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Beyond Marriage and Motherhood: The Motifs Involved in the Portrayal of Women in Literature

(2014)

BY

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English

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of English

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Reflection

When I was in elementary school most of the books that I voluntarily read featured female characters. Part of the reason was that it was expected of me and those books (about girls/women) were the ones recommended to me. Another part was that female characters were the ones I could most closely relate to. They gave me ideas about what it is to be a woman, and subtly led me to approach the question of what kind of woman I wanted to be. It took me years to really pick up on the stereotypes and recurring female characters, and it is only recently that I began to realize how detrimental these stereotypes are. The fiction included in my portfolio are responses based on my question: what does literature tell us about women and their "place" in the patriarchal world? More specifically, where do women fit in a heteronormative society, in a world where men are the traditional rulers of the overall system?

Much of the literature that I was exposed to early on featured the love story between a man and a woman. I realized that the "romance" genre was for girls and that most men did not pay attention to this genre. There were certain recurring motifs that I noticed within the romance plot. One, that it was the man's job to pursue the woman. Two, that the plot oftentimes (but not all the time) culminates in marriage. Three, that the marriage is frequently followed by the birth of a child. This was a common sequence of events in the literature I was exposed to. That this recurs time after time communicates the existence of a pattern where women are concerned, and a narrow one at that.

When I entered college I began to realize what feminism was, and that I was a feminist. The fact that "wife" and "mother" were the two most common roles for women as presented in literature made me angry and appalled. Men certainly seemed to have more options than simply

being a husband or father. Men went on quests and adventures, and spent their time pursuing their desires outside of the home. Thus far I have encountered far more literature about men that do not feature a love or parent story. Men are more than “father” and “husband,” oftentimes they function without being either of these roles. With women, this escape from the set-norm is rare. Women are placed inside boxes as well. Labels of the “good girl” and “bad girl,” the “slut” and the “prude” exist in the written word and in our society. With men, examination of their sexuality is not given such priority. They are sexual but they are not judged as sharply and as intricately as women. Men are also given the opportunity to be something other than simply “good” or “bad.” They can be a complex combination of the two, whereas there is a need to immediately delineate whether a woman character is “good,” “bad,” a “slut,” or a “prude.” Women are more than these words, and women characters should reflect this.

Several of the courses I have taken also inspired my writing and my general curiosity. Two of the main ones were “Gender and Sexuality in Literature” (ENGL 489) with Dr. Kate Oestreich and “Theory of Literary Criticism” (ENGL 483) with Dr. Steve Hamelman. I took the former in the first semester of my junior year. In this class we delved deeply into literature that portrayed how the struggles one faces in life vary greatly in accordance with gender. That is, whether you are a man or a woman automatically sets you up for certain expectations and limitations. *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf was a sound example of this. In the story Orlando starts out as a man. Halfway through the plot, he transforms into a woman. Orlando’s experiences as a man are vastly different from his experiences as a woman. This was not merely a result of the physical metamorphosis. From clothing to sexual encounters, the overall freedom of manhood was a contrast to the constraints of womanhood. The very petticoats that Orlando wore as a

woman restricted movement, just as the fact of being a woman restricted Orlando from being taken seriously by men.

In "Theory of Literary Criticism," which I took the spring semester of my junior year, I was introduced to the feminist theorists Monique Wittig and Helene Cixous. Jacques Derrida's theory of binaries also led me straight to questions about the differences in how men and women are portrayed. The binary way of thinking assumes that one out of two options is superior, while the other is inferior. With humans this dynamic has nearly always been man/woman. That is, man is superior while woman is inferior. For me this has always been an issue, especially since it permeates our reality and our literature. Being aware of this man/woman binary is the first step to overcoming it. Deciphering it and knowing the facts mean that escape may be possible, that what has thus far been "typical" can be subverted and a new dynamic (free of binaries) may be achieved.

Before I even began my official research I assumed that I already knew what I would find. I thought that the search for "women in literature" would lead me straight to descriptions of the stereotypes (confirmation that they do exist and permeate the overall ways women are represented) and my vague awareness that female storylines often revolve around men. I expected the sources to confirm what I had already observed. For the most part my suspicions were not far off.

Several of the sources made note of a trend in children's literature. In various samples of children's books that had won the Caldecott Award, there was an overall under-representation of women as characters. Boys were the ones involved in the main action, for example, going out and getting jobs, constructing vehicles and then riding around in them. Some stories featured no

female characters at all (Nilsen 919). The females that were featured were often passive in both their roles and their activity within the story. In many of the books females were pictured as watching the central action occurring, sometimes from a porch or through a doorway or window (Nilsen 919). Similar studies found that females in picture books were seen more often indoors than outdoors (Young, 757). The idea that the woman belongs in the domestic sphere is evident here. They are meant to be inside cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the household while the men go out and conquer the world. There is danger if the books that are handed to children are ones wherein "the boy does all the explaining while the girl does all the listening, where the boy does all the travelling while the girl does all the waving, where the boy does all the complaining while the girl does all the smiling" (Nilsen 920). The message is clear: there is a perception that males are active while females are passive. Males are the do-ers, while the females are not.

Literature within particular time periods exhibits questions about the very legitimacy of female autonomy. There were hundreds of novels and short stories written from 1850 to 1905 that featured female hypnotism (Pozner 412). The hypnotist was typically male. The consequence of this hypnosis is that "the subject's body, mind and possessions are vulnerable to appropriation, and such scenes often seem to deprive the female subject of 'ownership' of her thoughts, feelings, words and actions" (Pozner 413). Pozner's main argument is that this kind of fiction was a subtle means to demonstrate concern about the rights of women to have complete autonomy. That women are heavily influenced and easily controlled by men is the conjecture. This double control of both mind and body is especially alarming. In this sense not only is man portrayed as superior, he is the puppet master.

