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# Female hysteria across cultures and periods in American literature

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FEMALE HYSTERIA ACROSS CULTURES AND  
PERIODS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Thesis

Submitted in Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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## I. Introduction: Role Conflict and Hysteria

Modernity would like us to believe we are in control: *you can be whatever you want if you work hard enough; you are in charge of your own destiny; practice makes perfect; if you don't like something, change it; you are what you eat.* These popular aphorisms reflect our society's addiction to self-determinism. We are completely set on the idea that we create and direct our own lives. However, there *are* larger influences in the world which are sometimes out of our control. The government, the media, society as a collective, and other such establishments have power over the individual. The roles and stereotypes a culture propagates do make an impact on the paths people perceive as being possibilities and the identity they ultimately construct. Genetic predispositions as well as sociocultural norms and expectations affect our fate. An excellent example of this relationship is the notorious neurosis that gripped nineteenth century femininity.

The condition was coined “hysteria” after a Greek word meaning “uterus” or “wandering uterus” (Fowler 782). It described a condition where women experienced varying forms of madness supposedly due to having a misplaced or unhealthy uterus. In the modern version, females were observed exhibiting a superabundance of symptoms, often episodic, ranging from epileptic-like seizures, to anxiety attacks and paraplegia. They complained of depression, nervousness, unexplainable pain, and over-emotionality (Fowler 782). The epidemic both flustered and frustrated the perplexed physicians. At that time the medical field was largely male-dominated; nurses tended to be women and doctors were typically men. Thusly, physicians sometimes felt their masculinity and intelligence threatened due to their inability to cure (Smith-Rosenberg 209). In stepping into the household to treat a hysteric, they could not win. They were judged for believing the woman was actually ill in a world that saw her as being lazy, deceptive,

or childish. In attempting to cure her, they were enabling her to disobediently avoid her role as wife and mother so that she might stay bedridden, spend time in a hospital, or participate in a variety of other treatments. If they questioned the authenticity of her illness, they were seen as being unable to heal her or heartlessly skeptical (Smith-Rosenberg 209). There was also quite a bit of scrutiny over their specific efforts to cure, which sometimes included horrific shock-treatments or scandalous sexual therapies.

The spectrum of speculation as to hysteria's cause was as massively broad as the list of possible symptoms. Some respected medical authorities felt it was a grand scheme or malicious method utilized by spoiled, lazy, or immature housewives. Other doctors and psychologists hypothesized it was a result of repressed emotions or suppressed sexual desires. The theories extended on from there. Hysteria was often viewed through a skeptical and pejorative lens (Smith-Rosenberg 197).

### **Freud: Hysteria Sexualized and De-Historicized**

Sigmund Freud began his career in studying hysteria. He created an influential theory on the disease that radically de-historicized the etiology. Freud blamed hysteria on women's innate gender weakness. He explained the increased incidence in the Victorian era to be a result of the more powerful taboos of their highly civilized society. These social taboos had the potential to lead to hysteria in weaker individuals. He felt that the stronger members of society responded to this level of civilization by sublimating their desires to instead create art and culture.

Freud theorized that the symptoms were a result of inner conflict due to repressed sexual memories. He felt that, "guilt is based on the internalization of values as opposed to shame, which is based on external disapproval or reproof by others and is experienced earlier" (Woodward 211). The guilt women felt over their repressed taboo memories or desires was

internalized and built up until it caused physical illness. Freud used hypnosis and other various methods to try and bring forth the suppressed issue he thought caused the illness.

His methods were an attempt to resolve the inner conflict and subsequently cause the symptoms to subsist. In attempting to retrieve or guess the repressed memories or trauma, Freud was perhaps actually robbing the hysteric of her own voice and forcing her to accept his instead. Ultimately he came to the conclusion that the memories of sexual trauma he encouraged patients to “recover” were actually fantasy as was the case with his most famous patient, Dora (Fowler 783). However, he was quite set on emphasizing sexuality in the etiology of hysteria and he did innovatively create a uniquely de-historicized theory based on female gender weakness.

### **Smith-Rosenberg and Social Suppression in Hysteria**

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues a more historical theory as to the causes of hysteria. She claims the women of this period were responding to social suppression, that “the hysterical woman can be seen as both a product and indictment of her culture,” (Smith-Rosenberg 215). Hysteria was most often found in Victorian bourgeois matrons who were bred and groomed to be passive wives. This was their identity and role in society. They experienced an upbringing very different from those of the boys around them, who were encouraged to develop themselves through competition, learning, and discovery; boys were punished for misbehavior not through guilt or the threat of the withdrawal of love, but through corporal punishment. Smith-Rosenberg argues that by the time they reached adulthood, girls often struggled with abandonment and dependency issues, not having a fully-formed sense of self. As they were discouraged from asserting mastery, strength, and skill, they struggled with a lack of ego-development (Smith-Rosenberg 212-213). With this inadequate training, they were thrown into a life of domesticity.

Once in the home, women were expected to fulfill a set of strict and contradicting ideals. Society defined womanhood in terms of the True Woman and The Ideal Mother (Smith-Rosenberg 198-199). The True Woman was submissive, passive, and emotional, a follower. She was the angel in the home, the epitome of purity, and a refuge for her husband who daily braved the corrupt world of the marketplace. The Ideal Mother was strong and efficient. She was a prolific caretaker who effectively managed the daily happenings of the household. The Ideal Mother survived intense and often debilitating birthing practices as well as the frequent deaths of her offspring. She may be left bedridden or incontinent and then go on to see her child die young due to illness in a society where infant and adolescent mortality rates were high. Throughout everything she was always to be faithfully strong and resilient. The roles of the True Woman and Ideal Mother are completely contradictory. It is no surprise that women were left feeling confused, disappointed, unfulfilled, and inadequate. They are also focused entirely on the desires and will of the husband, rarely allowing for the personal needs of the woman.

The expectations on female sexuality were even more conflicting. After receiving little to no education on sex and the reproductive workings of the male and female bodies, women were expected to fill the “marriage debt” and keep their man happy, while never actually gaining any satisfaction through sex themselves. Sexual enjoyment was only acceptable for males. Females were to be skillful, yet innocent and entirely selfless. Their first experience with sex was often terrifying and painful. Sexual deviance through masturbation, prostitution, or otherwise taboo behavior was often viewed as being the cause of hysteria. This included anything that was judged to be promiscuous or lacking in self-control and created a level of immorality that went along with the hysteric label (Smith-Rosenberg 206-7). Women were to be sexually available to their

husbands but sometimes made to feel guilty for birthing too many children at a time when birth control was very primitive and largely nonexistent.

Though hysteria certainly presents itself as being a way in which women could fight against contradictory social ideals and demanding expectations, its actual efficacy is quite questionable. Whether or not the illness was a successful form of passive social protest is debatable. It clearly disrupted conventional home life. The basic familial structure of nineteenth century society perpetuated oppressive model of femininity and any disturbance of this structure could be seen as an attack upon this unit and the values it promoted. Marta Caminero-Santangelo articulates the common theory that the hysterical woman was speaking out with her body in ways that she was unable to do with her mouth. This could be seen as a subconscious attempt to fight oppressive gender expectations. However, Caminero-Santangelo goes on to argue that this method of protest was ineffective, limited, and individual. She states that,

This can hardly be seen as a successful revolt: 'Hysteria is not...the incarnation of the revolt of women forced to silence but rather a declaration of defeat, the realization that there is no other way out. Hysteria is, as Catherine Clément perceives, a cry for help when defeat becomes real, when the woman sees that she is efficiently gagged and chained to her feminine role.' (Caminero-Santangelo 71)

The unachievable contradiction of nineteenth century femininity was heavily marketed by society and created in women an extreme lack of power and voice. The result was that hysterical women's bodies acted out in the variety of symptoms associated with the illness. It was a survival tactic; the body speaks what the mind will not. In this way, the sometimes debilitating

disease acts not as an effective form of social protest, but rather as an incapacitating response to extreme life circumstances.

