grew resentful. I knew that as a critic he would punish me sooner or later, either by destructive faultfinding or by silence.⁶⁷

About this same topic, she also states in the diary: “When Wilson can’t have me for a mistress, he attacks my writing.”⁶⁸ From this relationship, the precariousness of the female writer in the literary world of the Postwar becomes even more acute, as the possible paths for her now seem to be either to be attacked and taken advantage of or, in the best of cases, ignored.

Nin struggled with silence and attack on the part of critics throughout most of her life—even if, fortunately, not to the extent that she did with Edmund Wilson. Already in the 1940s, she complains about the stupidity of reviewers and talks about her loneliness.⁶⁹ During a reading of *A Spy in the House of Love*, she complained that the organizers did not take her seriously and did not even mail invitations until a week before the event, which ultimately resulted in a small attendance of mostly friends: “No official figures, no invited celebrities (no William Carlos Williams, no John Cage, no Oscar Williams, no

⁶⁷ Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin Volume Four 1944-1947* (New York: Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 119.

⁶⁸ Nin, *Mirages*, 336.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 378-379.

publishers, no Laughlin, no critics, no Charles Rolo).⁷⁰ Later on in that same entry of the diary, she writes: “The absurdity of my position in letters was made clear to all that day. I am in a private world, recognized by very few.”⁷¹ Years later, Duane Schneider would write that her rejection by both the American public and the literati was due in part to publishers at the time not sharing her literary values which, in turn, made Nin feel abused.⁷² Nonetheless, Nin herself would describe her situation in this period later on not as being abused or hated per se, but simply completely ignored and silenced.⁷³ This is certainly the feeling we get from her entries at the time, where she complains about being ostracized⁷⁴ and appears acutely aware of the many ways in which she is not receiving the same attention as her contemporaries:

On my own I had to confront continuous rejections of *Spy* by publishers (most recent one from Macmillan), complete exclusion from poetry readings, from all critical estimates, debates. Total invisibility and failure.⁷⁵

I have seen so many writers obtain the praise I do not get: [...] I have been snubbed many times by James Laughlin in particular. I am excluded from contemporary anthologies, [...] from all collections of short stories. Not one big important critic has made a thorough study of me. I have had no devoted publisher. I can't fill a small theatre when I read. The bookshops won't carry my books.⁷⁶

This not only isolates her but also affects her mood and economic situation gravely, but also directly impacts her writing by leading her into a period of paralysis and self-doubt.

⁷⁰ Nin, *Trapeze*, 88.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷² Duane Schneider, “Anais Nin in the *Diary*: The Creation and Development of a Persona,” in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996); 184.

⁷³ Molyneux and Casterton, “Looking again at Anais Nin,” 222.

⁷⁴ Nin, *Trapeze*, 146.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

By 1955, she constantly wonders about her ability as a writer due to the constant rejections,⁷⁷ and even is dissuaded from attempting to write because she already anticipates struggle to publish and get critical or commercial attention even if she succeeds in publishing.⁷⁸

This situation comes to a boiling point in 1958, when Nin is being rediscovered by new tastes in literature and has the opportunity to reprint some of her earlier works but her new version of *Children of the Albatross* is carelessly treated by Lawrence Durrell. This is an important moment for Nin because it is late in her career but also because this carelessness and dismissal come at the hands of a colleague and friend of many years. When Durrell writes a mediocre preface for the book and comments on her work as “feminine subjective”—terms Edmund Wilson also used—⁷⁹ with a certain disparagement and frivolity, Nin finally starts to use all of the negative feelings she had been accumulating for years of neglect. She asserts the importance of being reprinted after so many years of critical oblivion⁸⁰ and, in a letter to Durrell, affirms: “My subjective feminine work is a *long, careful work* in which I am progressing from the dream outward as one way into relative truth.”⁸¹ It is clear from this statement that Nin was very aware of the damage that the dismissal of the literary world had had on her work, impact and legacy. Indeed, even during the years when she was effectively rescued and assimilated into popular culture, she would complain that critics still did not pay much attention to her fiction and, instead, focused on her diaries.⁸² The reality was that, even in the new era

⁷⁷ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁹ Oliver Evans, “Anaïs Nin and the Discovery of Inner Space,” *Prairie Schooner* 36, no. 3 (Fall 1962): 226.

⁸⁰ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 200

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

⁸² Barbara Freeman and Anaïs Nin, “A Dialogue with Anaïs Nin,” *Chicago Review* 24, no. 2 (1972): 31.

of identity politics, the reception of Nin's writing would continue to be polarized and even her diary would still be criticized as not a work of art⁸³ or overly narcissistic.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, in 1972, she reflected on her lonely trajectory: "...you have to be ready for not having the right person at that moment say, 'Yes, you have done it, you have said it, and I understand it.' You have to be ready not to find it instantly..."⁸⁵ At this point, where she could finally count on an audience as well as on commercial and academic attention, Nin would start to reflect that her lack of critical reception during the postwar years was due to her gender. While in those years she had attributed this dismissal to an incompatibility between her sensibilities and the contemporaneous cultural playground, in 1972 she would tell Sharon Spencer in an interview that: "...once women become critics, women writers will be in a stronger position. [...] Many male critics were very wonderful and other were highly prejudiced. They thought a woman's sensibility was superficial and limited."⁸⁶ In 1974 she would add to this line of thought: "I think it [her difficulty in publishing her work] must have had something to do with it, that the editors were always men, the editors of magazines were always men, the reviewers were men."⁸⁷ Indeed, she would even attribute a certain gender bias within women of the Postwar, conceding that there *were* women critics who tried to destroy her⁸⁸ but also stating: "I believe that the women who attacked me during the '40's were imitating men. Women critics who imitated men were particularly keen on separating themselves from what men defined as "feminine" writing, and to show they were not a part of this, they attacked it."⁸⁹

⁸³ Frank Baldanza, "Anais Nin," in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996); 15.

⁸⁴ Elyse Lamm Pineau, "A Mirror of Her Own: Anais Nin's Autobiographical Performances," in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996); 245.

⁸⁵ Freeman and Nin, "A Dialogue," 34.

⁸⁶ Sharon Spencer, "An Interview with Anaïs Nin," in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 180.

⁸⁷ Margaret Kaminski, "Interview with Anaïs Nin," in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 200.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Spencer, "An Interview," 181.

Consequently, we can see that Nin herself became an example of the precariousness imposed upon women writers in the postwar literary world, but also a reflection of how that same culture caused a rupture between women who wished to be part of the artistic sphere, either by alienating them or by pitching them against each other, which only contributed more to their own sense of rejection and isolation.

3.2.2. The diary as vindication: achieving agency through writing

Molyneux and Casterton would write in the 70s, however, that in spite of all these difficulties, Nin's distinction as an artist was that "she carried on writing."⁹⁰ She stuck with it even in the midst of attacks and alienation. What's more, she even started to make use of her writing as tool to analyze her precarious situation in the world of letters and, eventually, reframe it in her mind. She used the diary both as a refuge and as a weapon to question the cultural frames that marginalized her due to her double existence as a woman *and* a writer. We can even find moments in which diary writing becomes both a vindication of intimate writing and of Nin herself as a writer. Consequently, both the diary and the act of writing can be analyzed as methods of self-assertion and instruments that helped her achieve a certain sense of agency and power both over herself and over her work. In Nin's own words: "...writing helped me to talk. I didn't talk when I was sixteen. The development of the artist helped the life, and the life helped the art. This is a very strong belief I've had."⁹¹

One of the first ways the diary helped Nin in everyday life is not through active rebellion, but by turning its pages—and, therefore, its intimacy and secrecy—into a place where grievances could be aired. She could question her experiences and feelings without

⁹⁰ Lamm Pineau, "A Mirror of Her Own," 215.

⁹¹ Keith Berwick, "A Conversation with Anaïs Nin," in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 57.

the threat of conflict and let her negative feelings loose: “I have floating anxieties, not schizophrenia, but hysteria. I must either act *or use writing to prevent explosions*.”⁹² About this, she also writes: “I use writing as a discharge of unbearable tensions too, to express neurosis.”⁹³ From these statements we can see that, even in the earlier parts of the diary, the writer conceives of it as an outlet, a space where discontent can be finally expressed instead of just repressed—as it would be if the only possible outlet was outward conflict. Although this might seem another means of repression, articulating discontent can also be understood as a step in recognizing patterns of inequality and injustice. Sheila Rowbotham has argued that silence itself is not to be dismissed when it comes to analyzing disgruntlement:

The oppressed without hope are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist. This mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking.⁹⁴

Consequently, the very acts of wording this dissatisfaction and questioning her experiences and feelings cannot be dismissed merely as repression, as they are of incalculable value in the struggle to mount active rebellion. This is something she revisits constantly, always stressing the fact that it makes her avoid conflict with her immediate environment,⁹⁵ which is also critical as conflict could sometimes translate into physical danger, and the preservation of the mental energy and capacity for critical thought is crucial in the struggle for agency.

⁹² Nin, *Mirages*, 274. Italics mine.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁹⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1973), 29.

⁹⁵ Nin, *Trapeze*, 205.

In line with this avoidance of conflict, Nin conceives her diary as a refuge, a space for self-preservation. Early on, it takes the form of a confidant when we see the writer expressing that she cannot talk to anyone in her life the way she does to the diary.⁹⁶ She even states that writing is a way of dealing with the feeling of being somewhat trapped: “I see my early writing as an early presentiment of the imprisonment to which human beings are subjected. It was my means of evasion, of burrowing a way out to freedom.”⁹⁷ This is modulated by the idea of the diary as a refuge: “...my vulnerability, which is my instrument of creation, the sensibility which is the very vibration of my writing, rejects *the ugliness, anger, distortion*, and wants to *retreat* from this exposure.”⁹⁸ Indeed, there are several instances where the outside world is described in these threatening terms, and the intimate writing as a way of preserving the self of the writer: “I write every day, all day. Something is seeking to break through, to flood me, to destroy my art form: my humanity.”⁹⁹ This self-preservation has been historically thought of as one of the main functions of diary writing, even by those theoreticians like Lejeune who have questioned its artistic value but have extensively accepted its reflective function as a refuge for meditation.¹⁰⁰ In Nin’s case, one of the main objectives is avoiding pain, both her own and others’. She pictures it a fortress— “I am returning to the diary, my solitary refuge from the world. I feel wounded in a million places. I need this to reconstruct myself.”¹⁰¹— or as a means of *escaping* into creation.¹⁰² Years later, in 1971, the writer would link the writing of her diary—along with its secrecy—and the act of rebellion: “The diary was possible because it was a secret. I was a rebel. I didn’t think like my father or my mother.

⁹⁶ Nin, *Mirages*, 278.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 378. Italics mine.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Lejeune, *On Diary*, 195.

¹⁰¹ Nin, *Trapeze*, 291.

¹⁰² Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 207.

I dropped out of high school. The diary was the one place where I could bring out my thoughts. It wouldn't be what it is today if it hadn't been kept secret."¹⁰³ In these lines, having the diary as a refuge directly leads into assertion and rebellion.

A more "active" move towards agency appears in the moments when Nin starts referring to her use of the diary as a means of creating a new world, another reality where there is space for her questioning and defiance: "...or my creativity in which I manifest great active strength. But there is a strong, modern woman in me—if only she could act directly in the world instead of obliquely. I did not face the world squarely; but created obscure, legendary writing."¹⁰⁴ At first Nin uses diary writing as a means of questioning the difference between her private and public worlds and the difference in opportunities they provide for her to use her voice,¹⁰⁵ which later on leads her to creating a new reality where she can use a voice that is free of her societal constraints. This she admits, for example, when she feels trapped in the domestic life she leads with Rupert Pole: "...I have to create an inner world because I reject this one. It is not mine."¹⁰⁶ Writers like Felski have pointed out that this also occurs in other forms of intimate writing like the confession, which: "comes increasingly to symbolize a private assertion of freedom which may challenge rather than simply conform to existing social norms."¹⁰⁷ Writers of the 60s and 70s also shared this view and stressed the importance for the creative personality of having a means of breaking with the censoring fear of being judged and attacked by their surrounding reality.¹⁰⁸ Schneider would write that Nin took advantage

¹⁰³ Nancy Williamson, Evelyn Clark and Barbara Reyes, "A Conversation with Anaïs Nin," in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 80.

¹⁰⁴ Nin, *Mirages*, 274.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁰⁶ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 37.

¹⁰⁷ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Shapiro, "The Charmed Circle of Anais Nin," in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996); 154.

of her insights to live more freely.¹⁰⁹ This sense is also found in Nin's view of that new world that writing the diary provides her with, as the new inner reality is soon being discussed as something that can be added to outward reality: "...an instrument for enlarging the world and peopling it."¹¹⁰ Thus, writing becomes a way of having agency over reality and that creativity and art-making usually translate into the creation of an environment that offers her more possibilities than her own: "I write tonight to reassure myself that it is true and palpable. With words, I must touch this."¹¹¹ This is underlined—even if the ultimate intention was to censor this behavior as rebelliousness, a common sign of neurosis in women according to postwar Freudian analysis—by one of her therapists, Dr. Staff, who asserts: "Your art is an act of defiance. It is your act of self-assertion."¹¹² But Nin runs with this tool for rebellion—"...for then my life would match my writing and my writing my life, and it would all be integrated"—¹¹³ eventually coming to the conclusion that she had always used her diary as a way of rebelling against the constraints of her actual—outward—life.¹¹⁴ When Rupert Pole attempts to confine her to caretaking and housekeeping, she goes back to the diary as a means of accessing other worlds, either by copying previous volumes and re-living the lives that they recorded¹¹⁵ or by writing in the moment to actively rebel against the concepts of fate—which now we would call essentialism—that seem to be trapping her.¹¹⁶ This part of her process towards rebellion was crucial to achieve agency, as Nin considered that outward, collective change, if it were to happen, had to begin in the inside of the individual.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ Schneider, "Anais Nin in the *Diary*," 179.

¹¹⁰ Nin, *Mirages*, 290.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 404.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 303.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 396.

¹¹⁴ Nin, *Trapeze*, 64.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹¹⁷ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 46.

Writing is also used to justify the act of writing, to assert the author's sense of value in her art and to remind herself of its importance. When faced with rejection, Nin uses her diary writing to state that she will not sacrifice herself to the American public¹¹⁸ and to distance herself from outside judgement: "The strange thing is that I have arrived at an unshakable faith in my writing. No one can influence me or turn me away from what I am doing."¹¹⁹ The diary starts to become a barricade of resistance against outside attacks. Even early on, we can see that Nin stands up to frightening figures like Edmund Wilson through the conviction that there is value in her work—"You can't destroy my confidence in what I am doing."¹²⁰ which she links to the diary, saying she is glad she had concealed it from Wilson and, therefore, from his attacks.¹²¹ In the long run, this was one of the key elements that allowed Nin to stick to her writing and, therefore, distinguish herself from other female writers of the Postwar: "Despite feeling defeated in the literary marketplace, Nin retained a belief in her artistry, going so far as to consider herself the equal of Djuna Barnes, Anna Kavan, and Virginia Woolf as a force in what she considered new writing."¹²² What's more, Nin turns the diary into a weapon that helps her break the siege against her writing, recognizing the value of her diary as art and planning to publish it as such. In late 1952, she already starts preparing an abridged version with this intention: "... I feel absolutely ostracized in America as Anaïs Nin, the esoteric writer. I must achieve freedom from this life of servitude somehow."¹²³ With this mission, she starts to reorganize her intimate writing, which up until that moment had been a private means for creative freedom, and turning it into a public assertion of her value as a writer

¹¹⁸ Nin, *Mirages*, 271.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹²² Benjamin Franklin V, "Introduction," in *Trapeze: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1947-1955* (Ohio: Swallow Press and Ohio University Press, 2017), xiii.

¹²³ Nin, *Trapeze*, 151.

and a statement of her legacy: “If I do not write another word, I have produced something to be proud of.”¹²⁴ On this task, Lamm Pineau would write years later: “Nin used her *Diary* to claim voice and visibility out of cultural silence and invisibility. She used performance to challenge the marginality of female experience by moving it to the center of public discourse.”¹²⁵ Importantly, the diary also maintains its capacity to reassure the writer of her own worth, becoming a space in which she constantly reminds herself of the importance of her artistry: “In a strange way, I am quite aware of the stature of my work.”¹²⁶ These uses of the diary would turn out to be a distinguishing characteristic of Nin’s career and legacy, as not only did they allow her to break with the critical silence she had experience in the postwar years and enter popular culture during the 1960s and 1970s, but they allowed her to maintain a connection to writing even when ostracized by the literary scene.¹²⁷ This set her apart among postwar female writers: “She neither committed physical nor creative suicide. She was indefatigable (as every artist must be), and she left a body of work that other women writers can build upon.”¹²⁸

Finally, Anaïs Nin’s diary was a means to achieve agency even outside of writing, as we find several instances in which the author turns to its pages to reaffirm herself and her value as a person despite the personal attacks she continuously suffered. The diary was a therapeutic tool to reconstruct herself against damage; she proclaims that self-analysis was a source of personal power¹²⁹ and allowed her to keep writing.¹³⁰ Meyer

¹²⁴ Ibid., 196.

¹²⁵ Lamm Pineau, “A Mirror of Her Own,” 248.

¹²⁶ Nin, *Trapeze*, 277.

¹²⁷ Schneider, “Anais Nin in the *Diary*,” 181.

¹²⁸ Jong, “A Story Never Told Before,” 213.

¹²⁹ Nin, *Mirages*, 333.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 356.

Spacks has written that Nin's diary was a means for the writer to convince herself of the importance of her own experience,¹³¹ and Nin herself corroborated this sentiment:

The demons were going to be kept within the journal, as a secret. What changed my attitude was the realization that *these things that I had condemned were actually more valuable. The secret and intimate portrait I had made of people, as well as of myself, was far deeper and more revealing* than these roles that we all played in life.¹³²

This is a sense we often find in the pages of the diary, where the author constantly expresses the need that all the suffering she endures become useful in some way.¹³³ Consequently, writing was a way to maintain a sense of self-worth throughout her life, a defining characteristic of her work that Miller would describe as emancipating the self through creation.¹³⁴ The diary then was not only a way for Nin to take refuge from the attacks of her environment, but—most importantly—a site of *active resistance*, where the author saves herself and her integrity by questioning her experiences, both personal and professional, and by creating a new reality that does not endanger her and allows her to continue to work and, indeed, to *exist*.

3.3. Woman writer: A Divided Identity

3.3.1. Playing a feminine role and Identity fragmentation

One of the main subjects in Nin's writing around issues of identity is that related to what Smith and Watson refer to as "the politics of fragmentation," which

¹³¹ Shapiro, "The Charmed Circle," 160.

¹³² Nin, "Interview for Sweden," 15. Italics mine.

¹³³ Nin, *Trapeze*, 45.

¹³⁴ Henry Miller, "Un Etre Etoilique," in *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 150.

...reveals the cultural constructedness of any coherent, stable and universal subject. It may also reveal how problematic it is to maintain a decisive, unified point of departure for identity as the ground of a liberatory autobiographical practice since the exclusions of unified points are legion.¹³⁵

Indeed, we see how Nin uses the diary to explore her own identity and, most importantly, the cultural forces that pull different facets of her personality apart from each other and designate them as opposites. The main division is the woman/artist split, which is extensively discussed in the diary. At first, we see this division particularly through her relationship with her first husband, Hugo, which is plagued by conflicts derived from Nin's artistry. When Hugo demands that she not publish her book about D.H. Lawrence because it would disrupt his life as a banker, Nin states: "He demanded a sort of annihilation."¹³⁶ It is through this relationship that Nin herself starts to consider that there is a split in her personality, and she often writes of herself as either a woman or an artist, but not both at the same time: "It looks to me as if I will be fulfilled only as an artist, never as a woman;"¹³⁷ "This morning I was an artist, but I had to come to terms with the woman."¹³⁸ In these words, we see that Nin is conscious of the fact that there are both a feminine and an artistic part to her complete personality and that the trouble between them seems to be that they are mutually exclusionary, which is due to the gender roles of the postwar era.

Nin's idea of her "woman part" is undeniably linked to the feminine ideal of the late 1940s and the 1950s, and it is an ideal that she does seem to strive towards, especially in her relationships with men. This, in turn, makes her aware of the fact that that

¹³⁵ Smith and Watson, *Life Writing in the Long Run*, 307.

¹³⁶ Nin, *Mirages*, 269.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 293.

¹³⁸ Nin, *Trapeze*, 29.

“femininity” is also a *role*: “I keep pretenses, talking like a wife, cook, nurse, mistress, friend, but I am dead.”¹³⁹ When writing about her relationship with Hugo, she writes of her role as a wife in acting or enacting terms: “I gave in to his fantasy of a Japanese wife (obedient, docile, as opposed to the arrogant, independent American woman he still hates). But we were both frauds: I wanted pleasure and freedom, not servitude. He wanted total, exclusive devotion...”¹⁴⁰ This inability to fit into the womanly ideal often leads the writer to consider herself not entirely a woman.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Nin tries to adjust to a “feminine” role even within the literary world, where she attempts at playing the part of nurturer muse—like with Miller—or even patron—as with Gonzalo. Nin would reflect on this muse role years later:

...I played a feminine role. I was shy, I listened, and at that time my letters were merely to encourage his writing. I couldn’t keep up with him, and I couldn’t very well answer this avalanche, but I understood it—and made him feel I did. My real answer, because of the shyness, was in the diary, so the diary runs parallel and is a completion of the letters.¹⁴²

Demetrakopolous attributes this attitude to the self-sacrifice expected of female artists, who often turns to the nurturing, mother role.¹⁴³ Although this line of thought might appear too essentialist—and certainly dismissible—, there is an undeniable social current behind this behavior which explains the tendency in writers like Nin to take on the role of muse, as it was the only artistic role allowed to them at the time due to its connection to nurture—which was seen as feminine—as opposed to masculine creativity.

¹³⁹ Nin, *Mirages*, 350.

¹⁴⁰ Nin, *Trapeze*, 114.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴² Frank Roberts, “Writers at Work: Anaïs Nin Talks with Frank Roberts,” in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 4.

¹⁴³ Demetrakopolous, “Anaïs Nin and the Feminine Quest for Consciousness,” 31.

Nin, though incapable of breaking with her creative part, becomes an example of identity split due to her own acceptance of the idea that she *should* be able to let go of artistry and that not doing so constitutes a failure as a woman:

There is a deep split of the roles I play. I have suddenly rebelled at the role of ideal mother and muse towards Henry and Gonzalo. I played a lesser role with Hugo, that of the sick child, the suffering woman (when he didn't know the suffering was at my Don Juan life.) And there is my role of showing the world a legendary figure, a perfect jewel, an idealized woman, to which the world responded. The dream others have of me stimulates them to create.¹⁴⁴

This conception contributes further to the fragmentation, as she not only accepts that there is some kind of split in her identity, but also that she has failed in repairing it because she never comes to accept the female roles of the times: "...I did fail to be the wife he needed. He needed a nurse, servant, slave, house-keeper, cook, listener."¹⁴⁵ In fact, this is a recurring problem; by the time Nin comes to an agreement with Hugo about her artistic pursuits she is already in a relationship with Rupert Pole as well, who also tries to cast her into the role of domestic wife that she cannot help but hate: "I feel nausea at the idea of the house, the driving, the evenings with his family, the evenings of music with uninteresting musicians, housework, the paltriness of it all, the narrowness, and worse than that, Rupert will not help me create a different life."¹⁴⁶ When trying to reconstruct her identity to leave these troubles behind, she refers to this as "marrying the diary."¹⁴⁷ That is, there is no possible reunification of the split parts of herself for much of the diary, as the only possible answer she can come up with is retreating into artistry and essentially

¹⁴⁴ Nin, *Mirages*, 297-298.

¹⁴⁵ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 4.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴⁷ Nin, *Mirages*, 305.

abandoning her life, which would confront her with the loneliness she so fears. Thus, the split between domestic femininity—which accompanies companionship and sexual and romantic relationships—and artistry remains constant throughout her personal life, even if she does eventually break with the muse role in her professional life.

