

THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL*  
*JAR* AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath and Margaret Atwood each have novels that are currently being brought to the big and little screens. A film-version of Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, is expected in 2018, while *Hulu* will be releasing its *The Handmaid's Tale* at the end of this month. This thesis explores the relevance of the two novels in relation to the need for sustained feminist activism.

*The Bell Jar*, first published in England under Plath's pseudonym, Victoria Lucas, remains as the only novel among pages of her poetry. Since she ended her own life before the novel was published in the U.S., many readers did not experience it until after her death when her family published it with her name on the cover. Plath's novel provides readers an insight into the life of Esther Greenwood, a proto-feminist lonely in her quests to find what feminist theorist Helene Cixous calls an "elsewhere" away from patriarchal entrapment; that is, a space to explore her desire for advanced education, a fulfilling career, and a satisfying sexual life.

Atwood's novel offers a response of the post-feminist generation that followed that of Esther's proto-feminist one. Offred, *The Handmaid's Tale* narrator-protagonist, is pleased with her rights regarding education, careers, and sexuality. Before the dystopian Gilead takes over the U.S., she is only able to view feminist ideologies and activism in terms of her own complicated relationship with her mother. Both Plath and Atwood present the complex identities of women who struggle to navigate competing messages about socially acceptable femininity coming not only from society, but from within themselves as well. Each text exemplifies the necessity for women to stand in solidarity with each other so that we all can reach our greatest human potential.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers a reading of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as texts that frame the twenty years of the feminist movement between the early 1960s and the late 1980s. When read together, the novels offer a grim reminder of what a world without feminism was like prior to the 1960s "second wave" of activism—when forty years of less conspicuous feminist activity came to a head—and what a world without feminism could be like, given the ongoing backlash against feminism begun in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Bell Jar*'s setting of 1953, Esther Greenwood, the novel's protagonist-narrator, is a young woman in desperate need of some kind of feminist movement. However, as Plath represents it, nothing like that existed for her among white bourgeois women during the two decades of her life prior to her nineteenth year, when the novel opens. Plath's narrator attempts to end her own life while struggling to battle the competition between society's messages about what a woman should want and what her own mind tells her. She says, "I am I am I am" on the same morning she "had tried to hang" herself, and she says it again on the day that she is expected to be released from a mental institution (Plath 158, 243). Without a larger feminist vision, Esther can hope only to survive, only to exist, without understanding what it might mean to actually *be* fully liberated, that is, to achieve her potential as a human and a woman.

Conversely, set in the late 1980s with an afterword in 2195, Atwood's novel portrays its protagonist-narrator, Offred, as the daughter of a radical, anti-porn feminist, who had some separatist-feminist values as well. Flashbacks to her pre-Gilead days in the late 1970s and early

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the problematic use of the "waves" metaphor and a justification for its continued use when understood in global and intersectional terms, see the introduction to *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories*. Edited by Barbara Molony and Jennifer Nelson. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

1980s reveal Offred's contempt for her mother's feminist activism, the kind that was sparked in part by the discontent of women like Plath's narrator, Esther. In the "time before" Gilead, Atwood's fictional dystopia, Offred feels as though the fight for women's liberation is won because she has her reproductive freedoms, a husband whom she met during the course of an affair while he was married, and a career. She has all of the rights that she thinks she needs, deducing that the white, bourgeois feminist movement's battles have all been won. By the end of the novel, Offred uses any residual feminist notions she may maintain only for her personal advantage understood in individualistic terms, rather than in terms of a larger, collective movement. Offred, like Plath's Esther, says, "Maybe it's because I've been emptied; or maybe it's the body's way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer, *I am, I am. I am, still*" (Atwood 281). Like Esther, Offred's individual actions allow her to survive bodily, but perhaps also as someone who has been "emptied" of her fullest human potential as a woman. Both narrators remind themselves that they have managed only to survive in a patriarchal society that directly opposes their full liberation as human beings and as women.

Chapter one examines how Sylvia Plath's novel resists the dominant discourse of femininity in the 1950s as embodied in contemporary sex manuals, popular journalism, and consumer advertising to suggest the need for women's liberation if they are to attain their fullest humanity. Sylvia Plath's novel, poetry, journals, and letters all speak to the need of a feminist movement. In this chapter, I examine the identity of Esther, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, as a proto-feminist, as a woman critical of patriarchy but uninformed by the feminist analysis that later writers developed. I demonstrate how Esther struggles in her proto-feminism by both resisting and adhering to the dominant domestic ideology of the 1950s. I use Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in this chapter to

establish the dominant patriarchal attitudes about women and the social conditions under which they lived in the late 1940s-1960s.

My analysis of the novel is also grounded in Helene Cixous's theory of *l'écriture féminine* and the utopian "elsewhere" away from patriarchal entrapment that Cixous would like women's writing in the future to embody. Esther questions the mainstream discourse that tells her to abandon her future as a writer for a husband and children, yet she struggles with ridding herself of that conventional domestic ideal. In addition to her future, Esther also questions her own constrained sexual freedom in comparison to that of her on-again off-again boyfriend, Buddy. Esther recognizes the differences between herself and men in her society, and realizes that she wishes to be more like them. No one questions a man for having sex before marriage, or even outside of a marriage. No one questions a man, like Buddy, who wishes to go to school for both undergraduate and professional degrees. Using Cixous's theory to examine Esther's failure to achieve an "elsewhere," I conclude this chapter by suggesting that Esther eventually does "let go" of her identity as a domestic woman, though she does not have a group with which to identify, such as a "feminist" community, because the discourse about that community was not available to her in 1953.

Chapter two explores Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's dystopian novel tackles issues of reproductive rights that are especially relevant to an examination of how women's actions (and even more invasively, their bodies) are policed by a patriarchal society. Offred, the narrator-protagonist of the novel, struggles with her identity as a Handmaid in a dystopian version of what could happen if the 1980s backlash against feminism in North America were to succeed and extend its assumptions to its logical extreme. I use Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* to establish the myriad discourses—

especially those from the far right in politics and fundamentalist religious sects—to establish the discursive and social contexts in which Atwood was writing. Atwood’s novel suggests that there may be dire consequences for women who have grown complacent in their oppression and for women who have sought individual freedoms within a corrupt system rather than systemic change.

In addition to using Faludi’s *Backlash* to situate Atwood’s dystopia in the context of the reactionary politics that pushed against the gains that the second-wave feminist movement achieved, my analysis of the novel is also grounded in research into radical, anti-porn, separatist feminist groups, elements of which are loosely represented in the narrator’s best friend, Moira, and in her mother. The two, unlike Offred, embody ideals similar to those of separatist feminist groups of the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Cell 16 and the Radicalesbians. Paradoxically, the leaders in Gilead who run the “Re-Education” programs for the new Handmaids appropriate some of these more radical feminist ideas, which they deploy in the interest of the suppression of women, rather than their liberation. This seeming paradox suggests that dogmatism in the interest of women’s liberation can lead to a form of suppression that works against the aims of an effective movement because it alienates potential allies.

By looking at *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* together, my thesis suggests the vital need for a collective movement of women against the oppressive, patriarchal structures that control and regulate them. The relationship between Plath’s and Atwood’s protagonists—one a proto-feminist desperate for validation of her own desires for liberation, the other a post-feminist content in her own privilege—reveals both the need for constant feminist activism to transform social institutions and the fragile nature of any progress achieved through that activism.



**CHAPTER I. WOMAN WITHOUT A MOVEMENT: ESTHER GREENWOOD'S  
"ELSEWHERE" IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR***

Esther Greenwood, the protagonist and narrator of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, anticipates second-wave feminism by trying to resist dominant 1950s domestic ideology. Throughout the novel, she resists being a part of that domestic ideal by creating her own path in life, but she does not do so easily or without stumbling. She never calls herself one, but Esther is a symbol for feminists who sometimes speak or act in ways that are not in accordance with mainstream feminism as it developed in the 1960s. Esther exhibits the qualities of second-wave feminism by questioning traditional gender roles and by desiring independence from (and equality with) men regarding education, sexual relations, and careers. However, she and the text itself are proto-feminist in that Esther is ahead of the second-wave feminist movement, which had not yet taken place in the novel's setting of 1953. Thus, she is trapped within the dominant ideologies of sexuality and domesticity of the 1950s without a feminist movement, without an "elsewhere," despite her proto-feminist leanings. Women need an "elsewhere," according to feminist theorist Helene Cixous—some space in which female sexuality is not appropriated and subjugated by patriarchy—because we are "injured, trespassed upon, [and] colonized" (71). In spite of the fact that the narrator, Esther, expresses the desire for a new sexual economy and social framework in which women are not subordinated to male control, she cannot completely free herself from the prevailing patriarchal sexual ideology, and she looks in fruitless places for fulfillment as a woman. She longs to be born as a new woman; however, her attempts at freedom are constrained by the limitations her culture forces upon women. Nevertheless, Esther finds in writing the closest approximation to an "elsewhere" where she can at least point out the "routes, signs,

‘maps,’” as Cixous calls books written by women, that lead not to liberation but to entrapment in heteropatriarchal relations (72).

Cixous’s theory of “l’écriture féminine” as elaborated in *The Newly Born Woman* provides writers like Plath instruction and explanation for how and why they should use writing to redefine woman’s connection to her body. While Plath’s novel predates Cixous’s original text, *La jeune nœe*, by twelve years, Cixous’s ideas provide a useful lens with which to examine *The Bell Jar*. To redefine woman’s connection to her body, Cixous asserts that women, like Esther, “must write herself,” meaning she has to tell her own story and redefine “woman” and female sexuality for herself (97). Cixous opens her text with a series of binaries that describe metaphorically the circumstances within which women writers are forced to live and write:

Where is she?

Activity/passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

.....

Man

Woman

The first terms of the binaries are seen as the “superior” of the two, and are terms often paired with masculinity, or the phallus (Cixous 64). Cixous coins the term “phallogocentric” to describe a culture that upholds both male supremacy and the underlying structure of Western metaphysics, which is based on dichotomous categories that are hierarchically arranged: Man/Woman is the binary that forms the ground of oppression towards all marginalized groups.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath's narrator struggles to define herself as a woman amid the binaries of the phallogocentric culture of the early 1950s in the United States. Esther finds herself in the false binary amid domestic discourses of a woman's space in the 1950s: in the home/career.

Despite those binaries, Esther strives to find a space that will allow her to exist by her own set of standards for what it means to be a woman. Through narrating her own story and accessing feminocentric spaces, Esther attempts to reach her destination of an "elsewhere"—though her narration of these spaces is still embedded within patriarchy. Cixous writes that "there has to be a somewhere else [. . .] and everyone knows that to go somewhere else there are routes, signs, 'maps'—for an exploration, a trip—That's what books are" (72). Women writers like Esther, according to Cixous, can find their "elsewhere" through writing. Esther is a writer and has written at least this proleptic narrative about her past, which testifies to her attempts to find an "elsewhere" that is not bound by patriarchal constraints upon her own "jouissance" and bodily pleasures.<sup>2</sup> Her narrative recounts her looking for an "elsewhere" in dead ends, including competitive relationships with other women at the fictional *Ladies' Day Magazine*, her relationship with food, and heterosexual relationships.

Esther struggles and fails to find an "elsewhere" in friendships with women because they turn into competitions. Her competitiveness with her peers results from her internalized sexism apparent in her interactions with them. These interactions suggest that she has no space in which she can escape the confinement of patriarchal institutions that entrap her as in a bell jar. Esther's strained or hostile relationships with her female peers in the novel reflect the lack of solidarity between women that Simone de Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex*; Esther and her peers

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<sup>2</sup> See page footnotes 5 and 6 for further discussion of "jouissance."

immediately feel competitive towards each other because their internship was a contest (Plath 3). However, Beauvoir asserts that women need to build a movement to advance their fight to liberate themselves from secondary status in Western patriarchy, rather than compete with each other. Esther recognizes her place in the dominant domestic ideology, including where she fits in and where she does not. She is the “Other” to almost every character in the novel. Beauvoir writes that “[woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential,” and thus she is the “Other” to men (xix). Beauvoir is talking about phallogentrism and how women recognize themselves in relation to men, while men recognize themselves independently of women.

Still yet, Esther is not only the “Other” to men in the novel; she is even an “Other” to most women in her life, partly because of her proto-feminist ideology, which they do not share, and partly because of her internalized sexism, which keeps her from seeing other women as potential allies in a struggle for liberation. Her financial status also separates her from the other women at her internship because she is a “scholarship girl” whose family is not able to pay out of pocket. They are wealthy women who are not serious about a profession because they assume they can depend for their security on their own wealth and marrying a wealthy man.