Hysteria is no longer accepted as a diagnostic label in modern medicine. Instead patients with similar symptoms are defined as having types of somatoform or dissociative disorders. The causes of this historic illness continue to befuddle doctors and theorists. Many argue that hysteria has existed in other forms across cultures and throughout time. Demonic possession, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), and a plethora of other practices, conditions, and disorders are argued to be manifestations of hysteria (Fowler 783). Though it no longer exists as part of modern medicine, hysteria and other forms of gender role sickness continue to exist in literature.

### ***The Awakening: Awareness of Role Conflict***

Kate Chopin illustrates the phenomenon of stifling gender roles through the character of Edna Pontellier, in her famous novel, *The Awakening*. Edna ultimately embraces death as her final form of emancipation from oppressive gender expectations. She is entirely ostracized by society for desiring what is seen as only being a man's right: the pursuit of skills, passions, and independence. However, it is arguably her only viable choice in response to the options her society has provided her.

Edna's role conflict is mainly internalized. The awakening of repressed desires contrary to what society has created her to be creates a great deal of inner debate for her character. In thinking on the dock one morning with Madame Ratignolle, the narrator explains that, "Edna had had an occasional girl friend, but whether accidentally or not, they seemed to have been all of one type – the self-contained. She never realized that the reserve of her own character had much, perhaps everything to do with this" (Chopin 38). Edna rarely expresses what she thinks and feels. It is not until she slowly learns to at least try to vocalize her emotions and desires that she is truly



liberated. Instead of ignoring and repressing them deep within her being, she develops the ability to recognize and act upon her desires and emotions. She learns to overcome the extreme reserve society has cultivated in her personality. Later in reflecting upon this shift, Edna philosophizes that, “The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life.” (Chopin 135). Even though she has experienced quite a bit of pain and ostracism due to the choices she’s made, she still prefers the path of self-awareness and action, control over one’s existence instead of constant submission and subservience. However, Edna is still repressing unacceptable thoughts, refusing to acknowledge whatever it is she almost “finds” upon awakening. Were she to fully develop this awareness, it would lead not to death, but rather a liberated negotiation of her place in society.

Multiple sources of social support are available to Edna to help her through the transition that is her “awakening.” Unfortunately, they all seem to fall short. There is the ideal wife model portrayed through Madame Ratignolle, who is Edna’s foil and attempts to stop her rebellion. This has quite the opposite effect and actually makes Edna want to pursue her own desires even more, as Edna wishes to be nothing like Ratignolle. There is the young and vigorous Robert Lebrun who pursues Edna and values her with more authentic, though always innocent, passion than her husband does. There is also the man Edna has an affair with, Alcée Arobin, who awakens in her a new sense of sexuality and pushes her to embrace greater independence and freedom from her roles as wife and mother. The character of Mademoiselle Reisz offers Edna the closest thing to healthy social support. Her instructive insights into the life of an independent woman encourage Edna. She introduces her to music and emotion; though she cannot protect her from society. She ultimately proves to be another inadequate form of social support. In the end,

all of these sources fall short and Edna is left to fend for herself. Social support and a sense of identity in one's family or community are extremely influential for an individual's health.

Does Edna encourage us to embrace our own individuality and seek our passions? She dies in the end. Perhaps Chopin wrote of Edna's demise in order to appease the societal expectations of her time period and soften the blow of potential backlash that could come in response to her controversial novel. The *bad girl* is not traditionally supposed to live happily ever after. By killing off Edna, Chopin punishes her for her deviance. While simultaneously planting the seed of potential alternative identity construction through such a radical character, Chopin also simultaneously submits to patriarchy and tradition. She removes herself from the direct line of fire in leaving the ending up to the reader's interpretation. Patricia Yaeger argues that the conclusion is not a submission or acquiescence to patriarchy and social norms, but rather an acceptance by Edna, a forfeiting out of frustration to the limits of language and its inability to authentically express human experience and emotion. Yaeger argues that, "The 'voice' of the sea Edna tries to embrace is more than a harbinger of death, more than a sign of dark and unfulfilled sexuality; the novel's final images frame and articulate Edna's incessant need for some other register of language, for a mode of speech that will express her unspoken, but not unspeakable needs" (219). Though she attempts to communicate her frustrations with gender limitations and life, society is unwilling to listen and the language is incapable of authentically expressing her tragic situation.

## **II. Stifling Gender Expectations in Literature: Food and Friends**

The role conflict that caused Edna's struggles with identity, epidemic hysteria in the nineteenth century, and decades of psychological damage to women can be found in many other pieces of literature. Role conflict is bad for women's mental and physical health. This is

expressed, explored, and documented in the world of written word. Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar* as well as Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove from *The Bluest Eye* describe situations like Edna's in which females are pushed to choose mental illness in response to the conflicting role expectations placed upon them. Interaction with food and social relationships gives us insight into what is really happening.

In investigating the phenomenon of clashing role options, it is particularly telling to dissect the social support surrounding these characters. "Scientists have long noted an association between social relationships and health. More socially isolated or less socially integrated individuals are less healthy, psychologically and physically, and more likely to die" (House 540). Not only that, but studies have proved that, "less socially integrated people were more likely to commit suicide than the most integrated" (House 540). Social climate impacts lives and provides us with insights into *why* these characters turn to mental illness or suicide. The availability of support through friends, peers, mentors, and guides should offer strength and alternative role interpretations. Theoretically, women can encourage each other and work together to interpret the absurd ideals and expectations society has of femininity in a more practical manner. However, our protagonists all seem to be either lacking in healthy and effective role models, or exhibit an inability to connect socially to potential friends or mentors. This creates in them an immense sense of isolation.

Food is another intriguing angle of analysis when looking at the protagonist's failure to navigate societal gender role expectations. In many cases the prophetic words of the aforementioned aphorism, "*you are what you eat*" do seem to be somewhat applicable. Consumption enables us to see into *how* these characters deal with life, a more practical application of their negotiated identity. In their traditional oppression, women are expected to be

small and weak. Because they are genetically apt towards being tinier than the male of our species, they are expected to eat less. Even today, women are encouraged to be dainty and polite, while at the same time displaying a healthy appetite. Women are to eat well but physically appear undernourished. They are told to enjoy food, but not too much.

Authors often utilize the relationship to food symbolically in order to tell us about their characters. Pecola craves the beauty and innocence of the white ideal that is portrayed through the commercialized child star, Shirley Temple. Esther finds a window to her authentic identity through her insatiable appetite as she attempts to quell her numbness through exotic foods. Specific foods are not only symbolic, but consumption also gives us clues about character's inner struggle. It makes us aware of how they view themselves and how they feel the world perceives them.

Edna, Esther, and Pecola differ in their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. While hysteria was largely based in the white, bourgeois, American femininity, it also stretched across the classes and was even diagnosed in a small population of men. Role conflict spans society in the same way. These three protagonists allow for variety in the sample population of this analysis. Through researching the social climate and symbolic interactions with food, we can see why and how they surrendered to mental illness or suicide.