According to Felski, one of the main characteristics of the feminist confession is that it deals both with women's struggles to define their identities and with their need for intimacy.¹⁴⁸ Although Nin's diary does not belong to the category of feminist confession, it is not a surprise that the feminist movement would rescue it as an example of intimate, autobiographical writing by women, as these characteristics are certainly present within its pages and gender becomes a main source of conflict in Nin's identity. Throughout the writing of the diary, Nin seems extremely aware that there is a dichotomy between femininity and artistry and that the threat for the woman artist is becoming unappealing to men and completely removed from her sense of femininity:

...I had a feeling that I was living out a search, a question, a struggle which was faced by many women today who wanted to be part of the contemporary world, who wanted to be in action, but wanted to remain feminine. And in that sense, I mean a part of man's life, a collaborator, a friend, and not expanding or extending herself to the point of being no longer a wife, a mother, or a sister, or a friend (which happened to some women who went into professional life and lost contact with their intimate life.¹⁴⁹

The threat becomes clear in that there is a choice to be made. The split seems unavoidable and the possibility of reconciling both sides of the woman writer identity seem extremely complicated—full of concessions—or even impossible. When asked about this specific

¹⁴⁸ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 108.

¹⁴⁹ Nin, "Interview for Sweden," 17.

dichotomy in 1971, Nin stated that her relationships with men had not diverted her work but not because this was not to be expected but because of her own conviction in sticking to her writing and her deliberateness in choosing men who would not completely divert her from it.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, we can assume that the pressures to abandon artistry were indeed there and that, even though Nin managed not to succumb to them, she might be considered an anomaly even amongst women writers in that regard.

The sense of fragmentation is further aided by the pathologization of creativity in women that came at the hands of Freudian thought—of which Nin was an adept follower—during the postwar period. The split between woman and artist is accompanied by the thought that the artistic side is somehow unnatural or that even writing itself is unnatural.¹⁵¹ This is further imposed on her by one of her therapists—Dr. Staff—who is privy to all these sentiments that she usually confines to the diary. When Nin steps away from Edmund Wilson after being sexually assaulted by him, Staff interprets it as Nin running away from a mature and powerful man, and accuses her of *wanting* to maintain the split in her personality through having relationships with supposedly weak men whom she can control.¹⁵² This must have wounded Nin’s psyche, who was effectively told by her analyst that not putting up with sexual assault is a sign of her lack of feminine submission and, therefore, a pathological character trait. This extends to other parts of her “rebelliousness” like her writing—so much so that she starts to view her literary ambition as a symptom of her psychological misadjustment¹⁵³ and, what’s more, even writing itself as an illness.¹⁵⁴ Years later, Nin would reflect on the concept of psychological misadjustment in relation to her creativity: “I used to, for instance, define the difference

¹⁵⁰ Williamson, Clark and Reyes, “A Conversation with Anaïs Nin,” 108.

¹⁵¹ Nin, *Mirages*, 297.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 301.

¹⁵³ Nin, *Trapeze*, 171.

¹⁵⁴ Nin, *Mirages*, 322.

between being active and creative. You can't be creative without being active and aggressive (I didn't like the word aggressive)."¹⁵⁵ In these words, we continue to see the Freudian tendency to divide gender roles between activity—masculinity—and passivity—femininity. Through this lens, Nin's main psychological conflict when dealing with writing arises from the split between wanting to be considered feminine—which also means passive and non-threatening—but also creating art—which was linked to aggressiveness and activity and, therefore, inherently masculine. Thus, even in therapy, the author was once again confronted with the idea that the two parts which she considered most integral to her personality—femininity and artistry—were in direct opposition to one another and, therefore, she was an anomaly.

It is the acknowledgement of these different selves that turn Nin's work—and her diary specifically—into an example of identitarian fragmentation, which could be understood as the double consciousness that arises from seeing the self through both culturally prescribed acceptance and rejection.¹⁵⁶ The source of the split is, once again, the artist/woman dichotomy: "For a woman artist is, after all, a woman—that is her 'problem'—and if she denies her own gender she inevitably confronts an identity crisis."¹⁵⁷ The fragmentation of the woman writer becomes, therefore, one of the main themes of Nin's diary and writing, as she comes to understand her writing as indivisible from her fragmented self: "These women were all aspects of me which I developed to their utmost. [...] But this way I can write."¹⁵⁸ Consequently, the diary becomes a testimony of the psychological ramifications that the strict gender coding of the postwar

¹⁵⁵ Keith Berwick, "A Conversation with Anaïs Nin," 68.

¹⁵⁶ Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves," 75.

¹⁵⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 66.

¹⁵⁸ Nin, *Mirages*, 285.

decades had on Nin and the negative consequences that this would cause her personal wellbeing and her relationships with others and with her own writing.

3.3.2. Writing the Self: *The Diary* and identity configuration

Susan Stanford Friedman has said about Nin's writing: "From its beginnings, her diary functioned as a safe word-shop for self-creation, a place where she could attempt to integrate the multiplicity of selves she lived out into a meaningful whole."¹⁵⁹ Nin's autobiographical writing in her diary became a means of self-creation that helped the author break with the identitarian impositions of her times and often caused her to feel internally split. This was done through a variety of explorations that the writer could carry out in the intimacy of her diary, such as: 1) detaching herself from postwar notions of identity that poisoned her self-concept as a writer, 2) coming to conceptualize writing as a space for the creation of her own identity, and 3) achieving an understanding of identity as a creation and, therefore, reconciling herself with the concept of fragmentation by accepting identity as unfixed and fluctuating.

We see Nin's turning away from prescribed identity early in the postwar volumes. Already in 1945, she starts pondering her "roles,"¹⁶⁰ a word she often used to refer to her performances as devoted wife and muse in different relationships. The diary immediately becomes a place where she confesses these roles and, more importantly, starts distinguishing them from her own individual character. This freedom from performance has been extensively discussed when it comes to women writers, as it has been posed that only intimate forms of writing can liberate the psyche from its social constraints¹⁶¹ and, therefore, provide a more faithful portrait of the personality that wrote them.¹⁶² This is

¹⁵⁹ Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves," 44.

¹⁶⁰ Nin, *Mirages*, 311.

¹⁶¹ Spencer, "'Femininity' and the Woman Writer," 249.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 250.

certainly the case with Nin, who expressed not only the importance of her deconstruction of female roles but also the key part that her diary played in the process:

I think it was very important at the time when women did not feel free to express their feelings and also were not trained by our environment and by our cultural mores to express those feelings so that we had become in a way very inarticulate. And so the diary form became—[...]—at least a secret occupation where women could be truthful, because the social mores had made her play roles. She knew that there was another self that was very difficult to bring to the surface. So that's what happened to me, that the secret self was existing, talking, learning, examining. Diary writing is an underground occupation. You don't really do it for publication, so it helped me in becoming very articulate in the things women have difficulty being articulate about, and that's why I said I spoke for so many women because I felt I was really trying to say these things.¹⁶³

These words—along with Nin's constant confiding into the diary about the toll her performances take on her and her use of the diary as a space to acknowledge and question this situation—helps us better understand how Nin's autobiographical and intimate writing helped her to detach from the rigid set of behaviors and ambitions that accompanied the ideal postwar woman.

She also expanded on the importance of letting go of cultural ideas of femininity. She admitted in her diary that her troubles dissolved once she could accept herself—which she did by letting go of her wifely and womanly ideals—¹⁶⁴ and when she focused on her artistic self-concept when faced with ostracism in her personal life.¹⁶⁵ In these

¹⁶³ Karla Jay, "Two Interviews with Anaïs Nin," in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 133.

¹⁶⁴ Nin, *Trapeze*, 189.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

instances, not only is she acknowledging her problems of fragmentation, but also relating them directly to the cultural constructions of feminine gender roles. Because of this relationship between a female need to step away from social impositions related to gender and the use of intimate writing to do so, Nin would write of her self-creation through the diary as a courageous act that proved the necessity of applying artistry and creativity to one's own life; she also maintained that this was particularly the case with women writers due to the presumed contradiction between concepts of femininity and artistry.¹⁶⁶ It is the prerogative of autobiographical writing that it provides a place for examining different frames of identity, and Nin took full advantage of it. In fact, much of the critical response to Nin has focused on this aspect of her diary, which has been described as a development from fragmentation to reconstruction¹⁶⁷ and as the shedding of "false selves"—¹⁶⁸ these false selves being, in this case, the roles she continuously mentions in her journal. It is also this reception that links Nin to the literary exploration of female identity through autobiographical writing, contributing to what is—arguably—the most enduring theme of her writing: the fact that she used the diary to explore her artistic character and contrapose it to the dominant category of woman.¹⁶⁹ In Stanford Friedman's words:

Nin, [...], is aware that these fragmentary selves reflect the meanings of woman's nature constructed by man's fantasy and desire. The *Diary* records Nin's attempt to create a whole identity in a culture that defines WOMAN in terms of her fragmented roles as mother, daughter, wife, and sister.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Anaïs Nin, "Introduction," in *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, by Judy Chicago (London: The Women's Press, 1982 [1975]), xi.

¹⁶⁷ Miller, "An Etre Etoilique," 152.

¹⁶⁸ Demetrakopolous, "Anais Nin and the Feminine Quest for Consciousness," 24.

¹⁶⁹ Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves," 44.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 45. Capitalization not mine.

Nin also spoke of this in liberatory terms in 1970: "...once I could go beyond my own idea of femininity, [...] then I could act without this guilt, this ambivalence, this conflict into which most of our energies go."¹⁷¹ Thus, the use of the diary as a place to question and detach from postwar ideals of femininity that prevented and even villainized creativity within womanhood is one of the main themes in Nin's identity unification.

The second way in which Nin tackles identity reconstruction in and through her diary is by presenting autobiographical writing as a fiction of the self, that is, the development of an identity over which the author has complete control. In "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," Gusdorf describes the autobiographical as "...a work of art and at the same time a work on enlightenment: it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believed and wished himself to be and to have been."¹⁷² This is something Nin herself also acknowledged and an aspect of the diary that she struggled with, measuring it against conceptions of objective truth-telling and admitting that she is aware she offers incomplete portraits of the people she describes in her diary based on her specific relationship with them:¹⁷³ "At times I feel I can't do this because *outside of feeling* there is no reality for me."¹⁷⁴ Nevertheless, this doesn't become problematic for this particular analysis of Nin, as the concept of identity that we find in the diary is precisely that which comes from the idea of self-fashioning through writing. Although she is aware that she is offering *her version* of reality, it is this version that speaks to the writer's methods of self-creation. This creation of the self is confirmed by both Nin and her critics:

¹⁷¹ Clare Loeb, "Anaïs Nin on Women's Liberation," in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 28.

¹⁷² Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," 45.

¹⁷³ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 121.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Italics not mine.

...you can not be a valuable member of the universal life unless you first become a complete, unified and balanced entity. *The diary helped me to construct this identity* so that I was able both to relate to others and to receive the ideas of my time.¹⁷⁵

Miss Nin began “to build for herself an ‘image,’ a ‘persona’ which enabled her to face the world.”¹⁷⁶

...each act of art or idea-creation simultaneously constitutes an act of self-creation.¹⁷⁷

Indeed, when discussing Nin’s diary, Miller notes that acts of self-creation are her most important artistic production: “It is in this sense again that the human document rivals the work of art, or in times such as ours, *replaces* the work of art. For, in a profound sense, this *is* the work of art which never gets written – because the artist whose task it is to create it never gets born.”¹⁷⁸ Critically, the persona is figured *while* writing¹⁷⁹ and this means that the author herself becomes an example of identity crafting. The self is constructed in the writing, yes, but there is no acknowledgement of its objective authenticity and no factual evidence that can be used to support it in the outer reality. Identity creation becomes simply another means of artistic creation, a fiction of the self that can be incorporated into the persona of the writer or become part of the text:

...the “self” so often invoked in self-expressive theories of autobiography is not a noun, a thing-in-itself, waiting to be materialized through the text. There is no

¹⁷⁵ Nin, “Interview for Sweden,” 20. Italics mine.

¹⁷⁶ Paul Grimley Kuntz, “Art as Public Dream: The Practice and Theory of Anaïs Nin,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32, no. 4 (Summer 1974): 527.

¹⁷⁷ M. Lee Potts, “Developing creativity: Anaïs Nin a model,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 41, no. 2 (1977): 85.

¹⁷⁸ Miller, “Un Etre Etoilique,” 151. Italics not mine.

¹⁷⁹ Schneider, “Anais Nin in the *Diary*,” 181.

essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and “true.”¹⁸⁰

That is, the act of writing is not the act of *discovering* the self, it is the act of creating it through artistry, turning writing into a tool that both takes apart societal constructions of identity and also deciphers what the author means to incorporate into a self-created I.

Finally, this new conception of identity as another work of art by the woman writer ends up effectively challenging essentialist views of identity—which, in turn, not only further liberates the writing but also the writer by deconstructing the idea of a fixed, unmovable identity and, therefore, the very possibility of fragmentation. In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson utilize Stuart Hall’s idea of identity as a “production” which is ever-changing and dependent on performance¹⁸¹ to establish the fact that, within autobiographical acts, shape is given to identity in a “contextual, provisional, [and] performative” manner¹⁸² and that even though readers often conceive identity as a unified entity, coherence within identity is nothing but a myth.¹⁸³ Although it is true that, in her later years, we do find instances of Nin referring to the diary as her “authentic” self,¹⁸⁴ we also find instances *within* the diary that hint at Nin’s idea of identity as a concept that is far from essentialist, such as when she writes of Proust and incorporates the idea that

¹⁸⁰ Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance (1995)” 108.

¹⁸¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 392, quoted in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 34.

¹⁸² Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 81.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸⁴ Berwick, “A Conversation with Anaïs Nin,” 59.

one person can embody many personalities and that "... personality is reducible to a discontinuous series of psychological states."¹⁸⁵

Thus, it is possible to argue that Nin did use her diary as a way of parting with the notion of a unified identity that inevitably would lead into feelings of further fragmentation. In autobiographical theory, it is now widely accepted that that: "The truth any autobiography produces is a truth restructured and revised in its telling, a mixture of past and present, a process of self-invention in which the content of a life—the very subject of autobiography—is not impassive but *mutable*."¹⁸⁶ This mutability is also generally ascribed to Nin's diary writing:

In the journals she does not, indeed, present herself as a consistent, logical personality holding certain formed, firm opinions which can be expressed in a similar form to any interlocutor. Quite the reverse: she writes herself as a sort of conspirator in the self-revelation of others.¹⁸⁷

In fact, Nin noted the power of autobiographical writing for "rebirth"—or, reconstruction—¹⁸⁸ and acknowledged that there were very distinct selves contained in diary,¹⁸⁹ once again abiding by a Proustian conception of identity as unfixed. Due to all of this, it can be argued that Nin's diary turns into an example of identity construction through writing, turning her journal and her self-creation into what Demetrakopolous has described as a "...sort of *becoming that is being*."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 133.

¹⁸⁶ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 84. Italics mine.

¹⁸⁷ Molyneux and Casterton, "Looking again at Anais Nin," 226.

¹⁸⁸ Lamm Pineau, "A Mirror of Her Own," 241.

¹⁸⁹ Freeman and Nin, "A Dialogue with Anais Nin," 29.

¹⁹⁰ Demetrakopolous, "Anais Nin and the Feminine Quest for Consciousness," 39.

3.4. The theatrical self-fashioning of a Woman Writer

Anaïs Nin not only created a persona that could help her gain control of her life and interactions with others through writing. She also incorporated aesthetic elements into her self-assertion through her personal appearance. Goffman wrote that the individuals offer clues about themselves through appearance and even referred to self-presentation as “documentary evidence” offered to onlookers.¹⁹¹ In a similar manner, Nin complemented her self-fashioning by using her body, her styling and her clothing as expressive means to enact and embody the traits that she wished to project in her everyday life. If, as Fred Davis suggests, clothes can be taken as a statement of personality to the point of being analogous to what we say or write about ourselves,¹⁹² we need to turn to the fashion and self-presentation of the author to complete the portrait of her self-creation. In her diary, Nin often talks of beauty and of how, in her conception, it is something completely fabricated: “I *became* beautiful. I *made* myself so.”¹⁹³ The link between appearance and identity seems to lie in the fact that both are creations of Nin’s. This aspect of her life and creativity has been referred to as the “...theatricality of her self-presentation,”¹⁹⁴ and is a testament to the many ways in which the author created and asserted her public personae.

3.4.1. A different kind of woman: dressing for Agency

Since dress and styling can be seen as both a stimulus and a *response* to one’s environment,¹⁹⁵ it is important to address one of the key parts of self-fashioning in Anaïs Nin’s life: the power it gave her to distinguish her person from more normative women and the aesthetic impositions of the time. Her personal style consistently contradicted the dominant mandates. For instance, we find the following description of her clothing during

¹⁹¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 13.

¹⁹² Davis, *Fashion, Culture, Identity*, 3.

¹⁹³ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 144. Italics mine.

¹⁹⁴ Lamm Pineau, “A Mirror of Her Own,” 233.

¹⁹⁵ Hartmann, “Clothing: Personal Problem and Social Issue,” 295.

1945: “I bought a cotton dress for seventeen dollars, shaped á la Recamier and of that peach salmon rose which suits me, and came out in my new costume looking, as Tom said, all of fourteen years of age.”¹⁹⁶ The “recamier” silhouette refers to Juliette Récamier, a fashion icon of revolutionary France who was famous for her Empire dresses, that is, the white muslin dresses with a very high waist that we also associate with England’s Regency period. (Figure 15). This type of dress was not only old-fashioned by 1945, but directly opposed the tenets of practicality, utility and durability. Indeed, a Récamier-shaped dress would change the silhouette of the 1940s noticeably, since its waist would be cinched quite high—directly below the breasts—and the skirt would drape. On the contrary, the 1940s silhouette was highly technical, cinching at the natural waist and accompanied by skirts—or even pants—that stayed closer to the skin, saving fabric—precious in wartime—and eliminating the possibility of the dress getting caught during daily activity. (Figure 16). This makes Nin look very traditionally feminine—with softer fabrics and a romantic silhouette—when compared to the more masculinized version of feminine attire that had taken hold in America during the war years. A similar instance happens when Nin describes her outfit at a party as a “low-cut peach cotton dress,”¹⁹⁷ utilizing a shade that was more whimsical than the more neutral colors that had taken hold over the general public. In this way, Nin is *asserting* herself as an outsider with a more fanciful and artistic approach to personal style than most American women at the time.¹⁹⁸ Consequently, Nin’s way of dress during this period could be considered a way of

¹⁹⁶ Nin, *Mirages*, 278.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁹⁸ Ironically, she is inadvertently also distinguishing herself as the wife of a banker and, therefore, someone who could access colors and shapes that were not generally available outside of fashion plates, celebrity pictures and well-off elites. This is a stark contrast to her theoretical rejection of bourgeois life but also further proof that clothing speaks both to personal construction and societal roles and status.

asserting her artistic, bohemian personality in opposition to the notions of utilitarianism and useful femininity of the time.



Figure 15. Nin in a dress à la Récamier



Figure 16. Typical 1940s attire.

There is also a power-centered element to Nin's aesthetic self-fashioning. She often describes clothing as a tool that helps her embody the personality of a more powerful, more confident woman. When she is nervous and scared of having to give her first literary lecture, she speaks of dress in terms of empowerment:

So I faced my fear of lecturing. I accepted to appear November 3 [1945] at the Young Men's Hebrew Association Poetry Readings. I awakened in the morning thinking, this is my new birthday. *I was calm all day. I made myself beautiful, quietly. I wore my black tailored suit with a fuchsia blouse.*¹⁹⁹

Another instance in which Nin makes the connection between clothing and power is found in a later volume of her diary when she speaks of another woman:

Caresse Crosby, author of *The Passionate Years* in a passionless era, appears. Her dress is airy, winged. It is of a black but transparent material, inflated and crisp by new methods as organdie once by starching and ironing. It gives her the silhouette of a young woman. Her hair, though grey, is glossy, brushed, starched and the opposite of limp, *because the spirit of Caresse is airy and alive*. Age can wrinkle her face, freckle her hands, ruthlessly drop the lids over her eyes, tire her, *but it cannot kill her laughter, her enthusiasm, her mobility*. Her second husband, Harry Crosby, committed suicide at the side of another woman. Her beloved son Bill died asphyxiated by a faulty gas heater in Paris. *But Caresse wears a huge bow at her neck because her dress and body and hair reflect the alertness and the discipline of her spirit.*²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Nin, *Mirages*, 303. Italics mine.

²⁰⁰ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 5. Italics mine.

In these lines, we can see that clothing is cited along with personality attributes of strength and perseverance: the silhouette can confer youth, a voluminous hair is a sign of aliveness, wearing accessories and putting care into dressing can not only confer energy but also speak to strength and perseverance in the face of tragedy and suffering. Importantly, and since we do not find evidence of a personal chat between the two women, these are all inferences that Nin makes from Crosby's appearance and personal life. Therefore, we could infer that it is in this way that Nin herself conceives the act of dressing in her mind: a source of power and autonomy against adversity.

Another way Nin asserts the self through clothing can be found in the manner in which she conceives of clothing as a mechanism to send messages to the world and to others. This goes in line with the communicative aspect of clothing posed by theoreticians like Davis, Gibbins, Storm and Wilson.²⁰¹ For example, Nin usually refers to clothing in terms of messaging her emotions even during situations when she cannot outwardly complain, establish boundaries or simply escape. When she is forced to attend a lecture, she protests her sadness through clothing:

Kimon Friar asked me to go to his lecture on love at the Y.M.H.A. I was in a sad mood, so I dressed as Mary Stuart, who had her head cut off by a jealous Queen Elizabeth, in a tight black dress with long sleeves half covering the hand, a heart-shaped black hat edged with pearls, and a white veil.²⁰²

Through dress, Nin is positioning herself—however historically inaccurately—in the position of a martyr, which is what Mary Stuart considered herself during her imprisonment and before her execution. Wilson writes of fashion that one of its main

²⁰¹ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 27; Gibbins. "Communication Aspects of Women's Clothes," 301; Storm, *Functions of Dress*, vii; Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 3.

²⁰² Nin, *Mirages*, 309.

functions is that of displacing emotion into aesthetics,²⁰³ and this is exactly what Nin seems to be doing by dressing up as Mary Stuart and using black in a way that still effectively communicates her inner feelings—therefore, avoiding repression—but allows her not to speak and possibly be faced with a bigger conflict. Interestingly, the use of black becomes of great importance when it comes to Nin’s communication of uglier feelings. On several occasions in 1956, Nin incorporated that same shade into her clothing when being sexually pursued by a woman she has no interest in as a way of trying to dissuade her.²⁰⁴ Consequently, it follows that Nin utilized clothing as a means of expression and assertion when both spoken and written words became elusive or even impossible to express, providing the author with a means of embodying her resistance and the feelings that could not be externalized.

Finally, the role of black in Nin’s life cannot be overstated as a means of assertion of her personality and herself. We often find pictures of the author dressed in black, and these constitute an important way in which Nin went against the grain during her life and through her self-fashioning. (Figure 17). This is important because black became, during the postwar era and even in the years prior, a strong means of resistance and revolt. Hartmann wrote that, in perfect conditions, clothing can become a means for the development of personality.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Nin, other artists and activists turned it into a means of assertion that became not only personal but also outwardly social and political. Indeed, fashion can be a site for political struggle,²⁰⁶ and it often was during this period where aesthetics was so generally conforming. Therefore, even if it lacked an over political purpose, nonconforming style of dress *became* political through its assertion of

²⁰³ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 9.

²⁰⁴ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 97.

²⁰⁵ Hartmann, “Clothing: Personal Problem and Social Issue,” 297.

²⁰⁶ Jobling, Nesbitt, and Wong, *Fashion, Identity, Image*, 5.

self over normativity. As Wilson wrote of fashion in the political landscape: "...its function [is] to resolve formally, at the imaginary level, social contradiction that cannot be resolved."²⁰⁷ A clear example of this took place during the mid-60s, with the aesthetics of the Black Panther Party, which used this color as both a revindication of pride and a sign of militarism within their movement— which aligns with other ways of using aesthetics such as implementing certain styles of dress for the intellectualization and configuration of social aspirations.²⁰⁸ However, Hillman points specifically that black was a vindictory color during the postwar years in the aesthetic of the figure of the beatnik—a subcultural group whose alternative style acted as a political statement.²⁰⁹ Importantly, the figure of the beatnik woman was exactly that of an female artist dressed in black, much like Nin herself. (Figure 18). This type of dress, muted and mysterious, was in direct opposition to the colorful femininity of the Postwar, which associated womanliness with soft, feminine colors and the bright fabrics and colorful patterns associated with middle-class domesticity (as seen in Chapter 1). Consequently, black becomes a motif of assertion of the self, communicating that the wearer might be an outsider, a personality not imprisoned in the suburban conceptualization of femininity.