In situations where the man is not quite the puppet master, he is often still vital to the woman's role in the story. In much literature of the late eighteenth century in particular, the

obedience of a woman to either her father or her husband is portrayed as a positive, even as a behavior to be rewarded. In these stories “female characters are not only surrounded by male characters, but more importantly, they are surrendered to their authority” (Vadidar 196). Women were not given much power—but especially not power concerning financial deals. There exists a noted “fairy-tale, the Cinderella-pattern story concerned with love, money and marriage, which has been adopted in various plots, is structurally based on the triangle of hero, heroine and social/financial conflicts” (Vadidar 194). The woman needs guidance, and may need to be “rescued” by the hero of the story. With this representation, it appears that women cannot act independently of the men in their lives. This is disconcerting because it is reminiscent of the ancient practice of a woman belonging to her father until she is married, then belonging to her husband. In each case the woman is treated as a “possession,” and as something that cannot survive on its own.

The issue of “beauty” surrounds women in real life and in literature. The heroine of a story is often, though not always, beautiful. In young adult fiction from 1975-1999 a study was done exploring the correlation between body weight, sexuality, and body image as portrayed by female characters (Younger 45). This literature contains “representations of young women that reinforce negative body-image stereo-types” (Younger 46). Younger argues that this literature perpetuates stereotypes about “fat” and “thin” young women. The thin young women are in control and exhibit confidence, especially in their sex lives. The overweight young women have low self-esteem and are more passive, and seem to be more promiscuous (Younger 48). The implication is that the more beautiful and thin young women are able to pick and choose and have standards where sex is concerned, but the overweight ones might just take whatever attention from men that they can get, no matter the quality. This article brings to light the

obsession with the female body in literature. "How" a woman appears is repeatedly given as much weight as "who" she is. Woman's worth is proportionate to her beauty—the more beauty one has, the more inherent power she has. Even the typical Medieval styled trope may feature a knight who is on a quest to rescue his "beautiful" princess or "fair" lady.

The role of women in heteronormative society is mirrored in fiction. Especially during the Victorian Age, literature demonstrated what was expected of women in the real world (Yildirim 117). Women's place in society was as wife and mother—it was expected that they should do all they could to be of aid in their households, and to please their husbands. The good wife was to exhibit "purity and domesticity" and was characterized by "tenderness and simplicity" (Yildirim 117). Virtuous women were typically rewarded, and the non-virtuous punished. This is still a practice in our society, though not quite so clear-cut. "Virgin" may have both good and bad connotations, but "slut" is rarely used as anything other than a means to degrade. "Prude" is negative too, which speaks of the double standard that women are forced to grapple with.

There is again the old standard that "A woman's virtues received praise as long as she conformed to the prescribed roles of a loving and loyal servant for her husband and children" (Yildirim 117). Once more, woman is confined to the roles of wife and mother. Any kind of promiscuity is banned in order to protect "the home" and the family. The base goal of patriarchy is to benefit man, and this includes having a wife that will be sure to give him offspring and then care for that offspring. There is a world that goes into the very idea of what a "woman" is, and this is apparent in the discourse of the past and the present. Feminist theorist Monique Wittig delineates how the role of "woman" has been created by society and is by no means a "natural" occurrence. Women are programmed from birth in the ways of being a "woman," that is, the

ultimate goal being mother and wife (for men). What women are and what they should be are created ideas, used especially by men to control and shape women to their advantage (Wittig 4). Women are defined by their relationship to men. This is not a "natural" event but it is because "they are seen as woman, therefore, they are woman. But before being seen that way, they first had to be made that way" (Wittig 3). Because mother and wife are so necessary to the idea of "woman," it is vital to see that this is only because the system was created to be that way. At one point the fixed notion that "women must be mothers and wives" was assumed to be the truth, and then the system was set up and put into place. My poem "I Do Not Want to Be a Mother, I Do Not Want to Be a Wife" is a response to this. It is a way of rebelling against this wife/mother mentality, because not all women (both in literature and in the world) have to desire to get married or bear children. They do not have this desire, and this is alright. Women can and do choose others paths free of these two options. That's the key word, option. My short story "Beloved Wife, Beloved Mother" is also a reflection on this. Margot, the protagonist, struggles with the various forces in her life that coerce her into becoming "mother" and "wife" only. The title of the piece was born because I have seen these four words written on tombstones time after time. It bothered me because even women who are someone's wife and mother are more than those two roles. They are a person, and matter independently of their family.

The limited types of roles that women characters are given in literature are a form of oppression. They force them into categories and dictate "you are either slut or prude. Angel or siren." It forces a return to the theory of binaries where the one is always superior to the other. This is limiting and puts a cap on the possibility (and reality) that women are more than simply one thing, and this one thing may not even be the most accurate word for them. Wittig argues that "Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to (fight against) oppression. It is also

the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression" (9). This binary way of thinking, this "you are either this or this," must be changed. My poem "The Words I Am Not" was inspired by this binary theory. Women can be a number of different personas, even simultaneously. "Virgin" in the physical sense does not mean virgin in the mental sense. Purity is a state of mind as well, so if the mind is not pure, is "virgin" really an accurate term? I created the poem so that virgin and slut are given equal power, just as "bad girl" and "good girl" are also used to demonstrate the concurrency possible with these two seemingly opposite terms. A person changes in every situation they are faced with. They change, but without completely losing what they were in the past, even if this past was five minutes ago. A good girl can be a bad girl too, and vice versa. "Good" and "bad" don't actually give us any precise information, but the root of these two descriptors is something I hope to continue in future research projects.

How women are presented has always been changing. Even with the steadfast stereotypes that permeate literature, new heroines show up every blue moon and new patterns are created. This is a sign of progress. In the 1920s and 1930s there was a noted trend in some of the literature being produced, and how the women characters were being portrayed. Professor Alexander Cowie argues that the mold for "the traditional and idealized heroine as having youth, beauty, virtue, and the modest but earnest pursuit of a good husband" (190) is transforming, and that women who do not fit this mold are becoming more and more common. They are also portrayed in ways that value their personalities and other qualities—not just their beauty and purity. They are no longer portrayed as "perfect"—they have flaws, they cuss, they smoke (Cowie 193). These imperfect women are also not punished for their "flaws" or lack of "ladylike" qualities, they do not suffer quite so by being called "slut," "harlot," or "bitch." This

is good. If men are permitted to be human and not be forced onto a pedestal (within literature), then so should women.