The “Otherness” Esther experiences in comparison to her peers increases her drive to succeed in her writing career, while the other women are seemingly content merely interacting with each other. Esther and her peers “had all won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and as prizes [*Ladies’ Day Magazine*] gave [them] jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair styling at a famous expensive salon...” (Plath 3). Esther knows she is different from the other women, both financially and ideologically, which

shows the lack of community Beauvoir argues was too common among European women when she was writing in 1948. She writes that “women as a sex lack solidarity” (Beauvoir 138).

Beauvoir believes there should be more solidarity between women in order to fight oppression, but she also recognizes that all women have different experiences that cannot be synthesized into one type of woman. Esther is an example of a woman who lacks solidarity with other women because she is unwilling to view what she and her financially privileged peers *do* have in common, which is oppression based on the Western hierarchical binary of male/female.

Although Esther feels as if she is “Other” to her peers in the New York internship, they too are influenced by domestic ideology and expectations. Esther reflects on the women she feels so different from: “These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tan, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas...” (Plath 4). Thus, despite their wealth, “these girls” are not so different from Esther after all. They may not know how to express their boredom, a concept described by Betty Friedan as the “problem that has no name” (13). The nameless problem—this sense of a meaningless life—should have bonded women from all social classes, but Beauvoir explains why that is not the case. “It is drilled into her,” Beauvoir notes, “that women’s liberation would weaken bourgeois society; liberated from the male, she would be condemned to work [; . . .] she feels no solidarity with working-class women” (125). Esther is unable to form alliances with the “awfully bored” girls because they are from a more privileged class than she is; her point of view is clouded by envy, leaving her blind to the realities of her wealthy peers, whose aspirations are also thwarted by the patriarchal restrictions of 1950s sexual and domestic ideologies. Conversely, Beauvoir argues, “When economic power falls into the

hands of the workers, then it will become possible for the workingwoman to win rights and privileges that the parasitic woman, noble or middle-class, has never obtained” (123). Beauvoir’s argument is that working class women, or “scholarship girls” like Esther, would not want to seek allies from the bourgeoisie because of their “parasitic” nature, which causes them to abuse their privileges rather than use them to help lower socio-economic classes.

Like the women with whom she competes at the magazine, Esther is also dominated by the pervasive domestic ideology, as seen through her back-and-forth wavering between wanting a career and wanting a traditional family. The reader is with Esther every step of the way as she strives to make a choice. Esther does write her testimony, though it seems that she explores how trapped she is more than her path to rebirth or liberation. What Esther fails to realize is that the wealthy girls who won the same *Ladies’ Day* internship contest presumably have writing skill and talent that is competitive with her own. However, Esther’s lower socioeconomic class drives her to seek a job or career for survival, if only until the right man comes along to marry. Esther’s wealthy peers, despite their potential, theoretically have no financial necessity to seriously pursue a career, and thus they are encouraged not to. Esther’s lower class gives her the advantage of a drive to pursue a path of resisting entrapment and dependency upon a man for survival; however, I argue she does eventually get trapped in the same patriarchal limitations that trap her wealthier peers at the magazine.

Despite the fact that Esther’s wealthy counterparts are in New York for an exciting scholarship opportunity, they know that in reality none of it matters because one day they will each be at home with their husbands and children, and their time in New York will just be another story to tell. Esther notes how her peers’ backgrounds influence how they treat their internships in New York. She says that the hotel the women were housed in, “the Amazon—was

for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs" (Plath 4). Doreen, Esther's closest friend within the duration of their internships, is a prime example of how financial and societal privilege influences her work experience at *Ladies' Day* Magazine. Recalling a conversation with Doreen, Esther says, "The only thing Doreen ever bawled me out about was bothering to get my assignments in by a deadline. 'What are you sweating over that for?' Doreen lounged on my bed in a peach silk dressing gown [. . .] while I typed up the draft of an interview with a best-selling novelist" (5). Plath carefully contrasts Esther from Doreen by comparing the hard-working woman whose collegiate career depends upon academic scholarships with a carefree, bourgeois woman whose family can afford her higher education—thus, her experience in the internship is leisurely, because that is all she has ever known. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan explains that during the 1950s, many—though certainly not all—white bourgeois women would go to college either to find a husband or to pass the time until an eligible husband came along. Therefore, women would often marry and drop out of college before graduating, or they would graduate only to marry and never utilize their education in a career setting. Thus, their domestic lives would begin to bore them due to the lack of stimulation, or as a woman Friedan interviewed phrased it, the lack of feeling "alive" (15). Esther says that "girls like that make [her] sick," because she feels as though they are unappreciative of their privileges (4). However, because their feelings are not yet in conversation with a feminist movement, Esther misinterprets the women's boredom as only a sign of their spoiled privilege and distinguishes herself as their "Other," who suffers under this social system. Perhaps Esther is closer to the "elsewhere" outside of rigid gender norms and stereotypical hyper-femininity than the other *Ladies' Day* interns will

ever be. She, at least, is dissatisfied with those norms and desires some other space in which women can develop as full human beings, though she soon learns that the magazine she interns for will never be that “elsewhere.”

Though she is dissatisfied with conventional gender norms, Esther is unaware of how *Ladies' Day* Magazine perpetuates the subtle intrusion upon her psyche of advertising and a consumerist culture that reinforce patriarchal norms. Under the influence of a commodity-driven culture, Esther internalizes society's sexist expectations for women. Despite her intentions, she is still swayed by advertisements that “utiliz[e] similar marketing strategies as household soaps and cleaners [; . . .] food marketed as ‘pure’ promise [sic] that consumers can fix their imperfections and undergo miraculous transformations by consuming the right products” (Downbia 578). As Downbia suggests, when unsure of which alcoholic beverage to order, Esther orders a straight vodka because she had “seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked clear and pure as water, so [she] thought having vodka plain must be all right” (Plath 10, qtd. in Downbia 577). Esther is also being enticed by the word “pure,” which represents a virtue she is expected to uphold.

Esther is intrigued by the “purity” of plain vodka perhaps because it will purify her so that she is free of anything that might contaminate her femininity or womanliness. Her attraction to purity indicates that she is aware her desires may be straying from acceptable norms and wishes to police them. Esther at first attempts to resist deviating from the mainstream domestic ideal by participating in “purifying” acts like drinking the vodka, or when she takes a hot bath and says that “‘Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, Frankie is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter anymore. I don't know them, I have never known them and I am very pure’” (Plath 20). At the beginning of the novel,



before she gives in to her refusal of domestic ideals, Esther differentiates herself from her “impure” friends like Doreen, who presumably has sex with her new beau, Lenny. Instead of forming a bond with Doreen that creates a safe, feminocentric space for both of them, Esther separates herself and imagines herself as purified, which could be a sign of her feelings as superior. Such labeling of Doreen as the morally inferior “other” only perpetuates the lack of solidarity among women that Beauvoir describes prior to second wave feminism, thus keeping women like Esther and Doreen even further away from the solidarity necessary if women are to find their “elsewheres” beyond patriarchal entrapment.

Relationships that Esther has with women while working at *Ladies' Day* Magazine overlap with the “elsewhere” that she looks for through her affinity with food. Friedan, often credited with sparking the second wave of the Women's Movement in the U. S. with her book *The Feminine Mystique*, notes that the “feminine mystique” is “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity” (35).<sup>3</sup> She later explains that some “women eat [...] just to fill the time available,” the surplus of time and boredom of course caused by lack of work, education, and other social stimuli (300). Esther, much like the middle-to upper-class white women Friedan discusses in her book, interacts with food as something she can control. Plath uses Esther's relationship with food to suggest women's failed attempts to fill the void that a patriarchal culture leaves in their lives. Bundtzen writes that “Esther is thrilled with the food being served by the ‘staff of the *Ladies' Day* Food Testing Kitchen in hygienic white smocks, neat hairnets, and flawless makeup of a uniform peach-pie color’ (*BJ 25*)” (87). Esther is *thrilled*, perhaps an exaggerated reaction to a meal, especially for her because while she

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<sup>3</sup> Friedan's assertions are not inclusive of working class women and women of color, who have historically had work and relationships outside the home.

is a scholarship girl, she always had meals on the table at home, even if they were just “economy joints and [. . .] meat loafs” (26). Thus, Esther is hungry for a life outside of frugal domesticity, and longs for the world of *Ladies’ Day* where she can be waited on. However, the staff of the Food Testing Kitchen serves up a false feast because they are trapped in domestic functions even in their jobs, and they work for a magazine whose ads and recipes reinforce bourgeois white women’s primary roles as homemakers and cooks. *Ladies’ Day* represents the same consumerist agenda and patriarchal values that Esther is attempting to escape. Ironically enough, Esther describes the staff’s makeup as a “peach-pie color” because that image is related to home-cooked food, and is domestic, even though Esther is attempting to separate herself from domestic ideology to pursue a career. The food served up at *Ladies’ Day* affords an illusory type of “elsewhere” for Esther because it is still rooted in patriarchal domesticity. Esther and her peers are fooled into believing that *Ladies’ Day* is pampering them with fancy New York City meals as part of their professional education, but in reality, they are nothing more than test subjects in recipe tests for the magazine. *Ladies’ Day* is, in fact, no “elsewhere” at all.

After binge eating at a *Ladies’ Day* event, Esther becomes ill with food poisoning, which symbolizes her repulsion from domesticity. Esther’s sickness represents her resistance to domesticity, though the sickness of the other interns does not signify the same eschewing of oppressive discourses that limited women’s options in terms of careers, sexuality, and relationships. Narrating her eating habits compared to her peers’, Esther notes that she “figured the girl across from [her] couldn’t reach [the bowl of caviar] because of the mountainous centerpiece of marzipan fruit and Betsy, on [her] right, would be too nice to ask [Esther] to share it with her if [Esther] kept it out of the way at [her] elbow by [her] bread-and-butter plate” (Plath 26). Esther ignores the dominant discourses of femininity in the United States during the 1950s

by ignoring the standards to which “ladies” are supposed to adhere. Instead, she behaves quite adversely to how a “lady-like” young woman is told to behave at an uppity luncheon. Because she rejects those standards and indulges much more than the other women have the opportunity, Esther takes up and uses as much space as she would like—a privilege that men are generally granted that women often are not. Her peers go along with standard meal-etiquette, missing out on the food that Esther keeps away from them so that she can have it all to herself, and thus, their binging of domesticity does not quite parallel Esther’s. Esther’s peers are still more concerned with how their behaviors are perceived by each other rather than being assertive, even if that simply means asking Esther to quit hogging the food at the *Ladies’ Day* luncheon. One cannot keep themselves from vomiting if they have food poisoning, so neither Esther nor her peers are special in that regard.

However, it is Esther’s decision to act in a way that resists stereotypical norms for women, especially before the second wave of feminism brought attention to the asinine double standards enforced upon women that distinguishes her from her peers. She at first guesses it was “all that caviar,” which was her favorite part of the meal, signaling her guilt for being so gluttonous. Instead, she is told it was the crabmeat that was spoiled, though the excessive amount of caviar likely contributed to the illness as well. Esther says, “I had a vision of the celestially white kitchens of *Ladies’ Day* stretching into infinity. I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink-mottled claw meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise...” (Plath 48, qtd. in Bundtzen 87). Bundtzen argues that this image of food “represents a sickeningly coquettish domesticity” (88). In addition, the image of the “pink-mottled claw meat” has characteristics of female genitalia, but the actual “claw” image represents the vagina in an

unpleasant light; this may suggest the “vagina dentata,” an ancient trope associated with the fear of castration that Freud says is central to the male’s sexual development.<sup>4</sup> This is the equivalent of calling the female genitalia a wound or a deficiency, a trope that goes back as far as Aristotle’s definition of woman. Thus, Esther’s becoming sick from the food symbolizes her being sick of the way she is defined by men in a patriarchal society, and that the definition of woman sees her as “less than” man because she lacks the phallus. Additionally, Esther expels the idea of ever finding an “elsewhere” from patriarchy within any kind of domesticity, even if she receives benefits from it.