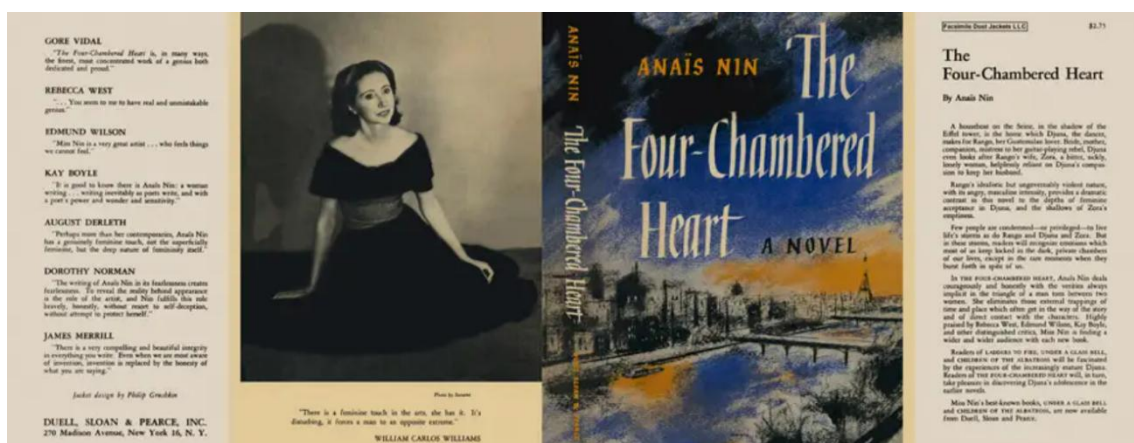


Figure 17. Anaïs Nin's photograph on the back of her book *The Four-Chambered Heart*

²⁰⁷ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 9.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 43.



Figure 18. Diane di Prima in black.

3.4.2. The writer's image: styling identity

Nin also used black in the construction of her artistic persona, which was the main focus of her dressing practices. Black is heavily involved in the portrayal of the artistic personality, and this was due to the Romantic Era, when black had been used as a color of mourning but also a color that emphasized sentiments of mystery, injustice, intellectuality and imagination. It is because of this that we often see that color in portraits of 19th century female writers or governesses. (Figures 19 and 20). In Nin's case, black became a staple in the presentation of herself as a writer. Lamm Pineau writes that Nin admitted to "dressing up" for her public performances and described this practice as the author's "...desire to incarnate her autobiographical heroine" and prove that she was indeed a self-created woman.²¹⁰ We also find descriptions of her dressing up as an artist that involve the use of black, such as a black cape that, according to Rupert Pole, became so much her trademark that it was sold at an Anaïs Nin event in 1972 with the name "The

²¹⁰ Lamm Pineau, "A Mirror of her Own," 237.

Nin Cape.”²¹¹ (Figure 21). This reminds us of Goffman’s concept of “mask,” which the author describes as the individual presenting themselves according to their ideal self, which is in tune with their desires and ambitions and therefore becomes a truer self.²¹² Gibbins expands on this to include fashion, stating that the items and styles we like speak to this ideal self, and that “liking is a form of ‘commitment’” to the aspirational self.²¹³ Nin’s ideal self was that of the artist, and she incorporated artistic motives into her every day—black being the most enduring. The writer even attests to this in her diary, when she writes that she dresses in a black dress specifically for a reading of her book *A Spy in the House of Love* because “it is a dancer’s dress.”²¹⁴ Similarly, by the moment she is living bicoastally, she often mentions changing clothes when changing cities, dressing differently for her domestic life with Pole in California than for her artistic life and work in New York. This artistic life is often accompanied by the use of black, which is not necessarily seen in her domestic quotidianity: “I arrived in New York in a black coat and dress. I left my white coat and white dress...”²¹⁵ Finally, the use of black becomes of extreme importance in the photographic representations we have of Nin, since she was admittedly concerned with her image and obsessed with retaining control of her pictorial representation and having the power to veto photographs meant for the newspapers in her later years.²¹⁶ Given this control over her image, the fact that she’s often portrayed in black when working with books or even printing them becomes even more significant and attests to her link of black and artistry in the construction of her writer persona. (Figure 22).

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 30.

²¹³ Gibbins, “Communication Aspects of Women’s Clothing,” 301.

²¹⁴ Nin, *Trapeze*, 88.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 259.

²¹⁶ Michael McNay, “Non-belligerent in the Sex War,” in *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Wendy M. DuBow (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 41.



Figure 19. Portrait of Mary Shelley by Richard Rothwell. Circa 1831.



Figure 20. The Governess by Richard Redgrave. 1844.



Figure 21. Nin in her black cape.



Figure 22. Nin dressed in black and holding the volumes of her diary in the back vault where she kept them.

Nin admitted that she conceived of clothing through the lens of identity building and as a tool of performance. While living in New York—where she devoted herself most to her artistic endeavors—she documents that her style consists of fur collars and hair inspired by Greek aesthetics.²¹⁷ However, in her domestic and naturalist life while living in Big Sur, where Pole worked as a forest ranger, she changes style, wearing sweaters and jeans.²¹⁸ Interestingly, the latter type of clothing is something she associates with a lack of discipline and with the depression that comes from a domestic life—which also impedes her writing.²¹⁹ Clothing, therefore, could be assumed as another creation, which ceases—as well as the writing—when the author feels entrapped and uninspired. Nin acknowledges that she uses dress to perform her interiority and her own conception of herself in these lines: “After a time, I discard a dress not because it is worn (I cannot wear out my dresses—I barely tear or fray them at all) but because the self that enjoyed that particular dress is outworn. I need a new set of feathers to match my new feelings.”²²⁰ Similarly, she speaks to the idea that wearing clothing from a time period where she considered herself a different person submerges her in the memories of that time instead of representing her as she is.²²¹ The author even complains of her second husband’s utilitarian use of clothing, which is completely opposite to her views on adornment.²²² This, along with her own admission about her styling choices, reminds us once again that Nin understood fashion as a way of materializing the self and that the removal of this channel of expression might have even been comparable to a writing paralysis.

Another way in which Nin distinguished her identity from the domestic femininity associated with wife- and motherhood was also through her use of “exotic” fashion and

²¹⁷ Nin, *Trapeze*, 220.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

²¹⁹ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 31.

²²⁰ Nin, *Trapeze*, 262.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 37.

motives in her clothing, oftentimes taken from South America—which she considered endlessly inspiring. This is another characteristic she had in common with the Beats and, therefore, speaks to her artistic affinities with their aesthetic. She mentions in her diary a white dress with leopard accessories in her diary, which were bought for her by Hugo. But she relates the outfit to Acapulco due to her own personal association between the outfit and her “...dream of passion and human life.”²²³ To Nin, including South-American motifs in her clothing speaks to her artistry, and she not get rid of this style even when she is in New York and working:

We meet at the Museum of Modern Art, on a subtly hot afternoon. I wear the light fiber shoes I got in Yucatan with Rupert, a chartreuse handwoven skirt from Vera’s at Cuernavaca, a black cotton blouse. I carry a wicker basket and wear a wicker crown and veil over my hair.²²⁴

This ensemble is highly “exotic”—as they would have said in the 1950s—especially for the time and the urban environment, and externalized her artistic persona outside of feminine constraints and, therefore, fulfilled her desire to differentiate herself through clothing: “...the subjective worth of any article of attire is proportionate to its contribution to some sort of extension or differentiation or enrichment of the self.”²²⁵ Furthermore, the link between this South-American motif in her dressing and her creative work becomes clearer when she states that she started incorporating these Mexican motives and items while she was in the midst of trying to write a Mexican novel—²²⁶which could be inferred to be a novel *set* in Mexico.

²²³ Nin, *Trapeze*, 259.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

²²⁵ Hartmann, “Clothing: Personal Problem and Social Issue,” 296.

²²⁶ Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 37.

Finally, the aesthetic self-fashioning of her artistic persona concludes by eliminating the middle-class, suburban, American motives that she so associated with artlessness. According to Hillman, the style of middle-class life in America transformed its wearers into conformists and materialists.²²⁷ By contrast, non-conforming styling implicitly reflected divergent personalities:

Countercultural or nontraditional hair and dress styles came to symbolize a rejection of the middle-class “lifestyle,” solidarity with other radicals and racial minorities, dissent against a culture of warfare and militarism promoted by the Cold War, and the freedom and independence of the American creed...²²⁸

It becomes possible, therefore, that Nin—who so often referred to America as a killer of the artist—²²⁹ put effort into distinguishing herself from the characteristics associated with middle-class, conformist America. Indeed, we do find instances of this distinction between herself and the normative dress of the Postwar in the diary: “Pearls are, for me, a symbol of bourgeois life, conventionality in luxury. Never liked them. Hugo and I made fun of the uniform of luxury: pearl necklace and fur. As a child I gave away or lost all the jewels given to me by my aunts. Why?”²³⁰ Critically, she also distinguishes aesthetic beauty from the idea of bourgeois conventionality, explaining that she does have a need for beauty²³¹ and underlining the importance of aesthetics in her life and identity. Thus, Nin’s pictorial representation and her intimate reflections on clothing in her diary end up underlining one clear thing: the centrality of aesthetics in the construction of her identity and in steering her persona away from conventionality.

²²⁷ Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 45.

²²⁸ Ibid. 51.

²²⁹ Nin, *Mirages*, 270-271; Nin, *The Diary of Others*, 28-29, 33-34, 46; Nin, *Trapeze*, 93-94, 119, 124, 176, 208, 308.

²³⁰ Nin, *the Diary of Others*, 117.

²³¹ Ibid.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter surveyed Anaïs Nin's self-fashioning and her difficult position as a woman writer living and working in the American Postwar. I have explored her struggles to gain agency and autonomy in two spheres: the personal and the professional. Her personal struggles stem from the pathologization, dismissal and attack—whether physical, emotional or economic—against women writers like her and against her artistic expression, inner ambitions, and talents. I have further discussed Nin's professional belittlement and dismissal as symptomatic of the situation of women writers during a period that completely ignored their contributions to literature, and often resulted in the suppression of their work and legacies and in a strangling of their financial possibilities that gravely impacted their writer's ability to produce work. Furthermore, Nin's use of diary writing as a means of expression, reconfiguration of reality, and self-assertion has shown that she used writing to break with the severe limitations imposed on her personal and professional agency, transforming artistic expression into outward control over herself and her work.

Nin's diary offers her personal misgivings and extensive discussions regarding her own self. Her own reflections as well as reported conversations with friends, partners and therapists pointed out the fragmentation of self that women writers often had to face at the time. This fragmentation is the result of the socially sanctioned opposition between the ideals of femininity and artistry, with the woman writer embodying both and, therefore, finding herself in the complicated situation of personifying a seemingly split identity. In this case, Nin's diary writing has been instrumental in exemplifying the use of art for questioning, deconstructing and reconstructing her identity. Through the passages of her *Diary*, the author reassesses her own notion of identity, turning away from

an essentialist conception of it and, therefore, opening space for a reconciliation of her notions of femininity and artistry within herself.

Finally, the aesthetics involved in Nin's everyday life show that dress and styling can be means of creation—as they indeed were for Nin. By aesthetic self-fashioning, the author could access, express, and communicate that had been elusive to her even in her writing. Therefore, dressing became a means of breaking with silence and expressing discontent that could have remained repressed. Likewise, Nin's stylistic choices and the way they are discussed in her journals as part of her performances connect clothing to identity building, as aesthetic presentation not only allows for agency through communication but also for identity building through visual self-fashioning. Whether in writing or in composing one's own image, the act of creating was a means of active resistance and for the emancipation of the female writer during this time. Through Nin's example, we can see how writing and dressing were incorporated into the woman writer's everyday and used as a means of achieving agency and constructing identity.

CHAPTER 4:

DIFFERENT AMONG THE DIFFERENT

4.1. Introduction

Carson McCullers was different even amongst the different. Born in the small town of Columbus in Georgia in 1917, she soon distinguished herself due to her incomparable artistry. Although her first relationship with art was through music, which she studied as a child and adolescent with the intention—and the talent—to become a concert pianist, she would later turn to writing as a means of expression that suited her more than the physically strenuous life of a concert pianist. Nevertheless, growing up in this musical world greatly impacted her, as she benefitted from two advantages not many women writers could count on during at this time. Firstly, her artistic personality and intentions were not only unquestioned but openly supported by her parents. In her mother, Carson found her first and most ardent fan and a support that would continue throughout her life in any artistic path she chose. Secondly, and through the figure of her piano teacher—the renowned Mary Tucker—, Carson was blessed with a very rare gift: an example of a successful female artist in her immediate environment. These circumstances propelled the young Carson, convincing her of her talent and the possibility of finding success in the world of art—which she achieved easily and soon. This confidence would maintain her throughout her life and distinguishes her from most female writers of her time, as she was not faced with constant self-doubt. Quite to the contrary, she remained sure of her literary genius throughout her life, and this sustained her work. Indeed, McCullers would not abandon her vocation even after a series of strokes that left her progressively paralyzed

and eventually caused her death at the age of fifty. She continued to write until she died, dictating her works to a secretary while she was cared for by her mother.

Nonetheless, the young writer was not alien to trouble and difficulty, even if she managed to avoid some of the problems usually found in the lives of women writers of the period. Her failing health was certainly an issue, and the reason she abandoned music and started to write. But her most present difficulties had to do with her very identity, as McCullers embodied a myriad of characteristics that were out of place in the America of the Postwar, and even more so in her southern setting—whose feminine ideals were even stricter than the rest of the country's. In self-presentation, personality and ambition she was considered masculine and odd throughout her life, which created great controversy both in her southern environment and even in the artistic circles of New York. Although very confident by the time she became a successful writer and adult, growing up as a would-be artist and tomboy in the south impacted her formative years and acquainted her with feelings of alienation and impotence, as well as a sense of her own strangeness that would accompany her for the rest of her life. Furthermore, her constant battle against traditionally accepted forms of self-fashioning made her an example of sexual and gender subversion, something that would always accompany and continues to define her.

She imbued these feelings in the characters of her novels, which in her postwar environment were read as deep explorations of the loneliness that accompanies the human condition. Later, with the birth of Feminist Literary Criticism and Queer Theory, the reception of her works would also focus on matters of identity, exploring the alienation, helplessness and freakishness of her characters and their characterization outside of normative conceptions of sexuality and gender—traits that had been widely ignored by postwar critics. Only one characteristic of McCullers' work remains a constant in her reception: the consensus that her characters somewhat constitute a self-insertion of the

author into the story. In fact, McCullers seems to have made use of her characters to explore her own psyche, her experiences and her formative years, and used these narrativized versions of her adolescent self to reconstruct and reinforce her senses of identity and agency.

Due to this, there are many characters who could be analyzed as parts of the author and intertwined with her life outside of literature. Nevertheless, most of them—like Singer and Antonapoulos from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*¹ or Amelia from *The Ballad of the Sad Café*—will only be named in passing. Others will be directly addressed—like Frankie, from *The Member of the Wedding*²—to pose instances of autobiographical motives that have promoted for the assumption that McCullers' fiction can be related to the author's own personality and story. Finally, and on account of this dissertation's concern with the themes of identity, agency and artistry, only the characters of Frances from the short story "Wunderkind" and Mick Kelly from *Hunter* will be analyzed in depth, as they are the ones who most closely exhibit the autobiographical side of McCullers' fiction and explore the themes in question.

This chapter will consist in three main parts that will address the particularities of McCullers' life and work: 1) The first section will be devoted to a general exploration of the characters who have been critically regarded as mirrors of the author within her novels in order to further establish an autobiographical intent in her fiction, 2) Frances from "Wunderkind" and Mick from *Hunter* will be analyzed as examples not only of the author's self-insertion within her narratives but of the interconnection between struggles of agency and identity in the life of the young female artist, and 3) McCullers' self-fashioning techniques will be presented within the analysis of agency and, most

¹ For the sake of brevity, this novel will be referred to as *Hunter* from now on.

² For the sake of brevity, this novel will be referred to as *Member* from now on.

importantly, construction of identity—demonstrating the relationship between these motives in the writer’s life and the utilization of dress as a another means of rebellion and self-creation in addition to her writing.

4.2. The autobiographical in McCullers

Although mostly known for her novels, Carson McCullers has also been widely regarded and studied through the autobiographical motif that permeates both her fiction and non-fiction. This becomes of special interest for the analysis of her exploration of agency and self, but also as a gateway to discovering how these themes are transplanted into her narrative. Thus, McCullers used her personal experiences to create a realistic and illuminating portrait of her real life observations inside her works. The autobiographical can also be explored through McCullers’ attempt at Life writing, most evident in her unfinished autobiography. However, Life writing in McCullers can be more accurately assessed through two characters from her fiction—Frances and Mick—who are heavily related to the author. These characters, therefore, are situated at the crossroads of autobiography and fiction, that is, within what has also been called—and this dissertation explores as—*life narrative*.

McCullers’ only explicit attempt at Life writing is her posthumously published autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare*.³ This source is scarce and unfinished, as the author’s health failed her before she could complete it. Due to the dire circumstances of its writing, many have also underlined the fact that this autobiography is out of the bounds of what is normally classified as autobiographical writing. Melanie Masterton Sherazi deems one of the main deviations of the text that it explicitly violates Lejeune’s pact due to its understanding of constant flux in identity and circumstances, which

³ For the sake of brevity, this book will be referred to as *Illumination* from now on.

distances McCuller's autobiography from objective truth but aligns it with both feminist autobiography and creative sociality.⁴ Nevertheless, *Illumination* does serve the purpose of demonstrating the author's regard for the autobiographical and the author's self-conception as an artist:

I think it is important for future generations of students to know why I did certain things, but it is also important for myself. I became an established literary figure overnight, and I was much too young to understand what happened to me or the responsibility it entailed. [...] Perhaps if I trace and preserve for other generation the effect this success had on me it will prepare future artists to accept it better.⁵

In these lines we can both see how the author conceives her identity as that of primarily an artist and writer, but also how the writing of an autobiography seems to hold power for McCullers, who plans on using Life Writing to create a persona that can endure for future generations. Life Writing is then both a source of agency over the self and a means to create very self.

Autobiography and writing itself are certainly acknowledged by McCullers as a source of agency in *Illumination*. Within its pages, the author focuses on writing as a source of relief and refuge against the difficulties of her everyday life. For instance, when threatened by the Ku Klux Klan due to her inclusion of queer and black characters in her fiction, she resorts to writing: "...as soon as I got to the typewriter and began to write, it seemed that the horror disappeared almost as quickly as it came."⁶ Furthermore, she used

⁴ Melanie Masterton Sherazi, "Collaborative Life Writing: The Dialogical Subject of Carson McCuller's Dictaphone "Experiments" and Posthumous Autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare*," in *Carson McCullers in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Alison Graham-Bertolini and Casey Kayser (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 52.

⁵ Carlos L. Dews, "Introduction," in *Illumination & Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, by Carson McCullers, ed. Carlos L. Dews (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999): xi.

⁶ Carson McCullers, *Illumination & Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, ed. Carlos L. Dews (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 31.

her autobiography to recognize the many instances in which she either lacked or had possessed agency over her life, as she both discussed her writing as a source of economic stability—especially compared to other writers⁷—and the difficulty in retaining a sense of autonomy in matters related to health.⁸ Regarding this particular issue, writing is once again understood as the only source of agency for the writer: “I want to be able to write whether in sickness or in health, for indeed, my health depends almost completely on my writing.”⁹ This might also be why McCullers was so adamant that she had to continue to write in spite of her physical ailments, as she kept secretaries that would take dictation of her work once she became paralyzed by two strokes.¹⁰ According to Masterton Sherazi, autonomy was at the core of McCullers’ writing, which was why she aligned “illumination” with creative production and “night glare” with the inability to write.¹¹

Identity becomes another key subject of McCullers’ limited autobiography, as the author seems to put great emphasis on the differences between the feminine persona and her own personality when discussing her artistic journey. The first instance of this is found when remembering her own marriage, about which she states that she had been too preoccupied with writing to pay mind to either her wedding clothes or to traditional wifely duties such as cooking and cleaning.¹² McCullers conceived herself mainly as an artist, which allowed her to detach herself—behaviorally and aesthetically—from traditional femininity. In the biography written about her by Virginia Spencer Carr, we find this differentiation again: “Walking, talking to people, observing life—all were a part of the creative experience. House-work was not.”¹³ Her biographer also writes that McCullers

⁷ McCullers, *Illumination*, 72.

⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 44.

¹¹ Masterton Sherazi, “Collaborative Life Writing,” 52.

¹² McCullers, *Illumination*, 18.

¹³ Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2003 [1975]), 83.

created herself as she would a character¹⁴ and that even during adolescence she dedicated herself to rejecting traditional values and asserting her own singularity.¹⁵ This uniqueness is certainly palpable in the way McCullers writes about her own personal life, discussing separation and divorce—as well as abortion—as natural subjects and necessities for the betterment of her creativity.¹⁶ Although the book is clearly unfinished, this primary concern with the difference between personal identity and prescribed identity is an important subject for McCullers, who managed to both underline the sociality of identity and also its state of constant flux.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the autobiographical aspect of McCullers' writing is mostly found in her fiction, where several instances of self-insertion allowed the author to create a character around her own self and use it to speak of her own experience within the narrative. This is observed in the Introduction of her autobiography, where, according to Dews:

...McCullers's life experiences shaped her fictional world; the line between her fiction and her reality was often blurred. As she once said, "everything that happens in my fiction has happened to me, or it will happen eventually."¹⁸

In Serge Doubrovsky's terms, McCullers' novels could be considered instances of "autofiction." This term is of extreme importance when dealing with this author, as its main advantage is that it does not necessitate a whole and coherent construction of one identity, but rather focuses on separate pieces of the subject.¹⁹ In consonance with this, her fiction is invariably centered around "freakish" characters that break with the

¹⁴ Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 115.

¹⁵ Ibid., 144.

¹⁶ McCullers, *Illumination*, 23, 46.

¹⁷ Masterton Sherazi, "Collaborative Life Writing," 52.

¹⁸ Dews, "Introduction," xiv.

¹⁹ Patrick Hayes, *Postwar to contemporary 1945-2020*, vol. 7 of *The Oxford History of Life-Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 65.

normativity of the Postwar by various means, including fluid gender expression and sexuality—related to her own androgynous self-presentation and attractions—,²⁰ experiences of dissatisfaction and loneliness—in relation to her creative identity—,²¹ and bodily abnormalities²²—which could be related to her own unfeminine presentation, as well as her ill health.

The capacity of characters to become representatives of the author has been widely acknowledged generally, particularly in relation to McCullers. Piper states that novels have the capacity of conveying “the thinking life,” turning the characters within them into representations of mental states, that is, the interiority of agents in a given environment.²³ In the case of McCullers, this is done through the freakishness of her characters, who speak to the non-conformity of their author. Their oddity is manifest in their failure to conform to ideal notions of womanhood,²⁴ and the isolation that results from this, an experience shared by McCullers herself: “Her characters are [...] almost always lonely and out of place in a conservative small town that looks a lot like her own.”²⁵ Furthermore, the autobiographical implications of McCullers’ characters can be understood as a way of creating a critique, through narrative, of her environment. The exploration of non-normativity invites the reader to consider identities outside conformity,²⁶ much like Carson McCullers did in her own life. This, once again, links the author’s personal life to her writing, as one of the key elements of southern fiction was the critique of societal

²⁰ Sarah Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies: Gender and identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 11, 40.

²¹ Rachel Adams, ““A Mixture of Delicious and Freak”: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers,” *American Literature* 71, no. 3 (September 1999): 552; Jenn Shapland, *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, (Portland: Tin House, 2020), 32.

²² Oliver Evans, *Carson McCullers: Her Life and Work* (London: Peter Owen, 1965), 51.

²³ Andrew Piper, “What Do Characters Do? The Embodied Agency of Fictional Characters,” *Journal of Computational Literary Studies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1-2.

²⁴ Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies*, 4.

²⁵ Shapland, *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, 3.

²⁶ Adams, “The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers,” 553.

artificial divisions through grotesque characters.²⁷ Similarly, McCullers' oddity became an example of criticism against socially prescribed femininity. The exploration of peculiar personalities has been widely accepted as proof of the writer's identification with the alien,²⁸ as well as proof of the autobiographical implication of a literary career focused on exploring identity through unusual characters that look and think like their author and share significant experiences with her.