There are two novels that also heavily influenced my writing. *Persuasion* by Jane Austen and *It's OK if You Don't Love Me* by Norma Klein present two incredibly different heroines and their respective love stories. The heroine of *Persuasion* is Anne Elliot. The story takes place eight years after she broke off her engagement with the only man she has ever loved. When he returns, they have many interactions, but all the while Anne is forever reluctant to tell him how she feels or give him any other indication that she still loves him. A majority of the novel is her wondering what he is thinking and simply waiting around for him to "make a move." He finally does, and they become involved again. The common practice of the woman waiting for the man, of her being passive while he must be the pursuer caught my attention in this novel. It bothered me that Anne felt so unable to communicate what she wanted, especially since this is not a "natural" occurrence but rather a ritual thrust upon her (and women in general) by society—reflected in the written word. The novel is set in the early nineteenth century, but the pattern for woman's expected behavior is still highly present.

In *It's OK if You Don't Love Me* the heroine's name is Jody. The story is set in the 1970s, and Jody is a teenage feminist. When she meets Lyle and they begin dating, she realizes that he is a virgin. Jody, however, is not. One of Jody's friends even wonders if Lyle "might not respect" her anymore once he finds out she has had sex before (Klein 67). Jody does not believe this. She and Lyle eventually have sex, and all the while Jody is nearly comfortable acknowledging her own desires and being forward with Lyle at times when she wants something. She does admit "I think it's hard to admit that sex is something you want to do or might do," when she lets on that she is on birth control (Klein 60). A feeling of being "almost ashamed" comes to her when she

notices how turned on Lyle makes her feel (Klein 139). Again, this feeling of being “ashamed” does not come directly from her. It comes from the expectations that she’s dealt with her entire life, that it isn’t alright for women to want sex too much, and that it isn’t “classy” for them to be open about it. Men do not face these same rigid expectations. They do not get labeled “slut” or “prude” nearly as quickly as women do.

My poems “They Said, They Said” and “What Kind of Girl Are You? (Things They Almost Never Ask the Boys)” were a product of my frustration with the traditional notion of how women “should” act. Anne does not pursue the man she loves because that course of action is thought to be unacceptable for a woman, and Jody is plagued by the knowledge that she will probably be looked down on if everyone finds out she is not a virgin and that she enjoys sex. These practices that attempt to constrict and control women’s desires can be poisonous. Women are punished for being “wanton,” especially in rape culture where questions like “what was she wearing?” or “why was she at that place so late at night?” arise when a woman is the victim of rape or other sexual assault. The questions in “What Kind of Girl Are You? (Things They Almost Never Ask the Boys)” are ones that I’ve been asked, and ones that I’ve heard people ask other women. These questions attempt to identify a woman—to examine her in terms of where she falls on the scale of “good” and “bad,” “angel” and “siren.” Which prototype is she? Should she be raised up or cast out?

The prototypes are where the problems lie. The tropes—the representations that keep showing up in literature lead to the dangerous conclusion that what we find in the written word are all that women are and can be. There have been efforts to break the mold—female characters that set a standard unlike those in the past. This is a phenomenon that needs to keep occurring.

New roles must be created so that someday there will be no set role, no "normal" female character and plot.

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Dangerous Nuances You Must Always Be Aware Of

The figure standing at the edge of the dark parking lot, questionable beverages, too eager smiles, eyes frozen on you like a portrait, keys that cannot be located, a car door not locked in time, being alone with someone you don't know, being alone with someone you do know, being alone with someone you've known for years, hands or words that keep you from leaving when you wish, salesmen that think you don't know they're trying to swindle you, clothes that show your cleavage, clothes that hide your cleavage

What Kind of Girl Are You? (Things They Almost Never Ask the Boys)

Would you sleep with him on the first date?

Would you ever ask him out first?

How do you get the courage to "make the first move"?

Are you waiting til marriage?

Do you really want to work and be a mom?

Do you worry people will think you're a slut?

Are you a slut or a prude?

How often do you go out to the bars?

Are you a dirty girl?

Do you think it's classy for girls to smoke? Do you think it's trashy for girls to smoke?

Don't you fear he won't respect you if you tell him what your "number" is?

How come you don't want to have kids? Do you hate children?

Are you sure you want to wear that? Don't you think you're kind of "asking for it"?

I Do Not Want to Be a Mother —I Do Not Want to Be a Wife

I want I want to have a life that does not include being a wife

I travel to seek the farthest reaches of earth

To know ultimate pleasure and sleep in at my leisure

I do not want to be a mother—to hover and clean up and bake

Arts and crafts are not my interest, nor picnics down by the lake

I will not have your dinner ready by 6—I've got other plans, you see

There's a club on the strip and it's amateur night—would you care to join me?

I've been told that I "will change my mind" I just have to meet the right man

I've met plenty of men and plenty of women--none of them shall have my hand

"Settling down" has never been on the agenda— it does not mean that I'm not capable of love

If you love and love so many weirdish things, how can you ever choose just two?

They Said, They Said

They said "be kind, be sweet, and smile,"

You'll only have to wait a while

Surely you want to dance tonight?

To see if he you can beguile?

They said "just sit and he will come"

Mum said you may not taste the rum

He does not want a girl who drinks

So play the part but don't act dumb

"Follow his lead, go at his speed"

Be sure to ask what he might need

Don't speak or laugh or sigh too loud

Comply and God will grant you seed

Delightful as the parlors are

Curtains mean you won't see so far

He says "take a ride in my car"

He says "your eyes are fair like stars"

School Rules

Soft pink and dull yellow be kinda pretty and a might "pure"

Shoulders covered and skirt too long—you gotta be "demure"

Them rules at school say you oughta watch out for the guys

Be considerate—don't tempt them—they got self-control like flies

Be angel and perfect and talk kinda sweet

Keep knees together when you sit at your seat

Say "yes ma'am" and "no sir" and don't act like some slut

Don't tell them of your nightmares— they'd like to call you a nut

The Words I am Not

A good girl who does as she is told with silence as her pistol and sweetness as her bullet

Bad girl who does what she does not want to do just to prove that no I'm not predictable and prudish and boring

I want you to touch me over the underwear, maybe under, someday, because I want you to and you want to and that's what counts. Maybe not

Slut because I smile that deathish way to make you ask what you already knew

From the start.

