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**“Mad to Be Saved”:
On the Borderline of Expectation
and Desire in Joyce Johnson’s *Come
and Join the Dance***

Senior Paper

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The year is 1955 in America the Great. Dwight Eisenhower is president, the Battle of Dienbienphu is underway, and Allen Ginsberg is reading his first draft of “Howl” at the Gallery Six. *The Seven Year Itch* has hit the big screen, women are stationed in their houses, and the economy has been struck by a momentous deflation. Vagabonds are scouring the states, their right thumbs in the air, while the abomunists¹ perform their 9-5’s in the center of an emergent poetic riff-raff. The 1950s was jazz, was finger-snapping stanzas; it was the year of the creative delinquent. The 1950s was The Beat Generation, and a fraction of that beat feeling can be attributed to 1950’s America being wrought with strict stereotypical roles for men and women, which produced alarming consequences.

To give context, men were oftentimes the ‘breadwinners,’ and were afforded the opportunities to establish careers, to explore the world in a multitude of ways, and to realize the capacity of their talents and traits, all which worked together in cultivating a sense of identity (Lindsey 17). Meanwhile, the women were condemned to a life tending to a household where they were expected to care for the children and display a nurturing attitude toward their husbands (Lindsey 17). Granted, women were allotted an education and they were able to obtain jobs, but the key is that they could acquire *jobs* and not *careers*. Women were merely meant to work as secretaries, assistants, and the like as these jobs were intended to be temporary until the women either got married or became pregnant (Neuhaus 532). Therefore, Western capitalism contributed to the creation and perpetuation of these assigned roles toward men and women. The original construction of capitalism asserted that men perform laborious tasks to maintain the economic flow while women were primarily seen as vessels to breed new workers (Neuhaus 533).

Therefore, because women were not allowed a variation of roles they could execute throughout

¹ From Beat Writer Bob Kaufman’s “Abomunist Manifesto,” a parody of Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* meant to convey the ridiculousness of hyper-obedient citizens.

their lives, the 1950s saw an epidemic where the diagnoses in depression and anxiety increased substantially (Brown 192). But rather than conclude that an age-old, traditional perception of gender roles was the true issue, women were targeted as the problem, isolating them into believing their discontentment with their limited lives was a product of their mental instability.

However, the 1950s also featured women who attempted to break through their stereotypical designations, opting to live a life in the realm of bohemia. In this counter-cultured world, women conversed with men intellectually, defied their fate as housewives, attempted to liberate themselves sexually, and lived paycheck to paycheck while exploring the extent of their artistic capabilities. Those women were consequently perceived as misfits, as rebels, as sinful creatures who could not be tamed and as such, were also viewed by the larger public as mentally unwell (Brown 69). But despite these women's convictions to escape their confinement, they were still exiled from the road, left behind to hold down a place of which the men could return after having journeyed to foreign places. So these bohemian women made leaps in terms of progress, but were nevertheless held down to numerous degrees, still giving mental illness the opportunity to develop. Joyce Johnson was one of those women, and her 1962 debut novel *Come and Join the Dance* offered insight into this female pandemic, revealing the unfortunate reality that women could only travel from cage to cage, but never embark on exciting and new adventures. As Johnson proclaims in *Door Wide Open*, a book containing her acumens on letters exchanged between her and Jack Kerouac, women were only able to experience "misadventures," her term for the kind of excitement women were offered – things such as abortions and crying over lost love in empty rooms, but never seeing the sky from a ship in the dead of midnight ("Door" 43). Ultimately, *Come and Join the Dance* was Johnson's attempt to rewrite this devastating reality and in its place, provide a narrative of which she was able to free

herself and inaugurate *actual* adventures (*Girls* 70). Johnson's endeavor was to gift herself a happy ending so that she might one day be able to fully encompass an identity meant especially for her as her fictitious self, Susan, takes to the riveting waters of Paris, leaving behind both bohemia and the household.

Since women were seen as mentally ill regardless if they rotted in their household confinement or rejected the nature of the status quo, they were caught in a double-edged sword scenario, damned regardless of their choices. Unfortunately, this damnation began to manifest in ways that made said illnesses more than a perception, and actual depression and anxiety *can* be attributed to these women. However, anxiety and depression are only the tip of the iceberg in regards to what these women were experiencing. In 1980, a new diagnosis emerged called Borderline Personality Disorder, which includes elements of both anxiety and depression, but focuses more on the absence of identity (Brown 198). As specified earlier, women were placed in circumstances that hindered them from accomplishing identities and moreover, women were expected to exhibit a specific set of personality traits in order to be considered desirable. According to a study performed in 1970 by Inge Broverman, the ideal woman is "tact, gentle, aware of the feelings of others, possesses a strong need for security, and easily expresses their tender feelings" (Gilligan 168). In other words, women were (and still are) meant to exude demure sensibilities that would not be perceived as threatening to the dominant male figure and doing otherwise was enough evidence to suggest a woman was mentally unwell, as Broverman's study concluded (Gilligan 168). So if women are "designed" to be submissive to men, then it is sensibly plausible that women would consummately develop a disorder based on the deficiency of identity. In a study performed at Radcliffe, a middle-aged woman notes that she has been dependent on three men throughout her life to provide her with identity: her father, her husband,