Plath suggests that writing is the closest activity for women that might afford a way out of domesticity, even if only by pointing out patriarchy’s many “dead ends.” An ideal woman, according to 1950s domestic ideology, cannot be separated from concern about food and its preparation. Esther, as a consumer, is manipulated by advertisements about both the consumption and preparation of food. Downbia characterizes Esther as a bulimic consumer, meaning that she binges on consumer culture and purges it later (570). For example, she eats fancy, expensive foods while in New York for her internship, despite the fact that her family’s financial situation forced her to eat frugal meals while she lived at home before starting college as a “scholarship girl.” As Downbia argues, Esther must maintain “a delicate balance between curbing her desire to consume and indulging in purchases that convey social status”; she therefore mirrors in her purchasing habits a person with an eating disorder (570). In addition to Esther as a bulimic consumer, Downbia also argues that Esther’s appetite is a symbol for agency. Esther is hungry for more than food and other material possessions. Instead, she is hungry to live a life that matches her own ideal as opposed to the domestic one. She looks for an elsewhere in

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle’s definition of woman is “a mutilated or incomplete man” (Agonito 41).

food, which will never keep her fulfilled permanently. She will forever have to feed this kind of fulfillment, and when that becomes too exhausting, she lands on the other side of the spectrum where she is malnourished. In looking for her “elsewhere” anywhere but in writing, Esther occupies the position that Cixous says patriarchy affords a woman. She “shrinks, [...] she is diminished, sees no more, lives no more” (Cixous 103). By being starved of autonomy, Esther matches Cixous’s description of the shrinking woman.

Heterosexual relationships in the novel also are failed “elsewheres” for Esther; they are unsatisfying for her even though she tries to be sexually autonomous. Romance and sex did not afford spaces where women could find their “elsewheres” in the U.S. during the 1950s because of the double standards of sexuality that condone sex for men while shaming women for it. Esther thinks she can find her “elsewhere” in sexual relationships with men. She is looking in fruitless places since Cixous sees women as colonized sexually by men in phallogocentric society (71). Esther’s relationships with men are all failed attempts for Esther to explore her sexuality in a way that affords her “jouissance”—or, as Cixous defines it, full pleasure not only sexually but also emotionally, erotically, personally and politically in terms of human autonomy.<sup>5</sup> Cixous defines jouissance as “woman’s libidinal economy,” an explosive pleasure, which women cannot achieve in a phallogocentric society such as the one Esther lives in the ‘50s, and the one that prevails even today (90). However, Cixous argues that, given the constraints that phallogocentric society puts on women’s sexuality, writing is the only place where women can truly explore or articulate “jouissance”: “There is a bond between woman’s libidinal economy—her *jouissance*,

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<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to the section in *The Newly Born Woman* in which Cixous discusses a woman’s libidinal economy and jouissance. Cixous sets out to answer the “most immediate and most urgent question,” which is, “How do I pleasure?” (Cixous 82). Cixous’s question asks not how she, a woman, can pleasure a sexual partner, but instead how she pleasures herself.

the feminine Imaginary—and her way of self-constituting a subjectivity that splits apart without regret, and without this regretlessness being the equivalent of dying [; . . .] without the ceaseless summoning of the authority called Ego” (Cixous 90). Here, Cixous explains what she means by “jouissance,” and how writing is a space in which women can explore such unapologetic sexuality.

In her writing, Esther struggles to realize that the world she lives in is one filled with hypocrisy and double standards, created by the dominant discourse of domesticity and sexuality that validated men’s premarital sexual activity but shamed women’s. She is caught up through most of the novel in her relationship with an on-again-off-again boyfriend, Buddy Willard, whom she calls a “hypocrite” for having slept with an older woman multiple times one summer (Plath 52). Esther assumed that Buddy was a virgin because he had portrayed himself as such; hence, she finds his actions and behaviors hypocritical when she learns the truth. Esther struggles with wanting to have sex and knowing that her boyfriend already has. She is fighting against what the discourse of female sexuality in the 1950s has made her believe. Through this scenario, Plath allows the reader to live the experience of women in the U.S. during the 1950s. In fact, Esther’s situation echoes one experienced by Gwen Barnes, one of the women who is interviewed by Brett Harvey in her collection *The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History*: “Once I asked him [her first high school boyfriend] if he’d ever gone all the way and he said he had, with this divorced woman that he worked with. I was absolutely floored” (7). While there is certainly a double standard concerning which gender is “allowed” to have premarital sex, neither Gwen nor Esther accept this fact without absolute astonishment.

Esther not only searches for her “elsewhere” in relationships with men that last over a certain length of time, such as her relationship with Buddy; for example, she also talks her way

into a potential “elsewhere” when she meets Eric. His original date, who lives in the same dormitory as Esther, “eloped with a taxi driver the day before,” so it was Esther’s “job to cheer him up” (Plath 78-79). They talk “frankly about sex,” which is part of Cixous’s idea about using *écriture féminine* to find a space where women can express their unabashed desires and experiences without fear of judgment and persecution. However, Esther announces to the reader that she does so to serve him, *not herself* (79). Esther quickly learns that she will not find this sexually autonomous elsewhere with Eric because he says “if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He’d go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business” (79). Therefore, to Eric sex is dirty, and so are women who enjoy sex; wives and lovers must be pure.

A sexual relationship with Eric would not serve as an “elsewhere” for Esther; in fact, there is no room in his life at all for her to find *jouissance*. Eric’s perception of sexuality only benefits men and the myth that men are more “sexual” than women, that men somehow have the right to have sex while women do not; women must serve men sexually in the same way that Esther felt it was her job to entertain Eric in the first place. Such a phallogentric opinion about sex unsurprisingly leaves Esther in a strange space within the binary of *pure/whore*. In terms of Cixous’s examination of “organization by hierarchy,” and according to Eric, Esther is on the superior side of this false pure/whore dichotomy in our patriarchal society (Cixous 64). Eric later writes “a letter saying he thought he might really be able to love [Esther], [she] was so intelligent and cynical yet had such a kind face, surprisingly like his older sister’s; so [she] knew it was no use, [she] was the type he would never go to bed with” (Plath 80). Thus, Eric is not willing to give Esther what she wants out of him, which is sex. Esther sees a potential “elsewhere” in Eric,

but he is so repressed about sex himself that he would consider her a whore, in need of punishment, if they had sex.

Esther tells the reader about Eric in the middle of discussing Constantin, another man with whom she attempts to find an elsewhere through sex. Constantin is a mutual acquaintance of Mrs. Willard and Esther. After being wined-and-dined at his restaurant, the two head back to his place. While having a good time in Constantin's company, Esther makes a conscious, premeditated intention to "let Constantin seduce [her]" (Plath 78). It is important to note that she does make a decision, though her intent puts her in a passive position; it is not much more than a wish. She *wishes* that he will seduce her, but she is not going to seduce him, as that would remove her from the "passive" side of the active/passive dichotomy. Only men, like Constantin, are socially accepted as active. To Esther's dismay, Constantin does not seduce her, and thus Esther does not find her elsewhere where she "wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions [herself], like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket" (83). Esther seeks an elsewhere where she can experience *jouissance*, or the multiple female orgasm as Cixous describes it, but Constantin treats Esther with respect, and with "eyes full of love," though she notes the temporariness of her almost-lover's eyes (Plath 85).<sup>6</sup> Esther's "elsewhere," she realizes, is not in Constantin's eyes, nor in any man's.

Constantin's tenderness leaves Esther with a certain affinity for him; however, the same cannot be said for Marco, a man she meets at a dance to which her friend Doreen and her beau, Lenny, drag her along. Esther immediately acknowledges to the reader that she does not like

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<sup>6</sup> Cixous decries the multiple female orgasm in the "Sorties" chapter from *The Newly Born Woman*: "Her rising: is not erection. But diffusion. Not the shaft. The vessel. Let her write! And her text knows in seeking itself that it is more than flesh and blood, dough kneading itself, rising, uprising openly with resounding, perfumed ingredients, a turbulent compound of flying colors, leafy spaces, and rivers flowing to the sea we feed" (88).



Marco. She says, "I had never met a woman-hater before. I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I'd happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards" (Plath 106). Marco verbally abuses Esther when she rejects his offer to dance; he does not take "no" for an answer, which foreshadows how he physically abuses her by the end of the night. Esther is told to just "pretend [she is] drowning" while he does all of the "dancing" (107). Marco's abusive rhetoric is a metaphor for sexual assault. After the two "dance," they go outside for some fresh air. After a brief conversation about Marco's incestuous love interest in his cousin, he pushes Esther into the dirt. He throws himself on top of her, and Esther thinks, "It's happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen" (109). Esther still desperately wants to escape to an elsewhere through sex, but when Marco sees that Esther is not fighting him off, he calls her a "slut" (109). The only part of Marco that Esther finds remotely redeemable is a diamond pin he wore; it caught her eye as soon as she saw it, and Marco let her wear it as if he were doing her some big favor (105). As a last ditch effort to maintain her pride, Esther briefly entertains the idea of keeping the diamond for herself, thinking of how much money it is worth, and thus how many material goods she can buy with its cash-value. Marco then does not only represent Esther's failed attempt at finding an "elsewhere" through a heterosexual relationship/encounter with a man; in addition, he also represents Esther's immediate reaction to escape to an "elsewhere" of diamonds, money, and other material goods, rather than writing.

Esther fails to find an "elsewhere" in the company of Buddy, Constantin, Marco, and later on, Irwin; Constantin and a generic, nameless "husband" appear on Esther's imaginary fig tree that symbolizes her inability to choose where she will find her "elsewhere" (Plath 77).

Cixous argues that women need an “elsewhere” because the current space for women is not a space for women at all; rather, it is a space where women are “other”—and subordinate—to men. Esther has trouble answering the questions Cixous proposes such as, “What is my name? [...] Where is my place?” (71). Like Cixous, Esther looks everywhere to imagine her “elsewhere.” Esther uses the metaphor of the fig tree to describe all of the different paths she could possibly take in her life. She feels that if she chooses one fig, she cannot have any of the others. Esther assigns meaning to each fig: “one fig was a husband and a happy home and children, another fig was a famous poet, and another fig was a brilliant professor,” implying that she could not possibly do all three of these things at once because the domestic ideal does not allow it (Plath 77). If she were to marry, it would be her job to take care of her husband (and children if she had them), leaving no room to write or teach. Esther “wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest,” meaning that she was stuck between the life that was expected of her with Buddy Willard, and the life that she wanted to pursue with her career (Plath 77). The figs, the images of which are both yonic and Biblical (i.e. the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden), further emphasize the false dichotomies from which Esther feels forced to choose. The one fig that the reader knows Esther rejects is a husband and happy home, about which she says nothing at the beginning of the novel when she briefly mentions that she does have a baby. Though she mentions the baby almost as an aside, she never indicates who the father is and never mentions a marriage, suggesting that she has stepped outside conventional norms to raise a child on her own. Having the child has not kept Esther from writing, as evidenced by the testimony she narrates about her past.

Esther’s recognition of her position amid her imaginary fig tree leads her to reject marriage and conventional domesticity in a way that separates her from other women during the

1950s, who saw their domestic roles as normal, necessary, and unquestioned. Furthermore, Esther lets go of material possessions that define her as a woman, symbolizing her transformation into a new kind of woman who is separate from the ideal of domesticity. On her last night in New York, after being beaten by the “woman hater,” Marco, Esther goes to the sunroof of her hotel right before sunrise: “I grasped the bundle I carried and pulled at a pale tail. A strapless elasticized slip, which, in the course of wear, had lost its elasticity, slumped into my hand. I waved it, like a flag of truce, once, twice. . . . The breeze caught it, and I let go [; . . .] I wondered on what street or rooftop it would come to rest” (111). Instead of hanging out clothes on a line as she presumably did in her home growing up, or as her mother did, Esther lets them go rather than securing them in place. Esther calls it a “truce,” as if she is surrendering to society’s expectations for her, but she instead releases them, which is an act of resistance to traditional domesticity—the exact opposite of a surrender. She acknowledges that the destination of her transformation is uncertain, as taking on a new way of thinking often is, though she knows it will take her someplace new, wherever that may be.

Esther is unaware of her transformation’s destination because the second wave of the U.S. women’s movement did not begin until 1962, and she therefore did not yet have a specific group with which she could identify seeking liberation from domestic ideology. Esther’s career goal, her destination as a professional, is to be a writer. Cixous says that “everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams...” (72). Esther’s writing exposes the vileness and compromises of patriarchy, even if that means her admission of being trapped within it. Thus, as she abandons her “flag of truce,” Esther is driven

toward a path that will allow her to escape the “vileness” she experiences as a woman who does not, and will not, meet society’s expectations. She is on her way to the “somewhere else,” the “elsewhere” free of patriarchy’s domination, though she does not know where that “somewhere else” is; she only knows that it is not on the rooftop on which she stands. Esther desperately seeks an “elsewhere” that is away from the “infernal repetition” of being a young woman in 1953. As she moves closer to her somewhere else, she will learn that she does not have to “reproduce the system” when writing herself. The reader at least knows that Esther chooses to become a writer because the novel—of which she is the fictional narrator—is in our hands.