### **III. Social Climate**

#### ***The Bell Jar***

Esther's struggle is definitely rooted in her inability to become an active player in life. Though she is smart, talented, and gifted, she constantly takes on the character of the outsider and the observer. She is unwilling to let herself step into the role of the leading lady, where she clearly belongs. As she searches for authenticity and meaning in life, her issues with identity

drive her to mental illness. This is impacted greatly by the social climate of her contradictory location and the upbringing she received.

### **Edna and Esther: Suicide Sisters**

Though their experiences and narratives are quite different, Edna and Esther do have some strong commonalities. They are both white upper-middle-class American women who experience identity confusion in life. Edna is wealthy and Esther attends an elite women's college at a time when few women went to college. In questioning the accepted and conventional gender stereotypes instead of just seeking to fill them, these two characters separate themselves from society and differentiate their paths from that of the norm. This leads to feelings of emotional isolation and desperation. It can be argued that they both attempt to use suicide as a way of freeing themselves from an oppressive and restricting world.

Different trigger factors in the timeline of their lives cause Esther and Edna to question their roles. Edna is a mother and wife when she realizes that she longs for more. She becomes aware of her own personal passions and desires while on holiday by the sea with her family and then takes a series of steps to pursue a more independent lifestyle. This includes leaving her husband, taking up painting again, having an affair, and ultimately committing suicide. Esther is a stressed and depressed college student who snaps after a daunting internship in New York. She feels her options are foreclosing and unsuccessfully attempts suicide several times. She is overwhelmed by the choices available to her and yet afraid to make the wrong one. Esther wants to do everything but she feels that society is forcing her to limit herself, to choose one or two roles because she is a woman. She mourns the impending loss of opportunities as a result of her inability to decide promptly enough. "I would guess that every woman who reads this passage has felt, at one time or another, that 'choosing one meant losing all the rest,' that because female

roles are no longer clearly defined, women are confronted by such a bewildering variety of seeming possibilities that choice itself becomes impossible,” explains Marjorie Perloff (515).

Though modern women have gained more freedom and role possibilities, they are still required to navigate an intense set of obstacles and restrictions. They are forced to choose one path so that they may fight to prove themselves and assert mastery in the field they decide to pursue. There is pressure that as women they must always match or exceed their male counterparts in skill and efficacy in order to justify their acceptance into what was previously an exclusively male sphere. This constant fight to prove themselves as adequate, capable, and deserving as women makes it nearly impossible for them to take on as many different challenges as the men around them.

Both Edna and Esther have talents, abilities, and passions very much like the men around them. Unlike Smith-Rosenberg’s True Woman and Ideal Mother, these two protagonists desire to lead lives of their own, full of adventure, competition, and achievement. They do not long to be sidekicks or submissive followers. Perloff argues of Esther that, “Indeed, her dilemma seems to have a great deal to do with being a woman in a society whose guidelines for women she can neither accept nor reject,” (511). They can never completely escape these guidelines and because they are women, their work is taken less seriously than the men around them. It is tedious or a hobby; not serious passions or occupations. Because they are female, they see their opportunities quickly closing around them while at the same time the men in their lives such as Buddy Willard, Robert Lebrun, and Alcée Arobin have proliferating options. The men are free to pursue as many of their dreams and ambitions as they want.

In the midst of great social oppression, both Esther and Edna become frustrated and numb. They are brought back to consciousness in a series of awakenings in which they attempt to live and feel again by breaking the deadness. They act out against role expectations, seeking

various methods of escape and testing out new ways of release. Sometimes these are successful and the women enjoy periods of freedom. Esther describes this saying, “the bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (Plath 176). Edna is similarly cured temporarily by Robert and Alcée, through testing her limits as a swimmer and artist, through the development of her own personality and ego strengths (Smith-Rosenberg 212). Perloff describes these rotations of illness and health, complacency and rebellion in terms of a cycle of re-birth in which women shed layers of masks they have been coerced by society into wearing as they become more authentic versions of themselves (509). In these cycles, the women seem to reach for greater and greater stimulation in order to fight the numbness. Esther originally uses men, exotic food, parties, adventure, and the city to wage her inner battle against the world. Ultimately she ends up turning to suicide attempts in order to make herself feel alive; in order to deal with life.

### **Social Support and Esther: Ineffective Encouragement**

Esther is surrounded by role stereotypes that are modeled out for her. She is overwhelmed entirely by the conflicting collection of voices that compete to influence her path and mold her character. Her halfhearted attempt to connect with the women around her typically turns into a disappointing failure. Perloff explains this in arguing, “Thus Esther’s quest for identity centers around her repeated attempts—sometimes funny but always painful—to find both a female model whom she can emulate and a man whom she need not despise,” (Perloff 512). In her peers she finds sexuality and innocence through the characters of Doreen and Betsy. Doreen is intuitive, wild, and gorgeous. She makes sarcastic comments about celebrities who visit the magazine and originally Esther loves her constant cynicism, explaining that “Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones” (Plath 6). However,

Esther feels differently after the scene Doreen and Lenny create while dancing drunk in his apartment. In this dance, Lenny is clearly in control, though they both exhibit licentiousness and violence. Neither is inhibited by Esther's presence, but instead they continue with their physicality. It is not something Esther wishes to be part of and she is left feeling dirty and ashamed. Upon returning home, she promptly takes a long cleansing bath, baptizing herself of the situation. After this incident, Esther promises herself to hang out more with Betsy, the innocent *good girl*.

Though she does plan on spending more time with Betsy who is less promiscuous and more wholesome, she cannot bring herself to give up on Doreen entirely, even if she is, as Esther describes, "an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature" (Plath 19). She justifies this in her mind by arguing that, "It was Betsy I resembled at heart" (Plath 19).

Both of these girls are examples of the type society would gaze upon. In all their beauty, magnificence, and youth, they are the ones being *looked at*, not observing others themselves. Doreen is strong and sassy in her sarcasm. Betsy ends up being a cover girl and is the embodiment of perfection; sugar and spice and everything nice. The world seems to revolve around them as they epitomize different extremes of femininity. While Esther longs to be in the place of the *looked at*, she consistently finds herself observing from the viewpoint of an outsider, a scientist looking at rows of little bell jars. She is quite modern in her detachment from emotionality and her reserved observational state. Even on her last night in New York, when she gets paired with Marco the woman-hater, she tells herself, "I am an observer" (Plath 86). This is a role she has resigned herself to and, even in her discontent, she somehow feels comfortable in. In the end, neither of the two are models Esther wants to emulate.



Esther has a very different experience with possible mentors. Later on in the novel she ponders over this, wondering, “Why did I attract these weird old women? There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Scientist lady and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them” (Plath 180). She seems to be the project of several older women, all whom wish to leave their legacy through her.

Femininity and her role options are described through the women around her. Esther does not get along well with her mother, whom she still blames for the death of her father. Her mother is constantly trying to teach her shorthand. In doing so she undermines the validity and legitimacy of Esther’s studies as she expects her daughter to someday take the career path of a secretary and argues that shorthand is a more practical skill than a college degree. Esther, however, wants to write for herself and does not wish to learn the trades of a side-kick. “The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters” (Plath 62). Her mother is frigid, unsympathetic, and emotionally reserved. Her daily unhappiness is a source of stress in Esther’s life as she endeavors to navigate her coming-of-age (Plath 32).