Although there are many characters in McCullers' novels that could be related to their author, the most outwardly autobiographical are two adolescent girls who—like Carson herself—struggle to limit themselves, their ambitions and desires to the strict bounds of mid-century southern femininity: Mick Kelley from *Hunter* and Frankie Addams from *Member*. Many of McCullers' characters are distinguished in their grotesqueness as “would-be artists,”²⁹ like Mick Kelley—a tomboy obsessed with getting a piano and becoming a musician. The similarities with Carson are very noticeable, due to McCullers' own music studies: “Mick Kelley, the adolescent girl Carson was creating that winter in her novel, was very much the girl Carson herself had been, and still was. Mick's whole life was tied up with music. [...] She dreamed of being a famous musician...”³⁰

Art is associated with the fear of paralysis, which turns Mick into an exploration of McCullers' own experiences of failure in art during her early years.³¹ Moreover, her ambiguous identity as a tomboy further relates Mick and Carson: “She would climb trees

²⁷ Kadir Luta, “Grotesque Bodies and Gender Performativity: Dismantling the southern Belle in Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*,” *Turkish Academic Research Review* 10, no. 3 (2025): 676.

²⁸ Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 23.

²⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 1840.

³⁰ Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 79.

³¹ Constance M. Perry, “Carson McCullers and the Female Wunderkind,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 37.

and run races with boys, so that by the time she was twelve she had acquired a local reputation for being a tomboy, rather like Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.³² Evans further relates Mick's name to the gender ambiguity that McCullers adopted when she started to refer to herself by her second name—Carson—rather than her more feminine first one³³—Lula.

This gender ambiguity is also the link to the second character that most resembles the author, who also goes by an androgynous version of her name—Frankie.³⁴ Throughout her story, Frankie starts off with that very gender neutral nickname, like the one McCullers would take for herself, and only uses other versions of her name—like F. Jasmine—when trying to assimilate into the soft and romantic characteristics related to traditional femininity. Despite Frankie's efforts, androgyny—just like with Mick—connects her character to McCullers, as they both show the same unfeminine traits:

The autobiographical element in *The Member of the Wedding* looms, as we have seen, larger than in any of the other novels: Frankie, like the youthful Carson, is too tall for her age; she is a tomboy; she yearns to go away, particularly to places where it snows; she puts on shows which she writes herself; she has a desertion complex; she longs for a glamorous identity; she even reads the same books.³⁵

Frankie's tallness as a sign of physical difference from the feminine ideal was something McCullers embodied herself and commonly reflected in her female characters due to its importance in her sense of self growing up:

Carson was taller, too, than most girls her age: she was not slow in attaining her present height of five feet, eight and a half inches. [...] The hypersensitive girl

³² Evans, *Carson McCullers*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

resented the attention that her height never failed to create, and this physical peculiarity was responsible for some of the more agonizing experiences of her childhood.³⁶

Similarly, Carson's distinctive tallness growing up was a cause for concern that made the author—like her character—worry about becoming a “freak.” Something both Carson and Frankie also shared was that they both took up smoking at some point during early adolescence in an effort to stunt their growth.³⁷ Admittedly, Frankie was her most autobiographical character and the author herself stated that she became so likened to her character that when she went to sleep during the time she was writing *Member*, it was only so *Frankie* could get rest.³⁸

The great number of similarities and the personal account of the writer's identification with her characters create a very strong link between them, further pointing to the idea that McCullers used fiction as a gateway into autobiography. Outside of these two examples of *highly* autobiographical characterization, similarities between the author and her characters can be found in other explorations of subversive gender identities—for instance, through Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*—or in accounts of alternative sexualities in novels like *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, or even within *Hunter*—through characters like Singer and Antonapoulos. Thus, from all of these instances, it seems logical to conclude that the autobiographical is certainly a present and pressing ingredient in McCullers' fiction, providing a gateway into the artist's explorations of her own life and psyche.

³⁶ Ibid., 13.

³⁷ Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 30.

³⁸ Ibid., 219.

4.3. Agency and Identity in the Young Female Artist: “Wunderkind” and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

One of the main themes in *Hunter* revolves around the youth of the female artist, her struggles to maintain agency over her creative ambitions and the fragmentation of identity that can occur when the artist is confronted with the expectation of conforming to traditional feminine behavior. In the novel, Mick Kelley personifies the young girl obsessed with music that McCullers herself had been in her childhood and serves as a representation of the author within the narrative. Importantly, this novel had been preceded by a short story called “Wunderkind,” centered around a young music student called Frances and her increasing difficulty to perform her art as she grows up. This character became the mold for Mick Kelley and, due to this, both stories will be analyzed in the same section in order to create a coherent study of McCullers’ representation of the young female artist and her struggles.

Frances from “Wunderkind” could be considered a study of lack of agency in the young female artist, which in this story is manifested through creative paralysis—a fear that McCullers herself shared in her own life. Like *Hunter*, the story is centered on how “...adolescence brings a paralyzing knowledge of inadequacy to the exceptional girl and bars her passage into the world of art.”³⁹ The story begins with this problem when Frances—who was been considered a musical prodigy, even being called a “wunderkind” by her piano teacher, Mister Bilderbach—is already struggling and accumulating a debilitating sense of anxiety around her playing:

She sat down on the sofa and began to take her music from the satchel. Again she saw her hands — the quivering tendons that stretched down from her knuckles,

³⁹ Perry, “The Female Wunderkind,” 37.

the sore finger-tip capped with curled, dingy tape. The sight sharpened the fear that had begun to torment her for the past few months.⁴⁰

This fear expands rapidly in her mind and body and starts affecting her ability to play. Interestingly, Frances' anxieties seem to revolve around her teacher, as what is making her so nervous is being watched by Bilderbach.⁴¹ This is further accentuated by the presence of Mister Lafkowitz, who is sometimes present during her music lessons and makes Frances "...feel clumsy and overgrown."⁴²

The main issue for Frances is that this difficulty is not something that she has had to contend with in the past. Indeed, her paralysis starts only a few months before the story begins. This indicates that Frances, who is distraught by a new situation in which she is no longer praised as she was in her younger years but cannot discern why, is experiencing some type of change—whether inner or environmental—that has led to her current artistic debilitation. When she was a child, she was Bilderbach's star pupil, constantly reassured her of her specialness by him: "A *Wunderkind* — a *Wunderkind*. That was what Mister Bilderbach had called her when, at twelve, she first came to him."⁴³ Bilderbach had also distinguished her from other pupils by underlining her intelligence— "I know it must be terrible. Carrying around all the time a head that thick."⁴⁴—and taking to her like a friend, almost a daughter: "She had lessons Tuesday after school and on Saturday afternoons. Often she stayed, when the Saturday lesson was finished, for dinner, and then spent the night and took the streetcar home the next morning."⁴⁵ From these lines, it could be argued

⁴⁰ Carson McCullers, "Wunderkind," in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1963), 86. Although only named *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, this book contains different short stories by McCullers, including "Wunderkind," which extends from page 86 to page 102.

⁴¹ McCullers, "Wunderkind," 87.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 92.

that the center problem is related in some way around Bilderbach, as these past experiences seem very removed from the vigilant and unsettling figure he has become to Frances.

“Wunderkind” has been described as a story where the female gifted child is stunted by male musicians,⁴⁶ and this appears to be the main reason for Frances’ paralysis, as her immediate and artistic environment start to shut her out as she grows into adolescence. This is best exemplified by her comparison to Heime, a boy “wunderkind” who had always practiced alongside her but is now a famous musician while she is stuck as a pupil. At first, it might seem that this differentiation could be due to talent, as Heime started to play noticeably better than her and, when they were given the chance to do a concert together, he distinguished himself and the papers took to praising him above her.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it becomes clear that this distinction is also due to a change in her environment, specifically a change in the male musicians around her—Bilderbach and Lafkowitz—who turn to actively discouraging Frances from her music as they change allegiances to Heime’s side. This is seen in how Bilderbach deliberately chose a piece that would benefit Heime for the concert he played with Frances and how this initiated her descent into anxiety and, eventually, artistic paralysis: “Later, after the review had said she lacked the temperament for that type of music, after they called her playing thin and lacking in feeling, she felt cheated.”⁴⁸

Why was it Heime had done so much better at the concert than she? ...the question would twist knife-like inside her. She would worry about it in bed, and even sometimes when she was supposed to be concentrating at the piano.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Perry, “The Female Wunderkind,” 39.

⁴⁷ McCullers, “Wunderkind,” 93.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

When discussing McCullers' life, Free makes a point to underline that lack of agency was often linked to all the social conditions that made it impossible for the individual to express themselves or their desires.⁵⁰ This is the main change we see around Frances, who suddenly, and unbeknownst to her, starts to be pushed out of her artistic identification and has no way of recognizing this and, therefore, of rebelling against it.

However, Frances does try to rebel. Her problem is that she does not really know how to do it. Instead of breaking with the artistic circle that is slowly poisoning her confidence and pushing her into artistic incapacitation, she struggles, for a time, to gain back Bilderbach's approval: "Nothing mattered much except playing the music as it must be played, bringing out the thing that must be in her, practising, practising, playing so that Mister Bilderbach's face lost some of its urging look."⁵¹ Nonetheless, she keeps being discouraged by Lafkowitz—who dispossesses her of passion by associating it with masculinity—⁵² and by Bilderbach, who—while reading her unfavorable review, effectively categorizes her outside of artistry with the disheartening statement: "Not for you, Bienchen. Leave all that to the Heimes and vitses and skys."⁵³ Finally, Bilderbach's looming figure is too strong and cuts off her ambitions:

But her hands seemed to gum in the keys like limp macaroni and she could not imagine the music as it should be. When the last note had stopped vibrating, he closed the book and deliberately got up from the chair. [...] He laid the Beethoven gingerly on top of the rest of her music and propped his elbows on the smooth, black piano top once more. "No," he said simply, looking at her.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Melissa Free, "Relegation and Rebellion: The Queer, the Grotesque, and the Silent in the Fiction of Carson McCullers," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 4 (2008): 430.

⁵¹ McCullers, "Wunderkind," 96.

⁵² Ibid., 95.

⁵³ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 100.

In the end, Frances is so isolated from her artistic capabilities that her hands freeze and she becomes incapable of reading music, turning the story into a tragic tale of loss of agency through the silence that results from artistic paralysis.

This erosion of the female artist's autonomy is linked to the fact that she is a *female* artist. In fact, the fact that Frances is entering adolescence is related to the changes in how she is treated. The alteration in her environment is due to the feminization that Frances is being subjected to as she approaches female adulthood. The treatment she receives from the world of art specifically can be related to what Gleeson-White defines as one of the main characteristics of McCullers' stories: the "victory of socialization."⁵⁵ The author further relates this to matter of identity, saying that characters in McCullers' stories are often socially restricted to "roles."⁵⁶ We can find several instances in the story where the changes Frances experiences align with an attempt at inducing traditionally feminine qualities into her rather than focusing on the "masculine" creative ambition of becoming a famous musician. This is seen especially in her relationship with the Bilderbach couple. Beforehand, Frances had related strongly to Bilderbach, but had thought of his wife in the following terms:

Mrs. Bilderbach liked her in her calm, almost *dumb* way. She was much different from her husband. She was quiet and fat and *slow*. When she wasn't in the kitchen, cooking the rich dishes that both of them loved, she seemed to spend all her time in their bed upstairs, reading magazines or just looking with a half-smile at nothing.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies*, 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ McCullers, "Wunderkind," 92. Italics mine.

Mrs. Bilderbach, described as dumb and slow and seemingly uninterested in anything of substance—unlike Frances and Mr. Bilderbach—is later said to have been a famous singer. Nonetheless, she seems relegated to traditional wifely duties in her marriage and all artistic or even intellectual expression is completely removed from her characterization. However, this might be due to her environment and not her ability, as the process of feminization Frances is undergoing seems dedicated to reducing her to a role very similar to Mrs. Bilderbach's. Even before the concert, Frances is already getting her music lessons interrupted and being subtly instigated into traditionally womanly interests like clothing:

When Mrs. Bilderbach began to cut out the dress and fit it to her with pins, he interrupted his lessons to stand by and suggest ruffles around the hops and neck and a fancy rosette on the shoulder. The music was coming along nicely then.

Dresses and commencement and such made no difference.⁵⁸

Mr. Bilderbach starts to assume, even before her “failure” at the concert with Heime, that Frances is more interested in looking beautiful and having a nice dress for her performance than in the performance itself, no matter what she says: “‘I bet I know what Bienchen wants’ He insisted. He would not believe her when she explained that she honestly didn’t care at all.”⁵⁹

Finally, this link between the removal from artistic ambition and expression as a part of the process of feminization is stated by Mr. Lafkowitz, who tells Frances that she is not capable of performing Bach with the proper passion because the passion to be found in his music is that of a man that had fathered twenty children.⁶⁰ This is indicative of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 95.

McCullers' context, where the association between passion, active creativity, and masculinity was already established by Freudian thought. Thus, male sexuality becomes associated with musical ability and is removed from the female subject.⁶¹ Authors like Perry have stated that Frances' paralysis comes from her recoiling from the masculinity that surrounds her.⁶² However, it is clear that this identity is enforced rather than willingly accepted, as there is a great emphasis on the difficulty of adolescence during the story:

The notes began springing with a glib, dead intonation. Adolescence, she thought. Some kid played with promise — and worked and worked until, like her, the least little thing would start them crying, and worn out with trying to get the thing across — the longing thing they felt — something queer began to happen —. But not she! She was like Heime. She had to be.⁶³

Adolescence is central to the subject of identity and the loss of agency, as it is the time when gender transgressions become completely unacceptable. This period of forced feminization that is adolescence is what, in González Groba's opinion, marks the end of the androgynous liberties of McCullers' characters.⁶⁴ As adolescence is a period of assimilation into society,⁶⁵ gender becomes a central identity marker and finally separates Frances from music.⁶⁶ Consequently, it becomes apparent that it is through this forceful gendering that Frances is stripped of her agency and fragmented in her identity.

Mick's character in *Hunter* is clearly constructed around Frances; she uses music as a means of transcending alienation and categorization while becoming disconnected

⁶¹ Perry, "The Female Wunderkind," 39.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ McCullers, "Wunderkind," 97.

⁶⁴ Constante González Groba, "The Intolerable Burden of Femininity in Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding" and "The Balad of the Sad Café," *Atlantis* 16, no. 1 of 2 (1994): 134.

⁶⁵ Nicole Seymour, "Somatic Syntax: Replotting the Developmental Narrative in Carson McCullers's The Member of the Wedding," *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (2009): 295.

⁶⁶ Perry, "The Female Wunderkind," 39.

from her agency and fragmented as she grows into adult womanhood. For Mick, agency is centered around two main issues: isolation and difficulty in expressing herself. Isolation is also established early on. Early on in the story, she is asked whether she was at a Girl Scout meeting, to which she responds: “I don’t belong to them.”⁶⁷ The young girl is constantly outside age-appropriate circles,⁶⁸ and even makes a point to underline the importance of privacy.⁶⁹ This detachment from expected socialization is one of the trademarks of McCullers’ rebellious characters, who are unassimilated into the group. This was a distinctive reason for the criticism the author received throughout the 40 and 50s, as she was understood to be normalizing stories and characters that were “uncivilized.”⁷⁰ Indeed, discrepant characters are the reason why theoreticians like Adams, Freeman and Gleeson-White claim that the author’s work itself was representative of resistance.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the story presents moments of hesitation in this resistance, as Mick eventually starts to wonder about the fact that she is not making an easy transition into high school: “In the halls the people would walk up and down together and everybody seemed to belong to some special bunch. Within a week or two she knew people in the halls and in classes to speak to them—but that was all. She wasn’t a member of any bunch.”⁷² Like with many of McCullers’ stories, this sense of alienation prompts an attempt at assimilation—as Mick tries to host a party in order to construct “a bunch” for herself, like she had been able to do during Grammar school. However, when the party is ruined, Mick is confronted with the realization that the kids at her Vocational are not that special, and that gives her confidence.⁷³

⁶⁷ Carson McCullers, “The Heart is a Lonely Hunter,” in *Carson McCullers: Complete Novels* (New York: The Library of America, 2001), 16.

⁶⁸ McCullers, “Hunter,” 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Bush, “Woman, Southern, Bisexual,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019): 106.

⁷¹ Free, “Relegation and Rebellion,” 431.

⁷² McCullers, “Hunter,” 89.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 99.

Straying from the group becomes essential in Mick's journey towards liberation. She leaves her party and walks to the suburbs to hear songs from the radios of the rich people living there, resorting once again to her most important means of agency: music. Mick has harvested a peculiar obsession with becoming a musician as a means of attaining fame⁷⁴ but also of having the privilege of removing herself psychologically from her environment: "It was a funny thing—but nearly all the time there was some kind of piano piece or other music going on in the back of her mind. No matter what she was doing or thinking it was nearly always there."⁷⁵ This is certainly connected to art, as the other way in which we are told that Mick attempts this construction of a private space for herself is through drawing, though it is not quite as satisfying for her as the very idea of music.⁷⁶ Yet, she is unable to access the type of agency that music could provide her, as she doesn't have any instruments at her disposal. When she tries to construct a violin out of an ukelele and it does not work, her frustration is clear as she cries and slams the strange violin to pieces.⁷⁷ The character seems already convinced that musical expression is the only means of exercising autonomy over the self but is trapped outside of that very possibility by the sense that "...she will probably never be an artist. She has no musical background and no avenue of escape."⁷⁸ Once again, being removed from agency and being paralyzed out of artistic expression become the same thing.

The feeling of entrapment is also connected to agency, and there are several examples of Mick being cut off from her artistic aspirations by her reality. Gleeson-White states that it is the "captivity" trope that distinguishes McCullers' fiction, as it could be understood as an exploration of feminine confinement.⁷⁹ In the case of Frances from

⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

⁷⁸ Perry, "The Female Wunderkind," 42.

⁷⁹ Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies*, 18.

“Wunderkind” and now Mick, this confinement bleeds from the outside into the character, holding the artistic young girl hostage in her own sense of inability. The fact that Mick has not had a formal education in music renders her unable to compose in the way that she would like—in her mind, her art is fully realized and she can come up with the notes and the songs she imagines, but her body is incapable of reproducing them outwardly.⁸⁰ This is where McCullers’ most common theme related to lack of agency—paralysis—is introduced, as Mick has quite literally to *wait* for the tunes to come to her and, when they do, she cannot reproduce them and is relegated to the awful business of simplifying them.⁸¹ Like with Frances, the music is there but the body remains incapable of externalizing it.

Nevertheless, one thing that distinguishes Mick from Frances is that there is a sense of resistance in her, of taking action—whether inward or outward—that preserves her ambitions. This is related, in Mick’s mind, to the very hope that the construction of the violin represented:

She could never have made it like a real one—and after all those weeks of planning the very thought of it made her sick. But how could she have been so sure the idea would work? So dumb? Maybe when people longed for a thing that had the longing made them trust in anything that might give it to them.⁸²

This is followed by her adamant idea of getting a piano by whatever means possible. At first, she stays at school during the afternoons to practice on the gym’s piano⁸³ and, not long after, she takes up a job with the idea that it will pay for a piano of her own. Felski stated of writing that it was a means for the female author to impose order on the outside

⁸⁰ McCullers, “Hunter,” 205.

⁸¹ Ibid., 206.

⁸² Ibid., 45.

⁸³ Ibid., 137.

world,⁸⁴ and this is exactly what Mick seems to feel in the moments she gets to play and compose: the sense that she has power.

But getting a chance to sit at a piano was worth any amount of knocks and trouble. She would arrange bunches of notes together until the sound came that she wanted. [...] And she made up new music too. That was better than just copying tunes. When her hands hunted out these beautiful new sounds it was the best feeling she had ever known.⁸⁵

The ability to arrange and create brings agency into the character, who constructs a new reality and a new field of possibilities for herself through her playing.

Nonetheless, the most representative instance of the search for agency through art is in how music provides Mick with a psychological refuge. She achieves this through the split between inner and outer reality, what she calls her outside and her inside rooms. The concept of withdrawing from reality to access creative freedom is a constant one in the female writers of the Postwar, as the very act of creating became exemplary of asserting the I against one's cultural background.⁸⁶ Mick refers to her inner room for the first time on page 139:

She went into the inside room. With her it was like there was two places—the inside rooms and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. [...] Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 86.

⁸⁵ McCullers, "Hunter," 137-138.

⁸⁶ See section *Life Narrative as a tool for Agency*.

⁸⁷ McCullers, "Hunter," 139.

This withdrawal, as was also seen with Nin's diary, could be considered one of the first steps in rebellion. Indeed, withdrawal from the outside reality has even been posed as Mick's technique for *survival*.⁸⁸ Lenviel associates the survival of the character to her capacity for distinguishing between her inner and outer worlds, a way of escaping from her background—the “being-for-others.”⁸⁹ The moments of complete lack of agency are not marked by extrinsic difficulties like the impossibility of getting a piano or getting a musical education, but are rather moments in which Mick seems incapable of accessing her inside room.⁹⁰ Therefore, it seems significant that this room—this mental refuge—is so strongly associated with music. McCullers' character seems to become, in this way, an open discussion of creativity both as a trait of uniqueness—of special awareness within the group—and as a shelter for the young female artist—exploring the characteristics of her agency and linking them to artistry throughout the plot.

In a similar fashion to Frances, Mick's struggles for agency coincide with a time of unrest in her identity—adolescence. Unlike ideal tropes of femininity, Mick seems to be growing into a grotesque adulthood marked by tomboyism. One of the first descriptions we find of her focuses on of cross-dressing, as the character is presented in an androgynous way with a tendency to wear “boy clothes:” “...youngster, a girl of about twelve, stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes—so that at first glance she was like a very young boy.”⁹¹ Mick is also said to have “a hoarse boyish voice” and the stride of a cowboy.⁹² As the character is approaching an age where her usual style is becoming a gender faux-pas, her environment implicitly reminds her of that fact: ““Are you just going to tramp around the room all day?

⁸⁸ Claire Lenviel, “Hopeless Resistance: The Self-Look in McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*,” *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 26, no. 2 (2013): 119.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹⁰ McCullers, “Hunter,” 301.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19.

It makes me sick to see you in those silly boy's clothes. Somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave,' Etta said."⁹³ At the time McCullers was alive, the ideals of femininity of the Postwar took shape and were circumscribed inside the idea of the southern belle—which was still very prevalent in the South.⁹⁴ Mick's tomboyism is a reaction against the role and the image she has already recognized a pattern for, as she clearly states when saying that she is not moving on from her masculine clothing because she does not want to be associated with her sisters:

I wear shorts because I don't want to wear your old hand-me-downs. I don't want to *be* like either of you and I don't want to look like either of you. And I won't. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day.⁹⁵

In these words, it could be inferred that Mick not only has made an association between dressing and gender from what she sees in her older sisters, but that she is deliberately resisting the idea of growing into the role of woman by rejecting the social behaviors—walking, talking and dressing in a feminine style—that eventually lead to gender socialization.

The fragmentation in her identity becomes apparent in the moments she tries to appear acceptably feminine, when she is attempting to integrate into the new social codes of her vocational school. With that intent, she organizes a prom party in her house and changes her look for it:

Very slowly she went into the bathroom and shucked off her old shorts and shit and turned on the water. She scrubbed the rough parts of her heels and her knees and especially her elbows. [...] Silk teddies she put on, and silk stockings. She

⁹³ Ibid., 37. Italics mine.

⁹⁴ Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies*, 13.

⁹⁵ McCullers, "Hunter," 37.

even wore one of Etta's brassières just for the heck of it. Then very carefully she put on the dress and stepped into the pumps.⁹⁶

In these lines, Mick becomes representative of one McCullers' main identity explorations: the emphasis on how sociality eventually conditions aspects of the self⁹⁷—in this case, gender. This contributes to her fragmentary sense of self, as the change in presentation limits her possibilities for uniqueness and multiplicity. Lenviel recognizes in this process a reaction against the difficulty of resistance by which the character “reduces all the object's possibilities of being into one static form” as a way of avoiding the misinterpretation of their environment.⁹⁸ Further evidence to that sociality that contributes to fragment the characters' identity is that Mick starts to use her sisters as mirror figures to guide her attempted acceptance of gender norms.⁹⁹ According to Yiyuan Zhou, mirror figures serve as the blue print for gender development, which underlines that gender itself is a process of social replication.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the fact that Mick turns to her sisters, to the point of wearing inner garments she does not need yet, further underlines gender's artificiality instead of constructing a developmental narrative in which gender is *naturally* grown into.

The disconnect between Mick's sentiments and her new, more feminine presentation is the second part of her fragmentation, as her resignation to societal gender norms results in a reversal by which her identity struggle now becomes internal—against herself—rather than against her environment.¹⁰¹ Mick becomes hyper-aware that her body exists in stark contrast to the feminine image she is trying to convey: her feet are too big,

⁹⁶ Ibid., 91

⁹⁷ Masterton, “Collaborative Life-Writing,” 62.

⁹⁸ Lenviel, “Hopeless Resistance,” 115.