After Esther begins her journey to find the “elsewhere” where she and her “slip” will end up, she heads back to her mother’s home in the suburbs of Boston, a place where she also cannot find an “elsewhere” because in that space a woman’s professional aspirations are subordinated to domestic ideology. Her mom picks her up from the train station, and Esther comments that “a summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death” (113). Her description of suffocating heat indicates that her hometown will not be an “elsewhere” for her, unless it is in death. Esther’s mother fits into the stereotypical role for women in the dominant domestic ideology of the ‘50s in ways, but she also holds a job that *seems* as though it could serve as an “elsewhere.” Esther hears her mother preparing for the day in the kitchen. Still lying in bed, she does not see her mother cooking and cleaning, but she hears and describes it clearly enough for the reader to imagine: “At seven I heard my mom get up [...] Then the buzz of the orange squeezer sounded from downstairs, and the smell of coffee and bacon filtered under my door. Then the sink water ran from the tap and dishes clinked as my mother dried them and put them back in the cupboard” (115). However, she also has autonomy because she *has* to work due to her husband’s death, which occurred when Esther was young. Harvey comments that “the notion

that work was something for women ‘to fall back on,’ a phrase that seems to have emerged in the fifties, presumed that work was a kind of afterthought, something a woman should be prepared to do in case something happened to her husband” (128-29). She is able to have some sense of an “elsewhere”—away from the domestic responsibilities of suburbia. She encourages Esther to take up her profession, shorthand, seemingly so Esther can be independent. However, women were relegated to both this skill and the jobs that utilized them in the predominately gender-segregated economy of the U.S. during 1950s. Esther’s mother pushes this kind of secretarial occupation rather than professions that Esther actually aspires to, such as being a professional writer, which is a male-dominated field. Shorthand is not the place that Esther will ever find her “elsewhere,” even if her mother thinks that she has found hers there. The reason that Esther and her mother have not found their “elsewheres” is that neither of them is exercising the kind of writing to get her there. Esther’s mom writes what the man, her boss, says; this suggests her entrapment within a phallogentric society, and thus Esther’s as well, were she to follow her mother’s lead.

Unlike her mother, Esther struggles with the dichotomy of finding happiness in the home as opposed to in a career. She is aware that the “elsewhere” she strives for is not in the domestic sphere. In her work on *The Bell Jar*, Bryant writes that “domesticity becomes an unambiguous, therapeutic, and normalizing space outside of Plath’s troubled psyche,” a claim with which I disagree (213). Esther finds housewifery to be silly: “The reason I hadn’t washed my clothes or my hair was because it seemed so silly. . . . It seemed silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next” (Plath 128). She is attacking the continuous cycle of washing both herself and her clothing, and this metaphor can be extended to all of the housework expected of 1950s housewives: the dishes, the floors, cooking, child-rearing, etc. She recognizes that even for

herself, a single woman in her early twenties, her future is already sucked into this cycle. The cycle will only become more continuous if she is to get married and have more children. Thus, Plath does not represent domesticity as a safe-place for Esther. Esther is expected to maintain the upkeep of her appearance, and will be expected to do the same as a future “lady of the house.” By refusing to keep both herself and her clothing clean, she rejects the criteria of an ideal woman measured by the 1950s’ domestic standards, yet the thought of having no place within society and no clear path to any “elsewhere” free from society’s constraints on women throws Esther into a deep depression.

Esther’s emerging depression and eventual psychological collapse are foreshadowed in her experiments with creating a made-up persona. After she randomly meets a soldier, she lies and says that her name is Elly Higginbottom and that she is from Chicago (rather than Boston). She tells the reader that if she were to go to Chicago, she “might change her name [; ...] then nobody would know [she] had thrown up a scholarship at a big eastern women’s college and mucked up a month in New York and refused a perfectly solid medical student for a husband who would one day be a member of the AMA and earn pots of money” (132). Both college and marrying Buddy were expected of her, and she recognizes that marrying him would secure her financially, but she has already rejected that option, overwriting Buddy’s sexist message that he might choose her as his sexual mate—someday. She is also aware that, as the old cliché goes, money cannot buy her happiness. “Elly” comments on Buddy a lot, and it seems as though she is not totally comfortable with her decision of refusing him—not because she secretly wants to marry him, but because she feels guilty for not doing what she is “supposed” to do. However, she never really receives pressure from her mother. She is mostly pressured by Buddy and his parents, whose insistency represents the societal pressure she feels, even if she cannot

specifically name these pressures. Living in a shallow and self-satisfied capitalist society makes Esther feel that perfection is an attainable goal, so it is no wonder that she feels so guilty about “failing,” and therefore becomes so depressed. Esther does not find her “elsewhere” through her alternate persona, “Elly.” She still does not know her “name,” as Cixous suggests women seeking their “elsewheres” will eventually know. In fact, her adoption of this alter ego can be seen as a sign of her deteriorating psychological state as she appears to experience dissociation from reality under the pressure of depression.

Women who were not willing to abide by society’s relentless expectations during the 1950s in the U.S. were sometimes interpreted as mentally ill, sometimes correctly and other times not. Esther’s psychological state, “the problem that has no name” as described by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, is self-recognized through her depression and suicide attempt. According to Friedan, Freud “saw [women] as childlike dolls, who existed in terms only of man’s love, to love man and serve his needs” (117). Cixous, too, picks up on the idea of how women are dehumanized in Freudian thought when she describes us as a “procession of mistreated, deceived, devastated, rejected, patient women, dolls, cattle, cash. Stolen swarms. Exploited and plundered to such an extent. They give everything” (75). There is a part of Esther that would like to give herself to a potential future career as a writer, searching for the “elsewhere” in it; there is another part that spends a lot of time contemplating a more traditional and accepted life for a young woman in the ‘50s, and thus she gives all of herself to a false dichotomy that so divides her against herself that she attempts suicide. The second line of the novel hints at Esther’s eventual electroshock “treatment” for her depression, while also setting the historical and cultural contexts of the book: “The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers [; . . .] It had nothing to do with me, but I

couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (1).

Here she is referring to the Rosenberg trials and execution of Ethel, but it certainly foreshadows what is to come at her stay in the mental institution, caused by her internalized sexism apparent in her interactions with her female peers and by the lack of a space in which she can escape the confinement of patriarchal institutions that entrap her.

Esther's depression is initially treated with shock therapy before her suicide attempt; this first experience with ECT by Dr. Gordon is not a good one. She is correct in her preconception about being electrocuted: she "thought it must be the worst thing in the world" (1). Then, after her suicide attempt, Esther receives electroshock therapy, in addition to insulin injections at the Caplan mental institution under the care of Dr. Nolan. Esther notes that the insulin causes her to gain weight, a reaction explained by Showalter as a "parallel [to] the pseudopregnancy of the rest cure" (Plath 192, Showalter 205). Thus, Esther is put into a position where she is encouraged to stay put, both physically and mentally. Weight gain is generally only socially acceptable for women if it is pregnancy-related, meaning that mental healthcare professionals encouraged women to spend time "reducing" upon release from mental institutions, rather than focusing on a career or anything outside of the domestic ideal. This preoccupation with weight plays right into the oppressors' hands. However, Esther is not fazed by her weight gain, nor does she allow it to keep her from thinking about her future in terms of an occupation in the "elsewhere" as a novelist, rather than in a marriage.

Esther's weight gain is a mild symptom compared to others endured by those subjected to electroshock therapy; this therapy often resulted in "short-term and partial amnesias" (Showalter 207). Esther immediately experiences such forgetfulness while eating her late breakfast, delayed by her early-morning electroshock treatment appointment: "I took up the silver knife and cracked



off the cap of my egg. Then I put down the knife and looked at it. I tried to think what I had loved knives for, but my mind slipped from the noose of the thought and swung, like a bird, in the center of empty air” (216). The suicidal imagery Esther uses to describe her lapse in memory indicates that electroshock therapy is only successful in obliterating consciousness rather than actually treating mental illness. Esther not only experiences such “treatment” in terms of herself; she also has a friend, Joan, who shares many of Esther’s struggles as a patient in a mental institution.

Joan, Esther’s acquaintance from college and eventual patient alongside her at the Caplan mental institution, contributes to the feminocentric space that she finds while being treated for depression. Joan is first described as “a big wheel—president of her class and a physics major and the college hockey champion [. . . ;] She was big as a horse, too” (59). Esther speaks spitefully of Joan, and Buddy defends her because “she never cares whether you spend any money on her or not and she enjoys doing things out-of-doors [. . . ;] we went on a bicycle trip to East Rock and she’s the only girl I haven’t had to push up hills” (59). Buddy compliments Joan’s character based on her stereotypically masculine traits, like being athletic and enjoying the outdoors. He ironically likes Joan for qualities that are only appropriate for men to possess according to the mainstream discourses of stereotypical femininity and masculinity in the 1950s. Likely unknown to Buddy, though never called a lesbian, Joan is sexually interested in women, and even indicates having feelings for Esther.

Joan first begins as Esther’s competition for Buddy’s attention, but by the time the two are institutionalized together, it is clear to the reader that college and Buddy are not the two women’s only commonalities. Assuming that most women in her life have ulterior motives, Esther is at first suspicious of Joan’s appearance at Caplan especially because at one time, they

were in a love triangle of sorts. Esther's relationship with Joan echoes those that she had with her co-interns in terms of competitiveness and otherness. Despite Esther's outward dislike for Joan, she does admit that Joan is a "beaming double of [Esther's] old best self, specially designed to follow and torment [her]" (Plath 205). Esther recognizes that she and Joan have shared experiences and thus are akin to each other, but her homophobia and internalized sexism keep her from ever using the friendship to carve out a feminocentric "elsewhere" away from a society in which men are the only ones who can write both their own stories *and* the stories of women.

Joan is not the only female character in the novel who attempts to form a meaningful, feminocentric friendship with Esther; she also has Dr. Nolan by her side. Dr. Nolan, Esther's physician, even talks to Esther about her friendship with other women, like with Joan for instance. After seeing Joan and DeeDee being intimate with each other, Esther says, "I don't see what women see in other women [. . . ;] What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?" Dr. Nolan answers, "Tenderness" (Plath 219). Whether Esther is aware of it or not, she certainly has better relations with Joan and Dr. Nolan in comparison to any other characters in the novel. However, as a college-aged young woman in a competitive capitalist society, she has been trained to be suspicious of other women who desire their respective "elsewheres" just as much as Esther does. For example, Esther is apprehensive about believing Dr. Nolan's advice about ECT treatment because she assumes that the two could not possibly have a shared experience within some kind of mental healthcare treatment (205). Esther is unable to make the connection between herself and Dr. Nolan because she is too distrusting of other women to thrive off of relationships with them.

Unable to accept support from women who attempt to create a feminocentric space in the patriarchal institution of a mental hospital, Esther seeks sexual liberation as a way to reach an

“elsewhere” through sexual autonomy, but she actually subordinates her desire to a “great tradition” of phallocentrism. Only in the latter part of the novel does Esther stop “defending” her virginity and thus momentarily takes her sexuality out of the mainstream discourse’s hands about female purity by sleeping with Irwin, a man she hardly knows (Plath 228). As Esther moves up the hierarchal structure of the mental institution, she is allowed more privileges, such as the ability to “stay overnight in Cambridge with Joan,” when in reality she is in Irwin’s apartment losing her virginity (227). She hemorrhages profusely, announcing “‘I’m bleeding!’” rather than reaching some ecstatic experience of jouissance and multiple female orgasms as explored imagistically in Cixous’s *Newly Born Woman* (Plath 229, Cixous 88, 90). Her hemorrhaging could also be read as a sign of her guilt for a one-night stand, but she “smiled into the dark. [She] felt part of a great tradition” (229). Hence, it is more likely that the smile and hemorrhage together suggest her unconscious entrapment within patriarchal sexual ideology, which she does not question. Undercutting any autonomy, she does not feel whole until she has slept with a man, rather than experiencing wholeness from herself as an independent woman. She says she is “perfectly free” after losing her virginity with no strings attached, but she needed to have sex with Irwin to feel free in the first place (242). By sleeping with a man before marriage, Esther resists the idea that she must wait until marriage to have sex, hence resisting the dominant discourse on sexuality that had dominated all her relationships with men earlier in the novel. At the same moment, however, she is again dominated by patriarchy because she does not find “freedom” (which is not really freedom at all) until she has sex with a man. In addition, her smiling response to being made “part of a great tradition” goes totally against her proto-feminist views because whether she realizes it or not, that “great tradition” is actually the tradition of patriarchy. Through attempting to resist patriarchal discourses, the novel nevertheless reinforces

heteronormative discourses about female sexuality and in this regard, Esther's resistance to patriarchy is still contained within heteronormative assumptions. She still does not find her "elsewhere," her autonomy.