Esther is greatly unsatisfied with the mother roles around her. She views Dodo Conway as being the Ideal Mother. She is submissive and stupid, like a dodo bird. Yet, she also gracefully accomplishes a role Esther has little desire to fill, therefore being deserving of some respect. From time to time Esther toys with the idea of motherhood and even hints to having a baby at the beginning of the novel. But in the midst of her summer, she wants to be nothing like the Dodo Conway who walks her baby stroller back and forth across the sidewalk outside Esther’s window. Her presence is a constant reminder of a stifling role Esther is not yet ready to take on,

for fear it will mean the death of all other dreams and ambitions. This fear may be attributed partially to Buddy Willard's commenting, "in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more" (Plath 69). She compares marriage to brainwashing and tells of how after her parents left for their honeymoon, her father had commented, "Whew, that's a relief, now we can stop pretending and be ourselves" (Plath 69). Unhealthy views of motherhood permeate Esther's existence.

Mrs. Willard is yet another example of the disappointing mother role. Her entire life is wrapped up in making Buddy and Mr. Willard sandwiches. In constantly being there to serve them, to dress, feed, and advise, she has no real life of her own. As one of her hobbies, she weaves together old rags to make a kitchen mat. It is a lengthy and beautiful process, but ultimately the mat just goes on the kitchen floor. Esther finds this to be greatly depressing and pathetic. After all that work, this is what it amounts to. Esther has no desire to live out her days serving a man.

Even the academic models of Jay Cee and Philomena Guinea, accomplished career women, do not represent realities Esther wishes upon herself. They are stifling in their desire to turn Esther into their own protégée. Philomena writes about things that Esther sees as being mushy and silly, like a soap opera in book. Jay Cee expects Esther to take on a foreign language and conquer the world. She is *very* driven and Esther never feels adequate around her. Both women seem to be confined in institutions devoted to these reductive ideals of womanhood. Even Jay Cee works at a magazine devoted to woman as consumer and spectacle.

Esther should be able to utilize her elders and peers as forms of social support, to share experiences with and work out the negotiations of role conflict. However, she finds them all to be decidedly flawed and unworthy of pursuing relationships with. They enforce social

stereotypes and restricting roles instead of encouraging Esther to be herself. Kate Baldwin describes her as “a character who throws herself against the limited options available to her like a furious pinball, aiming for and then bouncing away from discrete targets of female identity,” (25). She goes through bouts where she struggles to appease those around her and tries to fill the expectations laid out for her by others.

Ultimately this always leaves her feeling unsatisfied and lost. “It is important to note that Dr. Nolan, the only wholly admirable woman in the novel, is also the only woman whom Esther never longs to imitate or to resemble. The point is that Dr. Nolan serves not as model but as an anti-model; she is the instrument whereby Esther learns to be, not some other woman, but herself” (Perloff 521). It is only through her connection with Dr. Nolan that she truly finds a healthy relationship.

### ***The Bluest Eye: Pecola’s Social Support***

#### **Esther and Pecola**

Pecola Breedlove and Esther Greenwood come from very different worlds; however they both seem to be pushed towards mental illness as a result of the pressures they face as adolescent girls. Pecola breaks because of long-term strain and her traumatic encounter with her father, whereas Esther’s inability to negotiate her coming-of-age and embrace a role pushes her over the edge. They both lack the development of what Smith-Rosenberg describes as ego-strengths and are thusly unable to successfully navigate the unrealistic role conflict society oppresses them with (213). Instead they use mental illness as a survival tactic to try and get through life.

In struggling with their identity in the world, Esther and Pecola both deal with the issue of gaze. They long to be the ones who are *looked at*, like the pretty light-skinned black girl,

Maureen Peal or the future cover girl, Betsy. Unfortunately, they typically end up in the role of the observer. In this way they are unable to live up to societal standards on beauty and they can not define themselves through their physical appearance. Malin LaVon Walther explains that,

Here black women are presented as conveying the gaze, and thus presence, to white girls. They perpetuate the white scale of visual attractiveness. Throughout *The Bluest Eye* Morrison presents black women who look at black girls—Maureen, Geraldine, and Pauline to reject them in favor of white girls. The scene in which Pauline chooses a little white girl over Pecola, her own daughter, is particularly telling. Morrison’s point is that the gaze is not exclusively male; women can hold other women up to a visual scale of attractiveness too. (Walther 779)

For years women have used their appearance to garner strength and agency. This method of identity construction is limited and false; however, it is a source of self-esteem and confidence for many. In her novel, Morrison describes how women can perpetuate stifling gender ideals instead of supporting and encouraging one another. “Women look at other women to determine social status and to make comparisons to themselves, which is an objectifying act” (Walther 779). A cycle of unfulfilled lives is perpetuated through competition and comparison as nobody really ends up meeting any of the ideals or experiencing a healthy sense of self.

### **Pecola’s Social Situation**

Pecola is the lowest of the low on the totem-pole that is American society. She is a child, female, poor, African American, and ugly. She is also part of an abusive and dysfunctional family. Pecola has a lot to overcome with few sources to garner encouragement or strength from. None-the-less she still has some options as far as social support goes.

Frieda and Claudia offer some stability, particularly in playing host when Pecola comes to stay with them. She relies on them for information about menstruation and love. Though they are just as ignorant as she is on such matters, their presence makes her life a bit more bearable. Unlike the other school children who shun her, Claudia and Frieda sometimes offer her refuge. They are a more reliable source of companionship than the flaky character of Maureen Peal, who only momentarily takes pity on Pecola. When possible, they fight for Pecola, as is the case when the boys surround and tease her in the schoolyard. The sisters are two of the few people in town who want Pecola's baby to live. They even go as far as to pray and plant their seeds in hopes that the baby will survive.

Morrison creates four main types of women for Pecola to look up to. These exist in the form of the sexually repressed, the church women, the blues singers, and the "ruined" women. Walther argues that, "In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents a black community that has taken the white criteria of beauty for their own" (779). Positive role models of femininity simply do not exist, but rather the options are limited to differing examples of attempts to emulate the white standard. The sexually repressed "coloured" women like Geraldine fight against the black stereotype in their effort to mirror the white ideal. In doing so, they enforce and propagate the restrictive ideals of femininity more than any of the others. The church women like Pauline find their significance and social standing through their identity as pious church-attendees. Women like Claudia and Frieda's mother sing the blues in order to effectively deal with their place in society. The trio of prostitutes or "ruined" women live their lives somewhat outside of the stifling expectations of society. They come the closest to fighting the socially constructed model of femininity. Overall black women are some of the biggest supporters of this oppressive model of identity.

## **The Repressed**

Junior's mother Geraldine buys into any and all gender role expectations she can. In living out the ideal of the *perfect* brown girl, she is embracing the oppressive identity society has pushed upon her. Her house is perfect; her son is perfect; her life is perfect. Unfortunately, when you look closely, you can see that everything is very synthetic. Geraldine loves her cat more than her husband or son. She is obsessed with cleanliness and appearance to the point that she is oblivious to the fact that Junior is miserable and alone.