and her clergyman (Gilligan 170). Here, it is evidenced that this woman has been made to believe she cannot exist as her own entity and needs guidance from male figures to instruct her sense of self. This anonymous woman's story is not unique as many women cite feeling the male figures in their lives have principal impacts on their identity and portrayal of self at any given moment (Gilligan 171). So not surprisingly, Borderline Personality Disorder is typically associated with females as it is diagnosed in three times as many women as men (Bradley 930). Furthermore, with different men, women will morph into different people to appease each specific man as they have been raised to believe it is their duty; therefore, Borderline Personality Disorder is the ultimate disease of compliance (Bradley 930).

The DSM-V states that in order for one to be diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, he or she must exhibit at least five of the nine itemized criteria ("Borderline"). Famous sufferers include Sylvia Plath and Brigit Bardot, with Marilyn Monroe often being deemed the face of Borderline Personality Disorder as she possessed all nine, which is rare ("Borderline"). For Johnson's protagonist, Susan, there are exactly five of these attributes present:

- “(1) a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation ²
 - (2) identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self
 - (3) affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood
 - (4) chronic feelings of emptiness
 - (5) transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms”
- (“Borderline”).

Also of note is that one in ten sufferers of Borderline Personality Disorder commit suicide and this statistic includes Sylvia Plath and Marilyn Monroe, with Brigit Bardot attempting suicide

² This pattern is also often referred to as “splitting.”

four times throughout her life (“Borderline”). In Johnson’s interpretation of her circumstances, however, she gives her protagonist the life she always dreamed – one where she abandons expectation and accomplishes her desires, reaching out to northern stars from a ship navigating toward Paris. Writing for Johnson hence became a cathartic experience, the thread that dangled above her typewriter keeping her alive and hopeful that alternate possibilities existed (*Minor* 230). Because of her narrative that depicted a dispute against a woman’s narrow opportunities, Johnson was regarded as the first published female Beat writer (Knight 167). However, this notion alone was not why Johnson was grouped into the momentous movement that captured the attention of many and the fascination of the 1950s youth. For women to be considered a part of the Beat Generation, they needed a direct tie to the men, usually in the form of a relationship (*Girls* 118). Hettie Jones was the wife of LeRoi Jones, Carolyn Cassady was the wife of Neal Cassady, and Elise Cowen was the temporary lover of Allen Ginsberg. As for Johnson, she was the girlfriend of Beat Father and King, Jack Kerouac, who acted as a prominent figure throughout her life.

During Johnson and Kerouac’s relationship, he heavily encouraged her writing process, providing guidance and feedback whilst she authored *Come and Join the Dance* (“Door”). As such, *Come and Join the Dance* features two male love interests for Susan and both of these characters embody aspects of Jack Kerouac; thus, she has managed to split him in two. As mentioned above, splitting is an aspect of Borderline Personality Disorder, so what Johnson has done here, whether intentional or not, is create Peter the Idealized and Anthony the Devalued. This concept will be further explored later in the thesis, but it is important to first also note that all of Johnson’s novels have been inspired by the predominant relationships she encountered throughout her life. Just as *Come and Join the Dance* was inspired by her interactions with

Kerouac, *In the Night Café* centers around her first husband, James Johnson, while *Bad Connections* reveals her experiences with second husband, Peter Pinchbeck (*Missing* 102). Therefore, Johnson has documented her life through men rather than allow herself to be seen as an individual, further elaborating her struggle to maintain a stable self-image. In the earlier mentioned compilation, *Door Wide Open*, Johnson's infatuation with Kerouac is disclosed – for every two letters she mailed, Kerouac responded with one, her identity and purpose so closely intertwined with his existence. So as her relationship with Kerouac came to a close, Johnson understood her sense of self had degenerated, if only temporarily (*Minor* 180). But it is because of this end that Susan was allotted a new beginning – as Johnson stated in her 1987 memoir *Minor Characters*: “By making a [lover] into a character, I took away his power to hurt me” (117). Thus Susan's alternate possibilities were born as Johnson dreamed of a life that would feature her as the one who in the end walked away from the relationship to travel, to find *it*³, to be mad, and finally, to be saved. Using the criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder previously listed, this thesis seeks to break down each, linking them with evidence from the text and how those attributes were shaped by Johnson's, and therefore Susan's, circumstances as a 1950's woman. Furthermore, this thesis also strives to evaluate and elucidate what Susan ultimately does with her conditions as she attempts to distance herself from expectations and in turn, replace those expectations with the pursuit of her desires.