Esther cannot find her "elsewhere" in a sexual relationship until she finds it through writing; perhaps telling the story is on the way to her "elsewhere," though she does not embody the kind of sensual language that Cixous both calls for and uses herself. Cixous links this language to women's *jouissance*—their capacity for multiple orgasm, their explorations of multiple erogenous zones, their embracing of a bisexuality that does not fear or reject the "other" within the self, their political rejection of domination by patriarchy, and their use of a language not bounded by the rules of Western logic and linearity (84-85).<sup>7</sup> Esther's language does not explore this unbounded experience of female *jouissance*, but it does point out the need for women to free their bodies, their pleasures, and their quest for autonomy from the constraints of Western capitalist and patriarchal institutions.

Earlier in the novel, Esther attempts to define an "elsewhere" outside the phallogocentric Western order; she dreams of becoming a writer, which is why the *Ladies' Day* internship seems like an effective path for her to follow, though the consumerist agenda and patriarchal values of that publication make it a failed "elsewhere" for her. Once she is back home in the suburbs, she tries to begin writing a novel. In part, she does this to distract herself from dull, domestic suburbia. She does not want to wash her hair or clothes—an indication that she may be falling into a depression—but she strives for the "elsewhere" of writing, which Cixous notes is the *only* place where women can be liberated right now. However, Esther goes about this in a way that

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<sup>7</sup> See footnotes 5 and 6 for further explanation of Cixous's concept of "*jouissance*."

only puts her right back into the stereotypical role of a woman. She reflects on her failed brainstorming attempts, saying she “never had a love affair or a baby or even seen anybody die...” (Plath 121). She “decided [she] would put off the novel until [she] had gone to Europe and had a lover...” (122). Still, Esther will never find her “elsewhere” if she waits only to write about whirlwind romances that rely on others’ stories. “Write yourself,” Cixous says; “your body must make itself heard” (97). Esther must learn to write “herself” rather than the bodies of others.

Esther rejects the role of taking “dictation” from a male authority as her mother had for a job; she aspires to write her own story. She makes such a statement when she practices something like Cixous’s concept of “l’écriture féminine,” which Cixous argues is necessary “because, when the time comes for her liberation, it is the invention of a *new, insurgent* writing that will allow her to put the breaks and indispensable changes into effect in her history” (97). Esther roughly does Cixous’s *écriture féminine* by writing on top of a letter received from Buddy Willard. In the letter, he tells her that he “was probably falling in love with a nurse who also had TB, but [. . .] if [Esther] came along [. . .], he might well find his feeling for the nurse was a mere infatuation” (Plath 119). In response, she crosses out his words with a pencil and writes that she “did not want to give [her] children a hypocrite for a father” (119). Here, she tries to find an “elsewhere” away from the possible history of having children with Buddy through *écriture féminine*. Esther’s *écriture* works not to reject the maternal, but to reject the traditional Western subordination of women to men and of female sexual desire to male sexual desire. Esther’s *écriture* is “new, insurgent” writing because it allows her to overwrite the old patriarchal text of men subordinating women’s sexuality to their own uses and pleasures as Buddy tries to do in his letter.

Although Esther attempts to free herself from what Buddy expects of her, she still implies that children will be in her future because it is what is expected of her by the dominant domestic ideology of the U.S. during the 1950s; this is an expectation that Esther tells the reader *has* come true at the beginning of her narrative. From the beginning of the novel, readers know she already has a child who does not keep her from telling her story—from becoming a writer; she has a child but still writes her narration. Cixous promotes motherhood outside of patriarchy’s rule and so does Esther (Cixous 90). Cixous writes that “one trend of current feminist thought tends to denounce a trap in maternity that would consist of making the mother-woman an agent who is more or less the accomplice of reproduction: capitalist, familialist, phallocentrist reproduction” (89). Buddy, however, represents the all-American boy of the 1950s; therefore, this is the kind of relationship and family Esther scratches out in order to make room for her own future. Having children is a natural function of many women’s bodies, and neither Cixous nor Esther discounts the pleasure of pregnancy and motherhood. However, Esther also refuses to subordinate this pleasure to the conventional Western patriarchal structure. Esther wants to change the social expectation that a woman have children and take care of both the child-rearing and the household while her husband achieves his career goals and dreams. Esther uses her dream of being a professional writer to strive towards an “elsewhere” away from domesticity even as she chooses the maternal as something she desires; regardless of choosing to have a child, she still insists upon being a writer.

Esther fails to find her “elsewhere” by having sex, and again fails when seeking it through her second experience with electroshock therapy, but her writing has afforded her a means to explore the difficult process of struggling to escape from patriarchy’s bell jar. Plath frequently links electricity and death, as Showalter notes (217-218). Echoing her poem “Lady

Lazarus,” Plath’s mythologized self in her novel awaits approval for release from the mental institution, thinking, “There ought [. . .] to be a ritual for being born twice” (Plath 244). Metaphorically, Esther is reborn twice throughout the novel, but only reborn back into patriarchal constraints—once when she attempts suicide, and again when she is treated with ECT under Dr. Nolan’s care. Like many patients treated with electroshock therapy for suicidal thoughts, Esther “feel[s] that in a sense [she] ha[s] died and been born again, with the hated parts of [her] self-annihilated—literally, electrocuted” (Showalter 217). She later seeks transcendence through her attempted suicide. In the words of Beauvoir, “Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties (xxxiii). However, Esther’s suicide attempt does not provide her transcendence or freedom; rather, she finds herself in Caplan under Dr. Nolan’s care, where she does have the opportunity to be “born” again, but only through the use of electroshock therapy, which is more an obliteration than a rebirth of consciousness. At the end of the novel, Esther goes into her interview at the psychiatric institution to hear if she will be released. We do not know the outcome of the interview, but we *do* know that Esther eventually emerges from the institution healed enough to write the novel that the reader is reading and to have a baby.

Esther is not quite a newly born woman, but a woman aware that she needs to be born anew. She has a child but does not seem to be married—although she may be but it is not worth mentioning. She does not make the child the center and meaning of her existence, and that she has a child but is still able to be a writer all suggest that she is moving away from entrapment. Although she has not quite articulated an “elsewhere” in her writing that explores female pleasure free from phallogocentric constraints, at least she has named patriarchy for what it is—a

stifling bell jar. She has shed all illusions about trying to conform in order to find happiness within its domestic ideology (Plath 215). She does seem to have healed from her psychological break, and she *is* writing about her whole painful past. At the very end of the novel she says, “I am, I am, I am,” but she also says “I am I am I am” earlier in the novel shortly after her internship in New York had ended (243, 158). Ironically, and perhaps ominously, she says this phrase on the day that she attempts suicide and on the day that she is scheduled to be released from the mental institution. Even at her lowest point of depression when suicide is the best option from Esther’s perspective, she still acknowledges her humanity and worth by declaring “I am” over and over. After all, Esther is not the one who expects herself to behave like a robotic doll—the patriarchal discourses of femininity in the ‘50s do.

Esther’s story is more global than the world of *The Bell Jar*. Even today, in the twenty-first century, some women are reluctant to call themselves feminists for fear of being viewed as man-haters, prudes, or bitches. For similar reasons, many men shy away from calling themselves feminists because it might threaten their masculinities. Even with a feminist movement in full-force, many still cannot find a group with which they feel comfortable identifying, just as Esther could not. As a millennial feminist, where is my “elsewhere”? Where will *my* “slip” end up? The destination is unknown as Esther lets go of her worn-out slip, symbolizing her desire to shed the old person and for transformation as a new woman. We now know the destination: the destination is in writing, in books, in the streets, in the agency of women and men implementing change. The slip grazed the ground, and temporarily landed between the pages of Beauvoir, Friedan, and Cixous, but it now swirls around in the wind, as the journey, the final destination, the “elsewhere,” has not been reached... yet.



## CHAPTER II. A WORLD WITHOUT FEMINISM: MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND THE ASSAULT ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has made a come-back in American libraries and popular culture. The reinvigorated popular interest suggests that Atwood's grim dystopian vision resonates with readers today, who watch women's reproductive choices being restricted through legislation and healthcare policy proposals. As Katherine Brooks suggests in a *Huffington Post* article about the extraordinary waiting lists for the novel in public libraries, the novel's reinvigorated popularity comes at a time when women's "reproductive rights continue to come under threat" (Brooks para. 10).<sup>8</sup> Offred, the novel's narrator, is a "Handmaid"—or captive breeder—in a dystopian society called Gilead, a vehemently patriarchal "strict theocracy" founded on an extreme version of early American Puritanical Christian values.<sup>9</sup> The transcribed account of her experiences in Gilead constitutes the main narrative. In Atwood's dystopia, nuclear war and pollution have caused the infertility and sterility of most people in North America, causing low birth rates, and a high rate of babies born with both physical and mental disabilities. The novel suggests that Offred's complacency during the years leading up to the establishment of Gilead represents some women's choices to be by-standers in the oppression of their fellow women and other marginalized groups. This complacency about what is happening

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<sup>8</sup> Brooks notes that "In February [2017], readers placed 183 holds on 64 copies of the book at the New York Public Library alone. By March, the NYPL added 32 more copies of the book into circulation, and the number of holds jumped to 534" (para. 2-3). The novel has also recently been made into a miniseries, which will premiere on *Hulu* on April 26, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> An interview between Atwood and Victor-Levy Beaulieu uses the analogy to American Puritan society despite its being a bit historically imprecise. Atwood notes that "...the presidents of the United States have continued to quote the first theocrats, who referred to their colony as 'a city upon a hill,' and 'a light to all nations'" (72). She then goes on to pose the question: "...if you wanted to seize power in the United States how would you go about it?" (72). She answers herself and says, "...if you proclaimed, as the Republicans do, 'The will of God is with us, follow us'—that's what theocracy did. And it's also a form of tyranny, because when you join politics and religion, you have tyranny" (72).

contrasts with the attitudes of two strong feminist women in the novel: her mother, and her best friend, Moira. Each holds feminist ideologies that mirror the thinking of some feminist separatist groups of the 1980s, when Atwood wrote the novel. Offred represents what Susan Faludi calls a “backlash” to the long social justice movement for women’s equality.<sup>10</sup> I argue that Offred’s resistance to Gilead’s abuse takes place in the absence of any social justice movement for change away from a “strict theocracy,” and it is framed only in terms of individualism; her individual acts of resistance allow her to gain some perceived modicum of power for herself or to exert some illusory agency in a world where her every action is watched and regulated. Through Offred’s narration about this totalitarian patriarchy, Atwood suggests that there may be dire consequences for women who have grown complacent in their oppression and for women who have sought individual freedoms within a corrupt system rather than systemic change.

Offred’s attempts at agency are illusory because they do not destabilize the overarching power structure of Gilead; instead, her acts towards individual freedoms actually reinforce the corrupt system of power in Atwood’s dystopia. Her Gileadean name literally means “Of Fred,” and she serves as the “Handmaid” to a Gileadean commander whose wife is unable to conceive her own child.<sup>11</sup> As a Handmaid, Offred must participate in a monthly conception ceremony in which the Commander attempts to impregnate her so that he and his infertile wife, Serena Joy, might have children. In the “Historical Notes” section that ends the novel, the reader learns that Offred tape-recorded her narrative that was later transcribed and is being discussed at a scholarly

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Faludi notes that “a backlash against women’s rights is nothing new in American history [...] Yet in the popular imagination, the history of women’s rights is more commonly charted as a flat dead line that, only twenty years ago, began a sharp and unprecedented incline” (46).

<sup>11</sup> Atwood comments on the speculation about Offred’s real name in a recent article published by *The New York Times*: “...so many people throughout history have had their names changed, or have simply disappeared from view. Some have deduced that Offred’s real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium/dormitory, “June” is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought but it fits...” (3).

symposium on Gileadean Studies in 2195, suggesting that she escaped Gilead. Prior to her escape, however, she is trapped in a system that includes “re-education” or psychological coercion in indoctrination centers, spreading of propaganda and false information, constant surveillance, and public spectacles of totalitarian punishments for transgressions; hence, she does not have the strength or the strategies to effectively oppose the systemic imposition of power in Gilead, a totalitarian state formed by a military coup that assassinated the President of the U.S., and maintains a state of perpetual war against alleged “subversives” who expressed their disloyalty to the Republic.