Geraldine's identity comes from the distinction she makes between herself and other black people. She explains that, "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison 87). In trying to stay in constant control she fights the "funkiness." She describes her college experience where she was taught, "how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (Morrison 83). Geraldine is the epitome of black femininity. She is repressed and controlled; her happiness comes from her ability to successfully demonstrate most of the ideals society values in a woman of color. When she looks at Pecola, she sees quite the opposite of everything she values. In calling her a "nasty little black bitch" and believing Junior's story that Pecola hurt the cat, she is adding another scar to this little girl's already difficult life. Not only does this woman help propagate an unrealistic and unachievable standard of identity for Pecola, she also throws her out of her house in an act of extreme hate.

## **Church Women**

Pecola's mother Pauline finds her identity in religion. In her self-righteous piety she gains power and status as a martyr. In this way she is dependant upon Cholly's sin to provide her life

with tribulation worthy of her holy calling. She must have his damnable soul around to provide a contrast to her holy lifestyle. Though she was initially enthralled and obsessed with the images of beauty displayed through film, she soon became wholly unable to emulate them. This made her bitter and angry towards the world because of her broken dreams and unmet expectations as she struggled to deal with a disappointing marriage. Instead she finds religion to be a source of support and identity in the community. However, the value she has learned to place on appearance and this internalization of the “white scale of female beauty” remains with her and continues to create a rift between her and reality (Walther 779). Her love of the little white girl and the entire house where she works shows this adoration of the white ideal. It creates in Pecola a feeling of unworthiness and an inability to love herself. The climate of ugliness, hate, and violence created in the Breedlove home by both Pauline and Cholly effectively scars their daughter. Pecola wishes she were pretty or at least had pretty eyes so that they would change their actions around her. When this fails, she turns to imagining herself invisible and ultimately embracing insanity.

### **Blues Singers**

Claudia’s and Frieda’s mother deals with her frustrations in life through singing the blues and yelling. In this way Mrs. MacTeer utilizes her voice and is able to construct a narrative that expresses her feelings on life. The outlet proves to be a valuable source of release. Though the yelling sometimes scares her daughters, they know that it will always be followed by her beautiful blues songs. These songs make the girls want to face the sweet hardships of life, like “losing your man.” They provide strength, voice, and a positive outlook in an oppressive world. Claudia and Frieda sometimes fear the wrath of their mother, as they probably should. She is strong and brave in a world that has offered her little place in it due to her race. However, she

loves her family more than anything and constantly works hard to provide for them. This work ethic and faithfulness to one's own family is rare. Mrs. MacTeer is a pillar of strength in the community and an effective example of one way to successfully negotiate identity and the gender ideals of society.

### **Ruined Women**

The three prostitutes that take pity on Pecola represent a type of exotic anomaly in town. China, Poland, and Miss Marie are extremely ostracized for their social deviance and sexuality, they bond together to support one another. This type of family is much more effective and encouraging than the Breedlove family. It is an incredibly positive form of social support and quite possibly the best model of effective femininity available to Pecola. Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiak articulates that, "Like the child narrators whose position outside the social order is connected to an alternative ideology, one that validates pleasure in the body, the prostitutes...are also marginalized characters who embody a critical and alternative stance towards the social order. The three women are deeply at ease with their bodies," (200). The trio owns their sexuality and accepts their place in society. They effectively navigate feminine ideals without being consumed by them or rendered ill. While they are completely comfortable with their individuality and their position in the community, they also highly respect "good Christian colored women" who work hard and have spotless reputations, women whose husbands they slept with (Morrison 56). They are man-haters who abusively treat men like animals and really only value their sisterhood in terms of relationships.

They do not regret the loss of their innocence or the path they have chosen. "They were not young girls in whores clothing, or whores regretting their loss of innocence. They were whores in whores' clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence.



With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other” (Morrison 57). Without this word, *innocence*, they are not conscious of any such loss. They do not value themselves solely for their purity and they do not view themselves as objects on a pedestal, things to be desired and owned by men. Instead, the prostitutes are liberated, active individuals, who are responsible for their own happiness. They are aware of the pain and hardship that comes with life and they are fully capable of withstanding it together. In this way they are strong, enlightened, and empowered. The concept of innocence is very destructive for Pecola and Frieda. It is the one thing they have in common with Shirley Temple and the white ideal of femininity. In their innocence they gain a faulty sense of self and are sheltered from reality. They identify with and desire to be all that society admires and esteems, an unattainable white standard of womanhood. This does not help to prepare them for the harsh world they are forced to face very early on in life.

These women also make use of blues singing, another form of “sisterhood” that provides social support and identity within one’s heritage. They display a constant banter of playful conversation in order to articulate their feelings and deal with their existence. Though prostitution is very stereotyped in society, these three seem to be uniquely free of oppressive gender roles. They may buy into beauty ideals and effort to make themselves look done-up, however they do not define themselves by this and they know they always have one another to rely upon. Morrison compares them to “Three merry gargoyles” (55). They are grotesque and massive, yet strong and beautiful in their uniqueness. Of all the adult characters they are perhaps the happiest and their relationship with Pecola is a shining ray of hope in much darkness. It is tragic that the girl does not turn to these three pillars of strength when things get rough, when her father impregnates her and her family breaks apart.

Role models in *The Bluest Eye* and *The Bell Jar* consistently fail our protagonists. They provide limited options in their examples of possible ways in which women can navigate role expectations. Often times they support and perpetuate oppressive societal ideals. Social support greatly influences mental health and physical longevity. The lack of effective support plays a huge part in Esther's and Pecola's struggle with mental illness. Though a few positive role models do exist in the novels, the girls are unable to successfully connect with them. This renders the characters isolated, ineffective, and powerless.

#### **IV. Symbolic Interaction with Food**

The social climate surrounding Edna, Esther, and Pecola provides great insight into why they surrender to suicide or insanity. The details of how this goes about happening and their individual struggles that lead up to their demise are perhaps more readily seen through their symbolic interaction with food. It certainly provides a different angle from which to see their situation. Food represents sustenance and power. Consumption represents agency and identity. It is highly symbolic of the conflict that is going on within and around our protagonists.

##### ***The Bell Jar: Authenticity in Esther through Food***

Battling the numbness and isolation she feels, Esther turns to adventure in New York and exotic foods. Using comfort food and eating to relieve emotional problems is not typically a good habit, however; it often proves to be Esther's only form of release. It is somewhat ironic that through her gluttony and the consumption of food, she expresses her identity and articulates her struggle. Rich food like caviar, crabmeat, and avocados remind her of her grandfather, the one man who has not yet let her down. The positive memories she has of him working at a country club seem to express a healthy relationship between the two, full of good food and fun.

They joke that he will buy caviar for her wedding, both knowing that he could never afford such extravagance and that she does not intend to get married (Plath 22). Apparently he is accepting of this deviant attitude towards marriage and of his granddaughter in general. In enforcing her identity as member of a family, she gains social support and a sense of meaning.

Esther's gluttony is very much against the grain. "I'm not sure why it is, but I love food more than just about anything else. No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight" (Plath 20). The other interns have to be jealous of her ability to eat and not gain weight while they starve themselves on salads. Perhaps they judge her for her un-lady-like appetite. In this way she rebels against gender expectations and patriarchy. She is strong in her ability to absorb sustenance. Throughout the novel, Esther's health parallels her eating habits. When she is sick she loses her appetite and when she is getting better or is healthier, she eats massive amounts. While she is at the mental asylum, the doctors try to heal her by force feeding her calorie-packed foods that fatten her up.