Virgin even though I have never because in my thoughts I have and that's sharper and longer lasting than any hair sweat or fluid on my palm

Bitch because I do what I want to do even if that does not include afternoons decaying by the water edge while you tell me how much you want to and why won't I let you

Prude that wants to skate even though they all want to surf and that's what's wrong with me. I want to skate and they want to surf. Wear too many layers and not enough less

Princess that struggles and dies and breathes again and finally sees the heavenly sunlight that they can't

"Just some girl" that can be replaced and forgotten like the fights in the summer over what ice cream to get and what song to put on repeat. Just some girl that you touched and forgot the name because you were too busy trying to force her to do, be, act like what you thought you wanted but never bothered asking what she wanted.

Tease because I changed my mind the way your belief in yourself and God changes, or even disappears like a ghoul over time.

I changed my mind and was honest, too honest. I said no and am a slut virgin bitch prude princess tease all at the same ambiguous time. I am not yours.

Short Stories

Beloved Wife—Beloved Mother

They gave her a handbook her sophomore year on “How to Be a Good Wife.” It was in Home Economics Class—every girl got one. “I wish I had had one of those,” her mother said when she took the handbook home that first day. “I had to figure everything out for myself—although I was only eighteen.” Margot stared at her parents’ wedding photo for a long time before dinner. She couldn’t figure out why her Father looked happy but her Mother looked stressed out. Maybe a little frightened. Hard to tell in those black and white photographs. Hard to tell.

Then in October this song called “Earth Angel” came out, and everyone was wild about it. They played it at the school formal and Gabriel leaned over and asked her in time with the music “will you be mine?” Margot nodded. That’s what you do, right? Gabriel, with lovely blonde hair and good style for someone rather less well off. He had class, somehow. Class without actual class. And he asked her if it was okay for him to kiss her. They didn’t always ask.

“When your husband comes home from work, dinner should already be on the table. He should not have to wait- and don’t blast him with questions or stories about what you’ve been doing all day. Be quiet and respectful—remember that he’s been at work all day. His home should be a safe haven- it is your duty to make it so. Always ask him how his day was when he’s had a moment to settle. Be a good wife.” Margot asked her teacher one day if the boys had to take Home Economics. The teacher laughed and said “of course not.” Margot asked “but don’t they need to learn how to be a good husband?”

"If your husband pays the bills, and gives you children—he's a good husband," the teacher responded. She was a forty eight year old woman. Had been married for twenty six years. Margot also knew she had four children—all of whom were adults by now. Odd that there would be so many rules for wives to follow—but only two for the husbands to follow. There was also a section in the handbook about Motherhood- how to do it properly. No section on Fatherhood.

Margot asked Gabriel if he wanted to see "Rear Window." He laughed. "What's funny about it?" she asked, puzzled.

"You, coming over here asking me if I wanna see a flick with you. I'm the one supposed to ask these things. And besides, that don't look like the type of film for you. Too scary. Maybe a little disturbing. Maybe we go to The Point instead?" He responded. Margot was silent. She knew about The Point. Mostly loose girls went there- with whomever. People didn't talk much about the boys that went there. But it was always the girls that got the bad mouthing afterward. Pretty soon some of the girls stopped caring and went on there anyways. Margot didn't want to be one of those girls. "So what about it, you wanna go with me to The Point?"

"No. I don't want to go there. Maybe we can go to Morris Field and have a picnic," Margot eventually said. They were standing in the hallway between second and third period. A few feet away two girls laughed at a joke that wasn't funny. Jerry Masten was master of jokes that aren't funny. But he would never know. From what he witnessed his jokes were the funniest that had ever been. Margot didn't have the heart to tell him- though she had stopped laughing years ago.

Nearly three years later Gabriel asked her if she wanted "Earth Angel" to be the one they first danced to at their wedding. "Why that song? I mean it's pretty, but why that one?" she asked.

"You don't remember? That was the first song we ever danced to. Couple of years ago at a school dance. You looked good that night. Like a real dolly," Gabriel said. He put his hand on her thigh and stroked gently. Margot knew the words she was supposed to say, knew she should remove his hand from what Dad would call a "danger zone." Something about her heartbeat faltered, the urge to part her knees a little further. She wondered if Gabriel would lose respect for her- she'd kept so clean and good up til now. Even when she wanted his hand on her chest she'd had the fortitude to push him away. "It is ideal that your husband should be the first, and only, man to ever touch you," that handbook had said. Margot brought her hand to the one that still rested on her, moving the fabric of her dress up and out of the way. Gabriel's eyes went from hers to her hand covering his—then she pulled his hand slowly upwards. All the way to the apex of her thighs. That. That was what it had been—what she really wanted when he touched her in such innocent ways. Nothing was innocent.

She didn't know how to trace it—the lack that occurred in Gabriel soon after their second child was born. Twenty four wasn't so old- but it was. Gabriel acted old. Lack of energy, lack of enthusiasm, lack of general happiness. Sometimes he would play with the girls. Rarely would he actually care for them in the ways that they needed. That was Margot's job. "At least be glad he doesn't beat you, or get so drunk he destroys the house," a friend from highschool said over the phone. Sally had graduated a year before her- she had three children and an alcoholic husband. They were struggling and Sally had had to take up a job at a local beauty salon to help pay their bills.

“What you dressed like a prostitute for?” Gabriel asked when he came into their bedroom that night. He wasn’t angry—just startled. She was wearing this short purple negligee that she’d been saving for a couple of months. She thought now was as good a time as any to see if he was even remotely still attracted to her. It’d been a long time since they’d been intimate.

“I’m not just any prostitute—I’m your prostitute,” Margot said, attempting to be funny. Funny and seductive all at once. Gabriel snorted. He looked her up and down—but not in a sensual way.