As *Come and Join the Dance* opens, Susan's dissociative tendencies and feelings of “emptiness and/or boredom” come to fruition whilst she is taking her Senior Composite Exams, pondering the last question on Melville. When Susan raises her eyes from the test, she scans the room, internalizing the reality that there are 67 other girls likely fixated on the exact same

³ Refers to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, in which Kerouac (Sal Paradise) and the other Beats incessantly exclaim they are on the search for *it*, without ever defining what *it* actually is as *it* is intended to speak for itself.

question. Since people with Borderline Personality Disorder tend to exhibit multiple traits of existentialism, Susan starts to be overtaken with a feeling of emptiness and then defiance, resolving that the exam and various other aspects of life are completely meaningless. Having reached this conclusion, Susan opts to turn in an unfinished exam. By doing such, Susan is exercising her restricted agency as a woman, perhaps one of the only instances she has felt she could successfully reject the role she believes she must perform. Susan then exits into the stillness of the world that lives outside of academic vacancy. Feeling the sun beating upon her face, she wanders through the streets of New York, a whirlwind of thought contaminating her mind. As she walks, Susan catches her reflection in a store window and observes that, "...her face cheated her. It had a way of rearranging itself when she looked into mirrors, as though it were giving a performance... the image in the glass always had the same terrifying blandness. It did not belong to her" (10). From this quote, it is evident that Susan feels especially detached from herself as if she were living outside of her own body. Just as her face is putting on a performance, there is an internal acknowledgment that she is also performing in her everyday life, in her interactions with other people, and in her dutiful compliance to be and do what is expected of her. Further evidence of her performances is noted later in the novel when she confesses that "no one knew how much she lied, how skillful she had become in making adjustments in reality: inferences, suggestions, a few dark strokes, a laugh she had learned from someone else" (63). Because of the expectations that had been propagated toward her since childhood, Susan has become an actress, performing imitations learned from others; a dedicated form of method-acting.

While there are several other instances of dissociative tendencies demonstrated by Susan throughout *Come and Join the Dance*, the most noticeable and significant Borderline Personality

moments focus on her ‘stormy’ relationships of idealization and devaluation. Her stormy relationships are first witnessed when Susan returns to her dorm after aimlessly walking around. There, she stumbles upon her current boyfriend, Jerry, who has been sitting outside waiting for her eventual return. Jerry embodies all of the traits Susan has been told she should want – he is responsible, gets exceptional grades, is emotionally stable, is patient with Susan’s push-pull attitude toward their relationship, and is an overall guaranteed result. Unfortunately for Jerry, however, these are the exact traits that Susan finds to be completely insufferable; she thinks him to be dull and unexciting whereas Susan craves adventure and change – those moments of unabashed passion. Despite Susan’s indifference toward Jerry, he is still dedicated to her and goes out of his way to please her, so what is interesting is that Susan has managed to establish a form of gender role reversal (*Girls* 78). When the two go out, Susan constantly changes her mind on what she wants to do, calling all the shots, and Jerry obeys regardless of how helpless she makes him feel. In a scene beginning on page 32, Susan incessantly insults him and Jerry takes all of her negative words calmly, reminding her that he loves her. It almost appears Susan is once again trying to utilize what little power she feels she has to a point where she wants to control Jerry’s emotions and get him riled up. This is the aspect of the relationship that is stormy – if Susan can successfully get Jerry to lose his composure, then she will feel dignified in her ability to hold power over others while her life thus far has told her that others are in control of her. When Jerry does not comply with her attempts, she exclaims, “For heaven’s sake! Don’t agree with me! Tell me to go to hell or something! I think we should have a fight, have a big scene – right here. You throw the salt shaker at me, I’ll throw the sugar bowl at you. *Something!*” (33). Jerry, however, will not humor Susan’s outbreak and concludes that she is acting this way because she is simply “not interested.” Susan retorts with reassurances that she is in fact

interested, but her claims of interest are rooted in two reasons: 1) this is where expectation meets desire because it is expected that she will ultimately marry a man who resembles much of Jerry's likeness and 2) once she realizes she cannot control him, the possibility of losing of him arises. Since she lacks a true identity, she is prone to unmitigated indecisiveness, which she deflects onto others around her. She knows she wants *something* from Jerry, but she does not know what that something is. Therefore, when she is faced with losing him, Susan is confused and plays into the power dynamic. When Susan witnesses that she does not actually have power after all, she returns to her 'original subservient role' and allows herself to be 'controlled' once again.