We see Esther's fears illustrated in the fig tree dream. Afterwards she doubts its authenticity and attributes it to, "the profound void of an empty stomach" (Plath 63). She feels immensely better after she eats dinner on her date with Constantine. Eating gives Esther physical and emotional strength and she seems less worried and neurotic when she's well-fed. Though she does not present the idea of eating the figs, I would argue from a modern feminist perspective that perhaps a more healthier model would involve her relaxing her expectations a little bit in order to let the figs fall. This way she might collect them easily, dry them, and take them with her on her adventure, to eat as she goes. Trail mix travels well and dried fruit is an essential ingredient. This symbolic interaction would allow Esther to embrace many of the opportunities life has to offer in a more effective and healthy manner. The trail mix metaphor would involve

her taking control of her own path, her personal hike through life. She would need to be able to provide herself with the strength and sustenance she needs by being more open to healthy social support. It would also require of Esther that she let go of fulfilling others' and society's expectations and instead focus on her own dreams and desires. She could potentially be a career woman like Jay Cee and then later on settle down to have a family. What it comes down to is that Esther needs to be able to make up her own mind, be her own person, and survive on her own instead of trying to find meaning through how successfully she can live up to what other people expect of her. Esther must become the own active agent in her life, not an observer. The fact that she fails to see any of these options as possibilities illustrates the inadequate selection of paths her culture has modeled for her or her inaccurate grasp of reality.

Esther's eating patterns reflect her views towards society and her life. Her periods of not eating coincide with her painful skepticism toward the dominant culture and her perception that her options in life are increasingly limited. When she feels oppressively limited and restricted as a woman, she gets cynical and negative towards the world. On the contrary, when she feels empowered and optimistic about her identity and the future, she eats a great deal. As she feels the skepticism return, she tries to fight it with food. She can typically control her own consumption and this allows eating to be a manageable variable in her life.

### ***The Bluest Eye: Pecola and Food***

In drinking milk, a symbol for wholesomeness, strength, and purity, Pecola is sucking in all that Shirley represents. She longs to be like this child star in her constant quest for beauty. Shirley is a symbol of the white ideal and in desiring to be her, Pecola is admitting to her own inferiority in the social schemata propagated by her society. She is embracing her identity as ugly, young, and powerless. It is interesting that Claudia hates Shirley. As the youngest of the

girls, she has not yet identified with the expectations society places upon her to be a cute little girl. She instead hates Shirley because of her friendship with Bo Jangles. In her keen little mind, she knows that the white ideal of feminine beauty is worshiped in their culture. However, instead of trying to emulate that in any way she can, she hates it. She is not yet ashamed of her skin and largely due to the strength of her mother; Claudia is working to develop healthy ego-strengths. This contrasts the adoring Pecola who wishes and prays constantly to be made like Shirley in order that her life might be easier to deal with. In this text, eating is symbolic of cultural consumption and Claudia is a more skeptical consumer of mass media than Pecola.

The candy that Pecola buys also works to construct her identity. In the shame she feels from the store owner who refuses her eye contact and acknowledgement, she first feels the sweet taste of anger in response to racism. She learns to see herself from the perspective of an oppressive and hateful society. As an innocent little girl she is forced to work through the meanings of racism and her role as a black child.

## **V. Efficacy**

Social climate and consuming symbolism provide insight into the ultimate surrender of Edna, Esther, and Pecola. However, the actual efficacy of their responses to an oppressive society shows how they are ultimately unable to survive. It provides a view into why they surrender to mental illness or suicide.

### **Effectiveness of Esther's Strategy**

Perloff describes Esther's behavior and condition, whether it be mental illness of one type or another, to be "a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation," (518). She goes on to say that in *The Bell Jar*, "illness is to be viewed as part of the same spectrum: disease, whether mental or physical, is an index to the human inability to cope

with an unlivable situation” (Perloff 520-521). Not eating can be read in the same way, as a symptom of rejecting an exceedingly oppressive existence. The question then becomes whether or not this survival technique is effective or not. This assumes it to be the strategy Esther chose, not because it was her only option; her only path, but because her personality and surroundings made it the most suitable. Because her choices and efforts to free herself almost cause her to perish, I would argue that they are highly ineffective and unhealthy throughout the entire novel. The most dangerous actions revolve around violence; her suicide attempts and her loss of her virginity.

Another argument on the effectiveness of Esther considers language and communication. Feminine struggles and oppression have often existed due to the silencing of women. Feminists have fought for decades to give women a voice. Marilyn Boyer argues that, “for Sylvia Plath, writing the disabled body in *The Bell Jar* engenders a series of intimate encounters with the ineffectuality of language” (199). If we consider language to be communication through actions, words, and other forms of expression to be success, then perhaps Esther is triumphant. Boyer explains that, “After Esther’s suicide attempt, she decides to make her own language by freeing herself from the symbolic order, and, essentially, it is her ‘feminist task to prevent patriarchs from silencing opposition’,” (219). She utilizes her virginity and the control she has over her own sexuality to rebel against the patriarchal priority of feminine purity which is instilled in her by her mother, Mrs. Willard, the lawyer and society. She describes this quest in terms of tribal warfare and ancient tradition, much like her brawl with the woman-hater the night before she left New York. She wages battle against misogyny, patriarchy, and the ever-disappointing men in her life. Though the loss of her innocence is painful and scarring, she comes out of it feeling “part of

a great tradition,” (Plath 187). It connects her to society and history. I would argue that this is an ineffective and harmful way of revolting against expectations.

### **Effectiveness of Pecola’s Strategy**

Smith-Rosenberg’s description of girls’ socialization and resulting weak egos applies particularly well to Pecola. Though she is provided with models of role negotiation in the lives of older women around her, she is unable to grasp onto them. Her lack of efficacy through years of social oppression in her role as scapegoat has rendered her unable to translate these narratives into encouragement or guidance. Instead Pecola chooses insanity, which moves her, at least in her own eyes, back to a place of social acceptance. This is ironic because she is fictional. In embracing the qualities her culture values and endeavoring to emulate the ideals, she utterly misapprehends herself in her society. Society, however, sees her insanity as being socially taboo and monstrous.

### **VI. Conclusion**

Surrender ties these characters to hysteria. Nineteenth century femininity was assaulted by extreme and contradicting gender expectations. In endeavoring to meet these impossible, unrealistic, and conflicting ideals, women were silenced and isolated. The internalization of these ideals and their inability master them caused guilt, which was repressed and built up. This caused their bodies to act out in a wide variety of symptoms such as paralysis or convulsion. The body spoke out when the mind could not. In this state of weakness they, “defended themselves against such stress by regressing toward the childish hyper-femininity of the hysteric” (Smith-Rosenberg 215). Hysteria was not an effective form of protest; it was surrender to societal ideals. Similarly, Edna, Esther, and Pecola submit to the roles their society pushes upon them. They all experience a great deal of personal conflict as they attempt to negotiate the feminine ideals they have

internalized. They are unsuccessful in their attempt to navigate contradicting expectations of femininity, ultimately utilizing the ineffective paths of suicide or mental illness.

Edna, Esther, and Pecola all negotiate identity ineffectively in a way that leads them to either mental illness or death. Whether this is the result of social oppression or individual weakness is arguable, however, they all face terribly conflicting and restricting role expectations. It is helpful to look at them through the lens of nineteenth century hysteria in order to analyze their negotiation of femininity. Food and social support illustrate the ways in which the authors articulate their slow submission.

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## VII. A Short Fictional Piece on Related Themes: “Rebuilding”

The wise woman builds her house,  
but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.