The novel challenges the belief, circulating in the U.S. in the mid-1980s, that the fight for women’s liberation has been won and that society now accords women’s equality.<sup>12</sup> Susan Faludi, in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), illuminates the common beliefs surrounding women’s rights amid the post-second wave period in the United States during the 1980s. Faludi notes that “[w]omen, the mass media seemed to have decided, were now equal and no longer seeking new rights—just new lifestyles” (76). She uses examples such as a “special issue on the ‘Corporate Woman’ in *Business Week* that was ‘illustrated with a lone General Electric female vice president enthroned in her executive chair, her arms raised in triumph’”; the cover read: “‘More women than ever are within striking distance of the top’” (Faludi 76). Faludi’s example of the magazine cover demonstrates the kind of mixed messages that women received during the backlash to the mainstream second-wave feminist movement in

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<sup>12</sup> There are several other critics who have taken a similar tack in their analyses, including (but not limited to): Shirley Neuman’s “‘Just a Backlash’; Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (2006); Barbara Ehrenrich’s “Feminism’s Phantoms: *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood” (1986); and Nilanjana Ghosal and Srirupa Chatterjee’s “The Hysteric as a Chronicler in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (2013). My work adds to their analyses in terms of adding more historical context about some radical separatist feminist assumptions, and in terms of Atwood’s critique of some religious, social, and political ideologies that are depicted in their most extreme versions in the novel.

the United States. The magazine cover sent the message that women should be content with what they gained as individuals from the women's liberation movement, rather than to continue fighting for systemic change and the collective rights they had not yet gained during the mainstream second wave of feminism in the United States. The cover suggests that this one exceptional "corporate woman" triumphantly claims her throne as though she achieved this on her own without any of the hard-earned achievements of women's collective efforts. Telling as well is the trope of being "within striking distance from the top" as though her own individual effort—and not collective activism for systemic change—will enable her to "make it" to the top. The cover suggests that the fight for women's rights has been won.

Atwood has set the novel in the context of a totalitarian theocratic state that similarly uses propaganda to persuade women that the state of Gilead accords women not only equality, but also protection from the kinds of violence they faced in "the time before" the coup. Atwood has said that she likens the authorities in Gilead to the Puritan founders of the U.S., who sought a theocracy prior to the drafting of the Constitution in the eighteenth century. She states, "'It was in the light of history ... that the American constitutionalists in the eighteenth century separated church from state. It is also in the light of history that my leaders in *The Handmaid's Tale* recombine them'" (qtd. in Murphy 237). The leaders of Gilead have reintroduced a strict theocracy as a way to re-contain women and to recolonize their bodies following the strides women's collective efforts have achieved in "the time before." As Atwood herself has suggested in *Two Solitudes*, Gilead has adopted an even more extreme, Puritanical approach to the "New Right" ideology of the 1980s, and lynches any person who supports women's reproductive rights; in fact, the ritual of lynching of abortion providers at the Salvagings in Gilead parallels

the hanging of “witches” for “witchcraft” in Colonial America (Atwood and Beaulieu 72).<sup>13</sup> Similar to zealous crusading of Colonial America’s Puritans against “witches,” “the antiabortion group Operation Rescue, headed by the evangelical Randall Terry, gained notoriety [in the 1980s] for its protests at abortion clinics; ... members of Operation Rescue intimidated patients seeking access to clinics” (Dicker 105). In the 1980s backlash against feminism, evangelical groups worked to establish control over women’s reproductive functions and their sexuality—just as Gilead and its authority figures do in Atwood’s novel.

Faludi’s discussion in *Backlash* about the anti-abortion movement highlights that the fear of feminism—the fear of women’s equality with men—was and is one of the leading contributors to antiabortion overzealousness, and it provides a rich historical context for the antiabortion violence in the novel. This violence is part of the Gileadean apparatus for colonizing the Handmaids’ bodies for breeding purposes.<sup>14</sup> Faludi states,

The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* refused to run the Fund for Feminist Majority’s ad for a pro-choice film, *Abortion for Survival*. (And women who wrote to the *Los Angeles Times* to protest the decision received back a letter from its advertising department, advising them they were just puppets of a “certain orchestration” by feminist interests.) (418)

The media’s collusion in the repression of women’s reproductive rights, grounded in the fear of women’s equality, which Faludi refers to here, is not a far cry from the kind of criticism that

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<sup>13</sup> I use “New Right” as does Faludi when she says that the New Right’s lament “about the ‘decay of the family’ is [. . .] really a lament over lost traditional male authority in the home and in public life, an authority that [they] believe [. . .] is violently under attack” (294).

<sup>14</sup> Atwood’s novel can be read in terms of other reproductive health issues as well. For example, Karen Busby and Delany Vun’s study, “Revisiting *The Handmaid’s Tale*: Feminist Theory Meets Empirical Research on Surrogate Mothers” (2009) reads the novel in context of the surrogacy laws in Canada, the United States, and Britain.

Offred expresses about her mother's dedication to the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States, as we shall see (Atwood 38). The *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* are both left-center leaning news publications; however, fear and misogyny proved to be more powerful than the journalistic ethics of the major media outlets.

As Faludi demonstrates, women, too, are complicit with the oppression of other women and complicit with the forces that subjugate them. She notes that “we have seen New Right politicians condemn women's independence, antiabortion protesters fire-bomb women's clinics, fundamentalist preachers damn feminists as ‘whores’ and ‘witches’” (Faludi xxi). Women can serve as the gatekeepers and enablers of the patriarchal oppression of women—even when they are attempting to fight against that oppression. In Gilead, the Aunts serve to “re-educate” women for the role of Handmaid; the Aunts and the Marthas, or housekeepers, together exercise surveillance over all the Handmaids, whose bodies have been colonized as breeders for the state; and the Commanders' infertile wives gain “offspring” through the sexual slavery of the Handmaids.

Atwood's dystopia also provides a glimpse into a world where the voices of the oppressed, especially women, have been silenced, to be replaced with propaganda and false information spewing from the mouths of women who are in collusion with the state, like Aunt Lydia, a leader of Gilead's “re-education center,” and the wives of the Commanders. However, Offred's retrospective reflections suggest that her own voice has also been coopted by anti-feminist propaganda in “the time before.” Offred's reflections are dripping with sarcasm about time spent with her mother, whose views coincide with second-wave separatist feminists (Atwood 180). Her mother, along with other radical feminists, fought for women's reproductive rights and against pornography, rape, and all forms of violence against women, sometimes in

quite militant ways. While reminiscing about her mother, Offred makes the connection between the marches that she did not participate in—though others did—before Gilead had taken complete control of North America, and the ones that Offred’s mother participated in when Offred was at “that age when daughters are most embarrassed by their mothers” (180). Offred remembers that her mother and her friends had “been in a march that day; it was during the time of the porn riots, or was it the abortion riots, they were close together” (180). Not appreciating that the collective action of women like her mother have secured sexual and reproductive freedoms for women, Offred resented much about her mother’s activism, noting that she “went to [her] bedroom, to be out of [her mother’s friends’] way” (180). She continues, saying, “They were talking too much, and too loudly. They ignored me, and I resented them. My mother and her rowdy friends. I didn’t see why she had to dress that way, in overalls, as if she were young; or to swear so much” (180). Offred complains about her mom’s swearing, rowdiness, and overalls all in relation to one another. Young Offred wants her mother to adhere to a more traditional, domestic ideal of femininity; therefore, she adopts the stereotypically feminine, “maternal” traits that she felt like her mother was lacking. Before Offred was a Handmaid in Gilead, she was a wife and mother whose internalized sexism caused her to reject her mother’s feminist ideologies, even though she has benefitted from the advances of the Women’s Movement.

Just as Aunt Lydia has been interpellated by the anti-feminist, patriarchal gender ideology of Gilead and brainwashes new Handmaids at the re-education center, so too has Offred been interpellated by a subtly anti-feminist gender ideology that mirrors the 1980s “backlash” Faludi discusses.<sup>15</sup> At 14 years old, Offred has accepted that women should be quiet, polite, and

passive, relying on “their man” in domestic arrangements and using their sexuality to “get what they want or need” out of situations (Atwood 144, 180). Patriarchal discourses of femininity are instilled in Offred, despite her mother’s feminist ideologies. Not until Offred faces blatant abuse in Gilead does she consider her mother’s role within the second-wave feminist movement; however, it is in many ways too late for Offred to come to this realization at that point.

Offred’s experience and identity as an educated, middle-class, white woman represents the body of privileged women who, in the backlash against the strong feminist movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, had decided that they no longer needed feminism. Faludi notes that “the most recent round of backlash first surfaced in the late ‘70s on the fringes, among the evangelical right [; . . .] By the mid-‘80, as resistance to women’s rights acquired political and social acceptability, it passed into the popular culture” (xix). Those who began separatist groups were those who were not represented by “white, straight feminism” that did not fight for the oppression specifically faced by women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women of lower social and economic class. However, some white women—in either straight-identified or lesbian-identified groups—presumably like Offred’s mother, adopted radical, separatist feminist ideologies and “generally shared a mistrust of masculine/feminine roles, sexual ‘violence’ (whether real or in play), and pornography, which they saw as a manifestation of the misguided male sex drive” (Faderman 249). The portrayal of Offred’s mother as an anti-porn, separatist feminist alongside her daughter

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<sup>15</sup> In his influential essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser uses the example of someone’s being called out in the street by a police man to define what he means by the “interpellation” of the human subject by ideology: “‘Hey, you there!’ As soon as I turn around, I accept the position of the subject. This, too, is how ideology works” (246). Althusser notes how individuals become “subjects” by this process of interpellation by ideology. He further theorizes that all ideology has a material existence in “ideological state apparatuses” (ISAs), which are the non-violent mechanisms for interpellating subjects into ideology, and the “repressive state apparatus” (RSA), which is the totality of state power embodied in the coercive, violent, or repressive institutions of the government, army, police, courts, prisons, etc. (245).



who adopts more traditionally patriarchal values suggests how deeply rooted traditional patriarchal values are in the United States.

Offred's mother parallels the anti-pornography feminist ideologies that more radical activist groups like Women against Pornography and Cell 16, a heterosexual radical feminist separatist group, hold. Alice Echols in *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* explains that Roxanne Dunbar, Cell 16's founder and leader from 1968-1970, "articulated what was probably the earliest feminist critique of pornography" (165). In addition to their anti-porn beliefs, Dunbar's group "attributed women's behavior to their sex-role conditioning" similarly to how Offred describes her mother from the "time before" (Echols 160). For example, she notes how cooking is constricted as a feminine activity, and that Luke, Offred's husband, "wouldn't have been allowed to have such a hobby" because "they'd have called [him] queer" before the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s challenged such prescribed gender roles (Atwood 121). Offred's mother's attitudes seem to resemble those of Cell 16 and other radical heterosexual separatist feminist groups, but some of her positions also look like those of Radicalesbians and the Furies, which were lesbian separatist groups in the United States made up of white women. Echols notes that the biggest difference between these two groups is that "Radicalesbians avoided explicitly impugning heterosexual feminists' radicalism," while "the Furies portrayed heterosexual feminists as the movement's albatross" (Echols 232). The Furies, specifically, align with some of Offred's mother's ideologies and goals, such as "the destruction of the nuclear family" (Echols 223). Offred's mother exudes these same values by choosing to have her child outside of a patriarchal family.

Some of Offred's mother's feminist friends view motherhood in a way that coincides with the views of Cell 16. Echols notes that the group eschewed the gender roles that are

perpetuated by patriarchal constructs, “yet paradoxically [made] maternalism the cornerstone of their feminism” (163). Motherhood is still at the center of Cell 16’s feminism, though Dunbar argues it is a patriarchal social construct (Echols 163). When discussing how she was conceived, Offred takes the reader back in time to a discussion that she had with her mother: “I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk [; . . .] You were a wanted child, all right, and did I get shit from some quarters! My oldest buddy Tricia accused me of being pronatalist, that bitch. Jealousy, I put that down to” (Atwood 120). She goes on to mirror Cell 16’s maternalist, women-only Utopia when she says, “I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds’ worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn’t a nice guy and all, but he wasn’t up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off” (121). Offred’s mother’s commentary on her own experiences of conceiving reveals a woman who is completely conscious of her body and choices in complete separation from maleness.