“It’s not classy. You look cheap. Where’d you get that thing?” he asked. Margot didn’t answer. Just went to the bathroom and stayed in there a good ten minutes. He was asleep when she came back out. At least he didn’t hit her or the girls.

A few months before she was diagnosed, Gabriel came back. That is, he stepped back into his role of father and husband like he’d had a revelation or something. Margot didn’t ask what caused the change. Couldn’t figure it out. But he played with his daughters, sometimes made them lunch and brought home a surprise for Margot. Even suggested that Margot take a weekend and get away—go stay with a girlfriend or something. Now that was odd. Usually he panicked if she said anything about coming home late or going out of town for any reason. Margot was never gone from home for more than a night—and that was rare.

When the cancer was discovered, it was too late. They said she had maybe a month or two. For a while she spent many nights in the hospital. The girls were ten and twelve—they didn’t like spending so much time with Gabriel and so little time with Margot. She knew she’d die before 1969 was over. Asked her mother to have angels and flowers engraved on the

tombstone. Mother said that was impractical. "Beloved Wife, Beloved Mother" wasn't impractical, though. Her name, her lifespan, and those words. Those words were all she was.

Like the Movies Like a Thunderbird

I'm about halfway on my hike to the nearest post office when I remember this thing she once told me. "Love can help ease the pain, but pain is like the rain in Spain that always comes back again. Like a thunderbird." It's pretty hot out, but not nearly as bad as it was yesterday or the day before. Dry and empty, the plain makes me think that my heart isn't the only one feeling this way. I see a pair of waterbucks in the distance—at least I think they are waterbucks. It's strange that they should come so close to the village.

I met her in a grief support group. Forever after that, even after I learned her name, I thought of her as "Grief Girl." After my mother and my grandfather died in the same month, dad thought I should be around people my age who had had similar experiences. So I went to a grief support group. This girl stared at me periodically throughout our first session, olive colored eyes. Camo green. It was creepy. She didn't come up to me until our third meeting. She said I reminded her of a person from a Pixar film she saw once, and she apologized in case she freaked me out. I made some smooth comment, then hoped she didn't think I was flirting. I'm still not sure if I was or not.

I open the letter and it's from her mom. Asking if, when I get back, I want to have her dog. That thing was her baby. A basset hound with critical eyes and those droopy ears that they all have. I know she would want me to have the dog. She was obsessed with taking pictures of us- me and that dog. On facebook there's even a selfie of the three of us—the dog sitting on my lap while I sat on hers. A triple layer-lap-sitting-session is what she called it, barely managing to speak through the giggles.

I'm tempted to rip the paper into shreds. It's been three weeks since I got the news and her mom's already trying to give her shit away. It pisses me off. In the letter her mom even tells me she'll arrange another "mini" memorial thing when I get back since I couldn't go to the one they had last Saturday. It is a bit far of a trip from Dosso, Niger, to Powdersville, SC. This girl said she would come with me on the next mission trip because she loved watching Jeff Corwin and he was frequently in Africa. She said maybe she would meet him there. I rolled my eyes and told her it was a fat chance.

Halfway back from the post office, I sit down on the side of the road. It'll be dark in three hours—I have time. Did I love her? This girl that I met in grief counseling? God, that I even have to ask myself that. I hope she doesn't know that I'm asking it, but then I don't know how it works being a dead person. If you can read thoughts or just see what's going on here on earth. The places and people you left behind. Maybe being dead is something entirely different and inconceivable. Probably. I wouldn't know. She told me two years after we met that she loved me. I asked "Platonic, you mean?" Since us kids in the grief group were really affectionate and "I love you" was a common phrase. She got really serious and said "No. Not platonic." Then she touched my neck as she left and we didn't talk about it for three months. She was so patient and considerate. The embodiment of altruism in some ways. Immature and dramatic in others.

Before she told me that she loved me, I had been really hung up and "heartbroken" over this other chick. Mysterious and dangerous—you know the kind. She was dangerous, and detrimental to my life. Grief Girl would listen and let me go on and on. And then reassure me that there was nothing wrong with me, that sometimes people simply don't make sense and don't see what's right in front of their doorstep. She would smile when she said that, but in a sad kind

of way. I didn't realize until later that what I thought I felt for this other girl was what Grief Girl actually felt for me. Only without hangups and expectations.

Seven days before I left for Africa, she let me rest my head on her lap and we held hands while the others in counselling talked about their week. It was nice. Afterward she told me that she had never felt so peaceful as that since both her daddy and sister had died. How could that be? How could I make her feel that way without even trying? She brought her hand over my heart and got watery eyed once during the session. I was afraid she might actually cry—but she didn't. Just those tears that stay in your eyes and slowly trickle down, but don't lead to a full on sob sesh.

My canteen is nearly out of water, and I'm sitting here watching the African distance, two umbrella thorn trees across from each other. Like the ones in The Lion King. The road gets hazy down a ways. I think about how long it would take me to die of thirst, and wonder if maybe that would be easier than this. Whatever "this" is. I was so stoked to come here, for over a year I made plans and raised funds and did the whole "getting ready for a mission trip" thing. I don't care now. I don't want to stay but I don't really want to leave either since she won't be there when I get back, and her absence from this earth will be made manifest. Once I get back there will be no denying, lying, or looking away. No pretending that this is all a hoax to "test" my faith and see if God actually truly does not "give us more than we can bear." A bird I can't identify dives through the air—maybe it's a vulcher. Maybe it senses my weakness and is already preparing for a nice evening meal.

It was never like in the movies with us. No Jack and Rose or Tristan and Isolde shit. No "Blue is the Warmest Color." Just her watching me throw fits in the basement when my sadness

became anger becoming sadness becoming lostness. Sometimes she would go and bring me M&M's. One time she did this and I dumped them on the floor. Like a child. She went home after that and didn't text me when I apologized. All was forgiven when I baked her brownies though and gave them to her at our next meeting. "You can't use her like this. I think she's kind of crazy for you," a friend of ours told me. "I'm not," I snapped. Was I using her? Ever, in all the years we knew each other?