⁹⁹ Yiyuan Zhou, “Self and Other: Mirror Figures in Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*,” *Comparative Literature: East & West* 20, no. 1 (2014): 82.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Lenviel, “Hopeless Resistance,” 116.

and the heels hurt her,¹⁰² and she is too tall: “Five feet six inches tall and a hundred and three pounds, and she was only thirteen. Every kid at the party was a runt beside her...”¹⁰³ The impossibility of identifying herself with the children around her makes her feel more like an outsider than before. Even after her attempt at feminizing herself, she is confronted by the idea that her new feminine image not only does not fit her body, but it might not lead to other feminine developmental achievements: “No boy wanted to prom with a girl so much taller than him.”¹⁰⁴ The idea of assimilation finally breaks when, while talking about her height, a boy named Harry starts to speak of a freakishly tall woman he once saw at the fair.¹⁰⁵ All these instances make Mick aware of the fact that her femininity is a front that makes her unhappy and uncomfortable—something she had suspected even as she was getting dressed for the party: “She didn’t feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelley entirely.”¹⁰⁶

Finally, the reconstruction of identity comes—once again—at the hands of the artistic. Mick becomes increasingly detached from her feminine presentation as she becomes self-conscious of the disconnect between her body and the idealized feminine shape. During this moment, the music comes back to her: “As usual a song was in her mind. She was humming to herself.”¹⁰⁷ When she comes back to the party, the physical manifestation of her attempt at assimilation, it has been ruined by a terrible accident: one of her guests has been hit in the head with a brick. In that moment, Mick starts to drop the performance of the feminine role: “In the bathroom she took off the blue evening dress. The hem was torn and she folded it so the raggedy place wouldn’t show. The rhinestone tiara was lost somewhere. Her old shorts and shirt were lying on the floor just

¹⁰² McCullers, “Hunter,” 91.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

where she had felt them. She put them on.”¹⁰⁸ Although telling herself she will never wear shorts again after this evening, her boyish clothes are what she wears when she leaves the house that evening. Significantly, she starts to connect with herself again from “the inside room,” from her connection to music: “The outside of her was suddenly froze and only that first part of the music was hot inside her heart.”¹⁰⁹ The fragmentation between the inside self and the imposed self starts to dissolve as she walks alone to the suburbs, intent on listening to the music coming out of the houses. Since the choice presented to Mick had been either to give up her artistic desire or reveal her sexual inadequacy,¹¹⁰ the fact that her more androgynous look is connected to the search for music seems to indicate that Mick has decided on an identity based on artistry rather than acceptable femininity. This is finally underlined when, listening to the music, she states: “This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In the hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. *This music was her—the real plain her.* [...] The whole world was this music and she could not listen hard enough.”¹¹¹ Throughout the story, McCullers links identity and artificiality and makes it apparent in Mick’s feminine performance, which also seems to necessitate the abandonment of artistic ambition. Thus, the incorporation of artistry into Mick’s sense of self becomes the author’s way of resolving the fragmentation in the character, who actively chooses to construct her identity—in the way art exemplifies—through self-determination rather than assimilation.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹¹⁰ Perry, “The Female Wunderkind,” 44.

¹¹¹ McCullers, “Hunter,” 101. Italics mine.

4.4. A Queer Self-Fashioning: Androgyny and Artistry

Although no one in the 1950s would have thought it by looking at her, Carson McCullers was distinctly aware of the importance of clothing. In fact, she used style to rebel against cultural prescriptions and create a self she could inhabit. In her therapy sessions during the writing of her unfinished autobiography, she focused heavily on the pieces she had worn for different occasions during her life: “Clothes gave her a way to express an identity that was fluid, a way to change who she was to the world each day.”¹¹² Shapland writes on the importance Carson paid to her clothing and how the author lamented the loss of her status as an “it girl” after her strokes,¹¹³ trying to cling to it by having clothing designed and sewn for her every mood, performance and occasion. Importantly, she referred to her clothing as her “costumes,”¹¹⁴ a word that itself suggests the performative nature of her dressing. Throughout her life, the author would be forced to change her self-expression due to changes in her environment, like her move from her parents’ house to New York—and then back again—or her failing health by the end of her life. However, two patterns—or two styles—seem to emerge in relation to her aesthetic performance of identity: the androgynous and the artistic.

McCullers seemed a person acutely aware of her difference and the ways in which she could weaponize it against postwar society impositions on her self-articulation. In her revolt, she especially used her androgynous image as a site of resistance. During the postwar decades, androgyny was already widely associated to rebellion. Although the relation between self-fashioning and self-assertion would not be fully articulated until the rise of identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s, writers like Shapland have retrospectively linked McCullers to later conceptions of dress by including her in the select group of

¹¹² Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 99.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

people who turned their own bodies into political sites.¹¹⁵ In a period marked by the strict division of gender roles, aesthetic neutrality could not avoid being politized, as ambivalence itself started to function as a means of resistance:

Ambiguity, or rather our experience of it, recognized the possibility of alternative, contradictory, or obscure interpretation. And it is upon this recognition that any number and variety of ingenious equivocations, calculated duplicities and artist conceits come to be constructed...¹¹⁶

This was also the case during the postwar period, as exemplified by McCullers articulation of her own difference. The author's subversive identity as a gender non-conforming person was key to her articulation of a public persona: "...differentiating behavior, including dress, is more often found among members of marginal groups, [...], who lack the traditional vehicles for gaining social approval from the greater society."¹¹⁷ Thus, McCullers' "strange" self-presentation was not only directly related to her difficult position in postwar society, but also a mode of rebellion against identitarian impositions.

The author's androgyny has often been spoken of as "masculinity," but it is important to note that this masculinity was the only path for androgyny open during the postwar years—and even today. Davis writes that: "...the items meant to represent androgyny are, in terms of their gender-associated origins and allusions, located much more often on the male side of the gender division than on the female."¹¹⁸ The feminine seems to have been regarded as too artificial and ornamented to be equated with the ambiguity that is expected of androgyny and this differentiation has been pointed out by scholars like Wilson, who wrote of the relationship between simplicity and masculinity

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹¹⁶ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 22.

¹¹⁷ Storm, *Functions of Dress*, 329.

¹¹⁸ Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 36.

from the 18th century onwards: “Henceforth, sobriety of style was the hallmark of the elegant man. Soon, manliness itself came to be associated with sober dress, and by of the nineteenth century flamboyant clothing for men was coded as irredeemably effeminate.”¹¹⁹ This relationship between neutrality and masculinity started due to what has been called “The Great Masculine Renunciation”—a process by which the ideals of simplicity and morality were interconnected during the Enlightenment. As a result of this and the new sober fashions of post-French Revolution politicians—who wished to distinguish themselves from the corruption of Versailles aristocrats—, extravagance, color and ornamentation became only acceptable as part of feminine dress. This helped differentiate the new political class and added to the relationship between frivolity and femininity. In turn, the association of femininity and vanity helped establish a new political arena that still excluded women from participation, since it was the assumption that they were inherently frivolous and, therefore, unfit for public life. Due to this, masculinity came to symbolize a blank canvas in image that, in time, would provide more space than femininity for the development of androgyny. This is the type of gender neutrality that we find in the author.

McCullers’ androgyny awarded her great attention, something that she enjoyed and used to differentiate herself amongst others of her kind. Even in artistic circles, her style set her apart:

Another characteristic of Carson’s that put off Miss Porter considerably was her masculine attire. At Yaddo as at Bread Loaf, Carson almost always dressed in dungarees or men’s pants. With them she wore a man’s white dress shirt buttoned

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, “Deviant Dress,” *Feminist Review* 35 (summer 1990): 69.

at the top. [...] On top of this she frequently wore a boy's jacket with sleeves so short that they ended well up on her forearm.¹²⁰

This type of attire was not only for intimate moments, as we find most photographic representations of McCullers' in this masculine—androgynous—style. The author was also in the habit of forgoing other traditionally feminine adornments. She was often photographed without make-up and with short hair. According to Bush, her signature bob—which appears in many of her photographs—was the longest she wore her hair.¹²¹ (Figure 23). However, the distinguishing feature of McCullers' hairdo that Bush fails to mention was its natural straightness. During the 1940s hair had been worn generally long, but instances of bob length were still found. Lare, during the Postwar, short hair would be in vogue even in the advent of hyper-feminine presentation for women. Nevertheless, wearing her hair straight distinguished McCullers from the norm, as feminine hairdos were dependent not on length but on curling patterns that required the hair to be wet-set at least once every two weeks. This also required heavy maintenance, with constant peregrinations to the beauty parlor and lengthy care routines at home to maintain the curl. (Figure 24).

¹²⁰ Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 157.

¹²¹ Bush, "Woman, Southern, Bisexual," 108.



Figure 23. McCullers in her signature bob.



Figure 24. Actress Lauren Bacall in a bob that has been wet set.

Another characteristic that has been pointed out about McCullers' dress is her habit of wearing pants rather than skirts or dresses. Instances of a more feminine style are found in her earlier years. For example, she bought a skirt suit to meet with her editor for

the first time¹²² and she wore a green velvet gown when she got married.¹²³ There are also photographs of her in long hair and a white dress from when she was a girl. However, she soon grew out of the southern belle style of her small town in Georgia and devoted her style to the construction of an eccentric personality: “The woman the world wanted her to be—with dainty features and demure affects—was deeply at odds with the woman she was.”¹²⁴ Eventually, she would abandon all sight of a skirt. Scholars like Wilson has written how pants were more accepted during the 1950s than they had been in previous decades due to the popularization of the gamine type through figures like Audrey Hepburn.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, this was not necessarily the case and, certainly, not the type of style McCullers could be classified into. It is true that the Postwar was more accepting of women wearing trousers, but this allowance was very limited. Pants became casual wear or “sportswear” during this period and were allowed only during very casual occasions or for outdoor activities.¹²⁶ In spite of this, they became one of the staples in the author’s closet—to great controversy. A review in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1948 wrote: “Carson McCullers used to astound the Parisians by appearing for lunch in her blue jeans”¹²⁷ and the writer faced trouble from her family and friends, who opposed her cross-dressing.¹²⁸ This astoundment further reveals the fact that pants were still jarring when worn by women and that their incorporation to feminine clothing contributed to the gender anxiety of the period. In time, pants would become a symbol of the gender role shift and the identity unrest of the following decades, as they “challenged previous conceptions of

¹²² Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 62.

¹²³ McCullers, *Illumination*, 18.

¹²⁴ Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 112.

¹²⁵ Wilson, “Deviant Dress,” 69.

¹²⁶ Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 18.

¹²⁷ Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 114.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

feminine dress and seemed to symbolize deeper changes in societal definitions of womanhood.”¹²⁹

Another important aspect of McCullers’ self-presentation was related to artistry in that she always made a practice of *looking* like an artist in addition to being one. In part, this was also related to her androgynous style, which reflected on her personality and intellectually and distinguished her from the norm:

Her opinions, they suspected, were ‘radical’, and her way of expressing herself was not sufficiently conventional for their taste. There was some justification for this feeling: in her attitudes and in her manner Carson corresponded rather closely to the stereotype of the bohemian intellectual of the middle and late thirties—passionately liberal in her views on politics and sexual morality (the influence, respectively, of Marx and Freud), ‘advanced’ in her aesthetic tastes, and somewhat indifferent where her personal appearance and the ordinary routines of daily life were concerned.¹³⁰

The look to be found in most of her photographs is of her in a suit, with lapels and cuffs and pants,¹³¹ and this look was often accompanied by some sign of her writer identity—a book, a typewriter, or McCullers herself sitting at a desk. (Figures 25 and 26). The link between artistry and countercultural dress was frequent during the postwar decades. Masculinity and artistry were linked to such an extent that finding depictions of female writers in traditionally masculine attire was common. This was also the case with women authors who did not adopt masculinity in their daily dress but were often depicted writing in shirts and pants, like Anne Sexton. (Figure 27). Even beyond McCuller’s cross-

¹²⁹ Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars*, 19.

¹³⁰ Evans, *Carson McCullers*, 35.

¹³¹ Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 133.

dressing, the Postwar had created an unmissable bond between female artistry and gender disruption.



Figure 25. McCullers photographed with books.



Figure 26. McCullers writing.



Figure 27. Anne Sexton at her desk in pants and a shirt.

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the author decided to incorporate her masculine attire into her artistic persona. In her autobiography of Carson, Shapland states that many identity performances could be related to McCullers, one of which was that of the “prodigy.”¹³² This further proves how McCullers tried to distinguish herself, as a writer most of all by using her clothing to convey her creative personality and to contribute to the myth of her own genius: “Clothes offer a way to try on different identities, different manifestations of selfhood. They express more than gender, certainly more than binary gender, and more than sexuality too. For Carson, *they expressed her authorhood*, her artist status...”¹³³

Finally, McCullers continued to portray herself as an artist even after her strokes by implementing eccentric pieces of clothing into her wardrobe. This decision was not arbitrary, as the gender and class conforming dressing of the Postwar had birthed, by reaction, a line of thought that related so-called “bohemian styles” to subversive personalities— from marginalized groups to those who wished to distinguish themselves

¹³² Ibid., 43.

¹³³ Ibid., 114. Italics mine.

from middle America.¹³⁴ When McCullers was affronted by illness, she resorted to a fashion partnership with her friend Marielle, who started to create intricate nightgowns and robes for her¹³⁵ and, thus, allowed her to continue her self-fashioning. These are the pieces she called her costumes.¹³⁶ The personality-building function of her clothing is further shown in her attachment to what she called her “Chinese robe,” which she insisted was authentic and two thousand years old.¹³⁷ This was impossible due to the ephemeral nature of cloth, but greatly contributed to her mystique. McCullers herself even wrote of wearing this robe to the performance of one of her plays and enjoying being mistaken for an actress about to go on stage due to how much she stood out in her attire.¹³⁸ Other pieces of clothing that she wore during this time—such as tennis shoes or a red “Russian coat”—¹³⁹were also inappropriate to her postwar context and signaled her “artistic temperament.”

These examples provide ample evidence that McCullers deliberately used dress in the construction of her artistic persona. She succeeded in incorporating the characteristics that effectively excluded her from postwar ideals of femininity—masculinity and artistry—into her clothing style and managed to construct an alternative persona. This new identity gave her creative freedom and was a means of expression and rebellion; it permitted her to reject the Establishment and helped her avoid identity fragmentation during her adulthood. This coherent sense of self was instrumental in helping her professionally, as it contributed to the construction of both the myth and the mystique that would characterize her public image during her active years—and continues to do so. Finally, the fact that the author managed to preserve this means of self-creation in the face of illness speaks to the strong relationship between self-fashioning and agency, as it

¹³⁴ Wilson, “Deviant Dress,” 71.

¹³⁵ McCullers, *Illumination*, 68.

¹³⁶ Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 99.

¹³⁷ McCullers, *Illumination*, 71.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁹ Shapland, *My Autobiography*, 101.

allowed her to adapt into a new persona who still embodied the identity McCullers considered most true to herself: that of the artist.

4.5. Conclusion

The study of McCullers carried out in this chapter has included the exploration of autobiographical motives in her fiction in order to complete a rounded portrait of the writer within her context. The study of the author's unfinished autobiography and the instances of similarity between her characters and herself demonstrate the autobiographical nature of much of McCullers' writing, where there are numerous parallels between herself and her characters—such as rural southern environments, physical resemblances, and artistic ambitions. This autobiographical intent is key to examine McCullers' explorations of the themes of agency and identity in relation to artistry, as her young female characters act as mirrors of the author and provide insight into her struggles as a young female artist. Finally, the examination of McCullers' self-presentation adds to the exploration of her identity by analyzing her rebellion against the aesthetic impositions of conventional femininity as a means of self-configuration.

McCullers explored agency through her depictions of estrangement and alienation, which she understood as a consequence of exhibiting countercultural ambitions and gender non-conforming characteristics. Frances and Mick, who have a very limited social circle and difficulty in establishing relationships with kids their own age, are mirrors of McCullers, who remained a controversial figure even when she entered the bohemian, artistic circles where she had hoped to find complete understanding. Furthermore, I have shown McCullers also explored agency through the theme of paralysis, which connects both her young, would-be artist characters to herself—as the possibility of becoming unable to write was one of the author's greatest fears. By means

of these plot points, McCullers succeeds in creating a narrative around the young female artist and in presenting her readers with the difficulties that may obstruct artistic expression in the young woman. This shows how the censorship and belittlement of art created by women is not necessarily connected to outward forthright prohibition, but to the construction of an environment that negates all possibilities of artistic expression and condemns women writers to the very paralysis the author so feared.

McCullers' experiences of subversive sexual and gender identity are connected to her pubescent female characters who, through unfeminine characteristics and characterization, come to embody the impossibility of fitting into the postwar feminine ideal. Thus, Frances and Mick are also examinations of the author's identitarian struggles. Although McCullers did not seem particularly concerned about the peculiarities of her own controversial identity, much of her narrative is focused on that same peculiarity, as well as on the psychological and emotional issues it causes to a young girl. In her stories, both Frances and Mick are considered freakishly masculine and become acutely aware of the dissonance between themselves and the personality their environments wish them to have—which is seen in how Frances is steered away from her interest in art and encouraged to care about clothing instead and in how Mick attempts to make herself acceptable by changing her masculine clothes and boyish manners for a feminine performance. From these narratives, and their inescapable relation to the author's own unconventional gender expression, it could be assumed that these issues speak to McCullers' own adolescence and, thus, provide a window into the struggles the author might have faced during her early life and presumably overcome by the time she became a successful author.

Finally, I have carried out an analysis of McCullers' distinctive style of clothing, which differs from her background and even from the other two authors studied in this

dissertation. This analysis has provided a means of exploring the same matters of agency and identity present in her fiction without the restriction to her adolescent years to which the novels confine us. McCullers' androgyny and portrayal of her own artistry through unconventional, masculine dressing are connected to rebellion against the norm of the Postwar, and to the performance of her artistic persona. Consequently, and though her style is still very different from her companions' in this study, like them, she was profoundly aware of the power of aesthetics and used them to her advantage. The author's attention to her self-fashioning—as inferred from her autobiographical writings, the biographical explorations carried out by authors like Carr and Shapland, and the extensive photographic archive in her trade masculine attire and exotic robes—is undeniably precise and calculated, showing how dress helped her to build her persona and resist the constraints of her social context.

Consequently, McCullers emerges as another great example of the difficulties faced by female authors during the postwar era. In spite of her many differences from other female writers such as Nin and Plath, her writing connects her to the explorations of agency and identity common to so many women writers of this period. Like her companions in this dissertation, she used art and creativity as the ultimate tools to overcome the obstacles derived from her delicate social context. The author's artistic self-configuration not only allowed her to integrate her own revolutionary personality into her works, but also connected her to her peers. Thus, McCullers' use of writing and self-styling in the configuration of her artistic persona aligns her with her contemporaries and embeds her work into a female subculture in the literary world of the postwar era, allowing her, finally, to transcend the sentiment of isolation she experienced during her life.

CHAPTER 5: THE COLOSSUS

5.1. Introduction

Sylvia Plath is a colossal figure in the world of literature and Feminist Literary Criticism, an almost mythical creature that continues to entrance and divide her readers in the same way she herself seemed to be internally divided. While Nin and McCullers were perfectly aware of the impossibility of their access into a semblance of normativity—Nin as an immigrant and McCullers as a queer person—Plath’s lifelong struggle resided in the fact that, in appearance at least, she was the quintessential 1950s woman: sufficiently attractive, educated, middle-class and white. Aware of the possibility of assimilation, Plath was haunted by the feminine ideal of the postwar years as something she could easily fit into and this only further underlined her rebelliousness. As a consequence of this, her sense of fragmentation became particularly alienating, as her society had no external reasons to cast her out. Her subversion—in behavior, personality and self-presentation—would be a decision she would have to make time and again, often to great emotional distress. This constant battle often exhausted her, turning her into a figure stuck between two minds, too aware of the detriment of fully embracing any one of the available identities but seemingly unable to let them go. In her plight, she could only turn to writing for a sense of control and a means of reconciling her selves.

Due to this difficult situation, Plath often used her writing as a refuge in which she could withdraw long enough to assess and reconfigure the mixed messaging of her society. Her extreme self-awareness and ability to question postwar gender roles also turned her writing into a site where the author could analyze her identity struggles and the constant ricocheting that often came as a result of being a woman who *could have*

assimilated but *did not want to*. Consequently, an autobiographical element is integral to her output in many formats: intimate writing—diaries and letters—, poetry—often confessional— and her only novel, *The Bell Jar*—where she fictionalized the events of her first major depressive episode during the summer of 1953. However, departing from the usual emphasis on her poetry, only her intimate writing and her novel will be analyzed in this chapter, as their long format allow us a more detailed exploration of identity and agency in Plath's works and, consequently, a more exhaustive reconstruction of these enduring concerns during her life.

Plath's exploration of the intricacies of postwar women's creativity will be examined through her lifelong battles to achieve agency and reconstruct an extremely fragmentary identity. Her agency was tested by her difficulties to position herself as an artist both in personal and professional spheres and her use of the very act of writing as a means of providing for herself and asserting her ambitions. Her identity constantly bounced between the desire to assimilate into postwar femininity and the strong—and seemingly inevitable—rebound of an individuality that seemed to resist assimilation attempts. Finally, Plath's complicated relationship with her self-presentation will be presented as an exercise of agency over her own identity, as her design of her own image became an undeniable part of her individuality. Her changes in personal style were another example of her artistry, which turned her visual self-presentation into a portrayal of her attempts at reconciling her divided subjectivity into one coherent image she could actually live in.

5.2. The “courage to be unpleasant:” Sylvia Plath’s career as an assertion of agency

One of the main difficulties throughout Plath’s career as a writer was undoubtedly related to her awareness of the complicated position of the woman writer in the social background of the Postwar, which questioned, queered and attacked creative personality traits and artistic ambitions in women. One of her main explorations of this theme is found in her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, where she uses Esther Greenwood as a stand-in for herself to speak of her first major depressive episode, openly relating it to the conflict between herself and her environment. Esther, like Sylvia, is sent to New York in the summer of 1953 for an internship in a fashion magazine and—when removed from the safe environment of her college life—is attacked by the prospect of what life as a creative woman will entail. Importantly, Esther’s breakdown is heavily related to writing itself, which is used throughout the novel as a metaphor for agency—or lack thereof.

Being removed from writing precipitates Esther’s descent into her depression, as she is rejected from a prestigious writing course and is horrified by the idea of having to spend the summer in the suburbs. This is something that Plath herself went through during the summer of ‘53, when she was rejected by Frank O’Connor’s writing course. Aurelia Plath, Sylvia’s mother, gives some insight into how this affected Sylvia psychologically and prompted her descent into depression and paralysis:

I knew Sylvia would see it as a rejection of her as a competent or even promising writer, despite all the writing honors and previous publications she had to her credit. [...] From that point on, I was aware of a great change in her; all her usual joie de vivre was absent. [...] she finally began to talk to me, pouring out an

endless stream of self-deprecation, self-accusation. She had no goal, she said. As she couldn't read with comprehension anymore, much less write creatively...¹

From this moment, the ideas of losing her intellectual means of expression and her agency are linked together in the novel through the theme of paralysis. The inability to write becomes the main symptom of Esther's depression, which makes her abandon her projected novel and try to resort to other means of expression she quickly has to give up:

I decided I would put off the novel [...] I thought I would spend the summer reading *Finnegans Wake* and writing my thesis. Then I would be way ahead when college started at the end of September, [...] Then I thought I might put off college for a year and apprentice myself to a pottery maker.²

The situation progresses to the point where Esther loses all control of her handwriting, and is irrevocably separated from writing, the thing she most associates with control:

...when I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew.³

This is the symptom that worries Esther the most, even though she has also become unable to sleep, maintain personal hygiene or leave her bed most days. According to Gayle Whither, the conflict between awareness and inability to communicate awareness is the main characteristic of Esther's madness.⁴

¹ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber & Faber, 1978 [1976]), 123.

² Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019 [1963]), 118.

³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴ Gayle Whither, "The divided woman and generic doubleness in *The Bell Jar*," *Women's Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 141.