It is because of this power dynamic shift that Susan's dissociative tendencies resurface and she comments that "it felt like everything were moving except them," as she slips away from herself. As the night goes on, Susan also notices "...she and Jerry reflected in a massive gold-framed mirror... they looked like two people who might be walking together forever" (35). These two quotes work in tandem to express aspects of time, both centering around the stillness – they are not moving together and have been sentenced to a life of forever without first exploring the other possibilities that could await them. Jerry never questions this notion, but Susan is not as certain. She gathers this reflection to mean her life will be at a perpetual standstill were she to remain with Jerry and her indecisiveness begins to crumble. Susan then makes the executive decision to break-up with Jerry, knowing that while she was once happy with him, she is not now nor will she ever be again. Throughout all of this, however, Susan has demonstrated an alarming apathy. As Jerry sputters words at her about how she used him all this time, she feels nothing and her efforts to finally pull emotion from him did not produce the results she was longing for. Susan thought she would find a thrill, an excitement, at the bottom of jagged words, that those words would stab her in the heart and give her a feeling of magnitude. However, she

continues to feel nothing, so she gets in a cab and drives away from Jerry forever, pondering what real love would even look like. Deep down, she has a recognition that all things are temporary, as they probably should be, and love does not look like much.

But while Susan's break-up with Jerry seems pre-meditated, the idea had not even occurred to her until she met Peter, the first half of Jack Kerouac. Before, she alluded to feeling she must tolerate Jerry rather than consider the idea she could just leave him. Whilst Susan was meandering downtown after leaving her exam, she stumbled into Peter and the two decided to grab coffee, a small gesture where two people can slowly become more acquainted. An important side note about Borderlines is that they are notorious chameleons (Lewis 324). Since they grapple with maintaining their own sense of self, they transform into the people they are currently interacting with, and relationships serve as giving them a personality that feels more permanent rather than one that is temporary when engaging in quicker encounters (Lewis 324). Susan, not having conversed with Peter one-on-one before, does not know how to act yet, so she remains silent. Here, she is assessing him, trying to figure him out, break him apart, so that she can continue her lifelong propensity of imitating others. Until Susan is able to be completely assured in her evaluation of Peter, she remains more submissive, which is another trait of Borderlines. Currently, Susan is in default mode – she is acting how society has dominantly told her to act until she can specialize her personality for Peter. In default mode, she is impeccably portraying all the characteristics women are supposed to exude, so this strong femininity is effective at initially hooking her relationship. Once she fully understands the partner, she can try to remove herself from her defaulted role and find one that allots her power – just as she did with Jerry. Susan's submissiveness is evident not only in her silence, but in the few things she does actually say. Most of Peter's questions result in an "I don't know" or "Whatever you like"; and

the truth is, she really does not know until Peter tells her what to know or what to like. Peter, being relatively perceptive, takes note of Susan's silence and says, "Susan, I've never heard you say anything before. You come dutifully to my parties... you listen to someone very dutifully, and every now and then you tell a story or a joke." (18) Peter's remark comes as a shock to Susan as she has chronicled herself the observer, not expecting that someone else might be able to deduce her character and make observations about her. When Peter relays this summing up to Susan, she sees not a literal reflection this time, but one figurative in nature as she comes to understand her similarities to Peter – and since they do have this perceptiveness in common, maybe Peter is the representation of who she should be. Furthermore, Susan pays more notice to her surroundings than to herself, so it is often up to the supplementary characters to reveal the inner-workings of Susan's mind.

When it comes to Peter and Jerry, Susan was able to leave Jerry because she saw something in Peter that she liked, but more importantly, she saw something that she wanted to become. Susan tends to think admiration and love are synonymous without understanding admiration is only one part of the equation (see: Plato's Philosophy of Love). Her admiration comes from her lack of identity, and witnessing someone who has a strong sense of self makes her want to imitate it, to try on that persona for herself; however, until she is able to fully understand who she is, she is not capable of any of the other criteria that quantify as true, meaningful love. As such, Susan begins to adapt Peter's personality and moreover, tries to portray the image of his "perfect girl." Once she espouses this task, she begins to reject the old personality she had with Jerry entirely. So when she met with Jerry later that day, she was notably more difficult than usual because she realized, deep down, she did not have anything to lose in Jerry after all. Susan had someone new and more exciting. Unfortunately for Susan,

however, Peter is the boyfriend of her best friend, Kay, which means he is not someone she can completely pursue. But she has already begun to develop this new personality, one of spontaneity, one of societal rejection, and living freely. So in Peter's place, Susan imposes her new self onto his best friend, Anthony, the second half of Jack Kerouac.