"Every living creature on Earth dies alone" was this creepy thing she would whisper whenever there was an awkward silence. Even after a prayer sometimes she would do it, just loudly enough for me to hear. It embarrassed me until it became funny. It was a line from that Jake Gyllenhaal movie where he time travels or something. Darko something.

I imagine what her dog must be doing. Lost without her probably, just like I am. Palsy (the dog) has attitude problems. You have to treat her a certain way or she gives you the cold shoulder. Or pisses on your sweater. Sometimes both. Grief Girl thinks it's cute. Thought. Were we in love?

1st Corinthians says "love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant." The other girl that I was so broken up over was none of these things. Grief Girl helped me to realize this. Despite that, for months I still believed I wanted this other girl. Maybe I did, sexually and selfishly. I never loved her. How could I? How can you love someone so sadistic and manipulative when there is someone else in your life who is the opposite? Hind-sight is 20/20. All that bullshit that you're blind until you squeeze lemon juice in your eye and then suddenly you can see. Whoopee. I scream across the savanna. I won't be able to make it back before dark. If I get eaten by hyenas, who will care for Palsy?

She died alone, Grief Girl did. That is to say, nobody died with her, right by her side; thus she died alone. She was surrounded by people though. In the library at her college she was finishing this paper for her thesis. Lots of students were there that day. 2:17 pm. Some dude with a shotgun walks in and starts playing shoot 'em up. Grief Girl was the third to get shot. It got the side of her neck, so she didn't die immediately. A girl that didn't get shot crawled over to her and tried to calm her down while she bled to death. I wonder what she told her. "Everything's going to be alright? It's okay, it's okay? You are not, in fact, about to die and never return?" I'm crying now, walking back to my hut, still more than an hour away. She didn't know that girl, the girl didn't know her. Yet she got to have that last moment, be the last one she saw before she died. I bawl when I face the fact that she probably thought of me. What was I thinking of in that moment?

I go to bed immediately when I get back. Don't bother to remove my clothes or wash my face. I'm exhausted from seeing camo eyes and her sitting there with Palsy. Who the fuck names their dog "palsy?" I asked her once if she knew what that word meant. She made a pissy face and said "I'm not as stupid as I look. Of course I do. It has a lovely sound to it though, so I'm re-vamping the connotations surrounding it." She loved me but she also me put in my place time after time. Others too; she did not allow any bullying. Five weeks before I left for Africa I had another crying fit. We had gone to the beach for the day. I had found out the day before that my aunt had colon cancer; we were pretty close. Grief Girl, as always, let me lean back against her chest and she held onto me. Caressing my shoulder, her head close to mine. You'd have thought we were a couple. When I stopped crying I told her, "I think I'm ready. To try this" She stopped caressing my shoulder and asked, "to try what?"

“Being more than what we are. I mean, a relationship,” I said. She was quiet, but I felt her breathing change. “I don’t want you to ‘think’ you’re ready. I want you to know, and to want it as much as I do. I’ll wait,” she said after a while. I was almost angry at that. Here I am, finally giving her what she’s wanted for years and she’s putting me off? But I knew she was right. She deserved the full throttle, the entire shebang with fireworks. A whole heart to love her, not three fourths of one. Nothing lukewarm, nothing nearly “there” but not on point.

It was a week before I left that I put a huge bag of Laffy Taffy in her bookbag when she wasn’t looking. Before she left my house one night. Attached was a note that said: “I’m ready. I want you. Only you.” I got a text two hours later that said “Phase two complete. Now prove it.” What was phase one? I’d have to ask her.

We held hands that week more than usual, and she kissed my cheek in front of other people. Three nights before I left I tried to kiss her on the mouth. She stopped me when I could feel her breath on me. “What if we waited til you got back? And do it like the movies, the whole slow motion deal?” she asked. I sighed. I hadn’t realized how badly I wanted to kiss her. I was going to be gone for nine weeks—that was a long time. She had waited long enough for me though—I could wait those weeks for her. I said “okay” and she kissed me under my eyes, and I kissed her all over her eyebrows and forehead. She got a kick out of that.

I’m staring at the roof of my hut, my two “hut mates” are snoring lightly. I wonder what they dream of—I have an idea of what I will, if I ever fall asleep. Did I love her? I mean, the soulmate, marry you one day thing? We had such an intimate thing. How can I not know the answer by now? It pisses me off, she deserved so much better. So much better than to be murdered. Trying and failing to breathe while her blood ran over the carpet and choked her. Than

to wait over four fucking years to be loved by someone that she never even got to kiss. I wish it had been me in that library. Me who had been shot. And she would have been there to be the last person I saw before I ceased to live. She would be okay. Heartbroken, but her heart would still be beating.

Her mom wouldn't give me these gruesome details over the phone in the village post office. So I called our grief counselor and she told me. She sobbed telling the story, while I froze and tried to think to breathe. Nothing seemed real after, and nothing seems real now.

"Fate fell short this time, your smile fades in the summer," plays over in my head along with "I wrote this letter in my head, cause so many things were left unsaid, but now you're gone and I can't think straight." A tragic mashup that I can't won't deal with. Grief Girl liked "Adam's Song" as dark and deadly as that one is. She always said that she only ever heard it because a kid that survived the Columbine Massacre hung himself while this song played on repeat. A year or so after the shooting took place. She was fascinated with the Columbine Massacre, and sometimes lost her mind a bit when she talked about it. Water running down her face even though she never knew any of those kids. God. The irony.

I'm going to keep the dog. I'm also going to find that girl that held her as she died, at some point. If I'm ever brave enough to do that. What if Grief Girl was somehow able to tell her something, one last wish? No, it wouldn't have been physically possible. I know better. Seventeen other students died that day. Two professors.

Her hands on my hair, fingers tracing my neck. It was a game, how long before I laughed? Her running up behind me and begging for a piggyback ride. Sometimes she gave me a piggyback ride. That's her background on facebook, me on her back. She was pretty strong. Not

strong enough for a bullet. When I left her in the airport I hugged her for a long time. At least 120 seconds. I leaned over and pressed my lips against her neck; and for once she didn't giggle and say "Oh, Edward." She had a pseudo crush on Edward Cullen. The creep (him, not her). What did they write on her tombstone? What could you write? There aren't enough words in any language to do her justice. When I was walking away from her at the airport she called out, "I loved you from the ninth grief session. It was never platonic." I turned around and blew her a kiss. She was trying not to cry. What was "phase one"? Did I love her? My status on facebook is still "it's complicated." At this point I don't think that will ever change.