However, Esther's treatment becomes representative of her conflict against society, as the people around her do not seem disturbed by her inability to write, but by the great distress it is causing her: "I thought Doctor Gordon must immediately see how bad the handwriting was, but he only said, 'I think I would like to speak to your mother. Do you mind?' [...] I thought he might tell her I should be locked up."⁵ She is "treated" with electroshock therapy, something she cannot help but interpret as a punishment—"I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done."⁶—, which is completely understandable in light of its consequences. Although electroshock was believed to have great benefits at the time—as it did appear to modify behavior immediately after treatment—its "desirable" effects eventually disappeared and were replaced by myriad side-effects such as "...headaches, confusion, aching muscles, damage to the tongue, teeth, and lips, memory loss, and long-term personality changes."⁷ In this instance, the woman writer finds herself in a position that Elaine Showalter refers to as "being destroyed in the name of love and concern."⁸ Esther's environment seems more set on "curing" her unease about powerlessness than on restoring her means of self-assertion—indicating that the very desire for self-assertion is being pathologized in her. While dismissing previous critical accusations directed at Plath's supposed immaturity, Mason Harris wrote in a 1973 review about the novel that Greenwood's madness was not purely inherent but a consequence of being punished for trying to liberate her mind.⁹ Heather Clark, Plath's biographer, further contributes to this line of thought by stating that this was a common occurrence for women writers of the period—who were often treated with

⁵ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 130.

⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁷ Gail Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton* (New York: Gallery Books, 2021), 164.

⁸ Elaine Showalter, "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers," *The Antioch Review* 50, no. 1 (1992): 210.

⁹ Mason Harris, "'The Bell Jar,' West Coast Review," in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 107, 112.

electroshock therapy and mostly came to consider it as a punishment for their creative or intellectual pursuits.¹⁰ Esther's "crime," the thing she must be punished for is the act of *wanting* a means of self-expression: "...it is also a woman's awareness, not her pain, which, from a cultural standpoint, must be erased."¹¹ This experience would—quite literally—shock the real Plath into complete dread of mental treatment for the rest of her life.

Nevertheless, the most terrifying occurrence related to a loss of agency is through the threat of a much more permanent "treatment": lobotomy. Lobotomy is regarded with extreme horror, as it represents a complete mental castration for the young female writer. This dread is apparent in the following exchange between Esther and her ward mate, Valerie:

'Do you know what these scars are?' Valerie persisted.

'No. What are they?'

I looked at Valerie in awe, appreciating for the first time her perpetual marble calm. 'How do you feel?'

'Fine. I'm not angry any more. Before, I was always angry. I was in Wymark, before, and now I'm in Caplan. I can go to town, now, or shopping or to a movie, along with a nurse.'

'What will you do when you get out?'

'Oh, I'm not leaving,' Valerie laughed. 'I like it here.'¹²

¹⁰ Heather Clark, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2020): 269.

¹¹ Whither, "The Divided Woman," 141.

¹² Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 185.

This is an event that shakes the main character to her core and turns Valerie into a cautionary tale against rebellion in young women. Valerie becomes a representative of the very real threat of punishment that accompanies acts of rebellion on the part of young women. In fact, lobotomy not only promises painful punishment, but the complete removal of any agency. Statements like “I’m not angry anymore”¹³ or “Oh, I’m not leaving. I like it here”¹⁴ read like a sentencing, a complete removal of the young woman—who can no longer *imagine* a life outside prescription or even *feel* discontent—from her autonomy. This was a threat that Plath would bear in mind for the rest of her life. In a letter to her psychiatrist, Dr. Beuscher, she wrote: “What appals the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst—cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies.”¹⁵ This fear of being temporarily or, even worse, permanently dispossessed of her agency—which Plath’s biographer refers to as post-traumatic stress disorder originated from her 1953 institutionalization—¹⁶ would eventually prevent her from seeking psychological treatment during the 1962 depressive episode that led to her suicide in early 1963.

Loss agency is not only found in Plath’s only novel but becomes a reoccurring motif throughout her intimate writings, proving that it was ever present in her life and stemmed from various fronts. Her personal and professional relationships with men were another source of struggle. In the personal realm, Plath seemed extremely aware of the complicated politics that dictated a creative woman’s relationship with men from an early age. This can be seen in the early parts of her unabridged journals, where she constantly refers to the difficulties she faces when navigating her relationships with men *while* acting

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Clark, *Red Comet*, 297.

¹⁶ Ibid.

as the creative and academically competent woman she was: “If I didn’t think, I’d be much happier; if I didn’t have any sex organs, I wouldn’t waver on the brink of nervous emotion and tears all the time.”¹⁷ From these early lines, we can sense a conflict between her intellectual and her sexual facets.

One of the main difficulties facing the poet in this regard was that Plath—much like Nin before her—could not get rid of her longing for male companionship and desire: “How we need another soul to cling to, another body to keep us warm. To rest and trust; to give your soul in confidence. I need this, I need someone to pour my soul into. Maybe I need a man.”¹⁸ During the Postwar, attracting men was invariably linked to projecting feminine inferiority. This is something Plath seemed to be highly aware of and learned from a very young age: “From the time Sylvia was a very little girl, she catered to the male of any age so as to bolster his sense of superiority.”¹⁹ From the beginning of her life, she was consumed by the idea of finding a partner and conflict arose as she grew into her creativity and intellectuality. On one of her first dates in college, she was told she was one of the few girls who could be smart without being ugly,²⁰ which made her strive to hide her cleverness from her subsequent dates.²¹ About this, she wrote to her mother: “Naturally, I am sorry that none of the “nice” boys who’ve wanted to marry me have been *right*... I shudder to think how many men would accept only a small part of me as the whole and be quite content.”²² This reality was underlined to her during her first serious relationship with a man, Dick Norton, who would later be the inspiration for the character

¹⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 21. Referred to as “Journals” from now on for the sake of brevity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ Plath, *Letters Home*, 297. This quote is a note made by Sylvia’s mother, Aurelia, under one of the letters contained in the book.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²² *Ibid.*, 211.

of Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar*. In the book, we see Buddy Willard constantly dismissing literature in front of Esther, who is a writer:

‘Do you know what a poem is, Esther?’

‘No, what?’ I said.

‘A piece of dust.’ And he looked so proud of having thought of this...²³

Ironically, Buddy eventually takes an interest in poetry and tries to lecture Esther about literature.²⁴ This is extremely similar to what happened to the actual Plath in her relationship with Dick, who went from lecturing to her about art being only an acceptable pursuit for a *single* woman²⁵ to deciding *he* would become a writer while using *her* as a subject matter to attract attention:

[...] now Dick wanted to be a writer. He sent her half-baked stories and poems, and a four-page paper on her own world, titled “Individualism and Sylvia Plath: An Analysis and Synthesis. He asked if he could “edit and publish” her letters as “a boon for the literary world.” She pretended to be flattered, but she sensed a threat. Did he expect to achieve *her* goals while she cooked him steak dinners?²⁶

Situations like this acquainted Plath with the idea that she would have to face loneliness in her life²⁷ and made her ricochet between the options of staying single²⁸ or looking for a man outside of the art world, since she had found that her relationships with men who were also artists usually succumbed when she started succeeding above them.²⁹

²³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 52.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Plath, *Journals*, 107.

²⁶ Clark, *Red Comet*, 220.

²⁷ Plath, *Journals*, 29.

²⁸ Ibid., 221.

²⁹ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 53.

Nevertheless, she did eventually marry a poet—Ted Hughes—and this relationship became another example of Plath having to minimize herself and her art to try to avoid the heartbreak that usually followed a woman artistically surpassing her male counterpart. At the beginning of the relationship, Plath alludes to this as an artistic alliance where both parties consider themselves writers. In her letters, she describes an arrangement by which she used the study during the mornings and then the room was left to Hughes in the afternoons,³⁰ implying that they protected the other's need for time and privacy to write. However, we know that much of this time supposedly allotted to writing she spent acting as a professional and personal secretary for her husband.³¹ Part of her time in the studio was spent typing and sending out Ted's poems instead of writing her own.³² There are other indications that Plath was treated—and also willingly assumed—the role of secondary writer in the relationship. When in financial distress, she was the one to take up jobs to keep Hughes writing full time.³³ At the time, this was presented as Plath's own choice: "Plath, on the other hand, saw her husband as a genius who needed to be given the time to write, and she was happy to provide the opportunity."³⁴ However, Sylvia also showed some resentment over this in her personal diary:

You won't make my husband mad by raving about houses and babies. You won't make him ashamed by offering me \$300 for a course in stenotyping for my birthday (by implication, so I can work and earn money because he probably never

³⁰ Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath. Volume II: 1956-1963*, eds. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2018): 485. Referred to as "The Letters," from now on for the sake of brevity.

³¹ Plath, *The Letters*, 485; Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 155.

³² Plath, *Letters Home*, 408.

³³ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 97; Plath, *Letters Home*, 388; Plath, *The Letters*, 29.

³⁴ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 98.

will). My husband supports me in soul, body and by feeding me bread and poems.

[...] He wants me to change and make things too.³⁵

From these lines, we can rescue two inferences which seemed true at the same time—at least in Plath's mind. The first: Sylvia Plath believed that her husband understood and supported her as an artist and could teach her how to be a better writer. The second: the burden of providing was not shared in her household; she effectively sacrificed writing time to assume a responsibility her husband would not.

We find several instances of Plath continuing to diminish herself and her work to avoid the feeling of competition with her husband. When the couple moved to England, Plath completely stopped talking about her writing, even to the point where not even most of her close friends knew that she was a poet as well.³⁶ When Al Alvarez, a renowned critic who would later become one of Plath's few champions and supporters in the world of letters—until she was rescued by the second wave of feminism—, first met the couple, she did not make any efforts to communicate her identity as a writer to him. The reunion gave Alvarez the impression of meeting with a poet and “a banal little housewife.”³⁷ This was a front Plath often put up. At a Faber & Faber party, she decided to conceal her writing as well but then did show that part of her personality at a minor artistic gathering. From this, we can infer that she was effectively taking herself out of the race with her husband by assuming a subservient role:

I drank champagne with the appreciation of a housewife on an evening off from the smell of sour milk and diapers. [...] There Ted stood, flanked by T.S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNiece on the one hand and Stephen Spender on the other,

³⁵ Plath, *Journals*, 434.

³⁶ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 140.

³⁷ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: Picador, 1994), 20.

having his photograph taken. “Three generations of Faber poets there,” Charles observed. “Wonderful!” [...] Then we went to the Institute of Contemporary Arts and read our poems to an audience of about 25-30 young people...³⁸

Finally, concealment of her artistry is admitted by Plath herself, who acknowledges her awareness of a possible competition and the troubles it might bring to her romantic relationship when she rejoices that her husband is going to be published before her:

I am more happy than if it was my book published! [...] I am so happy his book is accepted first. It will make it so much easier for me when mine is accepted---if not by this Yale Series, then by some other place. I can rejoice then, much more, knowing Ted is ahead of me. There is no question of rivalry, but only mutual joy & a sense of us doubling our prize-winning and creative output.³⁹

Competition clearly was equated with emotional trouble, and there was no competition simply because Plath decided to take herself out of it.

The professional arena was also cause for a loss of agency, as Plath was completely dependent on the moods and philosophies of the postwar literary market—whose dismissal of female writers extended beyond the US. One of her few supporters in the critical world, Al Alvarez, stated on the matter:

...I was a critic who took Sylvia very seriously. What you have to realize is that in those days the stuff she was writing was in no way generally accepted. People were hardly falling over themselves to publish her poems. People didn't understand what she was getting at, or didn't like what they saw.⁴⁰

³⁸ Plath, *Letters Home*, 386.

³⁹ Plath, *The Letters*, 72. Underline is Sylvia's.

⁴⁰ Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, 120.

This was a reality that Plath was well acquainted with from a very young age. She had a terror of reviewers, which she equated with masculine authority—something she was particularly vulnerable to. In her academic life, for instance, she was quick to dismiss the authority of her female advisors as “bluestocking grotesques” but did not ask for male supervisors because she did not consider herself smart enough to have them.⁴¹ This vulnerability showed in other experiences like being confronted with writer’s block when her creative writing teacher—also a man—urged her and her classmates *not* to become writers because, in his experience, women writers usually ended up unhappy.⁴² Similarly, she expressed terror when she realized the Fulbright committee she would have to face to be accepted into Cambridge would be comprised of men:

At Smith, strong academic women like Mary Ellen Chase, Evelyn Page, and Elizabeth Drew had nurtured her; she was not used to defending her ambitions to a wall of stone-faced male professors. Sylvia saw herself through the men’s eyes—a woman and a former asylum patient—and was suddenly filled with doubt.⁴³

The problem was that Plath was simultaneously aware that her femaleness would be judged by men in intellectual and creative spheres— “What to do with fear of writing: why fear? [...] Ideas of maleness: conservation of creative power.”⁴⁴—and desirous for their approval as a gateway into self-acceptance. This put her in a very vulnerable position in which she was in constant danger of aggrandizing critics and editors and,⁴⁵ therefore,

⁴¹ Plath, *Letters Home*, 219.

⁴² Clark, *Red Comet*, 236.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁴⁴ Plath, *Journals*, 437.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

feeling personally wounded by rejection.⁴⁶ Plath knew that the literary sphere was not ready for her, and it would indeed attack her.

Sylvia's work would be dismissed through accusations commonly levelled at women's writing in general, such as a questioning her authority and authorship, as well as dismissal of her subject matters and forms. The closest she came to being accepted in her early reviews was through tokenism. In these, we see her praised *in comparison* to other women writers for her "technical accomplishment,"⁴⁷ stating that women writers do not usually possess technical abilities: "As a rule the work of women poets is marked by intensity of feeling and fineness of perception rather than by outstanding technical accomplishment."⁴⁸ Regarding her first poetry collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, the only person who made a point to distinguish her work outside of the bounds of gender was Alvarez.⁴⁹ Her novel was dismissed by critics due to its autobiographical and confessional aspects. This was undoubtedly also related to matters of gender, as confessional poetry and autobiographical fiction were common in women's writing and, importantly, only dismissed when done by women. In the words of Crowther: "When men write about their personal experience they are referred to as brilliant, sensitive essayists [...]. There is much less value attached to female experience and less value attached to the literature that deals with it."⁵⁰ When it was revealed that *The Bell Jar* had been written by Plath and, therefore, was highly autobiographical, this was exactly the grounds for its

⁴⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷ Linda W. Wagner, "Introduction" in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 2.

⁴⁸ Bernard Bergonzi, "'The Ransom Note,' *Manchester Guardian*," in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 32.

⁴⁹ Wagner, "Introduction," 2.

⁵⁰ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 12.

dismissal as “a journal done up as a novel”⁵¹ or an excuse to discuss the author’s suicide in the press without actually discussing her writing.⁵²

We also find moments where she is referred to as Mrs. Ted Hughes rather than Sylvia Plath.⁵³ In vogue with implications of gender of the time, she was critically shadowed by her husband, as most critics who decided to write on Plath’s work did so in comparison to Hughes’ poetry⁵⁴ or as an extension of it.⁵⁵ This is what Joanna Russ refers to as a false categorization of the woman artist as simply the partner of a male artist: “...women may not only be renamed as non-artists; their contribution to art may be absorbed into a man’s and recategorized as his.”⁵⁶ This is exactly what we see in these instances, where Plath is interpreted not as a poet in her own right but, at best, as a pupil of her husband or, at worst, an imposter. In some reviews, like the one written in 1966 by Hugh Kenner, her authorship is questioned due to the author’s personal—as opposed to actually professional—opinion that a woman about to commit suicide could not write as well as she did in her last collection, *Ariel*.⁵⁷ While Hughes is not mentioned in the review, there are allusions that someone must have taken the scraps of random writing left by Plath and put them together into a coherent poetry collection. Since Plath’s literary estate had automatically gone to Ted Hughes, making him owner and, therefore, editor of her works, it is not illogical to assume that Kenner might be alluding to Hughes as the true compositional mind behind *Ariel*.

⁵¹ Saul Maloff, “‘Waiting for the Voice to Crack,’ *New Republic*,” in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 103.

⁵² Geoffrey Wolff, “‘*The Bell Jar*,’ *Newsweek*,” in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 113.

⁵³ Wagner, “Introduction,” 2-3.

⁵⁴ Bergonzi, “The Ransom Note,” 32.

⁵⁵ A.E. Dyson, “review, *Critical Quarterly*,” in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 36.

⁵⁶ Russ, *Suppress Women’s Writing*, 60.

⁵⁷ Hugh Kenner, “‘Arts and the Age, On *Ariel*,’ *Triumph*,” in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 77.

The other common trope related to matters of gender that we can find in Plath's difficult reception is pathologization. In line with Plath's teacher's assertion that women writers were commonly unhappy, we can see that this was how they were *perceived* in the literary world, which affected Plath's reception greatly. Critics often labelled her writing as psychotic,⁵⁸ establishing a connection between her works and her illness that allowed for the repudiation of the former. According to Crowther, this pathologization was due to her chosen subject matters,⁵⁹ and we do find that in her reception. For instance, Furbank called her poem "Lady Lazarus"—about her suicide attempts—a "sick verse" and determined it to be both disturbing and terrifying.⁶⁰ Similarly, Richard Tillinghast said of *Ariel*: "...these are poems of schizophrenia, or rather poems by a schizophrenic."⁶¹ However, this sickly quality to her work also extended in some respects to dismissing her compositional capabilities. Kenner—who clearly did not leave any stone unturned in his attacks—removed Plath from her technical achievement with the line: "...there's more of compulsion neurosis than mathematics in those forms."⁶² In this way, compositional coherence was made to be a mere coincidence for the woman writer, who was not a genius but merely a lucky neurotic.

The last—and worst—robbery of Plath's agency over her work took place when she died in 1963 and her literary estate fell into Ted Hughes' hands, who—along with Sylvia's mother and his own sister—immediately began to tamper with Plath's legacy. Before publishing *Ariel*, Hughes took to rearranging the book—which Plath had left completed and arranged to her taste before her suicide. According to Rose, he not only

⁵⁸ Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 14.

⁵⁹ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 148.

⁶⁰ P.N. Furbank, "'New Poetry,' *Listener*," in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 73.

⁶¹ Richard Tillinghast, "'Worlds of Their Own,' *Southern Review*," in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London and New York: Routledge, 1988): 79.

⁶² Kenner, "'Arts and the Age,'" 75.

changed the order but also eliminated poems she had wished to be included—which he deemed too aggressive—⁶³ and added some others that were intended as the beginning for another poetry collection.⁶⁴ This clearly deprived the collection of its intended cohesion. More importantly, the rearrangement eliminated the positive progression that Plath had originally devised,⁶⁵ and silenced both her anger and its conquest.⁶⁶ Hughes also destroyed the latter volumes of Plath’s diary⁶⁷ and excluded all the aggressive and sexual references in the text that would eventually be published.⁶⁸ According to Hughes, he did this to protect his children from ever coming into contact with the material.⁶⁹ However, it seems clear that the editing was in his own self-interest. The “aggressive parts” lost in Plath’s diary and letters all seem to protect Hughes. For instance, a fight between the couple was edited so Plath biting Hughes was left in the text, but Ted’s previous physical aggression was completely deleted.⁷⁰ Aurelia Plath—on her part—devoted the volume of *Letters Home* to curating an image of her daughter that would counteract the resentment and anger found in *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*⁷¹—ironically, to aid in portraying herself as something other than the parasitic mother portrayed by Sylvia in her last works. This tampering greatly affected Plath’s lasting image, as it destroyed all allusions to anger, her mental illness or her (leftist) politics,⁷² as well as her sexuality and the possibly abusive nature of her relationship with Hughes, effectively robbing her of control over her legacy and identity.

⁶³ Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 70.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Wagner, “Introduction,” 8.

⁶⁶ Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 70.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁷¹ Aurelia Schober Plath, “Introduction,” in *Letters Home*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 3.

⁷² Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 79.

However, Plath seemed to maintain a sense of control and agency over both herself and her career that seems inextricably linked to her brains and creativity. On the professional front, she had a great knowledge of the literary world and was well versed in criticism and critics,⁷³ an awareness she made use of to circumnavigate the obstacles she encountered. She constantly wrote to her mother about her literary plans, analyzing which kind of stories seem to be accepted for publication more often,⁷⁴ recounting her writing routines—she set daily word counts or writing hours for herself—,⁷⁵ and tracing long-term plans for literary success such as using publications in women’s magazines—which she did not hold in high regard—to make a name for herself and enter more suitable literary circles.⁷⁶ Aurelia Plath remarked that, during her youth, people seemed to think Sylvia’s literary skills came naturally to her when, in reality, they took constant practice and effort on her part.⁷⁷ This discipline and understanding of the literary sphere—for which she was often devalued as “pushy” and “brash” in the artsy literary spheres of England⁷⁸—gave her power over her own career and the independence that came with financial self-sufficiency. Despite all the rejections and lukewarm reviews, she managed to get attention and benefactors, get a first-read contract with *The New Yorker*⁷⁹ and to be awarded a Saxton grant,⁸⁰ even using writing to provide for herself and her children once her marriage disintegrated.⁸¹ These achievements also gave her the confidence to advocate for herself, to exercise what—according to Malcolm—was one of Plath’s defining characteristics: “her courage to be unpleasant.”⁸² Due to this courage, we find

⁷³ Clark, *Red Comet*, 215.

⁷⁴ Plath, *Letters Home*, 36.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁷⁷ Schober Plath, “Introduction,” 38.

⁷⁸ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 148.

⁷⁹ Plath, *Letters Home*, 440.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁸¹ Plath, *The Letters*, 847.

⁸² Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, 32.

several instances of Plath opposing editors' changes in her poetry—"I also have gone over it very carefully and am not going to try to change it to fit some vague abstract criticism."⁸³ This quality allowed her to protect her vision and artistic integrity even in the face of adversity and possible punishment.

Finally, Plath used the process of writing as a means of acquiring a sense of autonomy. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's first measure of control after being rejected by the summer writing course she was planning to attend is turning to writing.⁸⁴ Plath herself often resorted to writing as a means of finding self-esteem:

I want to write because I have the urge to excell [*sic*] in one medium of translation and expression of life. I can't be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living. Oh, no, I must order life in sonnets and sestinas and provide a verbal reflector for my 60-watt lighted head.⁸⁵

She also used writing as a means of exercising control and rearranging her life: "I justified the mess I made of life by saying I'd give it order, form, beauty, writing about it."⁸⁶ When in distress, writing turned into consolation—"Hope, when free, to write myself out of this hole..."⁸⁷—or into a means of protection—"That's where writing comes in. It is as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh."⁸⁸ Throughout her personal works, the very act of writing becomes a theme and a prayer. It is her religion,⁸⁹ her means of survival,⁹⁰ the source of her power: "...writing makes me a small

⁸³ Plath, *The Letters*, 349.

⁸⁴ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 115.

⁸⁵ Plath, *Journals*, 184.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

⁸⁷ Plath, *Letters Home*, 466.

⁸⁸ Plath, *Journals*, 100.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 300.

god.”⁹¹ In the end, it is the only common thread to her moments of empowerment, and the only practice that kept her confidence, rebelliousness and sense of self-worth alive.

5.3. “A passionate, fragmentary girl”⁹²: Plath’s artistic exploration of Identity.

In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath provides a definition for neuroticism: “...flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another.”⁹³ This conception of psychological unrest comes at the hands of a division—the struggle between woman and writer that became central to Plath’s life and work. According to Whither, Esther’s primary struggle in the novel is that *she* becomes a paradox of the two seemingly contrary ideals of artistry and femininity.⁹⁴ During her younger years, Sylvia’s unrest was also embedded in this conflict, since she was haunted by this division:

I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing or refusing that mate.⁹⁵

I am jealous of men – a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life – his career, and his sexual and family life.⁹⁶

Plath was certainly aware of this division, and it occupied a great part of her mind and energy in her younger years, during which she grew extremely aware of the social

⁹¹ Ibid., 232-233.

⁹² Ibid., 165.

⁹³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 90.

⁹⁴ Whither, “The Divided Woman,” 130.

⁹⁵ Plath, *Journals*, 54.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 98.

conditioning that enforced this narrative. It became a constant motif for her—“And when I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. ‘But what about your *career*?’”⁹⁷ From a young age, Plath’s psyche was split by conflicts which eventually led to her feelings of fragmentation.⁹⁸ She accepted both the idea that she was fragmented somehow—“I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want.”—⁹⁹ and that her desires were oppositional—“my distaste at having to choose between *alternatives*.”¹⁰⁰ It was this assumption that led to an identity paralysis, as she was perfectly aware that her society would not allow a reconciliation between the feminine role and any artistic or intellectual interest. This is perfectly explained in *The Bell Jar* through the image of the fig tree:

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor [...] I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.¹⁰¹

Plath’s acceptance of the oppositional nature of all these identities made her angry and rebellious against the postwar constraints around acceptable concepts of femininity. We find clear signs of opposition to the path of marriage and housewifery:

Will I be a secretary – a self-rationalizing, uninspired housewife, secretly jealous of my husband’s ability to grow intellectually & professionally while I am

⁹⁷ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 211.

⁹⁸ Harold Fromm, “Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist,” *The Hudson Review* 43, no. 2 (1990): 248, 251.

⁹⁹ Plath, *Journals*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 44. Italics mine.