Anthony is an eighteen-year-old vagabond who often houses himself on Peter's couch, where Susan found him one morning while following Kay to Peter's apartment. Anthony bears many similarities to Kerouac, such as his obvious disregard for authority, his love of poetry, and his natural intellect that leads him to perform well in school; however, Anthony often gets suspended for openly disagreeing with authoritative figures. If Anthony possesses all these likenesses to Kerouac, much of them positive, then what about him makes him the devalued aspect of Johnson's splitting? Johnson still to this day romanticizes Kerouac, but despite her fascination with much of his characteristics, there is an awareness that his refusal to follow any guidelines and settle down would ultimately warrant his demise⁴. Furthermore, Anthony could also represent any bitterness Johnson felt after being essentially abandoned by Kerouac. As is evidenced in *Door Wide Open*, Kerouac encouraged her to find someone else and then quit responding to her letters, never to be seen or heard from again. In the midst of her first conversation with Anthony, he insists Susan buy him breakfast and she refuses, interestingly, as when Johnson met Kerouac, he had no money and asked she pay for his food. Johnson obliged and even felt momentarily empowered that she could care for the man rather than vice-versa – it was something she had yet to experience and she found it thrilling to some degree. However, Kerouac did often borrow money from Johnson and failed to pay her back. Perhaps Johnson felt

⁴ Johnson's memoir, *Minor Characters*, chronicles her life until she meets Jack Kerouac. While she is dating him, *On the Road* is published, and she sees her lover skyrocketed into fame. Afterward, there is an obvious shift in his personality – his constant running from his demons whilst on the road turns into other forms of running, and through an intense drinking problem, Johnson witnesses the man she adores completely fall apart as he is unable to settle down or feel settled.

she was merely being used for comfort, for stability, for a fraction of security – rather than be Kerouac’s sole lover, she was a woman meant to provide for him when he failed to do so for himself. So whilst writing this novel, there is a possibility that, since Susan gets the happy ending Johnson wanted, Susan is also able to engage in the actions Johnson did not do in other areas of her life. What would have happened if Johnson had not met Kerouac and paid for his food? Would she be better or worse off? Johnson seems to be flirting with the idea just as she tries to speculate how things would be if Kerouac were more passionate toward her overall.

Sometime after meeting Anthony, he, Kay, and Peter invite Susan along for a joyride in Peter’s car. Susan is captivated by Peter as he drives – his ownership of a car, of being able to drive them throughout and outside of the city, gives the appearance that “he could go places” (73). In that moment, she is overcome with a sensation of impulsiveness, gifted to her from Peter, and she makes a spur of the moment decision to give her ‘precious’ virginity to Anthony. The two then exit the car and make their way to Peter’s apartment. Her interest in Anthony is extraordinary for the time being, but what is likely happening here is that she is taking her feelings for Peter and implanting them in Anthony. While the four were in the car together, Susan and Anthony were playing flirtatious games with each other, and Susan asks Peter if she should have sex with Anthony. She *literally* asks for Peter’s permission first. For that reason, Susan begins to detach while she and Anthony are having sex and she thenceforth feels empty; she believed sex was supposed to be more miraculous and more life-changing, as though the world would suddenly be saturated with more vibrant hues. However, she feels the same as before and she quickly distances herself from Anthony thereafter. But Anthony is enthralled with Susan, verified by his laying out plans for what they could do with their remaining time before her eventual departure to Paris. Susan, nonetheless, rejects all of Anthony’s advances, saying

what happened was a onetime thing, never to be repeated again. This deliberation of honesty causes Anthony to be overcome with emotion. As a result, he yells and throws things, his pain taking on the form of an ugly beast, which leads to the moment when he smashes a window and runs out of the apartment in emotional apology. Initially, Anthony's actions may be viewed as strictly negative, but in actuality, it was one of the best things that could have happened for Susan. Once Anthony leaves, she is left to witness the destruction of the window, her heart feeling equally broken, and she begins to cry – but by having a breakdown, she is having a breakthrough. As was mentioned earlier, Susan is inherently apathetic toward her surroundings, void of any genuine emotion. During this scene in the novel, the readers are able to catch sight of Susan's first external display of her inner-workings, her identity heavily represented by the fragmented window. Referring back to the beginning of the novel when Susan caught her reflection in the window, that window is now broken, and that window represents Susan's obligatory feelings toward the expectations of society. When the window was unbroken, it was perfect, a manufactured treasure that would assure Susan was like every other woman who subjected themselves to their submissive, decorous purposes within society. However, if one were to break a million windows, they would all break differently. Those windows would become unique. So now that Susan has broken down her walls, she can start to rebuild them, and she can piece that window back together with all its distinctive cracks and fragments. Because of this momentous occurrence, *Come and Join the Dance* could be classified as a Bildungsroman as Susan has finally found a place where she can come of age, where soul unites with body.

The scene that follows is Susan's interactions with her parents, who have arrived to see their daughter walk across the stage and claim her diploma. However, Susan will not be graduating as she turned in an incomplete test and also failed a class due to her refusal to attend.