However, her extreme separatist views do not resonate with her daughter, who consequently rejects all forms of collective feminist activism. Atwood suggests that Offred’s mother’s dogmatism may be unintentionally undermining the ultimate effectiveness of women’s struggle for equality. Reflecting on her mother’s expectations of her, Offred says, “...My mother expected too much from me [; . . .] She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she’d made. I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once” (Atwood 122). Her mother’s feminism is also off-putting to Offred because of her distaste for Offred’s husband, Luke. During the “time before,” Offred’s mother openly criticizes Luke, her feminist ideologies echoing those of Cell 16. Offred’s mother is unimpressed

that he's the husband who slices carrots and helps her daughter cook (121). Explaining that Offred is "just a backlash" from all the progress made by the women's liberation movements of the '60s and '70s, Offred's mother voices her distaste for her daughter's choice of traditional domesticity (121). Simply cooking and doing household chores that are stereotypically feminine does not make for an egalitarian marriage in Offred's mother's eyes, and she is disappointed that Offred is so easily satisfied by superficial gestures toward "equality" within a systemically unequal heteropatriarchal marriage.

Some of the radical separatist thinking of Cell 16's members appears in the strict theology of the dystopian world of Gilead, allowing Atwood to make connections between the two extremist positions. Dana Densmore, a member of Cell 16, "suggested that 'healthy (free) people would engage in the act of sex only for reproduction' and that 'happy, healthy self-confident animals and people don't like being touched, don't need to snuggle and huggle. They are really free and self-contained in their heads'" (Echols 162). Offred's circumstances as a Handmaid reflect Densmore's ideas of sex when she records that "we are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood 96). Densmore's radical, separatist ideas about procreation-only sex are mirrored in Offred's haunting words about the perceived purpose of her own sexual body in Gilead, since in both instances sex for pleasure is not a consideration. However, other women of Cell 16 are free to agree or disagree with Densmore's assertions and engage in sex for pleasure if they wish; likewise, they are free to leave Cell 16 at will. Offred, in contrast, is held hostage as a sexual slave, no matter how Aunt Lydia tries to persuade the Handmaids that they are safer in Gilead than they ever were in "the time before" (117). Still, Atwood suggests a similarity between the dogmatism of radical separatist feminists and Gilead's anti-feminist, puritanical sexual ideology as promoted by Aunt Lydia.

Atwood parallels these two extremist ideologies to point to those gray areas where their beliefs and practices overlap. Some of Cell 16's, Densmore's, and Offred's mother's dogmas overlap with Aunt Lydia's in the novel. These are the spaces that Atwood invites the reader to examine and investigate. Aunt Lydia and Dunbar from Cell 16 each value and lead feminocentric lifestyles; the general idea of feminocentric spaces in and of itself is neither inherently good nor bad. It just *is*—neutrally. However, the intentions behind those feminocentric spaces are determined by ideologies that, according to Althusser, “exist [. . .] in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices” (242). The actual practices in these spaces reveal whose intentions and ideologies shape them. The intentions of Aunt Lydia's Red Center are to subordinate and colonize the woman's mind and body, while ultimately benefitting the patriarchal elite within the state. On the other hand, Offred's mother (alongside Offred's best friend, Moira), are driven by their knowledge of the systemic oppression of women, and the women's liberation movements that improved the conditions for many women in the United States. Their intentions in opposing pornography, critiquing heteropatriarchal marriage and family, or seeking feminocentric and separate “women's spaces,” are to free women from patriarchal ideology that they see as normalizing the physical and psychological abuse of women. When Atwood puts these feminist ideas and their misappropriation by the Aunts in Gilead into her novel, she invites readers to ask themselves: “Which side of history will I be on?” However, simultaneously, the reader must ask: “Are our strategies for collective feminist action mirroring the dogmatic authoritarianism of the system we wish to transform?”

Similarly to how “feminism” is often perceived, Offred reflects on specific memories that she equates with her mother's feminism associated with the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s. She, much like critics of feminism and its various subgroups and movements

in the 1980s, views feminism in terms of a few specific events that received a lot of media coverage—and anti-feminist media distortions—rather than in terms of a set of beliefs that fueled community organization for women’s liberation. From the perspective of those who criticize it, feminism is one totalizing and oppressive entity rather than several feminist ideologies. From a relatively privileged background as a straight, white middle-class woman, Offred is not accustomed to the kind of abuse she experiences as she is kidnapped and forced to live within the puritanical confines and compelled sexual relations of Gilead where she is only valued as a “walking womb” to conceive, carry, and give birth to children for those in power who cannot (Atwood 136). Thus, Offred’s complicit handling of such mistreatment mirrors her skepticism about the collective feminist activism of her mother, her best friend, and other women who sought systemic change through radical opposition to the whole sex/gender system.

Offred’s responses to her abuse in Gilead stands in stark contrast to her best friend, Moira, who is a feminist lesbian and has faced oppression in terms of gender and sexuality even in the “time before” the Gileadean regime. Atwood characterizes Moira as more akin to Offred’s mother rather than to Offred; she even breaks out of the “Red Center,” before being caught and sent to work at the brothel, the Jezebels (133). Though Moira is a lesbian feminist, Offred does not know this until much later in their friendship. Offred initially stops hugging Moira “after she’d told [her] about being gay,” but once Moira reassures Offred that she “didn’t turn her on,” so they had “gone back to it” (172). Atwood represents Offred as a woman who has been interpellated by heterosexist and homophobic ideologies that reinforced the backlash against feminism by accusing feminists of being lesbians—as though there’s something wrong with that.

In contrast to Moira and Offred’s mother, who worked for women’s liberation in “the time before,” Aunt Lydia, one of the leaders of “re-education” in the Red Center, believes that

life for women during the “time before” was even worse than in the current state where women are sexually used and treated as breeding bodies. She represents the collective of women—the Aunts—who, for their own ideological beliefs, purposely push for the normalization of reducing women to mere bodies. In the Red Center, fertile women are “re-educated” into the role of Handmaid through the use of psychological coercion and propaganda about “the time before.” When training the women who are to become Handmaids, Aunt Lydia shows “old porn film[s], from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed” (Atwood 118). The brutal images in the pornographic films justify Aunt Lydia’s own abuse and mistreatment of the women she is in charge of at the Red Center. Having been interpellated by Gilead’s misogynist gender ideology, she believes that in Gilead women have been liberated from the oppressive conditions during “the time before” because, she says, there is no pornography, no rape (as though the conception ceremonies are not rape), no female immodesty, and no disrespect for women.

Some of Offred’s mother’s ideas (anti-porn book burning; woman-only utopian ideas) are actually what Aunt Lydia talks about. The difference is that Offred’s mother condemns pornography under the assumption that it leads to sexual violence and other patriarchal abuses of women, whereas Aunt Lydia condemns pornography in order to legitimize the systematized subjection of women to ritualized, forced sexual intercourse in Gilead. As Shirley Neuman notes in her analysis of the novel, Aunt Lydia seems to be modeled in part on anti-feminist leader Phyllis Schlafly, whom Wendy Kaminer, journalist for *The Atlantic*, quotes as saying, ““Pornography really should be defined as the degradation of women. Nearly all porn involves

the use of women and involves subordinate, degrading poses for the sexual, exploitative, and even sadistic and violent pleasures of men” (Neuman 860, Kaminer para. 3). Schlafly’s ideas coincide with both Aunt Lydia’s and Offred’s mother’s ideologies, though the thorough rejection of patriarchy distinguishes the feminist anti-porn position from the fundamentalist and patriarchal Christian ideology that Schlafly espouses.

Just as Offred’s choices about her own body and her reproductive functions are denied her in Gilead, the social conservatism of the 1980s strove to take choice away from women in the United States. Looking back on her mother’s activism, which she viewed with post-feminist skepticism, Offred recognizes that her mother made conscious, unconventional choices regarding when, why, and how she wanted to conceive, birth, and raise a child.<sup>16</sup> In *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, Estelle Freedman explains that Atwood’s novel “drove home the centrality of reproductive rights for North American feminism. By the 1980s reproduction had become politically charged and politically controversial...” (229). Atwood’s characterization of Offred’s mother highlights the choices that were taken away from both her and her daughter. Offred can now choose between letting her face melt off while cleaning toxic waste in the colonies, or being one of the Handmaids, whose bodies are considered to be nothing more than vessels or “two-legged wombs” (Atwood 252, 136). The dichotomy that Offred has to choose from is no choice at all. Afforded no substantive choices that would free her from sexual subjugation, the resistance Offred attempts mainly serves herself rather than substantively threatening the oppressive hyper-patriarchal system of Gilead.

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<sup>16</sup> I use “postfeminist” here as it was used in popular media of the 1980s to persuade women that most of their problems were caused by the second wave of the feminist movement. Faludi in *Backlash* explains that “just when record numbers of younger women were supporting feminist goals in the mid-‘80s (more of them, in fact, than older women) and a majority of all women were calling themselves feminists, the media declared the advent of a younger ‘postfeminist generation’ that supposedly reviled the women’s movement” (xix).

Among the most intolerable situations during the record of Offred's time in Gilead is the monthly forced sexual intercourse that she is required to do as a Handmaid. Segmentation of the female body and fetishization of female reproduction dominate sexual relations in Gilead. During the monthly ritualized intercourse "ceremony" among Offred, the Commander, and his wife, who holds Offred by the wrists as the Commander penetrates her, she is condensed to a reproductive body. She exists only for reproductive purposes under control of a repressive state and its functionaries, like the Commanders (Atwood 94). The objectification and segmentation of Offred's body echoes Faludi's discussion of the reification of fetal rights during the 1980s antiabortion backlash: "The antiabortion iconography in the last decade featured the fetus but never the mother [; . . .] the whole 'unborn child' floats in a disembodied womb. The fetus is a conscious, even rambunctious tyke, the mother a passive, formless, and inanimate 'environment'" (421). Similarly, Offred's body is sectioned off so that only her reproductive organs are important: "My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved..." (94). Her body is effectively "colonized" by the state of Gilead as a national security measure to insure the state's survival in an ecological wasteland where pollution has rendered the majority of women sterile, while male sterility goes unremarked.

Offred's idea of resistance to Gilead's abuse and denial of women's basic human rights is limited, and is couched only in terms of her individual self and individual choices she believes she is free to make, as though any choice is empowering. She views a simple gesture, such as tilting her head so that a "young Guardian" can see her face, as an act of resistance. In Gilead,



“the Guardians aren’t real soldiers. They’re used for routine policing and [. . .] menial functions, [. . .] and they’re either stupid or older or disabled or very young...” (Atwood 20). Offred notices that one of the Guardians tries to “get a look at” her under the elaborate head garb with side blinders the Handmaids are forced to wear. She moves her head to help him see her, “and he blushes” (21). She views the “event” as “a small defiance of rule, [. . .] the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child” (21). Atwood’s protagonist perceives this silent exchange of eyes between herself and a Guardian of Gilead as an act of resistance, but as indicated by her comparison to her childhood, Offred’s mini-rebellion is one that is undeveloped, short-lived, and self-serving.

Offred acknowledges the passivity of her muted act of resistance, but she still calls it “power.” She notes that she is “not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds” (Atwood 22). She may have something that they want as if she is teasing a dog with a bone—but she is the bone to be gnawed. The systemic distribution of power in Gilead has not shifted due to Offred’s swaying of her hips and making of eye contact with the Guardians. Offred thinks that her sexual effect on men gives her agency; however, a substantive and lasting act of resistance would need to aim at systemic change to disrupt the power structures within a culture or society.

Offred’s “small defiance” is just that—a brief moment of boldness that perhaps leaves the Guardians yearning for her, though she is not distinguishable from the other Handmaids who are clothed identically, leaving her with no individuality or autonomy. Her body is a stand-in for all women that the Guardians are not allowed to converse with, look at, or touch. In fact, her “helping” of the Guardians to direct their male gazes at her body affords them the immediate and

deferred pleasure of sexual arousal and the anticipated pleasure of sexually objectifying her again when they return to their duties and when they masturbate to fantasies of her while off-duty. While it affords Offred some modicum of control and agency in brutally oppressive circumstances, her “small defiance” effectively serves to reinforce the abusive gender system by rewarding the Guardians as they fulfill their duties. None of the power dynamics between Offred and the Guardians have been affected by her looking and/or being looked at. Offred’s “postfeminist” notion is that she can exert control by using her body to gain “power” over men—to, in effect, self-objectify. Her reflections from the “time before” reveal other ways that she used sex pre-Gilead; her ability to have an affair with a married man, Luke, is just one example of Offred using sex in terms of her own sexual agency. Although Offred acknowledges the passivity of her muted act of resistance, she still calls it “power.”