Essays

The Problem with Being "Madly" in Love

The thread that links passion and love has an offshoot that can lead to a certain level of possessiveness. The notion of "you are mine" is common in romantic situations, in particular with how men feel about the women with whom they are involved. There is a desire for control, a need to capture and then maintain the hold the lover possesses over the beloved. Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" draws attention to the fact that this mixture of passion and possessiveness, especially passion that is selfish and impulse-based, can be a dangerous and deadly combination. The occurrence with Porphyria demonstrates the potential for passion becoming overwhelming to the point of madness, and in this case, madness that results in a fatal act of violence.

The speaker wants more than just the love of Porphyria. The storm goes on outside while Porphyria brings warmth and comfort to the speaker, who, up to the time of her arrival, has sat listening "with heart fit to break" (5). The speaker is too lost in his (this is assuming that the speaker is a man) thoughts to respond when Porphyria goes on to "put my arm about her waist," also "murmuring how she loved me" (16,21). She seems to be the one experiencing a comparatively gentler kind of love. It is not enough for the speaker, however. Her love alone is not sufficient, he wants her to "give herself to me forever" (25). This is a source of frustration and anger for the speaker. That Porphyria appears to him "weak," "vain," and "prideful" does not indicate perfect, accepting love on the speaker's part; it indicates a desire to change her so that she will acquiesce to what he wants. What does he want?

The speaker laments that his "love of her" is "all in vain," hinting that perhaps she will not marry him, or allow the consummation of their love through intercourse (29). He is vexed at her pride and stubbornness; she loves him, yet does not accept his love enough to let him have his way with her just yet. To the speaker, his passion is justification for them to have intercourse. She is his, a possession to be consumed. When the realization arrives that "at last I knew/Porphyria worshipped me," the "surprise" follows means that the speaker's wish has finally come true (32-33). He then debates "what to do" as if he must do something immediately, before she changes her mind. Instead of simply basking in the contentedness that being in love with one who reciprocates the feeling, the speaker feels the need to take action; perhaps to ensure that she will always be his from that moment onward.

The possessiveness of what the speaker feels for Porphyria carries over into how he perceives her sexually. It is possible that Porphyria and the speaker engage in intercourse right before he strangles her. When he states that "passion sometimes would prevail," it is not clear if that passion is his or hers (26). It may very well be his, but if it is hers, this may be the point at which she finally "gives" herself to him. In the case where they have sex, "that moment she was mine, mine, fair/ perfectly pure and good," "pure" may be indicating her state of mind and spirit—not necessarily her body. Or, it could be that Porphyria is so incredibly pure that even intercourse with the speaker cannot make her state of pureness obsolete. Whether or not they actually consummate the relationship, the narrator is overwhelmed by his pleasure that she is finally "his." So overwhelmed, that the passion he feels compels him to take action to guarantee that "that moment" will never end. He feels such passion that he cannot bear the thought of her ever leaving or changing her mind—possibly falling out of love with him. He finds "a thing to do," and this happens to be murder (38). At least now, that perfect moment is frozen in time.

Porphyria is now dead, but the speaker reassures himself that he is "quite sure she felt no pain" (42). This is a sure sign of madness, since strangulation can be a miserable way to die. That the speaker demonstrates no remorse or sadness also that he is mad. He continues to kiss her cheek with a "burning kiss" and "propped her head up as before" (48-49). The scene is as it was moments earlier, only Porphyria is now a corpse. Her head now rests upon his shoulder, where before their positions were reversed. The speaker is now the one in control of the relationship; Porphyria cannot come and go as she pleases. She really is "his," only now as an actual possession.

The speaker appears pleased that Porphyria's "scorn at once is fled" and "I, its love, am gained instead!" (54-55). A corpse is unable to feel scorn, and is unable to recognize any gain. The speaker is not aware of this, he is too content with his accomplishment; seemingly unable to register that it has cost his love her very life. The only indication he gives that he realizes what he has done is when, in the last line, he comments "and yet God has not said a word!" (60). This suggests that he expects some form of punishment or at least action on God's part, and he is shocked and delighted to find that he has gotten away with the deed.

"Madly in love," may be the most appropriate way to describe Porphyria's lover.

Romantic Clichés and Harsh Realities

“It’s the clichés that cause the trouble” (Winterson 10). This is one of the first points that the narrator (xe)¹ makes in Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* and it is one that xe contemplates throughout the novel. Early on in the narrative, xe becomes involved with a woman named Jacqueline that xe is not attracted to or in love with. Almost every romantic cliché that one might expect does not apply to their relationship, in fact there is little that is “romantic” about it at all.

Love at first sight, or even infatuation at first meeting is not what occurs with Jacqueline and xe. One of xe’s first thoughts concerning Jacqueline is “I have nothing to say to this woman” (25). Xe is still broken hearted over the end of an affair xe had with a married woman, and is at a point where xe “could not foresee pleasure in any woman” (25). Jacqueline is the one that offers to clean the house and decides to keep coming over day after day. Soon after, they both “agree that they are good for eachother” and that’s that (27). No flowers or grand gestures or romantic music. “Simple and ordinary” are the very words that xe uses to describe their relationship (27).

Jacqueline is the one who makes the move to begin the relationship. She is, from the start, the one who seems to “call the shots.” Xe has something that Jacqueline wants, apparently, and she does not seem bothered that xe is not passionately in love with her, or anything even remotely akin. According to xe, Jacqueline loves xem in an “uncomplicated and undemanding way” (28). The only time when Jacqueline becomes demanding is when Louise comes into the picture. By then it is too late, however. Really it was too late from the very beginning.

¹ “Xe” is the pronoun invented to represent the narrator in *Written on the Body*, of whom we do not know the gender.