(Proverbs 14:1)

Miss Lee woke with the usual pain and ache that age had accustomed her to. As her eyes adjusted to the morning light, she surveyed the room. A strong feeling of home hung thick to the freshly painted walls. She had only been back for a few months and yet her time away seemed like another life. Her petite bedroom was connected to the living room on one side and the kitchen on the other. Small as it was, the new paint and ceiling fan did wonders for the recently renovated old French colonial style duplex. The home had undergone much deeper gutting than these visible surface upgrades and it still amazed her that it had even made it through the storm.

Climbing out of bed, Miss Lee made her way down the hall towards the kitchen and stopped in the bathroom to start her morning bath. The rush of water felt fresh and new on her dark weathered hand as it melted from cool to warm. It distracted her from the continuous ache that regularly resided there. At 4’6, Miss Pat Lee was as wide as she was tall. The quintessential picture of grandmotherly love, this woman had seen more than her fair share of life. Living through the death of one husband, divorce with another, the stresses that came along with mothering children in a world that was beyond broken, and the recent devastation of Katrina, she held onto a glow that had long since faded from many of her peers. The dark pigment of her cheekbones was salted with deep mocha freckles that danced around her radiant brown eyes. Through the obvious presence of hardship, she retained her sparkle.

While the bath continued to fill, Miss Lee went back to brew some coffee. Humming as she swayed into the kitchen, she passed by the newly installed stove and smiled to herself. Hesitant to dirty the beautiful white machine, she had yet to actually test the appliance out. Filling the coffee pot with water, she stared out the kitchen window into a neighborhood she had known for years. Now just a small remnant of what it had once been, empty lots and dilapidated old houses remained where families, neighbors, and friends could never return. Here and there a speckling of solitary cement front steps remained in the midst of barren empty lots. Feeling a familiar ache in her heart, Miss Lee put her free hand to her chest. It would take quite a bit of time for this scene to lose its sharpness. The loneliness she felt was much worse than the pains of old age. It was a wounding of her heart.

Contrasted with the immense blessings she had experienced, it would take a while to process the tumultuous change and emotional dichotomy of her present reality. Katrina had ripped, raided, and ravaged the city of New Orleans. Yet almost instantaneously the pouring of continuous support and encouragement began through teams from around the states who came down to pitch in and help, donating their time, money, and love to reach out to the hurting community. This faithfully continued even three years after; the rebuilding process seemed to never end. Miss Lee could not deny God had provided. She wouldn't trade for anything the friendships she had made. Even more than the physical work they had done in rebuilding her home, the impact the volunteers had on her life seeped deep into her soul. They left a mark that would last.

Miss Lee likened the whole phenomenon to a magic trick. It was as if her creator God had decided to pull out the tablecloth of society and in one quick move had replaced it with his own hand. All that they had found their security and significance in: the money, the careers, the

generations of family tradition built into homes filled with memories had been removed. Any sense of control, independence, and self-sufficiency had been taken. They were forced to look to God and each other to meet their basic needs. She marveled at how incredibly un-American the whole thing was.

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"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy."

(Proverbs 31:8-9)

In a warm log home in Northern Minnesota, a very different reality played out. Bella Andrews walked down the staircase, pausing on the landing to examine her face in the large mirror before proceeding on to the kitchen. Her figure was slim but aged, a mere shadow of the beauty she once was. Dressed in a tight red sweater and a pair of designer blue jeans twenty years too young for her, it was easy to see this woman valued her appearance. As was the custom, that day she was home managing the house and chipping away at chores. She cleaned while her family went out into the world to work and play. She lavished the opportunity to sort out her thoughts.

"For once, I am actually grateful to be able to stay inside and hide today! I never thought I'd be saying that. This weather is disgusting," Bella thought to herself.

The wind raged against the powdery outside world as Bella glanced through the window and her body automatically shivered at the sight. It was contrastingly comfortable inside; the

warmth of the oven completed the absolute coziness that spread throughout the entirety of the large home. As she began to pull ingredients out of the cupboard, she contemplated her life.

“I can’t figure out why, but I feel uneasy; restless. The Christmas decorations are up, with presents under the tree and stockings hung ready for Santa. It is like a scene out of a holiday TV special. I should be content. I should be more than content, but something isn’t right. Something is missing. Why can’t I relax?” She wondered.

Struggling as she worked, she attempted to distract herself from the discontent that plagued her mind. She clouded her lack of peace with busyness and tasks.

“I have no valid reason for these feelings. I am so blessed. George loves me. Abrielle and Peter are happy and doing well off at college. For years my life has been the picture of perfection. I have *nothing* to complain about. What more could I ask for?” Bella argued to herself.

Pausing yet again to look at her reflection in the hallway mirror, she began to critique.

“I have aged a bit. But I still have it, right? I know that appearance isn’t everything, but it certainly helps,” Bella worried. As she pulled a frozen pie crust out of the ice box, it came to her, “I must miss the children! They have been out of the house for three years now. I thought I had moved passed the empty nesters transitional phase. Perhaps I got used to living without them too quickly, never really working through the transition. In all the craziness that is life, maybe I still have some unresolved emotions over the departure of my babies,” she thought.

Having temporarily persuaded herself of the solution to her feelings, Bella continued on with her day. She worked to get the house in order and planned out dinner for that night.

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Does not wisdom call out?  
Does not understanding raise her voice?

On the heights along the way,  
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;  
beside the gates leading into the city,  
at the entrances, she cries aloud

(Proverbs 8:1-3)

Before her bath, Miss Lee received a call from Sylvia, a daughter-in-law from her second marriage. Though under strict orders from the doctor not to talk for a few days after having surgery on her throat, Sylvia could not contain herself. The girl thrived on fresh gossip and this time the conversation was based on the news that her father, Miss Lee's ex-husband was moving to Georgia with his newest wife.

We ain't neva gonna see him no 'mo! That woman can't take my daddy!" Sylvia cried as she spewed forth the story, filling in details as everything poured out of her mouth like angry bees overflowing from her insides.

Miss Lee was fairly certain that because the two were legally wed, Sylvia's newest stepmother was entirely within her rights in moving her husband with her to Georgia. However, the back-and-forth banter over the news was a customary way of dealing with change and she did not hesitate to partake in the conversation. More than just processing life, it was a way of strengthening social connections and bonding to those around you. Near the end of the call Sylvia invited Miss Lee over to have her hair washed and done.

After saying goodbye, she got another call from Katie, a young friend from the local mission. An active member in her church, Miss Lee connected particularly well with the teams of volunteers. Katie was a full-time team coordinator with the church mission and stopped in occasionally to visit with Miss Lee. Though the house was almost entirely finished, the girl loved to spend time with her. The visits were a fresh relief from the desolation Miss Lee had come to know in the remnants of her neighborhood.

“Whatchyou up to today, Miss Lee?” Katie asked in her sweet southern accent.

“Well, darlin’ I’m goin’ over to Sylvia’s later to have my hair done-up. But I will be around for a while befo’ that,” she responded.

“You mind if I stop on by?” inquired Katie.

“That would be jest’ fine, honey. Just make sho’ it doesn’t get on too late. I promised Sylvia I would go over. And you know how I love to have my hair done,” Miss Lee reminded.

“Sounds good, Miss Lee. I’m headed over to the ninth ward and then I’ll be right over,” finished Katie.