¹⁰¹ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 73.

impeded – will I submerge my embarrassing desires & aspirations, refuse to face myself, and go either mad or become neurotic?¹⁰²

This is a thought also found in her novel—"This [domestic life] seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's."¹⁰³ Importantly, this rebellion was noted even by Plath's doctors, as one of her main diagnoses after her stay at McLean during her depressive episode in 1953 was "difficulty with the feminine role."¹⁰⁴ Indeed, her unrest about imposed limitations was clear: "I felt suddenly breathless, stifled. [...], and the warm, *feminine* atmosphere of the house enveloping me in its thick, feathery *smothering* embrace."¹⁰⁵ The very concept of femininity—and, with it, the home—came to symbolize the entrapment of feminine standards, turning the supposed feeling of nurture associated with the domestic environment during the Postwar into a sense of being locked in a cage. For a while, Plath tried to focus on diverging as much as possible from domesticity by delving into her writing¹⁰⁶ and her academics.¹⁰⁷

However, the constant pushback of her environment—being regarded as weird at Smith for focusing too much on school work,¹⁰⁸ being told during her months of psychological treatment that her ambitions were contributing to her illness,¹⁰⁹ etc.—greatly influenced that part of her that had already wished to simply assimilate. At some points, she even came to regard her psychological symptoms as signs of her "penis envy."¹¹⁰ Sylvia oscillated in her rejection of gender prescriptions, and we find several instances where she seemed determined to abandon her writerly identity. In the early parts

¹⁰² Plath, *Journals*, 151.

¹⁰³ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 80.

¹⁰⁴ Clark, *Red Comet*, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Plath, *Journals*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰⁸ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹¹⁰ Clark, *Red Comet*, 187.

of her diary, for instance, she writes that she plans on *getting used* to the idea of marriage and motherhood,¹¹¹ implying that it is something she does not inherently desire but she plans on conforming to. In *Red Comet*, Clark writes: “Plath had diagnosed her situation with remarkable clarity well before second-wave feminism. Yet on account of the Emersonian upbringing and the sexist era in which she was trapped, she was conflicted about her goals, and often worried the she was selfish.”¹¹² This sentiment of selfishness was related to her writing, as the hunger for a career and its public recognition were deemed—even by Plath—as opposite to the sacrificing and nurturing aspects of femininity. In her diary, she screams at herself for her literary ambitions: “CAN A SELFISH EGOCENTRIC JEALOUS AND UNIMAGITIVE FEMALE WRITE A DAMN THING WORTH WHILE?”¹¹³ In the following page, she resolves that the only way to be rid of her egocentric tendencies is by giving up writing:

Anyway, there are two tentative solutions for getting rid of selfishness – both involving a stoic casting-off the thin tenuous little identity which I love and cherish so dearly – and being confident that, once on the other side, I shall never miss my own little ambitions for my conceited self, but shall be content in serving the ambitions of my mate, *or of a society, or cause*.¹¹⁴

In these lines, it becomes plain that Plath made an association between ambition and narcissism in women but, more than that, that she was also perfectly aware that *society*, as opposed to simply nature, was responsible for that association.

In later years, during her partnership with Hughes, there is an attempt at reconciliation on part of a new Plath who thinks that she has managed to integrate both

¹¹¹ Plath, *Journals*, 21.

¹¹² Clark, *Red Comet*, 219.

¹¹³ Plath, *Journals*, 99.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100. Italics mine.

society's idea of femininity and her own artistic ambitions by way of her marriage to a man who is also a poet and—at least in her mind—supports her writing. She boasts about this reconciliation in front of the Fulbright committee who questions her for getting married while studying: “I’ve spent a gruelling [*sic*] time telling Fulbright people [...] about my marriage & convincing them I would still think while cooking for Ted.”¹¹⁵ Plath’s assimilation into the domestic feminine role was heavily aided by her marriage to Hughes, and while it is true that she never stopped writing and making money from her writing, she came to think of herself primarily as a wife and mother—which she wrote as her occupation when the family moved to England.¹¹⁶ Motherhood was another part of her role and, early on in her marriage, Plath refers to wanting to establish herself as a writer before having children so her motherhood will not overtake her entire identity¹¹⁷—therefore admitting that this danger existed. Nevertheless, the couple soon started to have children and this clearly became part of Plath’s assumed identity. Despite their supposedly egalitarian writing arrangements, Plath was in charge of housekeeping and childcare *while* maintaining the financial responsibilities stated earlier in this chapter. It seems that the work load division was anything but egalitarian:

Caring for two young children under the age of three, keeping the house running smoothly, writing poems, and typing up her husband’s work pushed Plath to the limit. She took care of the business side of her and Hughes’s writing as well as paying all the bills, doing all the shopping, replying to correspondence (often ghostwriting letter for Hughes), making sure poems were regularly submitted to

¹¹⁵ Plath, *The Letters*, 12.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 718.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73, 150.

journals and newspapers, as well as proofreading the galleys for her upcoming novel.¹¹⁸

During most of this time, Plath did not seem aware of the injustice, and she assimilated into her domestic roles with the best of attitudes, even commending her husband for his protection of her writing: “Ted is a marvel of understanding: helps me with dishes or a meal when he sees I’m especially tired & is strongly behind my having 3-4 hours of writing & study time a day.”¹¹⁹ The very use of the word “helps” points us to the fact that Sylvia was indeed charged with the chores of the home. The question emerges on whether Hughes insisted on Plath having four hours of writing a day just so she would be accepting of him having the remaining twenty. However, Plath was approaching a new period of self-identification.

Authors like Crowther have associated Plath’s eventual questioning of domestic femininity to her split from Hughes,¹²⁰ and this is certainly a narrative that has influenced her public image. However, Plath’s re-examination of prescribed femininity and the reconstruction of her own identity started *while* still in the marriage. As the years pass, we find admissions of resentment against the burdens of domesticity, which Sylvia equated with self-erasure: “But I must get back into the world of my creative mind: otherwise, in the world of pies & shin beef, I die.”¹²¹ She began to associate writing with a new sense of self-worth and well-being,¹²² and this made her detach further from domesticity, even when she was still with Ted and envisioning herself as a wife: “I miss not cooking & keeping up the house [...]. I envision myself as writing in the morning & reading widely

¹¹⁸ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 130.

¹¹⁹ Plath, *The Letters*, 485.

¹²⁰ Crowther, *Three Martini Afternoons*, 106.

¹²¹ Plath, *Journals*, 275.

¹²² Plath, *Letters Home*, 105; Plath, *Journals*, 286.

and being a writing-wife.”¹²³ These instances help us infer that there was some type of process, of change, that was taking place in Sylvia’s head even before Hughes left her. In her diary, she admits to the fact that her own identity is indeed still shaping.¹²⁴

Plath used her literary ability to draw Esther Greenwood’s journey and its culmination in the freedom and self-possession that come from reconnecting with one’s sense of identity. In the last months of her life, the author struggled to reconstruct her very own, also by means of writing. Focusing on her writerly identity allowed her to reject her previous attempts at assimilation into domestic womanhood:

Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee, writing like mad—have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, *as if domesticity had choked me*.¹²⁵

I see, too, that *domesticity was a fake cloak for me*. My trouble is that I can do an awful lot of stuff well. I can give a floor a beautiful scrub, cook a fine pie, deliver a baby with ease, and stitch up a nightgown [...]. But *I hate doing housework all, or much of the time*. I have been running a 103 fever out of sheer mad excitement with my own writing.¹²⁶

Similarly, Plath starts to question complete devotion to motherhood and distinguishing herself from that role in a way that she had not before. It is important to note that there is no resentment toward her children and there are no expressions but those of love for them to be found in the letters—she even decided she would dedicate *Ariel* to them.¹²⁷ The process was not one of detaching from love, but from being purely defined by her

¹²³ Plath, *The Letters*, 187.

¹²⁴ Plath, *Journals*, 327.

¹²⁵ Plath, *Letters Home*, 466. Italics mine.

¹²⁶ Plath, *The Letters*, 878. Italics mine.

¹²⁷ Plath, *Letters Home*, 478.

motherhood: "... my children will have a whole mother who indeed loves them, with vigor and warmth, but has never 'laid down her life' for them."¹²⁸ The work in the writing is not of assuming one personality, but on doubling down on what Rose states to be the question Plath most relentlessly addressed in her life: that of her own subjectivity.¹²⁹

The only sense of self that can be found in Plath is in identification with the very act of writing and the creative personality, as she states to only feel like herself when she is working on her literature.¹³⁰ The revelation becomes very repetitive in her last letters:

I am and have been an intelligent woman [...]¹³¹

I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.¹³²

I must be one of the most creative people in the world.¹³³

From this process of self-examination and her frequent discussions of her writing schedule, poetry and her literary plans, the last revelations of Plath about her own sense of self become deeply engrained with artistry. Much of her public perception is engrained in myth, or in constant allusions to her mental illness, and there is certainly no means of knowing if these moments of illumination would have transformed into a cohesive and stable sense of identity had she not ended her life so soon. However, the connection between identity and the act of writing places the focus on the *construction* of the self rather than a conception of identity as a finished product. Writing itself became Plath's identity, not a finished product but a constant *process* of reaffirmation of her own

¹²⁸ Plath, *The Letters*, 831. Underline is Sylvia's.

¹²⁹ Rose, *The Haunting*, 5.

¹³⁰ Plath, *Letters Home*, 333.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 468.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 475.

subjectivity. In her words: “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.”¹³⁴

5.4. Frivolity or Substance: Sylvia Plath’s complicated self-fashioning

Sylvia’s Plath self-fashioning was directly related to her identitarian journey and, therefore, her relationship to fashion became one of oscillation as well. Throughout her life, she seemed to use fashion to present herself in her chosen manner but also be disdainful of fashion as a frivolous affair, a sentiment we find both in her life and her only novel. As a teenager, she was certainly aware of the power of aesthetics and trend-conscious: she liked to tan and keep slender,¹³⁵ and she sometimes took to dying her mousy, brown hair a fashionable blond. (Figure 28). During this time, and until her first mental health episode, there are several instances where Plath made use of 1950s staples and seemed to conform to the aesthetic impositions of the Postwar: she wore her hair in a pageboy—a fashionable hairdo for a young woman at the time— (Figure 29), and used structured underwear such as girdles and petticoats. During a prom party, she even reported wearing a Cinderella-like dress.¹³⁶



Figure 28. Sylvia with a tan and dyed blond hair.

¹³⁴ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 233.

¹³⁵ Clark, *Red Comet*, 142.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.



Figure 29. Plath in a pageboy hairdo.

But this fascination for aesthetics would soon turn into a troubled relationship. Like Esther, her narrative stand-in, Plath was immersed in the fashion world as a young woman and during her internship at *Mademoiselle* in the summer of 1953. This experience confronted her with the limitations this world seemed to offer to an aspiring female author and created an association between fashion and foolishness in her mind for the rest of her life. The relationship between aesthetics and frivolity starts very early on in the story, while Greenwood is preparing to travel to New York:

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little

successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue.¹³⁷

Greenwood becomes instantly critical of her own actions, gaining awareness that her preoccupation with her own image and the world she is about to jump into are removed from substantial matters. This resonates with Plath's own experience, as the magazine ordered all its interns for the summer to focus on their wardrobe, which had to include items such as hats, gloves, and gowns.¹³⁸ Interns were also instructed to include pieces made in specific fabrics—such as silks—and to never enter the building without makeup and a hat.¹³⁹ When going through the same journey, Esther judges the girls around her as uninteresting due to their concern with their own image.¹⁴⁰

Wilson wrote that the postwar period conflated clothing and identity so much that different styles came into vogue in association with different “types” of women,¹⁴¹ and it seems that Plath often took to considering herself above matters of image as part of her intellectual and creative identity. Clark attributed this facet of the author's personality to the austerity that environments like Smith University promoted, where intellectualism was often equated to a more utilitarian approach to clothing.¹⁴² Plath certainly showed this equivalence to be part of her value system even before going to New York, as she often spoke of physical and intellectual interest as complete opposites:

For I feel a great equanimity about peoples [sic] opinions, now. I don't care any more about the handsome wealthy boys who come gingerly into the living room to take out the girl they thought would look nice in an evening cocktail dress... I

¹³⁷ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 2.

¹³⁸ Clark, *Red Comet*, 240.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 240-241.

¹⁴⁰ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 123-124.

¹⁴² Clark, *Red Comet*, 238.

said I wanted to go out with them to meet new people. I ask you, what logic is there in that? What guy you would like, would see the depths in a girl outwardly like all the other physical american queenies?¹⁴³

Concern with the physical is related to shallowness while interest in the world of ideas seems to be directly related to intellectual depth. Importantly, there is a clear divide between the two and the notion that they might coincide in one person is absent. Indeed, clothing was a means of enforcing conformity during the period,¹⁴⁴ and those with a creative or rebellious temperament were often inclined to judge aesthetic assimilation as conformity. In the novel, Esther recalls the consumerism surrounding her experience and how it seemed to envelop her: “I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn’t be cynical. I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us.”¹⁴⁵ From this point on, *The Bell Jar* treats matters of fashion as examples of conformity to the gender rules of the Postwar¹⁴⁶ and the entire plotline, in turn, makes the fashion magazine scenes read almost like a warning, revealing the danger and slippery nature of indoctrination into consumerist conformity.

This was not entirely misguided on Plath’s part. Her aspiration by this point was to become an author, and the magazine world became a bitter disappointment to her writing aspirations. Although the magazine was publishing commendable writers—like McCullers—its public image, promoted by the magazine itself, was that of offering shopping, style and beauty advice to young women.¹⁴⁷ This disheartened Sylvia, who had hoped this internship would translate into career opportunities for a *serious* writer:

¹⁴³ Plath, *Journals*, 53. Underline is Sylvia’s.

¹⁴⁴ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 12, 117, 122.

¹⁴⁵ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Clark, *Red Comet*, 141.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

“Sylvia had assumed that literary doors would open for her at *Mademoiselle*, but she found herself corralled into fashion editing—the literary equivalent of women’s work.”¹⁴⁸ A division between either caring for looks or for substantial matters was solidifying more and more in Plath’s head as the summer internship progressed, and her conception of frivolity and unimportance, in turn, became more associated than ever with femininity. In the story, Esther tries to remain upbeat while reminding herself that at least she is in the hands of the only employee of the magazine she respects:

I was college correspondent for the town *Gazette* and editor of the literary magazine and secretary of Honour Board, which deals with academic and social offences and punishments – a popular office, and I had a well-known woman poet and professor on the faculty championing me for graduate school at the biggest universities in the east, and promises of full scholarships all the way, and now I was apprenticed to the best editor of any intellectual fashion magazines, and what I do but balk and balk like a dull cart horse?.¹⁴⁹

The breaking point, however, was the photographic representation the magazine wanted to make of Plath. In the novel, the interns are forced to pose with something that represents their desired path in life—“Betsy had an ear of corn to show she wanted to be a farmer’s wife.”¹⁵⁰—but freeze when Esther says she wants to be a poet, for which she is given a rose to show “...what inspired the poems.”¹⁵¹ The reality was much more demoralizing: “When Sylvia said she wanted to be a poet, Landshoff sat her down next to a bowl of fruit and handed her a rose.”¹⁵² This was after she had just got a dressing down from one of the editors who had told her she had been given the internship not due

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 240.

¹⁴⁹ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 29.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Clark, *Red Comet*, 243.

to her literary accomplishments but because her mother had taught many of the best secretaries who worked there.¹⁵³ In the photoshoot, there was no discussion over the matter and the symbolism established in the novel seems to have been completely fictional; the real Plath's aspirations were being dismissed. Ironically, this provided Plath opportunity to characterize herself as an artist and the creator of her own image once more: "She managed to subvert the sentimental bric-a-brac: she smiled but held the rose limply, upside down."¹⁵⁴ (Figure 30)



Figure 30. Plath and her upside-down rose.

After her summer, Greenwood makes a final decision about fashion and its influence on her identity:

It was becoming more and more difficult for me to decide to do anything in those last days. And when I eventually *did* decide to do something, such as packing a suitcase, I only dragged all my grubby, expensive clothes out of the bureau and the closet and spread them on the chairs and the bed and the floor and then sat and

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

stared at them, utterly perplexed. They seemed to have a separate, mulish identity of their own that refused to be washed and folded and stowed.¹⁵⁵

Although in the book it is her “frenemy,”¹⁵⁶ Doreen, who disposes of the clothes, the actual Plath took the decision to break with the inconsequentiality of 1950s beauty prescriptions in a much more symbolic manner. Plath did not really throw away her expensive suits, and she would continue to wear them for most of her life, but she did go up to the roof of the women’s hotel she had been staying at that summer and threw her girdles and waist-cinchers into the street.¹⁵⁷ The intent was clear within its 1950s context: Plath was casting out the return of the hourglass figure, which represented a return to 19th century ideals of femininity¹⁵⁸ and, therefore, an exclusion of the woman from all public arenas—including that of art.

During the following years, Plath appears generally uninterested in adopting conventional ideas of feminine attractiveness. After the summer of 1954, she progressively let go of the upkeep of her hair, which went from a beach blond pageboy to a long and straight style in her natural mousy brown color. (Figure 31). Aesthetic consciousness was still within her, and she continued to use clothes as a means of self-presentation, but the identity she projected for the rest of her life was more in line with the principles of austerity and intellectualism. She stopped painting her nails in the bright colors of the 1950s—mostly red and pink. In a letter to her mother from September of that year, she explains the reason for these changes:

¹⁵⁵ Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 100. Italics not mine.

¹⁵⁶ “Frenemy” is used here to refer to Doreen because Esther and her are technically friends but Esther constantly judges, envies, and dismisses Doreen in her mind.

¹⁵⁷ Clark, *Red Comet*, 257.

¹⁵⁸ This association has been explored previously in the “Images of fashion” section of this dissertation.

My brown-haired personality is most studious, charming, and earnest. I like it and have changed back to colorless nail polish for convenience and consistency. I am happy I dyed my hair back, even if it fades and I have to have it touched up once or twice more. I feel that this year, with my applying for scholarships, I would rather look demure and discreet.¹⁵⁹

This trend continued during her following years at Cambridge and during her marriage to Hughes. She dressed in a pink suit for her wedding instead of a dress and she took to simple clothing, often living out of a single suitcase.¹⁶⁰ The suit became a staple in her closet, a way for her to appear as an intellectual while still dressing up for solemn occasions. This was an association she had made even before her summer in New York, when she had already spent her publication money in pieces like suit dresses and jackets, the type of clothing she considered part of “a wardrobe befitting a professional author.”¹⁶¹ She often dressed in a brown suit during the time she taught in the United States, and she wore an elegant black suit to sign the contract of her first book deal for *The Colossus and Other Poems*.¹⁶² Similarly, she sometimes took to wearing pants instead of skirts. A comparison between her younger years and this style reveals the picture of a much more well-formed author. Sylvia’s picture of herself writing when she was younger had been in her pageboy and the cinched waist and voluminous skirt of the era, worn—hilariously—while studiously typing, even though there was no writing on the page. (Figure 32). By contrast, a later picture shows Plath writing in Yorkshire, immersed in reading her own writing, dressed in pants and flat shoes and with unkept hair in a band while the moors of England stand behind her. (Figure 33). By the end of the decade, Plath

¹⁵⁹ Plath, *Letters Home*, 141, 144.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁶¹ Clark, *Red Comet*, 234.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 592.

was no longer wearing makeup, having created a completely different persona to the one she seemed to be attracted to as a young woman.



Figure 31. Plath wearing her natural straight, brown hair.



Figure 32. Sylvia pretending to write in conventional 1950s attire.



Figure 33. Sylvia reading her pages in her later, "serious writer" style.

Plath's experiences in the world of fashion became engrained in her mind as part of the cataclysm of despair that befell her during and after the summer of 1953. Before that time, she had already been reluctant to give herself completely to postwar fashion ideals, undeniably aware that committing to it would effectively classify her within the frivolity that surrounded the period's conception of femininity and, as a consequence, remove her from the world of art and ideas she cherished. After her experience at *Mademoiselle*, she created a long lasting correlation between conventional femininity, emptiness, danger and pretense: "New York: pain, parties, work. And Gary and ptomaine - and José the cruel Peruvian and Carol vomiting outside the door all over the floor – and interviews for TV shows, & competition, and beautiful models and Miss Abels."¹⁶³ Although we do find some instances of the author turning to traditional aesthetics—for instance, getting a fashionable haircut to make herself feel better after her separation from Hughes¹⁶⁴—the connection between conventional femininity and emptiness would never leave her. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Plath's awareness of the power of aesthetics would not leave her either, as she did not turn away from self-fashioning but rather seemed to devote herself and her poetic understanding of the image to constructing a new identity through her own body, the only identity she always came back to: that of the writer.

5.5. Conclusion

The close examination of Plath's works carried out previously draw a detailed picture of the vicissitudes that affronted the woman writer during the Postwar, perfectly represented in Plath's continued exploration of her own agency and identity. Personal and professional issues have surfaced in the writer's constant battle to both make a space for herself in the

¹⁶³ Plath, *Journals*, 187.

¹⁶⁴ Plath, *Letters Home*, 492.

world of letters while also trying to avoid the isolation and loneliness a woman who dared assert herself as a writer during this period was callously threatened with. Specially during her early life, Plath has been shown to be not aware but *made aware* of the social shunning, and the romantic and sexual rejection, that she would be exposed to if she took the literary path. This knowledge affected her mood, psyche and—therefore—ambitions and output. Nevertheless, her diaries, letters and, ultimately, her novel succeed in becoming sites of respite, where the author could openly examine the cruel realities of her society's gender divide and find a space for open rebellion through the very expression of two emotions so commonly denied to women: anger and aspiration.

Plath's identity struggles were another constant throughout her life; they reveal the processes of indoctrination and marginalization used during the postwar years to infuse a longing for assimilation in the woman writer. Plath's fragmentation has been shown to be a direct result of the difficult reality a woman writer embodied during this period: the split between a need for companionship and a strong sense of one's own individuality. Plath's works were instrumental in showing this process of fragmentation. What's more, they become instrumental in showing how fragmentation itself could be understood as a constant in the female author's life during the era. Thus, Plath unwittingly provides a complete image of the process of identity construction not as a singular and linear affair, but as a circuit of constant questioning and reconstruction. From this exploration, Plath's identity is devised as a perpetual work in progress, a process of self-creation driven by one's own desire.

Finally, the analysis of the author's self-representation has contributed to the study of the themes of agency and identity in Plath's life. Her fictionalization of her relationship with the fashion world, her biographical trajectory, and the testimony of her intimate writings depict that she was hyper-aware of the power of the image. Moreover, her

oscillation between styles associated with intellectuality and dress associated with banality further confirm the split between postwar conceptions of femininity and creativity. Plath's aesthetic choices mirror gender indoctrination of the, further contributing to the exploration of her cultural context and the consequent fragmentation in her identity.

Throughout this chapter, one constant seems to emerge: literary expression was Sylvia Plath's only source of relief and empowerment throughout her life. While her life and work were continuously plagued by the problems explored in this chapter, and common to postwar women writers, the author—seemingly out of sheer will—succeeded in maintaining a connection to writing that would help her navigate her difficulties. Consequently, Plath's literature becomes a perfect example of the plight of women writers during the Postwar and, most importantly, of artistry's power to grant women writers the authority to reconstruct their fragmented selves.

CONCLUSION

Self-creation could very well be the only common thread running through the myriads of experiences, genres, and images that comprise the life and work of a woman writer. From an outsider's perspective—probably even to themselves—Nin, McCullers and Plath could be understood as widely different writers, in accordance with their widely individualistic personalities. Nin was the immigrant daughter of a broken and artistic family, McCullers an androgynous prodigy from the South, and Plath a well-to-do, educated, white girl from the New England suburbs. Indeed, their lives seem only united in one common experience: the self-consciousness that arises from marginalization. This influenced them to spend a great deal of their lives exploring the self, bringing an autobiographical dimension into their work that shows affinity with the Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Rita Felski wrote:

Feminist confession exemplifies the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women's experience. In other words, the shift toward a conception of communal identity which has emerged with new social movements such as feminism brings with it a modification of the notion of individualism as it is exemplified in the male bourgeois autobiography.¹

This dissertation finds itself at the crossroads between this new wave of reception and the Postwar suppression of women writers as a group, providing key insights into the

¹ Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 93.

complicated relationship between gender identity and artistry that characterized the period immediately preceding the social liberations of the 60s and 70s.