While xe uses “love” to describe what Jacqueline feels for xem, xe is unapologetic when xe reveals that “I didn’t love her and I didn’t want to love her. I didn’t desire her and could not imagine desiring her” (26). Calling their relationship a “love story” is inappropriate, because that is not what it is. Well, maybe for Jaqueline. But the more suitable terms for what Jacqueline and xe have are words like “arrangement” and “exchange.” They help to keep each other company, while xe takes time to “heal” and Jacqueline tends to xem, and while Jacqueline accepts whatever attention and companionship xe offers her.

It is unclear from the start who has the most power in the relationship. In other words, who is the “dominant” one? Jacqueline may call the shots to an extent, but xe is the one that betrays her and leaves Jacqueline angry and hurt. In Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that one of the principal features of power “is the law of transgression and punishment, with its interplay of licit and illicit...a legislative power on one side, and an obedient subject on the other” (85). When Louise makes it clear that she wants more than friendship with xe, one of xe’s internal issues is that xe knows that because xe is “committed to someone else” xe cannot rightfully have an affair with Louise (Winterson 43). Xe does want to, though, and xe has sexual relations with Louise even before telling Jacqueline. Xe does not make it clear exactly what the “commitment” was that xe and Jacqueline agreed on, but it obviously meant a certain level of monogamy. Without knowing it, Jacqueline exhibits power over xe because of the guilt that xe feels. Xe also knows that telling Jacqueline about Louise (the shift in xis and Louise’s relationship, that is) is bound to have negative consequences. Xe has made a transgression, and is unsure of what type of punishment Jacqueline will bestow upon xem.

Foucault argues that the role of the “family” is to “to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support” (108). The “interchange of alliance and sexuality” that takes place between

xe and Jacqueline is like the one that takes place in the family (108). Their monogamy gave the sexual relationship between them an anchor, and their domestic arrangement, while not permanent, certainly served as a system of support for their alliance. Louise was a threat to this system. Xe contemplates that “the territory that she (Jacqueline) thought was hers has been annexed” (Winterson 38). The idea of property is recurrent in romantic clichés, and this is one case where Jacqueline and xe fit the bill. Jacqueline believes that xe is “hers,” that xe belongs with her and no one else. From what can be gathered of the “committed” nature of their relationship, xe seems to have agreed to this. The “permanent support” that Foucault mentions in the family is not permanent with xe and Jacqueline, clearly. Their family unit weakens when xe begins to commit adultery in xes mind, and falls apart when xe has intercourse with Louise.

Both xe and Jacqueline are predictable until a certain point. They share this and it is one of the reasons for the volatile nature that their break-up takes on. When xe tells Jacqueline that things have “changed” between xem and Louise, Jacqueline replies with “I thought you’d changed...you told me you wouldn’t do this again” (57). The “again” affirms that Jacqueline is well aware of xe’s past, and xe’s tendency of going from one relationship to the next after six months or so (76). This is predictable behavior for xe. Jacqueline knows this, yet believed that she held the key to changing xe’s behavior and that she would be the exception. This is the only situation when Jacqueline is possessive over xe, and expects to have control. Control over a partner is another one of those romantic clichés. If something is your property, then it is your right to control what happens to it, correct? And to control who else has access to this property? Of course it is. That is why it “belongs” to you. Even if it is another human being.

Xe makes the mistake of assuming that Jacqueline “would have crept away as quietly as she had crept in” (71). Jacqueline may have been “uncomplicated and undemanding,” but

apparently the one thing that she did demand was fidelity (28). Jacqueline is predictable and monotonous in her routine, but this ends when xe breaks xes part of their arrangement. The “law of transgression and punishment” that Foucault explains comes into play perfectly when Jacqueline locks xe out of xe’s flat and proceeds to steal xe’s things and destroy everything else. Xe transgressed by betraying Jacqueline and Jacqueline in return punished xe. In doing this, Jacqueline seemed to be trying to take back some of the power from xe, the power that xe exerted over Jacqueline by hurting her. Jacqueline no longer calls the shots by the end of their relationship; xe calls the shots when it comes to both her and Louise. Xe has the power to reject or accept, or keep them both in limbo. That xe rejects Jacqueline and accepts Louise is typical for xe- but xe’s continued interest in Louise, even after a long separation, is not typical.

Another characteristic that sets xe and Jacqueline apart from the more clichéd ideas of love is the selfishness that they both demonstrate. Xe admits that Jacqueline “had had roughly the shape to fit for a while,” which seems to be an indicator that xe was merely using her for the time being (61). Xe was heartbroken and Jacqueline happened to be there, offering comfort, so xe accepted it. When xe is about to break things off with Jacqueline, xe contemplates that xe can’t make it easier for Jacqueline, but xe “can make it a bit easier for me and I suppose that’s what I’m doing” (57). Even though xe knows xe is about to hurt Jacqueline tremendously, xe’s number one concern is still xemself. Jacqueline is not innocent either. Trashing xe’s place and then going after Louise with a shard of glass could be seen as ridiculous and rash actions. They are meant to punish xe and perhaps give Jacqueline some sense of satisfaction or “even the score,” but it does not seem that Jacqueline once stopped to think that maybe xe would be better off with Louise. The notion that love means that you care about someone else’s needs above your own is common, hence the self-sacrificing nature of love. At weddings especially, 1

Corinthians is often quoted with the words "Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful..." (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1 Cor. 13.4-7). Xe and Jacqueline were both self-seeking in their interactions with one another, their own wishes were at the forefront of their mind. The verse from Corinthians does not align with xes and Jacqueline's relationship. There is little evidence of "kindness," "patience," or any of the other descriptors of love in how they treat one another.

So what can be learned from this? The dynamics of xe's and Jacqueline's relationship do not seem shocking or rare; in fact these are dynamics that might be found in many relationships. Relationships don't necessarily mean love, which is why some do not even attempt to live up to the romantic clichés that intrigue us. Xe is onto something when xe states that "it's the clichés that cause the trouble" (10). Perfect romance and true love may be the ideal, but they are not reality. Relationships cannot be perfect all the time, and every relationship is different, so it is impossible to hold every one to the same standard. Trying to live up to perfect is impossible, and xe is percipient in realizing this from the start.