After hanging up, Miss Lee pulled her hair back and took her morning bath. Each day presented a new struggle as her aging body waged war against her youthful spirit and the routine she once mindlessly completed became increasingly complicated. Even the new porcelain tub installed by a team from Minnesota was almost too large for her to lower herself in and out of. Her failing body was a great source of frustration.

Soon enough Katie was at her door. She had just finished getting dressed and had to rush to let her in. Walking through the living room and bedroom to get to the kitchen, the two sat down and reconnected immediately.

“Miss Lee!!! Your new oven! It looks great! This place has come so far! Remember when we first got back and it wasn’t even gutted? Now it’s near done!” said Katie excitedly.

“I know, honey. The Lord’s sho’ been good to me. ‘Most feels like home again. And I can’t get myself to muss up the stove yet. I’m waiting for a special occasion to try it out,” responded Miss Lee.

Half an hour later the two were still chatting around Miss Lee’s kitchen table. The topic had changed quite a few times by then and ultimately rested on Miss Lee’s need for a renter. No longer able to work, she had relied on the added income of renting out the other side of her duplex for some years now. Because the renovations were nearly done, it was time to find another tenant.

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Choose my instruction instead of silver,  
knowledge rather than choice gold,  
for wisdom is more precious than rubies,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her.

"I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;  
I possess knowledge and discretion.

(Proverbs 8: 10-12)

The silence wiggled through the sheets like worms slowly pushing dirt in the ground. Eventually she could hold the weight no longer and Bella had to say something.

“Are you awake, Paul?” she asked into the dark.



Of course he had been asleep for over an hour by this time and he briefly stirred at the sound of her voice. She turned over in bed and eventually he responded, “What is it?”

“Something is wrong... with me... with life. I don’t know. Something more than menopause, Paul,” she said in a weary little voice.

“It has been for a while,” he responded gruffly.

“It’s more than the kids being gone. I was trying to make myself believe that was it. That I missed them. That I was bored. That I was...”

“IT’S LIFE, BELLA,” he interrupted. “Dreams don’t come true. I’m sorry I’m not your fairytale. Life goes on. The grind is wearing, but you have to buck up, princess,” he said, now sitting up against the backboard of their bed. “I’ve tried my best to give you everything. Why is it never enough?!” Paul questioned. And then he abruptly got up and left the room, his pillow in hand. It had been years since he had slept on the sofa.

Bella was left stunned and alone. The tears came slowly. After a few minutes she caught her breath, picked up her cell, and called Diane. Always a source of wisdom and counsel, her sister was often the one she turned to for support. Though they now lived far apart, their friendship hadn’t wavered. After listening to Bella’s sobbing explanation, all Diane offered this time was, “Come.” They both agreed it would be good for her to get away for a while.

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In all your ways acknowledge him,

and he will make your paths straight.

Two hours later Bella gave up trying to sleep and got up. She swiftly packed up some things and made the bed. On Paul's pillow she left a note, saying "Gone to visit Diane" and then hopped in the car.

Hours and states passed as Bella watched the snow turn to warmth. She found the time to be excellent for processing and her thoughts were only interrupted as she stopped occasionally to eat and rest her eyes. Though she worried about her impulsive departure, she felt an overwhelming sense of peace. This was what she was meant to do.

Following the direction of her GPS and the address Diane had given, Bella pulled up to a small townhouse outside of New Orleans. Travelled, weathered, and exhausted she wrenched her bulging suitcase out of the trunk and noticed a bra strap hanging out of one of the zippered pockets. She had hastily gathered her things before leaving and her packing job showed it.

Slowly dragging the bulky luggage up the stoop, she paused to scan her surroundings. In the early morning light she saw the desolation and damage that plagued the block. While chunks of rebuilding dotted the empty overgrown lots, a feeling of pain dominated the air. Diane had been living down in Louisiana and working with teams of volunteers since right after hurricane Katrina hit. It had been over three years and yet Bella had not visited. Always swamped with the ever-present bumble of activity that made up her over packed schedule, she had not realized places like this existed within such a blessed country. Between her morning aerobics class, shopping, coffee dates with friends, cooking, cleaning, and managing the household there was little time to ponder the reality of other places, not to mention visit them. She knew of the devastation of Katrina and had seen the shocking news footage, but it had been several years.

Like the rest of the world, she assumed normalcy had returned and thoughts of this place had left her mind.

After overcoming her shock, Bella pulled her suitcase the rest of the way up the stoop and paused before two doors. Noticing the “For Rent” sign on the left, she decided to go for the right. After a firm but gentle knock, she awaited the sight of her tall blonde sister.

A few anxious moments passed before the door slowly opened. Bella was surprised to be looking down onto a short, squat black woman. She would have guessed her to be in her early sixties and she appeared to be equally bewildered. Still dressed in her nightgown, she looked Bella up and down. Silence hung thick in the air as these two opposites stood face-to-face, neither one knowing quite what to make of the other. Finally, after what seemed an unbearably long silence, Bella spoke, “Um... I’m sorry, m’am. I must have the wrong house. Is this 1622 Worthington Drive?”

“Oh honey! Yes sho’ is. Scuse my manners! Diane told me you was commin’. I jest din’t spect so early, dear,” the woman said. “My name’s Miss Lee. Please come in, sugah. My! Don’t you look a sight!” she exclaimed.

Fighting against the fear that sat in her stomach, Bella followed Miss Lee into the house. Her Northern suburban lifestyle lacked anything close to diversity and she rarely came into direct contact with someone with such a different outward appearance. Though she had never considered herself to be a racist, the situation made her surprisingly self-conscious.

Back in the kitchen Bella sat as Miss Lee made tea. Bringing her a hot cup, she noticed the dark brown freckles and sparkle that radiated from Miss Lee’s face. There was great beauty in this unlikely woman and all she could muster was a “Thank you” before Miss Lee started chattering on again.

“We sho’ glad to have you here honey! Don’t mind my appearance. I woulda dressed and been up, hadn’ I known you were gonna be here. I been prayin’ the Lord provide me with a renter. Seems as you jest what I need right now. You make yo’self at home and stay as long as you like. We got lots to talk about. But first you best get some rest. I hep you with your bags and we’ll take that “For Rent” sign off the door,” Miss Lee said warmly.

Entirely drained from the massive drive, a dazed “Rent?!” was all Bella could muster as she followed the persistent Miss Lee over to the other side of the house. She was quickly packed away in a clean, warm bed and soon fell asleep, still wondering at the absence of her sister.

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She cries out:

“To you, O men, I call out;

I raise my voice to all mankind.

My mouth speaks what is true, You who are simple, gain prudence;

you who are foolish, gain understanding.

Listen, for I have worthy things to say;

I open my lips to speak what is right.

for my lips detest wickedness.

All the words of my mouth are just;

none of them is crooked or perverse.

To the discerning all of them are right;  
they are faultless to those who have knowledge.

(Proverbs 3b-9)

Several months later Bella and Miss Lee sat together on the front porch. Again they were drinking tea, but this time it was sweetened and iced. Fighting the summer heat, they fanned themselves and rocked in the hanging bench. They looked out onto the green, watching neighborhood children playing ball in the driveway across the street and enjoying a friendship they had both become so fond of.

“You get to talk to Paul today, honey?” Miss Lee asked.

“Yep. He called this morning. Says he is going to come back to visit next weekend.

Sounds like work is going well,” Bella answered, smiling.

Joy shone like a bright light from the faces of the two friends. Though life would never be the same, they had found peace in working through the struggles together.