The study has provided a comprehensive examination of the gender articulations of the Postwar era, analyzing the legal, philosophical and social sites of pressure that re-packaged and promoted domesticity and reinstated traditional femininity within the private sphere. Postwar gender ideology conceptualized femininity in association to traits like submission, passivity and containment, effectively barring women from public pursuits in the political, intellectual and artistic arenas. In turn, Nin, McCullers and Plath's works offer an open and sustained questioning and dismissal of the feminine values of the period. This shared critique of gender indoctrination allows them to be grouped within a wider line of pre-feminism feminist thought and be studied as representatives of a rebellious subculture of women writers in the literary spheres of postwar America.

This study has also focused on the contextual struggles of the woman writer and permitted the identification of thematic commonalities in the work of Nin, McCullers and Plath. Through this relationship, their postwar context can be seen as seeping into their writing to unify their legacies. Finding common struggles and concerns has translated into common thematic obsessions in tune with the main themes explored in this dissertation: agency, identity, and artistry. In this way, the authors' cultural context further motivates their grouping, turning their literatures into sites of negotiation with their society and with their own selves. From these analyses, a collective pattern of using their inherent creativity in the bargaining for autonomy and self-configuration emerges and further links the authors together.

In addition, this dissertation has dismissed canonical views of autobiographical writing as second-rate literature, using it as a pathway into the artistic and personal configuration of the woman writer. This has also allowed for the exploration of

autobiographical motives within different genres: fiction, short fiction, and intimate writing. From this perspective, the authors' discussions of their intimate lives and their use of fictional characters to speak about themselves affords a means of approximation to their personal experiences. This personal focus has also permitted me to understand the link between literary creativity and self-construction—to see the extent to which writing was, for the women of my study and many other in that cultural moment, a means of negotiation between ambition, expression, social expectation and imposed identities, proving artistry to be the only path into the articulation of a coherent self-narrative.

Finally, the intimate and autobiographical focus of the project has permitted me to study techniques for self-configuration outside the scope of literature. Establishing a relationship between literary configurations of the self and stylistic self-representation has generated a more complete portrait of the artists analyzed by interpreting the curation of a public persona—through personal style and photographic presentation—as both a site of resistance against and of negotiation of identitarian impositions. This parallel, common to every author discussed, allows for their further grouping through two main characteristics: their understanding of the performative aspect of identity and identifying practices, and the extension of the rebellion behind their self-identifying practices to realms outside the literary. This proves, in turn, the desire for self-determination and self-configurations to have been a common instance in these writers' lives.

In short, the present dissertation explores these writers' autobiographical and personal expressiveness to determine how each of them reacted against her particular context. Despite these authors' differences in background, literary styles and aesthetic presentation, this comparative analysis emphasizes their shared thematic concerns in order to avoid the usually heavily individualized study of women writers of this period. Furthermore, common thematic obsessions within their singular rebellions also allows for

their grouping, as they shared gender politics and common patterns of production and identity configuration. Consequently, the study not only provides a new understanding of these authors individually, but also succeeds in addressing their collective artistic rebellion.

The authentic voice may not be the one you want to hear.

*All true art is subversive at some level or other,
but it doesn't simply subvert literary clichés and social conventions;
it also subverts the clichés and conventions you yourself would like to believe in.*

— *Al Alvarez*²

² Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice*, 29.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, Richard M. *America Transformed: Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change 1941-2001*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Adams, Clifford R. "Making Marriage Work: How a Bride Adjusts to Marriage." *Ladies Home Journal*, July 1954, 16.
- Adams, Rachel. "'A Mixture of Delicious and Freak': The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers." *American Literature* 71, no. 3 (September 1999): 551-583.
- Alvarez, Al. *The Writer's Voice*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.
- Anderson, Linda. *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*. London: Prentice Hall and Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997.
- Are You Popular?*. Instructional film. Directed by Ted Peshak. Filmed in Illinois: Coronet Instructional Films, 1947. 10 min. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDzNiVsKWIs>
- Arnold, Sarah. *Gender and Early Television: Mapping Women's Role in Emerging US and British Media, 1850-1950*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- Bailey, Beth L. *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Bailey, Margaret. "The Women's Magazine Short-Story Heroine in 1957 and 1967." *Journalism Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1969): 364-366.
- Baldanza, Frank. "Anais Nin." In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 9-16. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.

- Ball, Terrence. "The Politics of Social Science in Postwar America." In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, edited by Lary May, 76-92. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Bancroft Schlesinger, Elizabeth. "The Women's Magazines." In *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, edited by Nancy A. Walker, 229-233. Boston: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.
- Benstock, Shari. "Authorizing the Autobiographical." In *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock, 10-33. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Berger, Milton Miles. "The Use of Films for Mental Hygiene Education." *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 3, no. 2 (1957): 109-113.
- Bergonzi, Bernard. "'The Ransom Note,' Manchester Guardian." In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 32. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Berwick, Keith. "A Conversation with Anaïs Nin." In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 52-69. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Random House, 1992 [1961].
- Bowlby, Rache. "Walking, women and writing Virginia Woolf as *flâneuse*." In *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, edited by Isobel Armstrong, 26-47. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

- Braslow, Joel T. "History and Evidence-Based Medicine: Lessons from the History of Somatic Treatments from the 1900s to the 1950s." *Mental Health Services Research* 1, no. 4 (1999): 231-240.
- Brown, Mike. *The 1950s Look: Recreating the Fashions of the Fifties*. Kent: Sabrestorm Publishing, 2008.
- Busby, Linda J., and Greg Leichty. "Feminism and Advertising in Traditional and Nontraditional Women's Magazines 1950s-1980s." *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (1993): 247-264.
- Bush, Rebecca. "Woman, Southern, Bisexual." *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019): 94-115.
- Carr, Virginia Spencer. *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*. Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2003 [1975].
- Cassidy, Marsha F. *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.
- Chodorow, Nancy J. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, § 703(a)(1), 78 Stat. 241, 255 (1964).
- Clark, Heather. *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK, 2020.
- Cohen, Sol. "The Mental Hygiene Movement, the Development of Personality and the School: The Medicalization of American Education." *History of Education Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (summer 1983): 123-149.

- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: BasicBooks, 1992.
- Cott, Nancy F. *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Coward, Rosalind. "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, 225-239. London: Virago Press Limited, 1986.
- Crowther, Gail. *Three Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton*. New York: Gallery Books, 2021.
- A Date with Your Family*. Instructional film. Directed by Edward G. Simmel. Filmed in the U.S.: Encyclopaedia Britannica Films, 1950. 10 min. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQIGiE5vSSM>
- Davis, Fred. *Fashion, culture, and Identity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Demetrakopolous, Stephanie A. "Anais Nin and the Feminine Quest for Consciousness: The Quelling of the Devouring Mother and the Ascension of the Sophia." In *The Critical Response to Anaïs Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 29-44. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Deutsch, Helene. *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1944.
- Dews, Carlos L. "Introduction." In *Illumination & Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, by Carson McCullers, edited by Carlos L. Dews, xi-xxii. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

- Diefenbach, G. J., D. Diefenbach, A. Baumeister, and M. West. "Portrayal of Lobotomy in the Popular Press: 1935–1960." *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 8, no. 1 (April 1999): 61–76.
- Dunne, Matthew W. *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society*. Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013.
- Dyson, A.E. "review. *Critical Quarterly*." In Sylvia Plath, *The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 36-40. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1983.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deidre English. *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Expert's Advice to Women*. London: Pluto Press, 1979.
- Erll, Astrid. *Memory in Culture*. Edited by Andrew Hoskins and John Sutton. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Evans, Oliver. "Anaïs Nin and the Discovery of Inner Space." *Prairie Schooner* 36, no. 3 (Fall 1962): 217-231.
- . *Carson McCullers: Her Life and Work*. London: Peter Owen, 1965.
- Evans, Sara M. *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America*. New York: The Free Press, 1989.
- Felber, Lynette. "The Three Faces of June: Anaïs Nin's Appropriation of Feminine Writing." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1995): 309-324.

- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- . “On Confession.” In *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 83-95. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
- Flügel, J.C. *The Psychology of Clothes*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1971.
- Fogarty, Anne. *The Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife*. London: V&A Publishing, 2011.
- Franklin, Benjamin, V. “Introduction.” In *Trapeze: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1947-1955*, xi-xiv. Ohio: Swallow Press and Ohio University Press, 2017.
- Franzwa, Helen H. “Working women in Fact and Fiction,” *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (June 1974): 104-109.
- Free, Melisa. “Relegation and Rebellion: The Queer, the Grotesque, and the Silent ein the Fiction of Carson McCullers.” *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 4 (2008): 426-446.
- Freeman, Barbara, and Anaïs Nin. “A Dialogue with Anaïs Nin.” *Chicago Review* 24, no 2 (1972): 29-35.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013 [1963].
- Fromm, Harold. “Sylvia Plath Hunger Artist.” *The Hudson Review* 43, no. 2 (1990): 245-256.
- Furbank, P.N. “‘New Poetry,’ *Listener*.” In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda. W. Wagner, 73. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.

- Gair, Christopher. *The American Counterculture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Gibbins, Keith. "Communication Aspects of Women's clothes and their Relation to Fashionability." *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 8, no. 4 (December 1969): 301-312.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. "A fine, White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath." In *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 245-260. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.
- . "What do Feminist Critics Want? *A Postcard from the Volcano*." In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, 29-45. London: Virago Press Limited, 1986.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. "Introduction: Gender, Creativity, and the Woman Poet." In *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, xv-xxvi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.
- . *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writer and the Nineteenth century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale Nota Bene and Yale University Press, 2000 [1979].
- . *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Vol. 1, *The War of the Words*. Binghamton: Vail-Ballou Press, 1988.
- . *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985.

- Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Gleeson-White, Sarah. *Strange Bodies: Gender and identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1959].
- Goldberg, Ronald Allen. *America in the 1940s*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009.
- Goldin, Claudia. *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Goldstein, Leigh. "Designing Woman!: Space, Affect and Femininity in Postwar American Public Affairs TV." *Critical Studies in Television* 9, no. 2 (2014): 39-53.
- González Groba, Constante. "The Intolerable Burden of Femininity in Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding" and "The Ballad of the Sad Café"." *Atlantis* 16, no. 1 of 2 (1994): 133-148.
- Good Grooming for Girls*. Instructional film. Directed by Mary Stuyvesant. Filmed in New York City: Frances R. Denny Company, 1946. 60 min.
- Gudmundsdóttir, Gunnthórunn. *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*. Edited by Theo D. Haen and Hans Bertens. Postmodern Studies 33. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003.

Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney, 28-48. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Habit Patterns. Instructional film. New York: McGraw-Hill Films, 1954. 14 min. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km4CR1uGYxA>

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 392-403. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Haralovich, Mary Beth. "Sitcoms and suburbs: Positioning the 1950s homemaker." *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 61-83.

Harris, Mason. "'The Bell Jar', West Coast Review." In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 107-112.

Harris, Kristina. *Vintage Fashion for Women with Values: The 1950s & 60s*. Atglen: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 1997.

Hartmann, George W. "Clothing: Personal Problem and Social Issue." *Journal of Home Economics* 41, no. 6 (June 1949): 295-298.

Hartmann, Susan M. "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years." In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960*, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, 84-100. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

Hayes, Patrick. *Postwar to contemporary 1945-2020*, vol. 7 of *The Oxford History of Life-Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

- Higonnet, Anne. *Liberty, Equality, Fashion: The Women who Styled the French Revolution*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024.
- Hill, Daniel Delis. *As Seen In Vogue: A Century of American Fashion in Advertising*. Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2004.
- . *Dress and Identity in America: The Baby Boom Years 1946-1964*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024.
- Hillman, Betty Luther. *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style & the Politics of Self Presentation in the 1960s & 1970s*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
- Howard-Williams, Rowan, and Elihu Katz. “Did television empower women? The introduction of television and the changing status of women in the 1950s.” *Journal of Popular Television* 1, no. 1 (2013): 7-24.
- Jackson-Lears, T.J. “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass Consumption Society.” In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, edited by Lary May, 38-57. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- Jay, Karla. “Two Interviews with Anaïs Nin.” In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 133-142. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Jobling, Paul, Philippa Nesbitt, and Angelene Wong. *Fashion, Identity, Image*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022.
- Jong, Erica. “A Story Never Told Before — Reading the New, Unexpurgated Diaries of Anais Nin.” In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 205-214. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.

- Kaempffert, Waldemar. "Turning the mind inside out." *Saturday Evening Post* 231, no. 47 (1941): 18.
- Kaminski, Margaret. "Interview with Anaïs Nin." In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 195-202. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Karl, Frederick R. "The Fifties and After: An Ambiguous Culture." In *A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture*, edited by Josephine G. Hendin, 20-71. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Kenner, Hugh. "'Arts and the Age, On *Ariel*,' *Triumph*." In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 74-77.
- Kuntz, Paul Grimley. "Art as a Public Dream: The Practice and Theory of Anaïs Nin." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32, no. 4 (Summer 1974): 525-537.
- Lamm Pineau, Elyse. "A Mirror of Her Own: Anais Nin's Autobiographical Performances." In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 233-251. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Lee Mock, Erin. "The Horror of 'Honey, I'm Home!': The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom." *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 41, no. 2 (2001): 29-50.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- . *On Diary*. U.S.: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.
- Lenviel, Claire. "Hopeless Resistance: The Self-Look in McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 26, no. 2 (2013): 115-120.

- Loeb, Clare. "Anaïs Nin on Women's Liberation." In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 27-39. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Lundberg, Ferdinand, and Marynia F. Farnham. *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1947.
- Lüta, Kadir. "Grotesque Bodies and Gender Performativity: Dismantling the southern Belle in Carson McCullers's The Ballad of the Sad Café." *Turkish Academic Research Review* 10, no. 3 (2025): 673-686.
- Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. London: Picador, 1994.
- Maloff, Saul. "'Waiting for the Voice to Crack,' *New Republic*." In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 103-106. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Marcus, Jane. "Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women." In *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock, 114-146. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Marcus, Laura. "Feminist aesthetics and the New Realism." In *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, edited by Isobel Armstrong, 11-25. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Marriage is a Partnership*. Instructional film. Directed by Ted Peshak. Filmed in Illinois: Coronet Films, 1951. 16 min. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ykwi_qoZ_Fo

- Mason, Mary G. "The Other Voice; Autobiographies of Women Writers." In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney, 207-235. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Masterton Sherazo, Melanie. "collaborative Life Writing: The Dialogical Subject of Carson McCullers' Dictaphone "Experiments" and Posthumous Autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare*." In *Carson McCullers in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alison Graham-Bertolini and Casey Kayser, 49-66. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Matthews, Fred. "In Defense of common Sense: Mental Hygiene as Ideology and Mentality in Twentieth-Century America." *Prospects* 4 (1979): 459-516.
- May, Lary. "Introduction." In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, edited by Lary May, 1-16. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- McBrien, William. "Anaïs Nin: An Interview." *Twentieth Century Literature* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1974): 277-290.
- McCarthy, Elizabeth. "Fast Cars and Bullet Bras: The Image of the Female Juvenile Delinquent in 1950s America." In *It Came from the 50s! Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*, edited by Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy, and Bernice M. Murphy, 135-157. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- McCullers, Carson. "The Heart is as a lonely Hunter." In *Carson McCullers: Complete novels*, 1-306. New York: The Library of America, 2001.

- . *Illumination & Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, edited by Carlos L. Dews. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.
- . “Wunderkind.” In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 86-102. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1963.
- McNay, Michael. “Non-belligerent in the Sex War.” In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 40-42. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne. “Introduction: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960.” In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960*, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, 1-16. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.
- Meyer Spacks, Patricia. “Female Rhetorics.” In *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock, 177-191. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Milan, B.T. “A Father’s Place... Is in the Home?” *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1958, 4.
- Milford-Cottam, Daniel. *Fashion in the 1950s*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury Shire, 2017.
- Miller, Henry. “Un Etre Etoilique.” In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 147-153. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Molyneaux, Maxine, and Julia Casterton. “Looking Again at Anais Nin.” In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 215-232. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Moskowitz, Eva. ““It’s Good to Blow Your Top”: Women’s Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965.” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 66-98.

- Neuhaus, Jessamyn. "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (spring 1999): 529-555.
- Nin, Anaïs. *The Diary of Anaïs Nin Volume Four 1944-1947*. New York: Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
- . *The Diary of Others: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1955-1966*. Pennsylvania: Sky Blue Press, 2021.
- . "Interview for Sweden." In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. Dubow, 15-23. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- . "Introduction." In *Through the flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, by Judy Chicago, x-xii. London: The Women's Press, 1982 [1975].
- . *Mirages: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1939-1947*. Ohio: Swallow Press and Ohio University Press, 2013.
- . *Trapeze: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin 1947-1955*. Ohio: Swallow Press and Ohio University Press, 2017.
- "The One in Barbados." Directed by Greg Malins. Written by Shana Goldber-Meehan and Scott Silvery. *Friends*. Season 9, episode 24. May 15, 2003. NBC.
- Oren, Tasha G. "Domesticated Dads and Double-Shift Moms: Real Life and Ideal Life in 1950s Domestic Comedy." *Cercles* 8 (2003): 78-90.
- Parrinder, Patrick. *Authors & Authority: English and American Criticism 1750-1990*. London: Macmillan, 1991.

- Pascal, Roy. *Design And Truth In Autobiography*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.
- Perry, Constance M. "Carson McCullers and the Female Wunderkind." *The Southern Literary Journal* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 36-45.
- Piatti Farnell, Lorna. "'At My Cooking I feel It Looking': Food, Domestic Fantasies and Consumer Anxiety in Sylvia Plath's Writing." In *It Came from the 50s! Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*, edited by Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy, and Bernice M. Murphy, 198-215. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Piper, Andrew. "What Do characters Do? The Embodied Agency of Fictional Characters." *Journal of Computational Literary Studies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1-12.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber & Faber, 2019 [1963].
- . *Letters Home*, edited by Aurelia Schober Plath. London: Faber & Faber, 1978 [1976].
- . *The Letters of Sylvia Plath. Volume II: 1956-1963*, edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber & Faber, 2018.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth. *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anaïs Nin*. Montreal & Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.
- Potts, M. Lee. "Developing creativity: Anaïs Nin a model." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 41, no. 2 (1977): 83-89.

- Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, Pub. L. No. 95-555, 92 Stat. 2076 (1978).
- Presley, Anne Beth. "Fifty Years of Change: Societal Attitudes and Women's Fashions, 1900-1950." *The Historian* 60, no. 2 (1998): 307-324.
- Rice, Alison M. "The Rise of 'Good Reading' over 'Good Writing': how and why women's magazine fiction changed in the 1950s and 1960s." *Journalism Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2000): 139-150.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* 34, no. 1, "Women, Writing and Teaching" (oct. 1972): 18-30.
- Roberts, Frank. "Writers at Work: Anaïs Nin Talks with Frank Roberts." In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 3-14. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Rose, Jaqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Rowbotham, Sheila. *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1973.
- Ruiz, Amanda Anais. "Generation Lobotomy: Kinase Inhibition Therapy, Memory Erasure and Identity Loss." *Stance: An International Undergraduate Philosophy Journal* 2 (2009): 9-17.
- Russ, Joanna. *How to Suppress Women's Writing*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018 [1983].
- Sakova, Aija. "Fighting Fear with Writing; Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* and Ene Mihkleson's *Ahasveeruse uni* (The Sleep of Ahasuerus)." In *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, edited by Gabriele Rippl, Philipp

- Schweighauser, Tiina Kirss, Marit Sutrop and Therese Steffen, 211-224. London: University of Toronto Press, 2013.
- Sayre, Robert F. "Autobiography and the Making of America." In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney, 146-168. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Schneider, Duane. "Anais Nin in the *Diary*: The Creation and Development of a Persona." In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 178-189. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Schober Plath, Aurelia. "Introduction." In *Letters Home*, edited by Aurelia Schober Plath, 1-42. London: Faber & Faber, 1978.
- Seymour, Nicole. "Somatic Syntax: Replotting the Developmental Narrative in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*." *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (2009): 293-313.
- Shapiro, Karl. "The Charmed Circle of Anais Nin." In *The Critical Response to Anais Nin*, edited by Philip K. Jason, 154-157. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- Shapland, Jenn. *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers*. Portland: Tin House, 2020.
- Shy Guy*. Instructional film. Directed by Ted Peshak. Filmed in Illinois: Coronet Instructional Media, 1947. 13 min. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf1h89f5KeM>
- Showalter, Elaine. "Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution." In *The New Feminist criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, 3 17. London: Virago Press Limited, 1986.

- . “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers.” *The Antioch Review* 50, no. 1 (1992): 339-353.
- . *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*. Oxford and New York: The Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Smethers, J. Steven, and Lee Jolliffe. “Homemaking Programs: The Recipe for Reaching Women Listeners on the Midwest's Local Radio.” *Journalism History* 24, no. 4 (1999): 138-147.
- Smith, Ken. *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945-1970*. New York: Blast Books, 1999.
- Smith, Sidonie. “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance (1995).” In *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 108-115. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
- . “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance (Smith 1995).” In *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson autobiography Studies Reader*, edited by Sidonie smith and Julie Watson, 261-282. U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. “Introduction: Mapping Women's Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces.” In *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 345-392. U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016.
- . “Introduction: Situating subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices (1998).” In *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography*

- Studies Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 3-88. U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016.
- . “Memory, Narrative, and the Discourses of Identity in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* (Smith 1999).” In *Life Writing in the Long Run: A Smith & Watson Autobiography Studies Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 629-656. U.S.A.: Michigan Publishing, 2016.
- . *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Social Acceptability*. Instructional film. Filmed in Ottawa: Crawley Films, 1957. Part of *Adolescent Development Series*. 19 min. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9Bdngd1Db4>
- Spencer, Sharon. ““Femininity” and the woman writer: Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and the *Diary of Anaïs Nin*.” *Women’s Studies* 1 (1973): 247-257.
- . “An Interview with Anaïs Nin.” In *Conversation with Anais Nin*, edited by Wendy M. Dubow, 178-185. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Stanford Friedman, Susan. “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice.” In *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock, 34-62. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988,
- Stanley, Liz. “From ‘self-made women’ to ‘women’s made-selves’?” In *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, theories, methods*, edited by Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, 40-60. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

- Stanton, Domna C. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" In *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, edited by Domna C. Stanton, 3-20. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Stimpson, Catharine R. "The Female Sociograph: The Theater of Virginia Woolf's letters." In *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth century*, edited by Domna C. Stanton, 168-179. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Stole, Inger. "Televised Consumption: Women Advertiser and the Early Daytime Television Industry." *Consumption Markets & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2003): 65-80.
- Stoltzfus, Emilie. *Citizen, Mother, Worker: Debating Public Responsibility for Child Care after the Second World War*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Storm, Penny. *Functions of Dress: Tool of culture and The Individual*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1987.
- Straub, Julia. "Richard Wollheim's *Germes*: Life Writing as Therapy, Despite Theory." In *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, edited by Gabriele Rippl, Philipp Schwichhauser, Tiina Kirss, Margit Sutrop and Therese Steffen, 85-100. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2013.
- Susman, Warren, and Edward Griffin. "Did success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America." In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, edited by Lary May, 19-37. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

- Thompson, Dorothy. "What Price Liberty?" *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1958, 11, 14.
- Tillinghast, Richard. "'Words of Their Own,' *Southern Review*." In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 79. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Tyler May, Elaine. "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb." In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, edited by Lary May, 154-170. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- . *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. US: Basic Books, 1988.
- Wagner, Linda W. "Introduction." In *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Linda W. Wagner, 1-24. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Walford, Jonatha. *1950s American Fashion: The American clothes that Defined the 50s*. London: Shire Publications, 2012.
- Walker, Nancy A. "Introduction." In *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, edited by Nancy A. Walker, 1-20. Boston: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.
- . "'Wider Than the Sky': Public Presence and Private Self in Dickinson, James and Woolf." In *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Shari Benstock, 272-304. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Weiss, Jessica. *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom & Social Change*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

- Whither, Gayle. "The Divided woman and generic doubleness in *The Bell Jar*." *Women's Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 127-146.
- Williamson, Nancy, Evelyn Clark, and Barbara Reyes. "A Conversation with Anaïs Nin." In *Conversations with Anaïs Nin*, edited by Wendy M. DuBow, 75-91. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003.
- . "Deviant Dress." *Feminist Review* 35 (summer 1990): 67-74.
- Woloch, Nancy. *Women and the American Experience: A Concise History*. 3rd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2024.
- Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1981 [1927].
- . *Virginia Woolf: Women & Writing*, edited by Michèle Barrett. London: The Women's Press, 1979.
- Zhou, Yiyuan. "Self and Other: Mirror Figures in Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*." *Comparative Literature: East & West* 20, no. 1 (2014): 78-86.