Susan's parents are in shock and are vastly disappointed with their daughter. Susan tries to explicate that she did not "know until yesterday" that she would not be graduating, which is true, but her parents unremittingly call her a liar. These accusations could, in part, be the cause for why Susan's is so adept at lying – if she has learned through conditioning that no one will believe her regardless, then there is no harm in constructing lies that will ultimately make her seem more interesting. Susan has garnered a reputation for herself as a "bad girl" at school, but her label is mostly based on false claims, ones that she herself conveyed to her classmates. Also of importance is the similarities the set of parents in *Come and Join the Dance* share with Johnson's actual parents. Johnson's mother was a reluctant housewife (*Minor 14*). In her earlier years, Johnson's mother dreamed of being a musical connoisseur, but sacrificed her desires for expectations, and married Johnson's father instead (*Minor 15*). But as the years passed, Johnson's mother became more and more bitter about her circumstances and imposed her dreams onto her daughter, leaving Johnson to merely be the object of which her mother could vicariously live through rather than live a life of her own (*Minor 19*). Due to her mother's adamant efforts to vicariously live through her, Johnson left home at an early age to pursue bohemia, hoping she would find an identity meant for her among the dancing heartbreak of poverty and artistry (*Minor 70*). So when Susan's mother discovers that her daughter will not be graduating, she exclaims in anguish: "This was supposed to be happiest day of my life! We've given you the best, but you have no consideration or gratitude" (126). This quote from her mother leaves Susan to insert that "her mother always spoke of gratitude – never love; perhaps she thought they were all the same thing" (126). So here, it can be said that just as Susan has come to equate admiration with love, her mother found gratitude and love synonymous as well – both only understand one portion of what it means to truly love someone.

Johnson's parents are only granted a limited role within *Come and Join the Dance*, but they still possess ample significance. Borderline Personality Disorder is considered by many psychologists to be a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; however, PTSD is usually inflicted upon someone after they have faced an event such as war or having a gun pointed to their head, while BPD tends to be more gradual (Lewis 323). The trauma of Borderline Personality Disorder is usually inflicted by parental neglect, sexual abuse during adolescence, substance abuse in the immediate family, death, divorce, and is an overall product of inconsistent parenting ("Borderline"). It is indicated in *Come and Join the Dance* that Johnson's parents were not necessarily neglectful – they were shadows who stood among her, consistently forcing an identity upon her – but they were negligent in regards to what Susan actually wanted or who Susan truly was. Therefore, Susan became confused in adolescence and followed rules accordingly until she began to realize her own internal locus of control. She realized she was a separate entity from her parents and began exploring the different possibilities, but in lieu of her parents, she obtained identities from men, from the people around her, and still generally struggled with detaching from what she was taught in her youth. Borderline Personality Disorder also tends not to be diagnosed on its own, but is typically in combination with Bipolar Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and Codependent Personality Disorder, among various other mental impairments ("Borderline"). In Susan's case, she seems to have also developed Codependent Personality Disorder as she is confused on how to be a separate being, therefore, she attaches to others. Studies show a "do as I say, not as I do" parenting technique substantially increases a child's probability in developing codependency later in life, which Susan's mother employs often (Martin 340). The reason behind this parenting technique being problematic is because words are contradicting actions, which leaves the child

feeling confused and conflicted, and thereafter, has trouble coping with those contrasts in emotions (Martin 344). As such, the child begins to numb out their feelings and relies on others later in life to feel for them – since they are numb and have not worked through their contradictions, they are indecisive and need others to guide them through their decisions (Martin 344). Hence codependency can lead to an absence of identity, which means the child, teen, or adult will begin to exhibit symptoms associated with Borderline Personality Disorder (Martin 344). Contrary to times in the past, however, Susan does not rely on her parents to make her decisions for her and she is defiant toward their attempts to guilt her for not staying within the parameters she was given. Instead, she merely apologizes for disappointing them and watches them interact, noticing all the flaws they harbor, their lack of perfection spewing from their tongues. They are human and humans do not own each other – it ultimately defies the law of nature, so she walks away.