Offred attempts to resist oppression in small ways that serve only herself; later she becomes more complicit in the oppression of Gilead, and ultimately rejects the Mayday movement to dismantle the theocratic patriarchy of Gilead—the only group that has real agency in challenging the dominant institutions that control Offred and everyone else in Atwood’s dystopia. The notion of “women’s power” got co-opted by post-feminist discourses that rejected second-wave feminism’s opposition to the sexual objectification of women’s bodies and their claim that all heterosexual relationships are forms of oppression. At times what Offred’s mother advocated sounds like a kind of woman-separatist or lesbian-separatist idea, which Offred rejects. However, Offred rejects all feminist organizing and collective activism as “too extreme,” not realizing how fragile are the gains made toward women’s equality. Because Offred does not become pregnant after months of attempting to conceive during ritualized intercourse with the Commander, who we begin to assume is infertile, his wife, Serena Joy, orders Offred to begin

having sex with Nick (Atwood 205). Nick belongs to the Guardians, Gilead's security force, and has been assigned to the Commander and his family. His duties include chauffeuring the Commander, in addition to helping Serena Joy attend her garden. Before learning that Nick is a part of Mayday, the underground resistance movement, Offred actually uses her sexually satisfying relationship with him to justify not supporting the movement. She admits that she "no longer want[s] to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom" so that she can "be here, with Nick," because he has become someone tangible to hold onto in a world where she has lost everyone and everything else (271). Despite her rejection of collective activism, she is eventually rescued by Mayday, and her tape-recorded narrative attests to her liberation by the movement, offering testimony to the importance of such collective action.

Offred's complicity, however, is understandable. Terrorized by the constant surveillance enforced by the Commander and Serena Joy, and haunted by public spectacles of punishment in the Salvagings, Offred is unable to consider any kind of resistance other than her own small individualistic gestures toward rebellion; she cannot conceive of her mother's kind of collective action, and thus she is scared, unwilling, and unable to resist effectively to pursue systemic change. Her relationship with her mother and skepticism about her mother's feminism explain why she is unwilling to become involved with Mayday and its collective action to undermine the whole system. Offred's shopping partner, Ofglen, is a part of Mayday. As the end of Offred's narrative approaches, she says, "Ofglen is giving up on me. She whispers less, talks more about the weather. I do not feel regret about this. I feel relief" (Atwood 271). Ofglen before states that she "could get [Offred] out," but Offred "rejects the anti-Gilead illegalities proposed by Ofglen" and refuses to join the resistance movement to save herself and those she loves like her husband and daughter (Stillman & Johnson 74). Offred's strategies for gaining some modicum of power

or agency can be seen as Atwood's taking to its extreme the emphasis on individualism of those who opposed second-wave feminisms, just as she takes to extremes the anti-abortion ideas of the backlash against second-wave feminism.

Therefore, Offred is willing to defy some of the strict rules of Gilead, but only when she receives some personal benefits from her transgressions. Stillman and Johnson note that Offred "frequently gives in to powerful people or strong emotions," such as the Commander who is able to get everything he wants from Offred through their secret, forbidden meetings that fulfill his nostalgia for the "time before" (74). Offred is willing to break the strict rules in order to have Scrabble dates with the Commander, to accompany him to the brothel, Jezebel's, as his "date," in addition to having sex with Nick as ordered by the Commander's wife (Atwood 138-139, 261). In these scenes, Offred does gain some kind of agency, but only within quite narrow parameters and only because she really has no other choice. With the Commander, she is able to participate in forbidden pastimes such as playing board games, reading magazines, and dressing up—such taboos in Gilead were common occurrences from Offred's old life, and thus allow her to cling to her old life and identity. This nostalgia, however, is a trait that hurts Offred more than it helps her because it makes an inhumane living condition slightly more tolerable.

Despite her complicity at times, Offred spends much of her narrative analyzing power structures in Gilead's many forms. When Offred considers asking her Commander (with whom she is supposed to interact only once a month to attempt reproduction) for something small such as hand lotion, she recognizes a shift in the power structure in her commander's home, noting that she "can ask for something. Possibly not much; but something" (Atwood 144). Aunt Lydia says that men are obsessed with having sex, but Gilead's power, and in turn the power that the Commander holds, is motivated by power more than sex (144). Offred says that "context is all"

when determining what is “bizarre” versus what is considered to be normal (144). While this is true when analyzing who holds power in such a dystopian society, Offred fails to see that while resisting through minor misconduct may advantage her in materialistic ways, it may only reinforce the power structure that she seeks to undermine rather than give her effective agency. There may be moments when Offred feels as though she has gained agency through her secret meetings with the Commander and with Nick, though these self-perceived rebellions continue to give power to the powerful, while her body and mind are gazed at and consumed for male pleasure. Her imaginary agency is disproven when the reader notes that these secret rendezvous are not initiated by Offred, nor does she have any choice to put an end to them because of the power dynamic of the Commander, his wife, Serena Joy, and Nick. When the Commander first arranges to meet with Offred via his messenger, Nick, she records that “I have to get away [. . .] before I dissolve entirely” (98). The metaphor of Offred dissolving discloses her lack of agency; she expects for her agency to be taken away in Nick’s presence. The same scene reveals the first instance in which Offred feels as though she has gained agency through a secret, sexual relationship with Nick. Atwood emphasizes the power the Commander, and potentially Nick, abuse to use Offred for their own personal, sexual, and emotional advantages, abuse that she does not know how to resist.

In contrast to Offred’s acts of resistance grounded in individualism and a personal sense of empowerment, Moira and Offred’s mother engage in collective feminist activism aimed at systemic transformation in “the time before.” Similarly, second-wave feminists engaged in collective action aimed at transforming the whole sex-gender system by insuring women’s reproductive rights; consequently, they faced violent opposition. In the novel, Moira, putting her own life at risk, “was working for a women’s collective” where “they put out books on birth

control and rape and things like that” at the same time that all women’s “Compucards” (credit/debit cards) were deactivated and reactivated in their male partner’s or closest male family member’s name, during the coup that established Gilead (Atwood 178). Like Moira, those working towards reproductive healthcare reform in the 1970s and ‘80s put their lives at risk during the backlash against the second-wave feminist movement in the United States. Faludi notes, “Antiabortion warriors were the backlash’s most blatant and violent agents. At their instigation, between 1977 and 1989, seventy-seven family-planning clinics were torched or bombed (in at least seven instances, during working hours, with employees and patients inside), 117 were targets of arson, 250 received bomb threats...” (412). Likewise, Offred describes the fate of a doctor in Gilead who was found-out by officials to have been providing abortion services, as some doctors resisted the regime after the coup.

Offred comments on what she and others have been taught to believe about these doctors after seeing one lynched during the morning’s “Men’s Salvaging.” She explains, “These men, we’ve been told, are like war criminals. It’s no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples, for the rest. Though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive” (Atwood 32-33). The Salvagings are one of the many means used by Gilead to control, to exercise surveillance, and to demonstrate state power through the spectacle of public executions. This display of overwhelming power by a repressive state apparatus forcefully coerces the compliance of any men or women who have not been effectively interpellated by Gilead’s ideological state apparatuses into subjects who accept forced reproduction in the interest of national security. In her dystopian vision, Atwood shows the reader what the U.S. could have looked like if the violent rhetoric spouted by antiabortionists

as well as their repressive militancy had similarly succeeded in interpellating more willing subjects through its ideology of reproduction and eliminating others who refused subjection to that ideology.

The world post-Gilead as portrayed in the epilogue of the novel, titled “Historical Notes,” reveals one which is still patriarchal; Atwood suggests that history does and will repeat itself if we are unwilling to make connections between our historical past, lived present, and looming future. This epilogue reveals that Offred’s “story” was only the beginning of Gilead, and that it took several years for it to be overturned. The rhetoric at the “Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies” discloses that the world post-Gilead is just as patriarchal as it was before. The Gileadean Studies symposium was held at the “University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195” (Atwood 299). The Chair of the conference is “Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, Department of Caucasian Anthropology” (299). Although the reader knows that the people at the conference heard her story, there is no way for Offred to know that her recording will ever actually be heard. What is clear, however, is that Offred’s story—though listened to, transcribed, and analyzed—still has not been truly heard. For if the members of the academic symposium had engaged with her story, and if it had resonance with them, they would not speak so unsympathetically about her (310). For example, when discussing Offred’s possible route when escaping Gilead, scholars called ““The Underground Femaleroad”” ““The Underground Frailroad,”” a comment that receives a response of laughter from the other conference attendees (301). Offred’s words are all scrambled up by the academics in the historical notes, and they demean her and completely give up on identifying her (yet they can identify the Commanders) (310). They are more concerned with critiquing her effectiveness as a narrator, noting that “she could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy” (310).

Centuries later, women are still given expectations that are unfair and impossible. These academics argue about “authenticating” her narrative, as though she and her words have no authority. The academic conference completely ignores the dire warning implicit in the “tale” as they also say one cannot judge what happened in Gilead because, after all, all cultures and time periods are different and we must not judge (311). As evidenced by the attitudes of the conference attendees, moral relativism allows them to almost excuse what happened in Gilead.

Nevertheless, Margret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is still a successful text of resistance, even though the central character does not effectively resist and her tape-recorded and transcribed story is not heard at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies by a receptive, empathetic audience that is willing to cast moral judgment on the patriarchal abuses of Gilead. The resistance is not really Offred’s, but Atwood’s in that she gives us a chilling vision of what not just “a day without feminism” would look like, but what “a world without feminism” would look like. In her work on the novel, Shirley Neuman notes that “Atwood, like many feminists of the period, was keenly aware of the instability of the newly acquired rights and equalities of women: of the opposition to these rights and equalities in many quarters, of the many places and ways in which these gains were threatened or actively eroded...” (859). Atwood’s novel forces the reader to live vicariously through Offred’s harrowing experiences of sexual exploitation. The reader is temporarily subjected to a world where the rights women have fought for, specifically in the United States, are gone. Finally, the reader witnesses how a condescending group of academics trivializes Offred’s tale of traumatic sexual degradation in a totalitarian state.

Of course, this is part of Atwood’s strategy and can be seen as part of her effective resistance because it suggests that the world is *still* dominated by the patriarchal subordination of women even though this new world is no longer under Western hegemony. Though it seems to



be ruled by Latin Americans, Native Americans, and non-western cultures, the old patriarchal system is still in place and the seeds of totalitarianism have been sown yet again (Atwood 299). Thus, Atwood's text *is* an act of resistance that encourages readers to resist patriarchal totalitarianism and provides a warning about what *is* alive and well today. Atwood has noted in a recent *New York Times* article, "What 'The Handmaid's Tale' Means in the Age of Trump" (2017) that "in the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades, and indeed the past centuries" (7). She warned us when *The Handmaid's Tale* was published during the age of Reaganomics in 1986 of the consequences of a Gileadean-like state apparatus, and she is warning us again today in 2017.

## CONCLUSION

Each novel examined in this thesis looks at the struggle for the liberation of women's fullest humanity in a heteropatriarchal society. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* looks at that struggle prior to the reemergence of public and visible white, bourgeois feminist activism in the 1960s. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* looks at that struggle in a dystopian world created by an effective backlash against feminism that has erased the gains made by the centuries-long history of women's struggle for liberation. Esther, Plath's protagonist, wants access to the rights that Offred enjoyed during the "time before" Gilead; Esther's lonely fight to become a complete and autonomous version of herself brings her to a suicide attempt and subsequent treatment in a mental institution where electroshock treatments are used to try to erase things from her consciousness. At 19, in 1953, Esther gestures toward a desired "elsewhere" away from the patriarchal entrapment of women, but she has no idea how to attain it; she serves as a representation of white bourgeois women who found themselves without a movement in the late 1950s and early '60s, but who felt the need to escape the confinement of domestic ideology if they were to attain their fullest human potential.

In the "time before" Gilead, Offred shares quite a few characteristics with Esther. They are both privileged in terms of their whiteness, socio-economic classes, and access to higher education. Esther—a direct by-product of the ideals regarding domesticity, femininity, and sexuality in the 1950s—is able to overcome some of these expectations, despite being a part of the very culture that produced these standards. Offred, on the other hand, is in her thirties during the novel's dystopian version of the late 1980s. Reading *The Bell Jar* and *The Handmaid's Tale* in context of the "second wave" of feminism in the United States and the ongoing anti-feminist backlash that received new impetus in the 1980s suggests that simply instilling liberal feminist

ideals in each generation will not be enough to eradicate the systemic oppression of women. Instead, we must diligently work for systemic change through collective action rather than being satisfied with securing individual privileges within an oppressive system.

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