With Susan's Independence Day in place, she walks into the bar Peter and Kay said they would be residing for the night. When Susan spots Kay, she realizes her friend is uncharacteristically drunk and emotional, shouting obscenities about how miserable she has been this whole time. These words come as a surprise to Susan who spent bounteous time admiring Kay for her seemingly strong sense of self. Kay had a carefree, go-with-the-flow type of aura about her and ostensibly shimmied through life with ease. Earlier, it was communicated that Kay had dropped out of college the semester before, got a job instead, and had been living in an old, dirty motel. Kay saw no point in her educational pursuits as afterward, she would end up with the same exact kind of job, waiting for the same kind of man to whisk her away into her mother's perfect future. With Kay, there seems to be a pattern of mothers trying to make their daughters live their lives for them, and not surprisingly, these autonomous human beings decide to pave

their own future. Susan notes how she would often be one step behind Kay, mirroring her attributes as she seemed a more assured personality. In real life, Kay was Elise Cowen and before her, there was Marie who is briefly mentioned in the novel as Marjorie. Johnson had a habit, much like Susan, of allowing her female friends to take the lead while Johnson simply observed and admired them. So when Kay confesses her true feelings, the illusion is shattered and Susan becomes fearful that she might have made a mistake by permitting herself to fall out of college. At that moment, Susan correspondingly reflects on what has been apparent the entire time – Kay was always with Peter, doing his laundry, double checking to make sure he was getting his work done, reading all the books Peter instructed her to read. Kay was not actually that different from Susan after all and Kay likely had Borderline Personality Disorder as well. The signs within Kay become most evident when Susan is buying a beer and Peter comes over to her, pushing her hair behind her ear; from this action, it is now palpable that Peter has been just as fascinated with Susan. When Kay sees this exchange, she falls into a fit of manic disarray. Granted, Peter is Kay's boyfriend so it makes sense that she would be uncomfortable at the sight of him with another woman, but her breakdown is rather unusual. Kay, while obviously not pleased with the scenario, insists that Susan and Peter would make a perfect couple – through tears, Kay is still trying to embody the image of the “cool girl,” who does not get too attached and can go along with anything. Because Kay feels she must consistently perform a role that makes her appealing to men, she is unable to healthily express her true feelings. Kay continues mumbling incoherent words to herself, leading to Susan and Peter chaperoning her back to her motel room where she remarks that wherever she goes, she always encounters “the same green walls” (157). Kay, much like Susan, feels trapped with nowhere to go.

As Peter and Susan leave a drunk and remorseful Kay to her own devices, Susan has thus left behind another one of her plausible futures. Walking by Peter's side, he now seems like the last option remaining and the two get in his car driving toward an undecided destination. Susan eventually falls asleep, but when she awakes, she and Peter are stranded in the middle of nowhere with the car broken down. It is within this moment that Susan realizes the outcome of her future were she to stay with Peter – she would be in the middle of nowhere with a broken down car, the car being Peter. Previously, Susan remarked how Peter's car made it seem like he could go places, but now she understands that he will not actually go anywhere. He is a perpetual student; having been in school for six years, he keeps purposely failing the last class so that he will not have to face the apprehensive, perhaps harsh, truth that might await him in the real world. Susan rejects this fear, embracing a burning refusal to be stagnant. She wants to venture out and see what else the world has to offer, what undertakings and lessons await her in a vast and astronomical future. Meanwhile Peter, much like Kerouac, lives only for “mañana.”⁵ Peter has no desire to leave, no ambition to better himself, and Susan begins to distance herself even from the idealized. However, she still makes the decision to sleep with him, and contrary to her experience with Anthony, she is engaged in what is occurring, in the closeness and satisfaction she can acquire from another human being. Afterward, she arises and fixates on herself in the mirror stating “there was a girl in the mirror with a clear-eyed, still look, who didn't smile this time. She could see Peter in the mirror too – sitting up alone in the bed, watching her. It was he who had tangled her hair, given her a different face” (177). Susan's face has now grounded itself, body and soul finally connecting in totality, and just as her face has ceased putting on a performance, she has quit acting in her reality as well.

⁵ Spanish word for “tomorrow,” often employed by Jack Kerouac (Sal Paradise) and friends in *On the Road* to express a negligence and disdain toward accomplishing goals and ambitions in the present.

However, if this novel is about a woman ultimately reaching a point of independence, of freeing herself from mental ailments such as Borderline Personality Disorder (and Codependent Personality Disorder), then why has it taken an act of dependence to consummately accomplish said independence? The universe, and life, is a composition of balance, so realistically, dependence is not as bad as Western culture has relentlessly propagated. Independence and individualism have become so ingrained and prevalent within western society that it has begun to become synonymous with isolation (Cushman 68). Isolation is cited as one of the leading causes for why mental illnesses are diagnosed to begin with – indubitably, there are some who genuinely possess neurological imbalances, but a considerable amount of sufferers can recover through Dialectal or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Cushman 81). For Susan to be liberated, she did not need to be completely independent – she already spent much of her life in isolation, feeling misunderstood by those in her environment. So for Susan to reach self-actualization, she needed to first find a true sense of belonging⁶. After all, Carl Jung, who is highly regarded for his psychological findings and has set much of the foundation of which modern psychology is based, presumed that the opinions and feedback of others helped in establishing a healthy, well-balanced human being (Jung 322). Humans are, in essence, social creatures that cannot function completely on their own. So in the end, Susan has successfully found a *balance* between independent and dependent as both are central to completing the full extent of a human being. Nevertheless, she is still independent enough to walk away from Peter, choosing Paris first and foremost, so that she might understand herself further.

Outdated findings on Borderline Personality Disorder assert that it cannot be cured as environmental factors are still key to neurological development; however, recent research

⁶ Refers to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which intended to stage the necessities of mankind on a hierarchical pyramid with the pursuit to accomplish self-actualization, a term coined by Kurt Goldstein in 1939.

suggests otherwise (“Borderline”). As mentioned previously, a person must exhibit at least five of the nine criteria to be diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, but with help, time, or deep internalization and a capacity to learn from past behaviors, a person can come to display four or less. Many psychologists consider the demonstration of four or less to be a cure as it no longer qualifies a person as one who carries the disorder (“Borderline”). So with this newer discovery in mind, does Susan now show four or less symptoms? Given the novel’s inconclusive ending, it is impossible to proclaim with guaranteed accuracy that she does. However, what is important is that she has established the basis for which having four or less characteristics is possible, whereas before, there was little indication that she could successfully recover.

But unfortunately, while *Come and Join the Dance* was greatly inspired by true events within Johnson’s life, the ending depicted never happened⁷. As stated previously, Johnson wrote the conclusion she wanted, the life she dreamed she could partake. Trapped in her circumstances as a 1950s woman, she was still “mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time,” (*On the Road* 5) just like her former boyfriend, the late Jack Kerouac, often acquiesced. When Susan had her first encounter with Peter, he told her, “You’re worth saving,” to which Susan replied, “But who’s going to save me?” (21). Peter played his role in saving her, but she was not the typical damsel in distress, for after her demons were slain, she left him behind rather than remain sired to him. Peter the Idealized *was* the ideal, just as Kerouac had been for Johnson, because the two so closely resembled each other. Although Borderline Personality Disorder is mostly associated with women, there is copious evidence that suggests Kerouac was also a candidate⁸. So while Johnson fed off the identity of Kerouac, he fed off her

⁷ However, Joyce Johnson did finally see Paris when she was 28 after the death of her first husband, James Johnson.

⁸ In numerous Kerouac novels, *On the Road* included, Kerouac acts as an observer and often imitates the behavior of his comrades, namely Neal Cassady. Kerouac was often noted to be sensitive, exhibiting several “feminine” traits. As such, Kerouac was greatly attached to Cassady and wanted to embody much of Cassady’s essence because he

identity as well – when he was with her, he felt he could settle down, like they could be happy together, but in the end, he knew he was too far gone, too incapable of staying in one place.

In a review of *Come and Join the Dance* written by Kerouac, he confessed his time with Johnson was “perhaps the best love affair I ever had. In fact, she sorta fell in love with me, but that was only because I didn’t impose on her” (“Door” 174). Kerouac and Johnson both acted as security blankets toward the other while they went through life working to find themselves – they were finding *it* apart, but together. Through Kerouac, Johnson was freed of expectations, given the agency to explore her desires. The capacity of which she could delineate those desires may have been limited, but with the encouragement from Kerouac to write, she birthed *Come and Join the Dance*. It was within the words she crafted and twisted in place on a blank page that she could fully divulge her desires, her dreams, and her venerated could-be’s. And just as Kerouac did not impose on Johnson, Peter did not impose on Susan either and he let her walk away to find a Great Perhaps⁹. As she leaves though, Peter reminds her that “you must never regret anything” (178). Kerouac once uttered the same words to Johnson and she carried those words with her throughout her life. Susan thus says “I know,” and then turns her back to leave, walking out of Peter’s life, ending this novel, so that the next can begin; and all of those novels that followed carried an essence of Kerouac. So the year was 1955 in America the Great. A young woman was stationed at her typewriter, rewriting the past, imagining a clinquant future, developing a heartbeat of a wide-eyed vagabond, *saved* by the miraculous lesson that she should never regret anything. That woman was a Mad One.

was the quintessential “man’s man.” He was also prone to stormy relationships and switched between loving people and hating people frequently, therefore making Kerouac an avid “splitter” as well.

⁹ French Renaissance writer François Rabelais’ famous last words.

“I see the girl, Joyce Glassman, twenty-two, with her hair hanging down below her shoulders, all in black like Masha in *The Seagull* – black stockings, black skirt, black sweater – but unlike Masha, she’s not in mourning for her life. How could she have been, with her seat at the table in the exact center of the universe, that midnight place where so much is converging, the only place in America that’s alive? As a female, she’s not quite part of this convergence. A fact she ignores, sitting by in her excitement as the voices of the men, always the men, passionately rise and fall and their beer glasses collect and the smoke of their cigarettes rises toward the ceiling and the dead culture is surely being wakened. Merely being here, she tells herself, is enough.”

– Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters*

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